

# Progress Children's Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Jacqueline Dunster / Suzanne Young
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	6 November 2007

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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## **Service information**

### **Brief description of the service**

Progress Children's Services fostering service (PCS) is part of Progress Children's Services Ltd. The fostering service was established in 2001 and first registered in 2003. It operates from Acocks Green in Birmingham. The administrative headquarters of the organisation are based in Wolverhampton. This office also operates as a sub-office of the fostering service with some social work staff and the education and health workers based there. At the time of the inspection PCS supports 23 foster families who care for 34 children and young people.

### **Summary**

During this full inspection which was announced all key standards were inspected. The inspection focussed on arrangements to safeguard children and young people's welfare, meet their individual needs and enable them to have a say in their day to day care. Additional standards were inspected relating to helping young people to prepare for independent living and the organisation of the service. PCS is judged as satisfactory overall with sound outcomes in all areas. The agency has re-evaluated its structure, reviewed its practices and recruited more staff since the last inspection. It has established a firm basis to develop consistent practice and stabilise the staff team and management. The agency maintains good quality records and undertakes excellent reviews of carers' approval. There are some shortfalls in relation to records of matching, fostering panel, assessments and staff vetting which do not fully underpin work with children and young people.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Following the last inspection the agency was required to ensure greater clarity and consistency in records of arrangements for consent to medical treatment and trips with schools. This has been achieved. This ensures that assistance is not delayed in the case of injury or illness. Children and young people are able to participate with their peers in school trips, increasing their ability to develop relationships and achieve in education. The agency was required to ensure that all placements have a foster placement agreement which includes all matters outlined in Schedule 6 of the fostering regulations. All placements now have foster placement agreements covering all relevant matters. This ensures foster carers and the agency are clear about the purposes of a placement and roles and responsibilities in relation to each individual placement. The agency was required to ensure that no children or young people were placed with foster carers outside their approval range. All children and young people have been placed within the foster carer's terms of approval since the last inspection. This ensures they are not placed with foster carers who are unable to meet their needs. The agency has improved the human resources department to ensure that staff vetting procedures are fully completed prior to appointment. The agency has had two shortfalls in staff vetting since the last inspection although these were quickly recognised and addressed by the human resources department. All staff posts are now subject to the satisfactory completion of a period of probation. These measures ensure the agency offers improved protection to children and young people from people who could harm them. The agency has made some of the required improvements to the assessment process. However, the quality of assessments delivered to panel is variable. This lack of consistency undermines the decision making processes of the panel and the agency and could result in the approval of

unsuitable foster carers. The children's guides now include information on how to contact Ofsted to make a complaint and have been distributed to children and young people. However, their content is not accessible for all children and young people as recommended following the last inspection. This could deter children and young people from reading the information and accessing assistance. The agency does not currently have a manager in post so requirements relating to the role of the previous manager are not addressed directly by this inspection. The agency has taken steps to clarify lines of accountability and to address longstanding difficulties in maintaining a stable staff team. Staff at the agency are more optimistic about the likelihood of establishing a stable, effective team which can better provide regular, long term support to foster carers. The agency has introduced a lead professional for quality assurance and monitoring. A new system has been developed to capture and analyse required information. This assists the agency in reviewing and improving the quality of care offered to children and young people. The levels of foster carer supervision have improved through increased staff stability and the use of independent social workers although foster carers would like to see long term consistency in their allocated supervising social worker. The agency has amended the foster care agreement to allow foster carers a period of representation following a recommendation that their approval be terminated. This offers foster carers the security of due process in challenging decisions about their suitability to foster. Following the last inspection the agency was recommended to retain Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for inspection, undertake annual health and safety checks of foster carers' homes, seek sufficient information at the point of referral and review their use of office space. These matters have all been addressed. These improvements add to safeguards for children, young people and staff.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is satisfactory.

PCS gathers information relating to the health needs of children and young people at the point of referral. Arrangements for medical consent are clearly established. This allows the agency to place children and young people with foster carers who are able to meet their specific health needs. The agency now employs a specialist health worker. Their role is to support foster carers in meeting the health needs of children and young people through monitoring health care provision, medication and appointments, providing training and advice on health matters to foster carers, building up relationships with key health professionals and attending health meetings. Although the role is new, there has been an improvement in the monitoring of health by the agency. This results in useful information being gathered in relation to health outcomes and interventions which promotes an informed approach to improving the health of children and young people. Although foster carers record information relating to health and medical appointments in daily records and diaries, they do not maintain a written health record for each child placed in their care. Therefore, the complete health record is not easily accessible and transferable. The agency trains foster carers and supervising social workers on health matters relating to physical and emotional well-being. Guidance on health matters is included in the foster carers' handbook. Supervising social workers discuss health matters with foster carers during their supervision sessions. These practices ensure foster carers are sufficiently skilled and knowledgeable to promote the health of children and young people. Foster carers ensure that children and young people are registered with primary health care professionals and access other health specialists as required. They ensure that children and young people are able to develop healthy lifestyles through good nutrition and physical activity. Foster carers attend training on attachment, separation and loss which increases their understanding of the emotional health needs of children and young people. Individualised training is provided for foster carers

to meet the specific health needs of individual children. The promotion of healthy eating and lifestyles ensures children and young people are able to develop positive lifestyles and emotional well-being which increases the likelihood of good lifelong health.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency's foster carers generally provide safe, nurturing environments for children and young people. The agency ensures that foster homes are safe to accommodate children by undertaking annual health and safety checks and unannounced visits. These checks assess the safety of the home, its surroundings and vehicles used by foster carers. Foster carers keep medication locked away in their homes and use appropriate safety equipment. The agency provides training and guidance to foster carers on health and safety. As a result children and young people are protected from risk of injury in the home. The agency requires children and young people to have their own bedrooms unless the local authority assesses it as in the best interests of siblings to share. Foster homes inspected were homely and welcoming and had been adapted to meet the particular needs of those living in them. Children and young people feel safe in their homes which increases the likelihood of placement stability. The agency has achieved some good quality matching of carers' skills to the needs of children and young people. There are examples of positive matches of ethnicity and culture and of carers' ability to meet the needs of children and young people with disabilities. The matching process has been developed to involve three stages. These address acquisition of good information about the referral, risk assessment and revision of safer caring practices. However, the matching documents do not clearly identify the reasons for the placement of a child or young person with a particular foster carer or the arrangements to meet any gaps in the match. This has the potential to compromise the quality of matching and result in the placement of children or young people with foster carers who are unable to meet their individual needs. The agency has introduced new foster placement agreements which clearly establish the roles and responsibilities in relation to individual placements. They assist foster carers in understanding their role in meeting the needs of children and young people. This results in a shared understanding of the purposes of a placement between the agency, the foster carers and the local authority placing the child or young person. The child protection policy is clear and up to date. It provides good guidance to foster carers and staff on action to be taken following an allegation of abuse. Foster carers and staff receive child protection training. This reduces the likelihood of referral to the relevant authorities being delayed or overlooked. The agency maintains records of allegations and other serious incidents to assist this process. Foster carers receive training in working with children and young people who have been sexually abused which enables them to contribute to therapeutic interventions with children and young people. Foster carers are trained in safer caring practices. All foster homes have general safer caring policies which are established at the point of approval. These are reviewed when new children or young people are placed. Children, young people and their social workers take part in the review of the safer caring policies although they are not always signed by the children and young people which could compromise their effectiveness. The safer caring policies are comprehensive and easy to understand. Some include comments from children and young people about their needs and wishes. The processes relating to safer caring enable those living in the household to feel safe. The agency has taken steps to improve its staff vetting processes. Generally they are sound although there have been two shortfalls since the last inspection relating to references and to the panel chair taking up their position before the receipt of their CRB check. However, both these shortfalls were quickly noted, addressed and remedied. Staff are well-qualified, experienced

and knowledgeable about their roles. The agency seeks to ensure that those working for the service are safe and capable to work with children and young people. This results in children and young people being protected from those who could harm them. The members of the independent fostering panel are subject to the same vetting processes as other staff. They undertake performance reviews to ensure they continue to meet the demands of their role. There have been some shortfalls in relation to the panel's activities since the last inspection. The panel minutes do not indicate the reasons for the recommendations of the panel. Therefore, they do not fully assist the agency decision maker in making decisions about approval or continuing approval of foster carers. On one occasion the panel sat while in quorate to consider an annual review of foster carers' approval. This undermines the reliability of the decision making on that occasion. The panel operates effectively in driving up the quality of assessments presented. Through feedback documents, liaison with the fostering service and records of discussion the panel is able to communicate concerns it has about the quality of information presented. This has led to management taking greater responsibility for reviewing assessments before they appear at panel. This assists the panel to make sound decisions about the suitability of applicants to foster and foster carers to continue fostering on their current terms of approval. The fostering panel operates in line with its overall objective to promote and safeguard the welfare of children and young people.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is satisfactory.

Although the agency makes provision to address gaps in matching children and young people to foster carers from a different racial background, the matching documents do not clearly outline these measures. This could result in failure to develop the skills of these foster carers to meet the needs of the children and young people in transracial placements. However, PCS has some successful placements of children and young people with foster carers who share their cultural and religious background. This enables these children and young people to participate in their religion and develop a positive sense of identity. Foster carers are able to help children and young people to develop the skills to deal with discrimination in the wider community. Children and young people with disabilities are placed with foster carers who have the skills to meet their particular needs throughout the placement and into independence. Foster carers ensure that children and young people with disabilities are able to participate in the wider community. Some young people with disability are very actively involved in community work and consultation forums within their communities. This results in young people developing a positive self-image and the confidence to achieve their potential. Foster carers support children and young people to join in activities with their peer group in school and in extra-curricular activities. This enables them to develop social skills and self-esteem. Foster carers are confident in meeting the educational needs of children and young people and advocating for their educational needs to be addressed. They maintain records in relation to education, discuss education in supervision, participate in parents' evenings, build communication links with schools and colleges and attend education meetings. Within the home they support children and young people to access educational resources and to complete their school work to the best of their ability. For a number of years foster carers have taken the lead in this work. The agency now employs a specialist education worker who supports the foster carers in this role, liaises with schools and monitors outcomes in education. The worker provides advice and training to foster carers on education matters. The combination of the foster carers' skills and knowledge with the education worker's experience and qualifications offers the opportunity to achieve improved educational outcomes for children and young people, a reduction in

exclusions and access to appropriate education placements. As a result children and young people are more likely to meet their educational potential.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is satisfactory.

PCS trains foster carers to support and monitor contact arrangements which allows foster carers to help children and young people to maintain contact with families and friends and develop more positive relationships with them. The agency establishes the arrangements for contact at the point of referral and matches children and young people to foster carers who can meet those needs. The record indicates restrictions on contact. Foster carers provide emotional and practical support to children and young people having contact. They record the outcomes of contact to share with supervising social workers and with statutory reviews. This facilitates an informed approach to contact arrangements with interagency partners. These practices result in the maintenance of children and young people's relationships with their families and friends which contributes to their emotional well-being. Foster carers generally listen to the views and opinions of children and young people. They encourage them to participate in decision-making in the household. An example was seen of foster carers assisting a young person in making a comprehensive and successful complaint to the local authority. Foster carers encourage children and young people to have a voice and to develop the confidence to communicate their opinions. Some children and young people are not clear about how to make a complaint or raise a concern. Although the agency has reissued guides to children and young people they do not appear confident in accessing this system. This could result in the failure of a child or young person to raise a complaint to someone in a position to address their concern. The family link worker makes links with children and young people within the foster homes to consult with them and build communication. Attempts to engage children and young people in forums to discuss foster care and the practices of the agency have been unsuccessful. As a consequence children and young people do not have an obvious influence on the development of PCS and improvements in the quality of care.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers assist children and young people to acquire age-appropriate independence skills. They help young people to develop practical skills for the home and in the community. They assist young people in money management and developing the emotional skills to cope with independent living. Foster carers ensure young people are able to access relevant government and community resources to further aid a smooth transition to adulthood. On a number of occasions local authorities have been slow to complete pathway planning for young people. Foster carers have tried to bridge the gap and have continued to look after young people into adulthood where their individual needs have required it. Foster carers ensure that young people are offered every opportunity to leave home in a positive way. However, the agency does not have comprehensive guidance or training on preparing young people for leaving care. This potentially leaves gaps in the knowledge and competence of foster carers undertaking this work. Foster carers sometimes lack confidence in their ability to manage transitional arrangements for leaving care. Foster carers work effectively with young people to prepare them for leaving care. However, this is not sufficiently supported by guidance and training.



## Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The Statement of Purpose, policies and procedures assist staff, foster carers and placing social workers to understand the aims and objectives of the agency. The Statement of Purpose includes complaints made to the service but not their outcomes. This could result in placing local authorities making referral decisions without full information about the agency. PCS has introduced new children's guides which are comprehensive but too complex to be understood by all children and young people. This has the potential to confuse children and young people about the role of the agency and how to share concerns. The agency has restructured its monitoring and quality assurance processes and appointed a lead person to undertake the work. This work has established a firm basis for developing the quality assurance functions of the agency and linking them to improvements in the quality of care. In recent months it has delivered improvements in the quality of records maintained by the agency and the quality of foster carers' annual reviews. Following the last inspection the agency invested in an audit and review of the service by a university based external consultancy. The audit identified changes to be made in the management structure of the organisation and the interactions of different parts of the service. Since then a full complement of staff has been recruited to all but the manager's post. The agency believes that the new infrastructure combined with changes in recruitment practices can address concerns raised in the last report about the instability in management. The fostering team are optimistic about the reorganisation of the service. Increased stability in the social work and management team could result in long term consolidation of the improvements which have been achieved since the last inspection. Staff receive supervision from a suitably qualified and experienced senior person in the agency. Supervision addresses issues of practice and professional development. The social work and support staff are competent and knowledgeable in their field of practice. They undertake relevant training to increase their ability to support the fostering role. Although there have been difficulties with staff retention in recent years, there are now adequate numbers of suitably qualified staff to provide sufficient levels of support to foster carers. The agency is currently recruiting a manager. In the meantime the operations director is responsible for their functions. Arrangements have been made to improve the responsiveness of the out of hours support service. Some foster carers have found it difficult to have numerous changes in their supervising social worker. However, a number have had a stable worker over the last 12-18 months and others express optimism that the agency will offer more consistent supervision and staff in the future. A lack of confidence in support offered by the agency could undermine the quality of the work foster carers undertake with children and young people. The agency has recruited support staff in human resources, administration and finance. They are skilled to fulfil their roles, to support the work of social work staff and ensure suitable staff are recruited and retained. Social work staff are taking on specialist roles within the agency and are supported by the health and education workers. This results in staff having better knowledge of education, health, recruitment, referral and life story work. Excellent annual reviews of approved foster carers take place to ensure they remain suitable whilst identifying areas for development. Foster carers attend both skills to foster and core training and are offered supplementary training. The agency has introduced the Children's Workforce Development Council training programme for foster carers. This is designed to ensure that all foster carers achieve a minimum level of training and development to improve the quality of their work. Foster carers in the agency are aware their training is now standardised and their continued approval is dependent on completion of the required training. A number of foster carers have undertaken National Vocational Qualifications in child care. The foster

carers' commitment to increasing their skills and knowledge results in children and young people being cared for by foster carers who have the skills and understanding to meet their needs. Independent social workers undertake assessments of applicants to foster. There have been some good quality assessments presented to panel over the last few months. However, the assessments continue to be of a variable quality and do not all contain the necessary information or statutory checks before they are presented to panel. Although the panel is rigorous in addressing shortfalls, these assessments do not assist the panel to make good quality recommendations. This results in delays in the approval process and could result in poor approval decisions. Record keeping within the agency has improved significantly and comprehensive and comprehensible records are maintained. The agency has implemented auditing and record management procedures to ensure this level of record keeping is continued. These practices assist staff to undertake their roles more effectively and consistently. The records of placements on the foster carers' files do not include the reasons for the termination of a placement reducing the integrity of the record of a child or young person's time in the foster placement. The agency's financial records indicate it has sufficient resources to run the service effectively and meet its financial obligations. The director of the company has undertaken training in the role of the director. This reduces the likelihood of disruption to the service through financial difficulties. Generally the organisation of the agency now offers better support to the role of the social workers and the foster carers.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
15	ensure that satisfactory information is available in relation to all persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, with particular reference to information detailed in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20(3))	31 July 2008
30	ensure the fostering panel makes a written record of the reasons for its recommendations (Regulation 25(2))	31 July 2008
30	ensure no business is conducted by the fostering panel unless at least five of its members, including the person appointed to chair the panel, or the vice chair, at least one of the social workers employed by the fostering service and at least two of the independent members, meet as a panel (Regulation 25(1))	31 July 2008
11	ensure children are enabled to make a complaint or representation, specifically by ensuring they are aware of the procedures for raising complaints or representations (Regulation 18(6)(a))	31 July 2008
17	ensure that all assessments of any persons the fostering service considers may be suitable to become a foster carer are carried out in accordance with Regulation 27 (Regulation 27(1))	31 July 2008

24	ensure that the record of each placement with a foster carer includes the circumstances of the termination of each placement. (Regulation 30(3)(a))	31 July 2008
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## Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure foster carers are provided with a written health record for each child in their care; this is updated during the placement and moves with the child (National Minimum Standard 12.4)
- ensure the agency evidences the elements of matching which were taken into consideration in agreeing the placement and identify areas where foster carers need additional support to compensate for any gaps in the match between the child and carer (National Minimum Standard 8.4)
- ensure the safe care guidelines evidence they are explained clearly and appropriately to the child (National Minimum Standard 9.3)
- ensure foster carers receive training to enable them to provide effective support and guidance to a young person preparing to move into independent or semi-independent living (National Minimum Standard 14.3)
- ensure the children's guides to the fostering service are suitable for all children fostered through the service, specifically by reviewing the formats in which they are provided to make them more accessible (National Minimum Standard 1.5)
- ensure the Statment of Purpose includes details in respect of the fostering service of the outcomes of complaints (National Minimum Standard 1.4)
- ensure the opinions and views of children on all matters affecting them, are ascertained on a regular and frequent basis and not taken for granted (National Minimum Standard 11.3)
- ensure approved foster carers are supported by a named social worker, specifically to ensure there are not frequent changes in the allocated worker. (National Minimum Standard 22.3)

## Annex

## Annex A

### National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

#### Being healthy

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

**Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.**

#### Staying safe

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

**Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Enjoying and achieving

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

**Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Making a positive contribution

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

**Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Achieving economic well-being

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

**Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.**

#### Organisation

**The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

**Annex A**

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

**Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.**