

Parallel Parents Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Sue Winson
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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

Parallel Parents is an independent fostering agency which is privately owned. The agency provides care on a short- and medium- to long-term basis for children of all ages, including babies, sibling groups and adolescents. It also provides placements for mothers and babies, and children with disabilities and complex health needs. Fees vary according to the type of placement and the care package provided.

Summary

This is an outstanding service that has a history of providing individualised foster care, which results in positive outcomes for children and young people. Diversity and equality are promoted effectively in all aspects of the service. Rigorous checks and assessments of foster carers, effective matching and supervision ensure that children are safeguarded. Planned packages of support are in place to enable them to meet children's needs in a holistic manner. The agency can respond quickly and flexibly to increase support where necessary. The staff group is skilled and experienced and the manager provides effective leadership. The work of the agency is well supported by the administrative and business team. There is a commitment to developing and improving the service in which all staff are involved. Quality assurance systems are well developed and allow for scrutiny of practice.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The two recommendations made at the last inspection have been addressed. All staff have received training on assessing foster carers. Child protection training has been provided to all foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The health and development of children and young people are promoted and their physical and emotional health needs are identified and met. The agency is persistent in ensuring that full information is gained from placing social workers to inform matching and ensures that services are provided to meet assessed needs. Full details of health issues are contained in the foster placement agreements, which are regularly updated. Children are registered with local doctors, dentists and opticians and receive specialist healthcare services. Foster carers are trained in first aid and health promotion and work with placing social workers and healthcare professionals to the benefit of the children. Where necessary they receive training to meet the specific needs of a child in their care. The agency uses a comprehensive monitoring tracker, which is organised under the five Every Child Matters outcomes, and this demonstrates that needs are being met. Foster care development workers monitor healthcare on supervisory visits. Young people who completed questionnaires commented that they are encouraged to eat healthily and take exercise.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The manager and responsible individual are suitable people to run a business concerned with safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. An effective monitoring system is in place to ensure that Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks are renewed every three years and records are kept of checks and references for all staff and foster carers. Well-established procedures and monitoring systems ensure that they are suitable to work with children. Staff are interviewed as part of the selection process and references are routinely verified by telephone. All social work staff are appropriately qualified and registered and those who undertake foster carer assessments have received training.

The agency's foster carers provide safe, healthy and nurturing environments. Full checks and references are obtained prior to presentation at the fostering panel. These include employer and local authority checks, two personal references chosen by the applicants and one chosen by the assessor. Preparation and training covers health and safety issues and a safety inspection of the home is carried out as part of the assessment, and prior to each annual review of approval. This includes pets and cars used to transport children. Health and safety issues are monitored through supervision visits and unannounced visits.

The agency places the needs of the child at the forefront when making matching decisions, in consultation with placing social workers and foster carers. It pursues placing social workers for written information to ensure that they and their foster carers are fully informed about individual children's needs. The agency considers the religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic needs of children when making decisions. Information sharing between relevant professionals, children and young people and their families is evident. Robust matching procedures are in place which results in stability of placements. Foster placement agreements contain all the required information and progress is monitored through the tracking tool. Risk assessments are also carried out at this stage and bespoke packages of support are in place from the beginning of placements. Reflective practice is evident and the agency has looked at lessons to be learned from the small number of placements which have been disrupted.

Children and young people are protected and their welfare is safeguarded. Policies on bullying, behaviour management and safeguarding largely provide appropriate guidance and practice is thoroughly monitored through supervisory visits, foster carer reviews and the manager's auditing systems. The permissible use of physical intervention does not provide clear guidance; however, records demonstrate that practice has been fully appropriate in this respect. Children and young people are routinely seen alone on visits and given the opportunity to voice any concerns. Foster carers are well trained and supported to manage challenging behaviour, which contributes to the stability of placements.

The fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively to ensure good quality decisions are made based on full information. The panel chairs and members have a wide variety and range of relevant experience which contributes to their robust scrutiny of applications and reviews, all of which are presented to panel. The quality assurance function of the panel informs and contributes to the agency's improvement agenda. Administrative support ensures that members have papers in time to read before the panel and minutes are produced in a timely manner. Panels are well chaired to allow all members to contribute to discussions and ensure that any queries are fully explored. Applicants attend panel at approval stage and are informed of the appeal procedures and the independent review mechanism, should they wish to challenge the decisions of the agency. No member begins work until all checks including CRBs have been completed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Promoting equality and valuing diversity runs through the policies and practices of the agency. Foster carers work with young people to promote self-worth and encourage them in any interests or talents. Examples were given where the agency has accessed services for asylum seeking children and has carried out life story work with the agreement of placing social workers. It is actively working to recruit a more diverse pool of foster carers. Building identity training is provided to foster carers. The agency provides training and support to ensure that education is valued and carers support children and young people to maximise their opportunities.

Education is promoted and young people are encouraged and assisted to attend and achieve. An education coordinator is employed, who provides training and support to foster carers. She also provides information about education outcomes to the manager. Foster carers usually take children to school, sometimes over long distances, and work with schools and colleges to the benefit of children placed. They attend school meetings and events routinely. Young people have achieved positive outcomes in improved attendance and attainment, further education and employment.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service promotes contact arrangements for children. There is a commitment to children being transported to contact by someone they know and the agency's social workers and support workers do so when necessary. Details of contact arrangements are contained in foster placement agreements and are also considered at matching and planning meetings. Foster carer training includes the importance of maintaining contact and the agency's expectation is that foster carers will work with parents for the benefit of the young people. Examples were given where positive relationships have been maintained between foster carers and children's families, and of parents being kept up to date with the progress of their children and involved in decisions about their care.

The agency promotes consultation with foster carers, young people and placing social workers in a variety of ways, including questionnaires for foster carers' annual reviews. Social workers' comments about the care provided by the foster carers are consistently positive. Young people attend their statutory reviews and are encouraged to give their views on a day-to-day basis. Foster carers listen to children and young people's views and advocate on their behalf. Examples were given where the agency has acted following children expressing their views. Several young people who completed questionnaires said that their views are listened to. Children are aware of their right to complain and know of a range of people they can talk to including children's rights workers and advocates. A complaints leaflet is provided to them. The agency has tried to gain the views of the parents and families of children placed, with little success so far. Complaints have been taken seriously and dealt with in a timely manner. Complainants are kept informed about the progress and the outcomes of their complaints.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are prepared for adulthood and are encouraged and supported to develop life skills in a gradual way which builds their confidence. The agency provides leaving care training,

and a pack for young people has been developed which is used to prepare young people for independent living. Foster care development workers monitor their progress and work is carried out by support workers where appropriate. The latter are aware of resources in the community and inform young people about services which are available to them, sometimes accompanying them on visits. Young people receive regular pocket money and clothing allowances and have bank accounts. Examples were given where young people had moved on to further education, independence or supported living and remain in regular contact with their foster carers, who continue to provide support.

Written information and foster care agreements give clear information about financial issues. Foster carers are paid regularly and on time.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Young people's religious, ethnic and linguistic needs are being met. Foster carers collect mementos and photographs for children to take with them when they move on. The agency's policies, procedures and practices are underpinned by valuing diversity, anti-discriminatory practice and equality of opportunity.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose which outlines the services provided and states its aims and objectives. Individualised children and young people's guides contain details of their foster carer and rules in the house, including safer caring guidelines. They are provided in other languages when necessary.

The agency is well managed and organised. The manager exercises effective leadership and supervision of staff and they are positive about her knowledge, skills and management style. They are involved in developing practice and the improvement agenda and their views and ideas are welcomed. Robust quality assurance and auditing are in place, which ensures that the quality of service is maintained as the agency grows in size. Practice is scrutinised and is in line with the agency's policies, procedures and core values. There is a clear management structure which now includes area team managers who have small caseloads and who monitor practice.

The staff team consists of foster carer development workers and support workers with a range of skills and experience, many of whom have worked for the agency for a considerable length of time. They work cooperatively towards the agency's priority of achieving positive outcomes for children and young people in foster care. There is evidence of problem solving and innovative and inventive ways of working to achieve this aim. They are well supervised and trained and there is a strong focus on continuing professional development. Caseloads are manageable and they work flexibly to provide high quality support to foster carers, including an out-of-hours service. Foster carers are positive about their approachability and availability and they expressed high levels of satisfaction with the service they receive from the agency. Their comments about support provided to themselves and children in their care by the agency are unanimously positive. The development of electronic recording systems allows for improved communication of information and monitoring of practice.

The agency has systems in place to respond to enquiries from people thinking about fostering in a timely way. Targeted recruitment takes place and its effectiveness is monitored. Foster carers are positive about their first contact with the agency and the pace of the assessment process. Thorough assessments of carers' abilities to parent looked after children are undertaken

and the agency has improved the recording of assessments and the evaluation and analysis of information. A recruitment and assessment post was established and has been effective in developing this area of the agency's work. The agency has access to a medical adviser who signs off the health reports and who is available for consultation.

Appropriate policies and procedures inform the work of the agency. A foster carer handbook provides comprehensive guidance and is a useful resource. Detailed and thorough reviews of foster carer's competencies and abilities to meet the needs of children placed with them are carried out annually and are chaired by foster carer development workers from the other area team. These are comprehensive documents which provide evidence of foster carers' competence and skills in meeting the needs of children.

There is a well-established training programme for foster carers which is continually reviewed and updated. The effectiveness of foster carer training is evident in their practice and their ability to understand and meet the needs of looked after children. Pre-approval training is mandatory and includes input from experienced carers. Foster carers value the opportunity to increase their skills and knowledge. Staff have annual appraisals and are encouraged to identify areas for professional development. The agency supports them to attend external courses.

The work of the agency is enhanced by appropriate levels of business and administrative support. There are efficient and robust systems to monitor all the functions of the agency. The staff work flexibly and cooperatively to ensure that the work is carried out in an efficient and timely manner. The building is fit for purpose and provides sufficient space. Security systems ensure that confidential records, including archived files, are securely stored. Foster carers are provided with filing cabinets or lockable boxes for confidential information storage.

Young people's files are held electronically with considerable safety precautions to eliminate unauthorised access. The foster placement agreement, risk assessment, tracker and running records are one single document which is updated following contacts or visits and are an effective working document which staff find easy to navigate around. These clearly reflect children's progress and cross reference to other documentation.

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
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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 that training and policies on the use of physical restraint provide appropriate guidance for foster carers. (NMS 9.2)