

Park Foster Care

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

Park Foster Care is an independent fostering agency. Services are delivered and managed from the agency's offices in Nantwich, South Cheshire. Park Foster Care is on the preferred provider list of five local authority consortia, throughout the North West and Midlands.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The agency provides outstanding support, training and supervision to its staff and carers. This enables them to provide very high quality care to children and young people. The promotion of children and young people's health is good and The promotion of all outcomes for children is outstanding.

Children and young people speak very highly of their foster carers and the support they get from agency staff. Foster carers comment on the excellent support and highly professional service they receive from the agency. Social workers report that children are well matched, make very good progress and are happy in their placements.

The agency continually strives to improve. There is one shortfall that has a limited impact on the care that children and young people receive. This shortfall relates to foster carers not always having delegated authority to make reasonable decisions relating to children's care.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were four recommendations made following the last inspection and these were followed up. Three have been met. Carers receive written parental consent to medical treatment at the start of each placement. A recommendation is made to ensure foster carers have and use appropriate delegated authority.

Foster placement agreements contain information about children's specific and diverse needs and how these are to be met. Foster placement agreements are being replaced by placement plans, drawn up in conjunction with the placing authority social worker.

Safe caring guidelines are held in each foster home and are specific to that home and the needs of the children and young people living there. They are updated whenever a new child or young person is placed. Effective monitoring systems

ensure that written records are of good quality and shortfalls in recording are addressed.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people live in foster homes that promote their good physical, mental and emotional health very well. They access health services that meet their needs and receive encouragement to take good care of their own health. For example, they have healthy diets and learn to look after their own personal and dental hygiene. One said, 'I always eat healthily but we have a treat every Friday, which is pizza.' Another said: 'I've had lots of bad teeth taken out and now I've got a brace.' They receive support from psychological services as necessary and learn to take responsibility for their medication as they prepare for adulthood.

Foster carers follow children and young people's health plans and know how they are expected to promote their good health. Supervising social workers routinely check that foster carers are meeting children and young people's health needs and ensure they have the skills and knowledge to do so. They ensure that foster carers provide a healthy and varied diet and plenty of opportunities for exercise. Carers have a very good and clear understanding of their role in promoting children and young people's good health and there are many examples of children receiving the treatment and support they need to promote their good health. There is a health representative on panel and children's health needs are highly prioritised by panel.

The agency promotes children and young people's emotional and psychological health very well through close work with mental health specialist teams who advise foster carers and provide one to one work with children where necessary. Young people's sexual health needs are identified and they receive good support from local services and their foster carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people live in safe and secure foster homes where they feel safe and well cared for. For example, a young person said: 'I feel safer now I am in foster care; much safer than before.' Effective health and safety measures and safe caring policies are in place, regularly updated and routinely monitored so that they serve to promote children's safety. Appropriate child protection software is in place and promotes children and young people's safety when using the internet. The agency has access to specialist technical support services that provide additional computer safety as necessary.

Social workers carry out unannounced visits annually, during which they check children's sleeping arrangements and the safety of the premises. Social workers ensure that foster carers have all the information they need to safeguard and

promote the welfare of the children they are looking after. A health and safety officer also checks each foster home annually and reports on any deficits in the physical safety of the premises; these are addressed as necessary.

Safeguarding concerns are dealt with promptly and the service works closely with the Local Authority Designated Officer for safeguarding, the police and other agencies when allegations or disclosures of abuse are made. This ensures that prompt action is taken to keep children safe. Investigations carried out by the agency are thorough.

Few children go missing from home but where they do, good procedures protect children who are missing and prompt action is taken to secure their safe return. Foster carers are supported to work closely with police.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people develop trusting relationships with their carers and enjoy participating in family life. A typical comment from a young person was: 'I am happy. I like being here because they look after me. They are kind and caring.' They learn to behave in a socially acceptable way because carers respond to them appropriately and provide encouragement and opportunities to develop self-esteem and self-control.

The agency employs an education consultant who trains and advises carers on how to work effectively with schools and support children and young people's education. The consultant also liaises with schools and local authorities, including virtual heads, to ensure that children and young people receive the education to which they are entitled; additional support is provided when needed. For example, one young person said: 'I get lots of help from school and lots of help from my carers. They help me with my spelling and words I can't read.'

Children and young people make very good progress at school, catching up on missed work and engaging in additional tuition where needed. Foster carers attend parents' evenings and personal education planning meetings. They have the skills to work closely and confidently with schools to ensure that children and young people make the most of their education and get the support they need within school.

Children and young people make very good progress. A number have won awards from school for the marked improvement in their academic performance and teachers comment on their improved presentation, readiness to learn and interaction with peers. One young person said: 'They've really helped me. I'd have been kicked out of school if I hadn't come here.'

Children and young people develop self-confidence through participating in a range of activities and through learning and mastering new skills. Foster carers encourage children and young people to develop their own interests and children and young people experience the joy of achieving in something they value. For example, they have won awards for successfully competing in rugby, horse riding and football. The

agency arranges social events and celebrations such as Christmas parties, summer barbecues and award ceremonies that children and carers enjoy.

The agency ensures that children live in foster homes that have sufficient space, and are maintained to a suitable standard. Children and young people have their own rooms, or share with a sibling when this is in their interests. The potential for bullying is always considered before room sharing is agreed. The amount of play space, including the size of the garden, is considered especially when placing young children. Some young people commented that their carers do not have sufficient authority for decision making about their day-to-day care. For example, foster carers have to seek permission for them to have overnight stays with friends.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people report that they are listened to and that their views are taken into account in all aspects of their care and future plans. For example, one said: 'They are always there for me and I can always talk to them.' Children and young people report they feel part of their foster families and are well cared for. The following comment from a young person reflects the views of many who contributed to the inspection: 'I have lovely carers who make me feel a part of their family.'

When local authorities have proposed a move of placement that is not in accordance with a young person's wishes and best interests, the agency has engaged the independent advocacy service, Voice, to act on behalf of the young person. Foster carers have pro-actively involved independent reviewing officers so that children and young people move placements only in accordance with good placement planning. This means that children and young people who are in successful, stable placements do not move unnecessarily.

Children report that they know how to make a complaint and have written information about how to access advocacy services. However, they report they have no reason to complain and are very happy with their placements and the support they get from Park Foster Care. For example, one said, 'They sort it out fast if I've got a problem.'

Although the service endeavours to obtain the views of parents and social workers, it has had limited success with this and their direct comments are rarely available to inform foster carer reviews. However, the service ensures that social workers have the opportunity to comment on the placement and the care provided through regular quarterly joint visits to carers by supervising social workers and placing social workers. Plans are in place to develop interactive questionnaires that social workers may find easier to complete. Similarly, the questionnaires that children are invited to complete are being updated because some children decline to complete them and young children, in particular, do not always contribute. Children and young people are contributing to the development of the new questionnaires through their involvement with Barnardo's care leavers panel and the agency's Shout group for

young people.

Each child and young person's needs are appropriately assessed and monitored so that they receive highly personalised care that meets their diverse needs and promotes their individual identity. This includes their religious and cultural needs as well as their health, education and social needs. The following comment from a social worker typifies their views: 'This is an excellent foster home; the carer has made a massive difference to the young person's life.' Support workers provide children with opportunities to develop positive, trusting relationships with good role models and to engage in a range of activities outside of the foster home. They also provide much needed respite for some carers.

Children and young people engage in life story work that is delivered by a competent support worker or social worker. Through this, they develop a good sense of identity and develop knowledge and understanding of their background. Foster carers understand the importance of keeping good quality information for children and young people. They encourage and enable children and young people to keep mementoes and photographs of significant people, events, and holidays. They understand the importance of promoting contact with birth families and support contact wherever appropriate. They challenge racist and prejudiced comments and help children and young people to develop tolerance and understanding of others.

Young people are invited to attend a support group called Shout that runs during the school year and gives them the opportunity to raise concerns, express their views and contribute to the development of the service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people receive support to develop self-esteem and emotional resilience. Through successfully achieving small steps at a time, they develop high aspirations for the future. Foster carers are good role models and encourage and enable children to succeed in all aspects of their lives.

Foster carers are fully involved in planning for children and young people and their views are taken seriously. They feel fully engaged in children and young people's care and development and in decision making. They work with social workers and others to develop and implement pathway plans for young people who are preparing for independent living. They provide very good support to children and young people in transition to new placements and to independent living arrangements. It is not unusual for carers of young people who wish to remain with them beyond the age of 18, to resign as foster carers in order to provide stability and care for the young person who has become a valued member of their family.

Foster carers understand the importance of helping children and young people to develop the skills they need for adult life and the agency's staff monitor how they help children and young people to prepare for independence. Young people are

supported to attend college and know that a good education is key to future successful work. One young person commented: 'I did work experience at a hairdressers and I loved it. Also, I've got a connexions lady at school helping me to plan for my future.'

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The agency has a clear recruitment strategy that responds to the needs of the local authorities it serves. Good arrangements are in place to ensure that applicants are dealt with fairly and promptly and that assessments are carried out in good time. Applicants are invited to attend an information open evening before they submit their application and attend a Skills to Foster training programme before or during the assessment. Robust checks of applicants' suitability are part of the assessment process and a comprehensive report is presented to panel, with recommendations relating to their potential approval status. Newly approved carers report their assessment was 'really in-depth but didn't feel intrusive.' They said, 'We've been very impressed by their professionalism' and 'we didn't have to wait...they kept us informed all along.'

The panel comprises of members with a range of skills and experience, including expertise in children's social work, education and health, a care experienced young person, foster carers and a birth parent. The central list is sufficient to ensure quoracy at each panel. All members actively and effectively contribute to discussions so that reports are very well scrutinised and recommendations are well evidenced. The panel is led by a competent, independent chair and has access to independent medical advice.

Prior to the inspection, the agency recognised that the agency decision maker needs to be social work qualified. It recruited a qualified social worker who is suitably competent to this role. The member of staff will take up post at the end of September 2011.

Social workers report that children and young people receive a very good standard of care. Effective systems ensure that they are well matched to foster carers who can meet their assessed and presenting needs. When shortfalls are identified, additional support is provided to ensure children's diverse needs are met. Foster carers report that information received about children and young people prior to a planned placement is usually 'very informative and extremely thorough.'

The Statement of Purpose accurately reflects the service provided and is made available to placing authorities, foster carers and staff. The children's guide is provided to carers to share with children. The agency has begun work on updating these and other guidance documents so that they fully reflect the 2011 Regulations and National Minimum Standards. A group of children and young people currently looked after by the agency are contributing to the development of the new children's guide. Foster carers report that the agency is always encouraging children and young

people to, 'make suggestions on how to improve things.'

The ownership of the agency changed in August 2010 and it is now owned by a national provider that is financially secure and committed to ensuring that the high quality of its work continues. It is well managed by a competent manager who has extensive experience in providing a fostering service. The manager is highly valued by the staff team who appreciate her depth of knowledge and good management skills. The manager leads the staff team effectively so that the agency delivers the best possible care to children.

Good recruitment and training processes ensure that staff are highly competent. First aid training is delivered annually and additional first aid training is put on to meet the needs of new staff. For example, an additional training day is planned in the near future for all the newly recruited support staff because the service recognises the importance of having these workers appropriately trained.

Foster carers are very well supervised, supported and trained and this means they deliver high quality care to children. Eighty seven per cent of carers have completed the Children's Workforce Development Council Training, Support and Development Standards and more than 80% have completed the Park Positive Parenting Programme. This course has been designed under the guidance of Kings College University Research Council and focuses on guiding carers to successfully parent children with attachment difficulties. Foster carers report that this and other training 'is excellent' and has helped them tremendously to understand the children better and to meet their needs better.

Each foster family has a safe caring policy that is updated to meet the needs of every child placed with the family and this ensures children's individual safeguarding needs are met. Annual reviews of carers are thorough and ensure that they continue to meet the high standards set by the agency. Training needs are identified and specific training is arranged for carers to meet the needs of the children placed with them.

Foster carers speak very highly of the 'brilliant' support and supervision they receive from the agency. For example, one said: 'They are always on hand, very supportive and are constantly and actively involved.' Five support groups are held in different locations throughout each month. Foster carers value the opportunity to meet with other carers and to discuss the challenges they are presented with and seek advice about how to address them. This includes advice from supervising social workers who remind carers of what they have learned in the positive parenting and other courses.

Each foster family is entitled to 18 days respite each year, when children are looked after by other carers within the agency. Children and young people are carefully matched and introduced to respite carers. This system works well to support children, young people and carers and sustains challenging placements. In addition, the agency employs a number of support workers who take children out on a regular basis. A foster carer said: 'When times get tough, they are there, preventing the breakdown of placements. They provide outstanding support to give carers a break.'

Staff are very well supervised, trained and supported and this enables them to work to the agency's required standard and provide a high level of effective support to carers. Foster carers have all commented very positively about the high quality of professional support and supervision they receive. Comments include, 'excellent supportive social workers', 'help and advice is always available' and 'these people really care about the children.' Senior staff participate in an out-of-hours rota and provide 24-hour telephone support to carers; this is very much valued by carers.

Records are held on computer and are well maintained and stored safely. The use of individual computer passwords ensures that staff have access to limited files and this ensures confidentiality and data protection. Information is routinely backed up to a local computer storage system that is external to the company. This ensures that records are stored safely and permanently. Carers are issued with lockable storage boxes where they keep children's confidential information. They maintain daily records relating to each child and young person and these are checked regularly by supervising social workers. Foster carers report that children and young people know about their records and can contribute to them if they choose to. Children confirm they participate in reviews and planning meetings and receive reports of these meetings.

Foster carers report notifiable incidents by phone immediately and record them in writing. This ensures the agency takes appropriate action to support carers in safeguarding children's welfare and that it notifies parents and placing authorities as appropriate.

The agency has very efficient administrative processes and payments to foster carers are always made on time. Carers know what they are entitled to and report it is sufficient to meet the children's needs. Good communication is enhanced because all recording is done on computer and supervising social workers use email and texts to keep in touch with foster carers. The office premises are appropriately insured and a business continuity plan demonstrates that the premises are leased for a minimum of five years. Foster carers, children and young people feel financially secure and are made welcome when they visit the agency's office. Foster carers appreciate the 'excellent and highly dedicated staff who provide a highly professional agency.' Foster carers who have been with the agency since its inception, said: 'We have seen many changes, but they still have the same high standards.'

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers are supported to make decisions within the authority

delegated to them without having to seek consent unnecessarily and that children can participate in age appropriate peer activities that would normally be granted by a reasonable parent within the framework of the placement plan. (NMS 7.4 7.5 and 7.7)