

# Parallel Parents

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	29/07/2010

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## 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, as well as children with disabilities and complex health needs. Fees vary according to the type of placement and the care package provided. The agency aims to promote a secure base and positive placements for all children and young people. Currently there are 200 children and young people accessing the fostering service and 177 fostering households.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Parallel Parents is an outstanding independent fostering agency which effectively meets the complex, individual needs of children and young people. As a result, children and young people make exceptionally good progress and excellent outcomes are achieved.

Children and young people are at the heart of this agency's practice and this is demonstrated throughout the service. It has a very positive and inclusive value base. As a result the views of all those involved in the service are actively listened to, respected and taken into account. Everyone in the service is valued and feels totally

part of the team. Foster carers all confirmed that there is 'none of this, us and them' in the agency, and that 'We are treated equally and very much part of the team.' Several other carers said that as part of the team, their job, 'Is to make sure children and young people have the very best family experiences.'

Staff in the agency know their carers very well and children and young people are extremely well matched with their carers. As a result they settle well, are safe, make secure attachments and thrive. The agency also provides a significant amount of high quality direct work with children and young people. This includes work by the supervising social workers as well as the support worker. This is instrumental in supporting improved outcomes and exceptional progress. For example, many children and young people show significant improvement in their ability to make attachments, in their emotional stability and in improved behaviour at school. This direct work also helps maintain some foster placements that could be at risk of breaking down. Consequently, the agency has a very low rate of placement disruptions. Carers and stakeholders fully recognise the value of the direct work of the agency and are extremely complimentary about it.

The agency effectively recruits carers to meet the needs of children requiring fostering placements and is currently working very hard to attract a more diverse group of carers. It is particularly good at recruiting carers for children with disability. As a consequence, the agency has a much higher proportion of children with disabilities placed with their carers, than the national comparator for Independent fostering agencies (IFS). For example, this agency had 12% of the total number of children placed, who had disabilities, and the comparator figure for IFS's in 2013 was 2%.

The agency's preparation, assessment and training of carers is excellent. Stakeholders are fulsome in their praise of the carers, who they describe as being, 'Extremely professional and of a very high calibre'. The number of filled placements is 58%, which is in line with the national comparators for all IFS at 56%. Foster carers have regular supervision visits, which are of a high standard. The agency carries out three unannounced visits each year and all foster carers are annually reviewed. These mechanisms provide an appropriate degree of both challenge and support to ensure carers are working safely and in the best interests of the children in their care.

Carers comment that the supervision and support they receive from the agency is excellent. Consultation with all those involved with the service is a high priority. Consequently, this is actively promoted and is used to support the development of the agency. Partnership working is strength of the agency. They have excellent, effective relationships with social workers, commissioners and other stakeholders to promote the best interests of the children and young people.

Leaders and managers provide very strong leadership and have a clear vision for the agency. The agency is exceptionally well managed and robust quality assurance systems are in place. The Registered Manager, regional managers and staff know the children and young people very well and regularly monitor the progress they are

providing. They are accessible and approachable to carers, staff, and children and young people alike. All those involved in the agency are ambitious for the service and continually want to improve and develop. It is a learning organisation which is able to demonstrate the progress it has made since the last inspection, including its learning from complaints and other issues.

### **Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people are very well matched with their foster carers. Carers have a very good understanding of their individual needs and they go to great lengths to ensure they are met. Children and young people develop excellent relationships with their carers. Consequently, they develop a very secure base with their carers and feel very much part of the family. They also receive exceptional care and are able to experience and enjoy a variety of extremely positive experiences. This enables children and young people to make considerable progress and achieve excellent outcomes in their lives.

Children and young people spoken with said they felt very much part of the foster family, were very safe and were extremely happy living with their foster family. A large majority spoken with said that they really trusted their foster carers, felt they had their best interests at heart and really valued the help, support and care they received from their carers. This is clearly illustrated by the young people spoken with, for example, one said, 'I am happy living with my family; I have never been happier'. Another young person said, 'My family are the best, what more could I wish for'. Another young person said, 'My foster carer loves her job, she is fantastic. I am so happy and I really love her'.

A number of children and young people, including some who had experienced a large number of placements, prior to being placed with the agency's foster carers, said that they felt secure, well cared for and were much happier with their current carers. All children and young people spoken with had developed extremely strong relationships with their carers and this had greatly enhanced their ability to trust people. As a result they had been able to develop relationships with their peers and adults, including those in authority. They had also made significant progress with regard to their confidence and self-esteem. They had also achieved a great deal in their daily lives, for example, in relation to their education, health and leisure activities. There had been a significant reduction in children and young people's risk taking behaviours, for example, missing from care incidents. Consequently, the proportion of young people going missing is 4%, which is 3% lower than the national comparator for all independent fostering agencies. Children and young people also increasingly develop positive peer relationships and aspirations for their future. For example, several young people talked about their plans to become skilled tradespeople, teachers, others talked about joining the police force and the prison service.

Children and young people are well able to express their views to their foster carers,

the agency's supervising social workers, the managers, as well as through one-to-one meetings with their social worker, as well as their independent reviewing officer. They also have access to an independent advocate via their responsible placing authority when there is a need.

Children and young people are always listened to and are encouraged to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. This enables them to feel good about themselves and empowers them to make appropriate choices in their lives. Consequently, there are many examples where children and young people's behaviour and outlook to life changes. For example, they acquire and considerably improve their intellectual, social and emotional skills. This is demonstrated by some young people being able to move from residential educational provision to schools in their community, which they can attend on a daily basis. Other young people have significantly increased their school attendance and a number of young people have been able to further their education by commencing college or university.

All children and young people have up-to-date health assessments, which clearly outline their health needs. Health care plans are in place, along with signed parental consent forms for medical treatment. This ensures that children and young people gain the treatment required when they need it. They all have full access to the necessary health professionals and resources so their health needs can be met. They also live in a very healthy environment and their physical, emotional and social well-being is very actively promoted. Children and young people benefit from healthy lifestyles, as foster carers work hard to ensure children and young people enjoy a well-balanced, nutritious diet. In addition, they are encouraged to undertake healthy exercise, such as playing football, rugby, running, walking and cycling. As a result of this, a number of children and young people who were previously significantly overweight have been able to lose weight and this has greatly increased their self-esteem. Foster carers are provided with excellent specialist health care training, if caring for a child or young person with disabilities and complex needs.

The agency is very active in promoting education. This has resulted in children and young people benefitting from attending schools, which meet their needs. It has also resulted in the vast majority of children and young people attending school regularly. Moreover, in taking in account their starting points, they are making exceptional educational progress and are attaining extremely good educational qualifications. Consequently, there are many examples of children and young people exceeding their educational targets and catching-up with their peers. This is underpinned by foster carers establishing excellent relationships with schools and doing their utmost to ensure they encourage and support young people to attend and succeed at school. Effective support from foster carers, as well as the advice provided by the headmaster of one of the organisation's schools, ensures children and young people are in an appropriate school to meet their needs. This enables them to gain qualifications and where ever possible to move on to further education.

All children and young people are able to pursue their individual interests and social activities, such as singing, dancing, playing football, rugby, walking, cycling, join local clubs and do art and craft work, and many other activities. The agency and foster

carers are very proactive in ensuring children and young people are able to pursue their interests and leisure activities. This enables them to develop their specific interests, abilities, skills and ensures children and young people lead full and active lives.

Children and young people, where it is appropriate, are able to live with their brothers and sisters. This enables them to meet their personal and emotional needs and maintain a family bond. In other circumstances, children and young people's views and opinions are respected regarding contact arrangements and they are fully supported to maintain appropriate family contact. Foster carers totally understand the importance of family contact and are fully supported in this by all the staff. Consequently, in appropriate circumstances, staff work extremely hard and often in a very creative way, to rebuild family relationships and enable the child or young person to realise their wishes in keeping in contact with their family. This enables them to remain connected to their family background and to develop a sense of identity.

A very large majority of children and young people in this service have enjoyed long-term stability within their placement. The agency also has some young people, over eighteen years of age, who have been able to remain with their foster carers. Those spoken with commented extremely positively about the fostering agency and the general view, as expressed by one young person, is that the staff are, 'Fantastic.' Children and young people stated that they know all the staff in the agency very well, as they all meet up on a regular basis to engage in leisure activities. This enables them to have fun together and if they want to; they can share their experiences of being fostered and support each other. During these sessions they also have the opportunity to talk to staff individually or as a group. For example, they can talk personally about any issues troubling them or talk about their ideas regarding the development of the fostering service. They stated that staff are always extremely keen to listen to their views and will use them to develop the service. For example, they have been involved in the development of the children's guide and there are plans to involve them in staff selection.

Children and young people's rights are protected by listening to their views. This enhances their sense of security. Children and young people feel valued because foster carers listen carefully and take on board any comments and feedback that is given. They willingly act as advocates so that views of the child are taken seriously and acted on. Children and young people know and understand that they have the right to complain if they are unhappy, concerned or bullied. The agency's supervising social worker and the local authority social worker see the child alone, this ensures that the voice of the child is heard and opportunities for improvement are not lost.

## **Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency recruits foster carers to meet the needs of children and young people requiring fostering. Whilst the majority of carers and children placed are white,

British, the agency has recently broadened its recruitment campaign in order to attract a more diverse group of carer to meet the needs of children and young people being referred to the agency from a different ethnic background.

The agency is particularly good at fostering children with disabilities. In the year to 31 March 2013, a significant number of children with disabilities were placed with the agencies' carers. This equated to 12% of the total number of children placed. The national comparator for independent fostering agencies (IFA) in 2013 was 2%, this clearly indicates that this agency places a much higher proportion of children with disabilities than other IFA's. Foster carers are extremely well supported by the agency and the care provided is of an excellent standard. This results in children and young people making exceptional progress in their development whilst living with their foster carers.

The agency has good quality information about their carers, which is very child-friendly. This information is sent to local authorities and available to children and young people prior to them moving in with their carers. This information is of great assistance in preparing them for their move to foster carers and helping them to settle into their foster home.

A significant strength of the agency is the quality of their matching process. This process is fully supported by a dedicated team, who have prime responsibility in ensuring all relevant information and documents are obtained from the placing authority. This ensures carers receive all the necessary information prior to placement to enable them to make a considered decision as to whether they can meet the needs of the child or young person. Carers reported they are not placed under any pressure to take placements, instead the agency carefully explores whether the foster carers and their families can meet the needs of the child or young person and the placement is appropriate. This results in children and young people being extremely well matched with their foster carers and ensures the needs of children and young people are effectively met. This greatly supports placement stability and as a result placement disruptions and unplanned endings rarely happen.

The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers is excellent. The agency undertakes initial visits to potential foster carers to discuss fostering and if appropriate they are then invited to attend the 'Skills to Foster' training programme ahead of the formal fostering assessment. This training programme places a strong emphasis on attachment; safe care and child development are well communicated. Assessments are of an extremely high standard and are produced in a timely manner. This has also been commented upon by several local authorities, as well as the panel chair, vice-chair and some of the panel members.

Foster carers spoken with confirmed that they have greatly benefited from the training programme, as it had enabled them to understand and help the child or young person in their care, for example, to begin trusting them and develop attachments. As a result children and young people have been able to increase in self-confidence and begin developing a sense of their own self-worth. It has also



helped foster carers to understand the behaviour presented by the young people in their care and to manage this more effectively.

Foster carers spoken with demonstrated a very thorough understanding of their role, including the limits of their delegated authority, and that of the agency and the child's local authority. Children and young people spoken with during the inspection were extremely positive about their carers and said the care provided them was excellent.

Foster carers are very aware of the importance of enabling a foster child to settle in to the family and feel happy and secure. Social workers were very complimentary about carers and full of praise about their practice. Foster carers are also excellent at working with members of the birth family and in gaining an understanding of their situation; they demonstrate a great deal of empathy towards them. As a consequence, carers were able to help their child understand their situation much better. Agency staff also assist in this, as where appropriate, they will undertake life work with a child or young person. They will also undertake direct work with young people on a range of issues, including self-harm, challenging behaviour, independence skills and personal care. The agency also liaises and very actively works with local authorities and other external services to ensure they obtain any necessary specialist support for their carers and children. As a result, children and young people make exceptional progress in their foster families.

Foster carers receive excellent supervision and support. All foster carers spoken with said, 'Parallel Parents is a very caring agency. It is not like being part of a corporate organisation; instead it is more like being part of a family.' Several other foster carers said, 'There is none of this, us and them; if we have a problem we can speak to anyone, including the Director. They are all approachable and really helpful.' Foster carers were particularly complimentary about the support provided and its impact on the care that they provide. They said, 'The support provided is absolutely fantastic.' Other said, 'Excellent', 'outstanding'. A large number of carers described their support and explained that, 'Staff are available twenty-four/seven and nothing is too much trouble.' Foster carers particularly appreciate this when in crisis and they require additional guidance and support. Carers provided numerous examples of this, including telephone contact and visits made by staff, in the early hours of the morning. One carer said, 'I really could not be as effective without the fantastic support provided by my worker. She is brilliant.' Carers also find the support from the educational services of the organisation really helpful, as carers are able to obtain appropriate educational packages and support for their child or young person. A number of foster carers stated that the supervision and support they receive from this agency, was far superior to that of other fostering agencies.

The agency recognises the importance of training and offers a very wide ranging programme of training. This ensures carers receive continuous professional development opportunities. A number of foster carers are experienced carers and have completed the Children's Workforce Development Council's training. These carers bring with them a wealth of knowledge and skills, as evidenced in their training portfolios. A large number of carers have undertaken the Training, Support

and Development (TDS) Standards. All new carers are also working towards completing the TDS standards in order to increase their professional practice. Foster carers were extremely complimentary about the training provided them and the agency in general. The overall view of carers spoken with during this inspection can perhaps be best illustrated in a comment made by two carers. They said, 'It is an excellent agency. Training is very good; I cannot fault them, nor can I think of any ways that they could improve.'

The agency has a robust fostering panel which plays an important role in the quality assurance function and promotes safe, secure and stable placements. The central list is currently being expanded as the agency recognises that it needs more diversity to reflect the current needs. The majority of panel members are independent and this ensures there is the necessary independence and objectivity. The panel chair and vice-chair are extremely experienced, knowledgeable and have good chairing skills. Both provide effective leadership in encouraging members to challenge and rigorously consider approvals, reviews and deregistration. The panel administration is extremely efficient and members receive the papers in good time so they can give them their full consideration. Decision making is robust, prompt and effective.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency places a high priority on safeguarding and has robust procedures and practices in place. This ensures children and young people are protected and kept safe.

Since safeguarding is at the forefront of their work, it forms a significant part of the work undertaken in the recruitment, preparation, assessment and supervision of carers. Consequently, foster carers receive a range of safeguarding training, which starts during their Skills to Foster preparation course and continues throughout their fostering career. The agency has also ensured all recent and relevant information regarding safeguarding issues have been addressed with foster carers. For example, the latest information and procedures to be followed regarding children missing from care, as well as child sexual exploitation and internet safety. Carers also receive a foster care handbook, which provides amongst other things, written guidance on how to respond to disclosures or safeguarding concerns.

Carers demonstrate a robust understanding and knowledge of safeguarding issues and their responsibilities as foster carers. They carefully follow the systems and processes to manage risk taking behaviours once young people are placed. For example, robust risk assessments are in place. These are regularly reviewed to ensure they are up-to-date and continue to significantly contribute to managing and reducing risks to young people. Those spoken with confirmed they had an excellent understanding of safeguarding issues and procedures. They also had a very open attitude to disclosures and fully understood the impact of abuse upon young people's behaviour. They were also very confident in responding to children and young people's changing needs for protection.

Placement planning is very comprehensive and fully addresses all aspects of risk. All safe care plans are individualised and based on a robust understanding of the impact of previous experiences to each child or young person. These are implemented and regularly reviewed in line with presenting and assessed risks. Children and young people take age-appropriate risks to enable them to develop their own understanding of how to keep themselves safe. This is further supported by direct work with some young people, including safe use of social networking sites.

The agency's supervising social workers have very good relationships with their children and young people, as well as the birth children of the carers. They always see the foster child or young person and any birth child that may be in the family, on their own. This enables the workers to develop a meaningful relationship with them. It also provides them with an opportunity to discuss any safeguarding issues, concerns or complaints that they might have about their carers, other young people in the home or the fostering service generally. Children and young people also see their own social workers, the independent reviewing officers and attend groups and social events run by the agency. There is also a process in place to ensure that unannounced visits are undertaken 3 times a year. This ensures children and young people are safeguarded and their safety fully addressed. Additionally, children and young people are informed of their rights to complain, have access to the complaints procedure, which provides them with opportunities to raise any issues of concern.

The proportion of children and young people going missing is 4% lower than the national comparator of IFS, which is 7%. Carers have clear guidance in addressing and dealing with these issues and there is considerable support provided them. The agency has worked proactively on reducing these incidents and as a consequence it has had a positive impact in reducing risk taking behaviour.

The agency has an extremely robust system for staff recruitment and is able to demonstrate, through a well-organised and systematic approach, that appropriate checks are carried out to ensure that staff are suitable to work with children and young people. Similarly, members of the central list are appropriately recruited and vetted.

The agency demonstrates a robust awareness of the actions to take if any allegations are made against either foster carers or staff and has implemented these in practice to ensure that appropriate action is taken to safeguard children and young people. Foster carers have access to independent support if they are the subject of an allegation, although the agency is mindful that the primary focus is to protect and support the child or young person. Carers are promptly deregistered if there are concerns that they are no longer appropriate to care for children.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Leaders and managers are passionate about their work and are totally committed to

providing a service of exceptional quality, with excellent outcomes achieved for children and young people.

At the last inspection, one recommendation was made with regard to ensuring policies on physical restraint provided appropriate guidance for carers and training to them was provided. This recommendation has been fully met and promotes children's and young people's welfare and safety.

Leaders and managers in the service are working hard to embrace current research in fostering, so they can incorporate it in their work and develop innovative and ambitious practice. Children and young people who are fostered in this service feel very well cared for, very safe and this has had a positive impact on their social well-being.

The agency has very clear managerial arrangements in place and regular, effective communication takes place with social workers and placing authorities. The excellent and highly effective working relationships that develop between them, enables the agency to ensure appropriate families are available to meet the needs of the children whom the local authorities need to place. It also supports the work being undertaken with the children and young people and as a result many make significant improvements in their development. For example, a number of young people have commenced further education and attend colleges and universities.

Children and young people have excellent opportunities to express their views, have fun and develop positive relationships with their community. For example, some children attend the local youth club, cubs, brownies and the scouts. These activities ensure children and young people have positive experiences in their lives and this greatly increases their self-confidence and social skills. They also influence their day-to-day care as they are involved in foster carers' annual reviews, as their views are always sought. They are also involved in social events and discussion groups, some of which include the birth children of foster carers in recognition of the significant role they play.

The agency has excellent quality assurance systems in place. For example, it has recently devised an excellent tracker system that very carefully monitors and tracks children and young people's health, education, and other aspects of their development, for example, their leisure interests and activities. The Registered Manager and the quality assurance team examine and analyse the data every month and if a child or young person is under performing in any areas; additional support can be provided. This helps to maintain and improve children and young people's achievement and outcomes.

The managerial team also regularly monitors and appraises agency records and they are extremely effective in addressing any shortfalls. Consequently, all records seen were up-to-date, very comprehensive, addressed the holistic needs of children and young people and were of a very high standard. The agency also completes detailed and analytical monthly reports, which are provided to the Director and senior managers. These give an honest appraisal of how

the agency is progressing. The annual report is similarly thorough, analytical and self-critical and used as a tool to drive improvement.

The ethos of the agency is such that there is a strong commitment to continuous improvement, which is shared by all staff, foster carers as well as the children and young people. There is also a strong commitment to participation and inclusion in the service, which is genuine and purposeful. This enables all who are connected with the fostering service to feel that they are valued, totally part of the service and its development. For example, foster carers are fully involved in the agency's service development through their one-to-one supervision sessions, their regular support groups and the various social events. Similarly, agency social workers seek the views of children and young people during their visits and at their regular activity and social events. The service actively listens to all those involved with the service and highly values their opinions. As a result, the service has made a number of changes. For example, the Foster Carer's Charter has been developed in consultation with carers and is fully meeting its commitments. As a result of listening to children and young people, the children's guides have been revised and re-written by them.

The Statement of Purpose gives clear information about the agency and is readily available on the website. The agency has a number of children's guides, devised with the involvement of the young people, so that information is available in appropriate formats so they can know what to expect from the service. Complaints are seen in a positive light and as a way of improving practice. The agency notifies the relevant agencies in a timely way and takes appropriate action in response to these notifications.

There is a systematic approach to recruiting carers which is reviewed regularly to ensure effective methods are being used to attract carers with the right skills and qualities to meet the needs of the children. In recruiting foster carers, the agency clearly values quality as opposed to the quantity of carers and is very eager to promote placement stability and positive outcomes for children and young people. Retention of carers is good, but the manager has clear oversight of this and uses her development plan to sustain and improve upon the number of placements provided.

Staff are appropriately qualified and extremely committed to providing excellent support to children and families. They are supported through access to good training, regular supervision and reflective practice. The agency is committed to supporting, valuing and developing staff, for example, in supporting staff to obtain professional qualifications. It has recently been accredited the gold award with Investors in People.

## 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.