

Progress Children's Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	David Morgan
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Progress Children's Services is an independent fostering agency that is part of Progress Children's Services Ltd. The agency provides a diverse range of foster care placements including carers who specialise in providing care for children with disabilities.

At the time of inspection the agency supports 35 households who care for 40 children. The number of households has increased by eight since last year.

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: **good**.

The last full inspection took place in November 2010 and found that the service was making adequate progress. Since then the requirements and recommendations have been addressed and additional developments have occurred. A new manager was registered in April 2012. As a result, the service is now at a good standard overall.

The children benefit from a high standard of support of their carers and the recruitment and retention of good quality carers. This is the basis of the good outcomes and highly personalised care that benefit most children. The management team has been adjusted recently with the promotion of the operations manager and appointment from outside the company of an experienced replacement. This has led

to certain refinements of responsibilities as well as important improvements. Although further changes are possible, there remains a high level of consistency in the service as a whole.

However, there is insufficiently robust attention to and understanding of monitoring. Although individual children's needs are reviewed regularly and addressed well, the overall trends and patterns emerging from the service's data are not evaluated sufficiently. This means that although the service has improved it has not done so as systematically or quickly as possible. Improvement is not as evidentially intrinsic to quality assurance and monitoring as necessary. In addition, a minor regulatory shortfall in the Statement of Purpose is identified and seven recommendations are made. These do not have a major or direct impact on children's safety or welfare but indicate insufficiently robust monitoring by the Registered Manager against the national minimum standards.

In most regards, the data provided by the service indicates that it compares reasonably well to its comparator services nationally.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
3 (2011)	place a copy of the Statement of Purpose on the website (Regulation 3(2))	03/11/2014
35 (2011)	ensure there is a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals. This is with regard to it being comprehensive evaluative and effective (Regulation 35(1))	03/11/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. This is with regard to risk assessments facilitating proportionality by quantifying the likelihood of occurrence and degree of hazard in order to demonstrate progress (or otherwise) in the level of risk (NMS 4.5)
- ensure foster carers receive sufficient training on health and hygiene issues and first aid, with particular emphasis on health promotion and communicable

diseases (NMS 6.7)

- ensure that unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and any information (including where appropriate, photographic information) they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding. This is with regard to Welcome Books being available for all households (NMS 11.3)
- ensure that each foster carer has a personal development plan setting out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. This is with regard to there being a commonly understood minimum level for each carer (NMS 20.5)
- ensure there is a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegations made against a particular member of the fostering household, or staff member, including details of how the allegation was followed up and resolved, a record of any action taken and the decisions reached, is kept on the person's confidential file. A copy is provided to the person as soon as the investigation is concluded. The information is retained on the confidential file, even after someone leaves the organisation, until the person reaches normal retirement age or for ten years if this is longer (NMS 22.7)
- ensure there is a good quality learning and development programme, which includes post-qualifying and in-service training, that staff are supported to undertake. The programme equips them with the skills required to meet the legal obligations and business needs of the fostering service. This is with regard to social work and other staff (NMS 23.1)
- ensure the fostering service's decision-maker is a senior person within the fostering service, or is a trustee or director of the fostering service. (NMS 23.12)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Most children are able to talk about or demonstrate significant improvements. One social worker reported that, 'The children's lives had improved significantly.' Individual cases show that children increase in self-confidence and benefit from wide-ranging social and recreational opportunities. Reflective practices by carers mean that children learn about themselves and increase their social skills. As a result they usually feel more socially integrated and are more able to resist disappointments. One young person said she had no enjoyable pastimes when she arrived and now she had lots. They establish constructive relationships with their carers and their extended families, which are the basis of their progress and have a sense of belonging. Children pursue the religions and cultures they feel most comfortable with. This confirms to them that their beliefs are valuable. Some children take an interest in religions that are new to them.

The vast majority of children attend school regularly and have clear education plans,

although some have necessarily had to change schools to achieve this. Progress in education is monitored regularly so that each child gets the support they need. In a small number of cases, extra support is provided by the service. Carers act like 'pushy parents' and were described by one social worker as doing 'an amazing job' on behalf of a child. Consequently, the vast majority are making academic progress. In some cases this means passing examinations. Awards have also been received recently for achievements in athletics and other non-academic subjects.

A majority of children are placed with carers at short notice. This is a challenging situation for them and they learn little in advance about the carers or their families. Most households have completed Welcome Books for new children but these are not consistently completed or issued. Subsequently, children experience a high level of contact by the support worker and supervising social workers. This particularly applies at the beginning of placements. Because of this contact, there are ample opportunities to express their views and the policies in this area are explained to them. Only small numbers of young people transfer every year to more independent settings but the opportunities to stay in the placements are considered.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The quality of service is good. A particular highlight is the support provided to carers and their families by all the staff. One carer said it 'vastly exceeded her expectations' and another said it easily exceeded that of other caring professions she had worked in. Carers and social workers consistently report that staff are friendly; helpful; transparent; accessible; eager to provide answers, and a pleasure to work with. This means that carers feel able to provide the most effective support to children.

Carers also confirm that a high quality and quantity of training is provided. As a result, nearly all households complete their inductions and training standards within their first year of fostering. This is a clear improvement since the last inspection. Subsequently, supervising social workers, the independent reviewing officer and panel members are not clear or consistent about what constitutes sufficient personal development of each carer. As a result, the competence of carers is not improved as systematically as possible. On the other hand, some carers have been supported to obtain higher qualifications and the service as a whole is increasing its therapeutic approach. Mandatory courses are completed by all carers and refresher courses occur as necessary. However, training does not occur on health and hygiene as required. This reflects poorly on the monitoring of the service against the national minimum standards and is of particular importance to the care of children with disabilities and complex needs.

One carer said, 'This agency was the best at following-up my query about fostering; they were persistent, which I liked.' Recruitment of new carers; their assessments, and annual reviews are currently the responsibility of an independent social worker who is supervised by the operations manager. This is a new, time-limited arrangement designed to improve the level of recruitment by undertaking a more

coherent series of campaigns. As such, it is too soon to judge its effectiveness although there has been a marked increase in households reaching assessment. The net gain in households so far this year is eight and significantly more than last year. Assessments are taking an average of four months, which is particularly efficient compared to other independent fostering agencies. Each year there is some natural turnover of households but this is minimal and retention is good. Recruitment of new carers occurs in all parts of the community (mostly the Midlands) and profits therefore from wide cultural diversity.

Placement disruptions led the service to review its matching processes. As a result, children benefit from much closer attention to their individual needs vis-à-vis the services on offer from individual households. Other strands of the strategy include increasing carer capacity and competence. Shortfalls in the information provided by local authorities (including placement plans) occur regularly and are routinely challenged in order to minimize delays in providing the most appropriate care to children. In tandem with this, all carers are now clear about the types of authority that have been delegated to them; this improvement is a significant benefit to children and helps avoid confrontations.

Panel provides another source of consistency in the service. The members provide a high level of expertise and analysis and are an invaluable source of advice to the service. Decision-making is thorough but is undertaken by an external individual. This does not comply with the national minimum standards but has minimal impact on children. Panel retain the services of a panel advisor too and this is under review. The organisation and timeliness of panel and decision-making are excellent, which serves to give clarity and confidence to carers.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children feel safe; they are encouraged to undertake new activities and take reasonable risks. There is careful assessment of the risks that pertain to each child and proportionate safeguards are applied. As a result, children are kept safe and the opportunities for them to come into contact with individuals who pose a threat are minimised. The agency's staff and carers are alert to the risks posed by social media, for example, and ensure that this is carefully considered in each household. Each household receives at least one unannounced visit per year. This is a satisfactory frequency with which to double-check the standards of care. Similarly, there is close attention to the employment of new staff, whether as employees or independent members of the team.

Incidents in which children go missing are relatively low both numerically and in terms of the degree of hazard involved. As a consequence, children miss a minimal amount of education. However, each individual case is carefully reviewed with other agencies and strategies revised accordingly. Notifications are made to other professionals, as required. The manager has recently improved the content of notifications to Ofsted to show that regulatory matters have been addressed. Carers

ensure that children know how to remain safe while also enjoying the same opportunities as their peers, for example, when using community services independently. Children understand how to make complaints and rigorous action is taken when they do, including referral to the external panel and de-registration in extreme cases. Importantly, appropriate efforts are made to ensure that children with different communication needs are regularly consulted in ways that are most likely to succeed. There is good verbal feedback to carers who have been the subject of allegations. However, more detailed written communication is necessary so they have clear verification of the outcome.

Following the last inspection, all carers receive training on encouraging positive behaviours and dealing with challenges. This is a significant improvement. Supervising social workers routinely review the effectiveness of such strategies for each child. Foster carers are able to demonstrate a good understanding of the processes that work best for their foster children and involve their own children, where appropriate. A helpful method of assessing levels of risk is in use although it not yet as useful as possible in reflecting trends to children themselves and the team around them.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Leadership of the service is satisfactory overall but requires improvement in some key areas. It complies with the Statement of Purpose but this is not on the website, as required. Children receive information about the service that is formatted to meet their individual needs. Recent changes have led to the appointment of a new, interim, responsible individual and a new operations manager. A review of the service has led to certain tasks being re-assigned, for example the recruitment of new carers and the decision-making role. These changes are evidence of the challenges and improvements that are underway to modernise and develop the service. On the other hand, the Registered Manager has provided important continuity to staff and carers since her appointment in 2011 and is appropriately qualified.

Regular monitoring exercises are undertaken by the manager but they lack insight and aspiration. As a result patterns and trends are not clearly evaluated. Opportunities to fully analyse important developments, such as placement breakdowns, the use of medication, suggestions from panel, and the holding of children, are not sufficiently well considered. This means that although improvements occur for individual children, they do not occur as extensively as possible for the whole service. Despite this, senior managers are ambitious to re-focus and improve the service, based on the principles enshrined in the Foster Carer's Charter. A quality assurance award has been achieved as an indication of the organisation's investment in its staff. There is close engagement with fostering bodies and investment both internally and externally in new initiatives. Sponsorship of public events occurs and new roles are being established to improve the service, for example, in the area of therapy. The commissioners in local authorities who

contract services from the agency feel positive about it. The agency improves its service as a result of concerns raised. A recent concern was raised about the management of children's savings, for example, which led to closer routine monitoring by supervising social workers. This benefits all the children.

Day-to-day support of the team is effective. For workload reasons, the supervision of certain team members is temporarily being undertaken by the operations manager. Although this complicates the decision-making process, satisfactory arrangements are in place to ensure the Registered Manager is fully involved. The last inspection raised four requirements, which were mainly about administrative issues. These have been all been addressed and have served to improve the service in a variety of ways. This means, for example, that carers always have up-to-date written details of their agreement with the agency. Of more significance to children is that all carers now receive behaviour management training. This has improved their confidence in dealing with challenging situations. Six recommendations were made last time and these have also been addressed. Of particular importance for children is that their health is protected by closer attention to the smoking habits of carers. Also, health and safety is now monitored by a separate team, which provides effective safety checks for households.

Team members are knowledgeable, highly motivated and present themselves well. They undertake extensive personal development and the social workers also provide training for carers; they sustain their professional accreditations, where appropriate. There are some minor gaps, however, which were brought to the attention of the manager. These include the lack of training in safeguarding for some administrative staff who occasionally meet children. Also, some social workers are not fully conversant with the medication and behaviour management procedures. This compromises their ability to monitor practices and raise standards.

There is improved attention to children's progress. The manager has begun a process of recording key changes and further work is planned in this area. The views of children about the service are also sought on a regular basis via social events and questionnaires. The results are analysed in an annual report and lead to changes in the service, such as increased attention to the needs of foster carer's own children.

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.