

Park Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC055725
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Inspector	Marina Tully
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

Setting address	Park Foster Care Ltd, Park House, Alvaston Business Park, Middlewich Road, Nantwich, Cheshire CW5 6PF
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Registered person	Park Foster Care Ltd
Registered manager	Philippa Kelly
Responsible individual	Beverley Senior
Date of last inspection	2 September 2011

Service information

Brief description of the service

Park Foster Care is an independent fostering agency. Services are currently delivered and managed from the agency's office in Nantwich, South Cheshire. The agency recruits, assesses and approves foster carers who provide a range of placement types including emergency, short-term, long-term and parent and child.

At the time of the inspection, there were approximately 61 approved foster families caring for 86 children and young people.

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**

This is a good and effective fostering agency. The vast majority of children make measurable progress from their starting points. Many of them benefit from being able to live with their brothers and sisters in stable long-term placements. This stability enables them to make meaningful and trusting attachments with their fostering families, which in turn supports their ongoing progress. Children profit from the additional input of the agency's therapist and education adviser.

There have been changes in the leadership and management of the agency. The overall view of these changes is positive, and both the foster carers and staff report benefits to the service. The new managers' future development plans are promising. The targeting of recruitment in specific areas to increase the diversity of foster carers will help to provide more children with the opportunity to live in a family.

The process for assessing and approving foster carers is robust and efficient. Assessments are thorough and the reports clearly demonstrate the ability of the applicants to care for the children effectively. Overall, matching, carer support and training are all good. Consequently, the majority of the children placed benefit from good care and placement stability.

The foster carers and staff are well supported and this is reflected in the high standard of care provided to the children. The managers are visible and approachable. The staff and foster carers say that they have easy access to the managers for advice and support when needed. The managers demonstrate a commitment to the continued development of the service and foster carers and children are meaningfully engaged in this process.

While there are areas to improve in safeguarding, specifically around recognising and reporting child sexual exploitation concerns, the majority of the children are safe and secure in their fostering homes.

Two requirements and two recommendations have been made at this inspection. These relate to improving safeguarding practice, sending progress reports to Ofsted, matching and safer recruitment procedures.

Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider; notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving any child placed by the fostering service provider, to the Chief Inspector; and, consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12 (3)(b)(c)(e))	06/05/2016
Ensure to provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. (Regulation 35 (2))	06/05/2016

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- Ensure that they match children and young people with foster carers who can reasonably meet their needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members is considered. (NMS 15.1)
- Ensure that they consistently follow good recruitment practice, and all applicable statutory requirements and guidance, when recruiting foster carers, staff and panel members. (NMS 19.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The children spoken to were extremely positive about their foster families and the care and support that they receive. This was reflected in one little girl's comments, 'I love it here, it's great! I want to stay here forever.'

A strength of the agency is their success at enabling brothers and sisters to live together. Over 50% of current placements are with sibling groups. Enabling brothers and sisters to stay together helps to support their emotional security and sense of belonging. In addition to this, the agency facilitates contact with family members in accordance with children's individual care plans. Well-planned family contact is helping children to sustain positive relationships with the people who are important to them, in a safe and enjoyable environment.

In the main, children benefit from stable nurturing placements and develop strong attachments with their fostering families. All foster carers receive training from the in-house therapist on attachment theory and practice. This supports them to nurture warm, trusting relationships with the children, which in turn enhances placement stability.

The majority of placements have ended in a planned way. Most children have moved in accordance with their individual care plans or, less frequently, when foster carers have moved to another agency. In the last year, there have been three unplanned moves. These involved four children moving on an emergency basis, with less than 24 hours' notice. The managers acknowledge how such endings impact on children's welfare and future, and have analysed these incidents and identified possible causes. They found that placing a child a distance from their home sometimes increases the likelihood of them going missing. This in turn impacts on the foster carers' ability to keep them safe and, on occasion, their willingness to continue with the placement. An action from the managers' findings is to place greater consideration on this factor when making decisions to place children out of the area.

The agency is continually improving how they prepare children for moving into their foster families. Whenever possible children are enabled to visit their fostering family prior to them moving in. The agency sends a child-friendly profile of the foster family to the placing authority to share with the child before they visit their carers. This includes photographs of the home, their bedroom, family members and their pets. In addition to this, each fostering household has its own welcome pack that clearly outlines routines and expectations. This pack also includes a copy of the children's and young people's guide to the fostering agency, providing additional information about who to contact if they are unhappy or wish to make a complaint. As a result, children are better prepared for their placements and know who to turn to should any problems arise.

Children have good opportunities to try new activities and to have fun. They are very much a part of family life. They go on holiday with their foster carers and are

encouraged to develop their interests, such as horse riding, cadets and socialising with their friends. The agency holds regular social events, such as Christmas and Halloween parties, including the foster carers' birth children. This helps to promote a true sense of family belonging and inclusion, as well as providing all of the children with the chance to socialise with other foster families. These well-received events are helping the children to develop new skills and greater confidence.

Participation and consultation are promoted effectively. The children's participation group 'SHOUT' has supported service development, for example by revising the children and young people's guide and making a powerful training video on what it is like to be fostered. Children have been involved in staff recruitment and a care leaver has recently joined the panel. Children's positive fostering experience is reflected in her comments, 'Even though I have left Park they are still there for me and if I ever need help they give it me even when they are not getting paid for me.'

The agency's education adviser supports foster carers to secure and maintain suitable school placements by working collaboratively with virtual school teams and placing social workers. Effective partnership working between schools, foster carers and specialist education teams is improving children's attendance and achievements at school. This is reflected in a head teacher's comments, 'They are doing a wonderful job with these girls. They are both making really good progress in all areas. The foster carers have transformed these children's lives.'

The physical and emotional health of children are promoted effectively. For example, in February 2016, 97% of children were registered with a dentist and 98% were registered with an optician. However, these statistics do not reflect the new placements where foster carers are in the process of getting children registered with the necessary health services. In addition to the in-house therapist support, the agency commissions a psychologist to provide the service with 15-hours input per month. This involves clinical supervision with their therapist, consultation and training with foster carers and supervising social workers, and, when appropriate, direct work with the children. As a result, foster carers and the team are fully supported and expertly guided to better understand and promote the emotional health of the children.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The process for preparing, assessing and approving foster carers is thorough and timely. Since the introduction of a different assessment tool, one that requires more detail and analysis, the quality of assessments has greatly improved. Feedback from foster carers on their assessment experience is positive. A newly approved foster carer said, 'The process has been very thorough but this is a good thing. It has helped us to understand LAC (child looked after) needs and how to deal with them. Park have been very professional and helpful. Although intense at times, I feel it has been a beneficial process and I feel more prepared and ready for the fostering task.'

The agency has a clear recruitment strategy in place, including ways to help increase the number of foster carers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This has involved adapting marketing material, such as posters, to better reflect people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. A targeted recruitment campaign in more culturally diverse geographical areas is further supporting the recruitment of black foster carers.

The agency has an appropriate central list of fostering panel members. The panel chair is independent of the agency and suitably experienced. Panel minutes demonstrate robust scrutiny of the information presented to panel, which helps to ensure sound judgements and recommendations. There is an effective process for agreeing the panel minutes that avoids delay in the decision-making process. This helps to ensure that the agency decisions are made within required timescales.

A range of training opportunities are available to approved foster carers and all agency staff. Training on attachment, autism, valuing diversity, first aid and supporting children with contact are just some of the courses provided. Records show that all current foster carers have completed the Training, Support and Development Standard (TSDS) within the required timescale. As a result, the children benefit from being cared for by suitably trained and skilled foster carers who are supported by a competent and knowledgeable team.

Foster carers speak positively about their supervision visits and the support provided by the agency. Regular visits, support groups, activities and phone contact ensure that the carers feel valued and part of the team. This helps to build the carers resilience and ability to manage the challenges that fostering can bring. Typical carer comments include, 'I get really good support and I rely on that a lot, especially from my supervising social worker' and 'Supervisions are great. I am most definitely supported, I can call any time.' Foster carers have access to 24-hour support, which includes the agency out-of-hours duty service. Foster carers value this service especially in times of crisis when they need additional guidance and support.

Overall, children are successfully matched to foster carers who can meet their full range of needs and provide them with a safe and stable family home. However, on one occasion, insufficient consideration of a foster carer's situation resulted in a placement breakdown. The manager acknowledged the shortfalls in this particular case and has learned from this isolated incident.

Foster carer reviews are held annually or sooner if necessary. These are independently chaired to ensure objectivity when appraising foster carers' practice and development. Placing social workers, agency social workers and children's views are routinely fed into these reviews. Most of the information presented by the agency is current, accurate and provides a detailed account of the foster carers' practice. However, it was found that on one occasion the agency social worker's report did not accurately reflect some previous concerns raised about the carer. The omission of such important information undermines the effectiveness of the reviewing process.

Partnership working with other professionals, including placing authorities, children's independent reviewing officers (IROs), independent advocates and schools, is

effective. This promotes the sharing of information about children and thus enables decisions to be well informed. Many professionals speak highly of the service provided. A social worker said, 'The carers are brilliant. The carers' supervising social worker is supportive of the carers and has attended meetings when required. She has also liaised with me when necessary. There has been absolutely no issue regarding the carers or Park Foster Care.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Safeguarding practice is not yet good because some child sexual exploitation (CSE) concerns had not been appropriately managed. This included not reporting concerns promptly to all relevant safeguarding professionals, including the placing authority, the local designated safeguarding officer, specialist CSE teams and Ofsted. For example, notifications, which were not sent to Ofsted until the inspector was on site, showed delays in child sexual exploitation risk assessments being completed, and supervising social workers failing to recognise child sexual exploitation risk indicators. Furthermore, a child's risks assessment had not been updated to reflect these concerns or the intended measures that should be taken to manage and reduce this risk.

In the main, children do not engage in high-risk behaviours, such as going missing from home, offending behaviour and drug and alcohol use. Most foster carers are vigilant and take effective action to manage risk. However, in one case, advice was not provided to carers early enough when there was evidence of known and ongoing risk of a child going missing from home. This did not ensure timely implementation of measures to help reduce the risk of going missing. Consequently, a young person continued to go missing without their carers knowing, which placed them in potential danger and compromised their safety, placement stability and welfare. The agency has appropriately addressed this situation through an early review of the carers' approval, and further training and practice reflection with their supervising social worker. The placing authority was satisfied that the agency had adequately addressed the concerns.

While this judgement area requires improvement, many elements of safeguarding practice are sound. For example, each fostering family has its own safe caring plan that is specific to the needs of their family and the children placed. Foster carers and all staff receive ongoing safeguarding training, including CSE and internet safety, substance misuse and allegations. This equips foster carers and staff with the knowledge and skills to support children to stay safe.

Health and safety risk assessments are in place for each fostering household and are subject to regular review. A minimum of two unannounced visits to the fostering home are carried out each year and children are spoken to alone. These visits are important as they help the agency to gain a more genuine picture of the standard of care and children's experience of family life. Children are supported by their carers to take age-appropriate risks, such as playing in the community with their friends. This ensures

that children have the same opportunities to learn through play and to take on new responsibilities like their peers.

The recruitment of foster carers is thorough. Rigorous checks are completed prior to their approval and this helps to ensure that only suitable people foster. However, a few shortfalls were found in the recruitment files of the staff and panel members. This included not having a second reference for a new panel member, not consistently exploring all gaps in employment and not routinely asking the reason for leaving previous employment that involved working with children and vulnerable adults. Therefore, safer recruitment practice can be further improved.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Over the past two years, there have been significant changes in the agency's leadership and management. A new Responsible Individual joined the company 18 months ago. She is very experienced and has a clear plan in place for moving the service forward. The Registered Manager has taken the lead on therapeutic support and learning and development. Her intention is to step down from the Registered Manager position and hand over this role to the team manager. The team manager has worked for the agency since 2011 and her application to register with Ofsted is currently being processed. She is very experienced and suitably qualified and demonstrates the enthusiasm and capacity for continued development and improvement. Strategic development of the agency is good. The new managers are keen to implement new ideas and to enhance their effectiveness, particularly in safeguarding practice.

Leaders and managers are extremely child-centred. They know the children well and have a good understanding of the progress that they make from their starting points. However, there are inconsistencies on how children's individual progress is recorded. Despite there being a wealth of anecdotal evidence of children achieving and making significant progress, this is not always captured and reflected in their individual records. This is an area that the managers recognise and wish to develop and they are committed to celebrating all achievements, no matter how small.

Management oversight and decision making is clear on foster carers' records. They complete routine audits designed to highlight missing documents and outstanding visits and appointments. Effective monitoring systems are ensuring regular and efficient monitoring and continued service improvement.

The manager produces quarterly reports for the directors of the company so that they are able to monitor the agency's progress and performance. However, these reports have not been submitted to Ofsted as required. This has prevented consistent regulatory oversight of the quality of care, help and protection and day-to-day operation of the service.

The statement of purpose and children and young people's guides are clearly written

and provide a comprehensive picture of the service. However, while the statement of purpose was available on the agency website, the children and young people's guides were not. This situation was rectified by the end of the inspection. Furthermore, a copy of these documents had not been sent to Ofsted. This did not have any impact on the children and was therefore addressed with the managers during the inspection.

All of the staff, managers and panel members are suitably qualified, experienced and receive regular professional supervision. Supervision is reflective and enables staff to consider case work decisions and areas for development. The staff feel well supported through regular supervision and visible and accessible managers, and they demonstrate commitment to improving the lives of the children by providing regular support and guidance to foster carers.

The requirement raised at the last inspection has been effectively addressed. The authority delegated to foster carers is clear, it is now routinely incorporated into the placement plan of the child. This is helping children to lead a more normal life, for example having sleepovers with their friends like their peers do.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and 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.