

Progress Children's Services

Progress Children's Services

Progress House, 127 Millfields Road, Wolverhampton WV4 6JG

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is a private limited company. The agency offers short- and long-term placements for disabled and non-disabled children, and short-break services. There were 28 fostering households providing care to 28 children at the time of the inspection and a further three children use the service for short breaks. The organisation also has five registered children's homes and operates a domiciliary care service that is registered with the Care Quality Commission.

Inspection dates: 7 to 10 November 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 29 September 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None.

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- A well-organised registered manager motivates and instils confidence in staff and foster carers.
- The organisation understands the needs of the children it is responsible for. Children benefit from use of the organisation's range of creative step-up and step-down services for children with disabilities.
- Safeguarding arrangements are well managed in partnership with child protection agencies.
- Placing authorities, children, foster carers and staff are wholeheartedly positive about the agency.
- Children make good progress in stable foster homes. The agency works hard to support children to stay healthy, to achieve in education and to feel safe.
- Good use of independent scrutiny helps the agency to make changes and to improve practice where it matters most to children.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The agency does not always ensure timely decisions and notification to foster carers about change or review of their approval and about the foster care agreement.
- The agency needs to keep a better record of children's overnight stays, and of when children have been restrained by foster carers.
- The agency does not always have the most up-to-date local authority care planning or review documentation before placements are made.
- The agency has not made sufficient improvements in evidencing matching considerations, risk assessment details and how the agency decides when the quality of a foster carer falls short of the agency's standards.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
The registered person must ensure that as soon as practicable after making the decision referred to in paragraph (9), (9A), (10)(b) or (11), the fostering service provider must give written notice to the foster parent stating (as the case may be)—the revised terms of the approval and the reasons for the revision. (Regulation 28(12)(a)(c))	31/01/2018
<p>The registered person must ensure a record in the form of a register showing in respect of each child placed with foster parents—all elements of this regulation 22(1) a–g. (Regulation 22, Schedule 2(1))</p> <p>This is with respect to children staying overnight with foster carers as part of any introduction.</p>	31/01/2018
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17(3))</p> <p>This also relates to implementation of The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, Paragraph 3.13 and 3.15 in relation to delegated authority as part of the care planning and agreement process.</p>	31/01/2018
The registered person must maintain a system for monitoring the use of any measures of control, restraint or discipline in respect of children accommodated in a foster home. (Regulation 35(1), Schedule 6(8))	31/01/2018

Recommendations

- The fostering service should only suggest foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. (NMS 15.1)
- Ensure the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. Specifically, that children's history of making allegations are clear with dates and context. (NMS 4.5)
- Ensure a clear policy framework which outlines the circumstances in which a foster carer should be removed as one of the fostering service provider's approved foster carers, in the interests of the safety or the welfare of children is available to foster carers. (NMS 22.8)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make good progress. Each supervisory visit to foster carers has a specific focus on children's outcomes and experience. Stable placements give most children the secure base they need to develop. One child told inspectors, 'It's wonderful. We are happy.'

The agency has a history of successfully removing barriers to ordinary family life for disabled children. Fostered children can also have short breaks in the organisation's children's home. Five children have moved into permanent foster care from the organisation's long-term children's homes. Proactive support for transitions into foster care is possible because the staff know these children and their carers. This provides the basis for realistic matching and knowledgeable support. A parent of a child using the short-break service told inspectors that they were very satisfied with the service.

The majority of placements are planned. Recent children moving into foster care have been able to see child-friendly information about foster carers before they visit. The agency helps children to feel comfortable about moving in by organising careful introductions. This ensures that children get on with their foster carers and feel part of the fostering family. One child told the agency that, '[My foster father] is like a father to me. I like his honesty and obviously the give and take thing.' A placing social worker described foster carers being eager to meet and care for another child. She told inspectors, 'The minute he moved in they learnt about what is important to him.'

Foster carer training prepares foster carers to be realistic about and responsive to children's health and education, and their emotional, social and psychological well-being. Supervising social workers are tenacious in their support for children's developing needs in placement. Children do well in their education. Foster carers take good care of children's health needs and encourage healthy lifestyles and leisure activities. Children with previously poor bedtime routines get into good sleep patterns. The agency listens and responds to any concerns from children when they do not feel at home in their foster families. Placing social workers told inspectors their children 'absolutely thrived' in the agency's foster care.

Some children have moved on because they were ready for greater independence, or because foster carers could not manage their challenging needs. The agency tracks and reviews placement endings, including the handful of unplanned endings, to learn lessons about placement stability.

Placing authorities recognise the expertise held within the agency regarding disabled children. Foster carers help children to keep in touch with far away families. Early planning for 'staying put' means that children's permanence decisions can be made at times that are right for the children. One young person is applying for university, and will continue to be a member of the family, with their own bedroom to return to

in holiday time. This mirrors the expectations children have of a birth family.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children are safe in foster families that are rigorously assessed and regularly reviewed and monitored through frequent visits by supervising social workers. Close partnership working with placing social workers, parents and schools helps children to feel safe in consistent shared care, including when they stay for short breaks. Up-to-date care plans and risk assessments provide valuable information to help foster carers and their supervising social workers monitor children's safety. However, clarity is needed when children are reported to have a history of making allegations, in order to ensure that there is an accurate history that will inform a risk assessment.

Children are protected as far as possible from unnecessary risks at home or in the community. Foster carers help children to overcome anxiety, worry and unhappiness. Children who run away or who are at risk of sexual exploitation are helped to be part of the plan to keep them safe. Vulnerability to extremism is also closely monitored by the agency. The agency takes action alongside safeguarding partners when risks are identified. Arrangements for safeguarding and child protection are sound. Trained staff and foster carers liaise with the local designated safeguarding officer about all allegations or concerns relating to foster carers. Local authorities report extremely professional relationships and informal consultation about safeguarding thresholds.

Systematic reminders and tracking in respect of health and safety checks, alongside at least two unannounced visits each year, ensure that foster homes are always safe places for children to live.

Foster carers manage children's behaviour well. The agency has provided extensive support to those who have struggled to respond to children's challenging behaviour. Not all incidents of physical intervention with children have been documented or reported within the organisation's monitoring systems. However, these incidents have always been reviewed during supervision sessions with foster carers. A summary is now made of any allegations. The suitability of foster carers is reviewed at panel after any allegation. However, the agency does not make it clear to staff or foster carers the circumstances in which a foster carer may be removed on the grounds of poor standards of care, for example when allegations have not been substantiated, but concerns remain. There is no policy to guide staff or foster carers on this.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency has undergone a period of change since the last inspection in 2014, including having a turnover of three registered managers. A stable steer from the long-standing responsible individual, the panel chair, the operational manager and the agency decision maker, has ensured continuity. The current registered manager

took up post in February 2017. Social workers, foster carers, senior agency managers and placing social workers speak highly of her positive impact. She has significant social work, fostering and managerial experience, and is now undertaking an advanced management qualification. Staff told inspectors that she encourages and cheers the team as well as promoting professional development. Her active engagement in the daily conversations and decisions in the office provides motivational leadership for the staff. One supervising social worker said, 'She keeps me thinking.'

A clear statement of purpose helps staff, foster carers, placing authorities and parents to know what to expect from the agency. Children learn about their rights and entitlements in a range of children's guides which are made accessible to those with sensory or learning needs. The children's, foster carers' and staff's heritage and diverse needs are celebrated within an inclusive ethos. An independent professional told inspectors that, '[The service has] a real ambition to make sure disabled children get the services they need. A particular passion around disability.'

Recruitment, preparation and assessment of foster carers has been low this year. Only a handful of applicants have moved from initial enquiry to assessment. The agency is realistic about the balance between recruiting numbers and ensuring the quality of foster carers. Once they are being assessed, the agency ensures that prospective foster carers feel part of a timely and fair process.

The agency aims to make sure that foster carers hold the local authority care plan and know the history and wider plan for the child. The agency always chases this information. However, in one recent planned placement the foster carers did not have important details about a child's history because the local authority had not provided the child's care plan. Similarly, not enough foster carers hold clear agreements regarding the decisions they can make in relation to the children who live with them. This could be a barrier to children's experiences of ordinary family life.

The agency has revised the matching documentation to better record its extensive considerations prior to suggesting a foster carer for any child. However, this omits consideration of the needs of foster children who are already in the placement. Assessments and matching documents have not always been explicit about how foster carers manage the practical parenting of up to three children in placement. In one case, for an emergency move between foster carers in the agency, the matching form was not used and the placing authority said it had not been consulted in advance of the placement. Training recommended for foster carers at the matching stage of a placement has not always been completed, for example training on safeguarding or child sexual exploitation. This has relevance for future matching and placement considerations. The agency does not always make the legally required record of all children staying with foster carers part of its positive introduction to a foster placement.

One placing authority praised the supervising social workers as 'excellent'. They say that their support of foster carers is 'second to none'. Social work and support staff are very positive about their supervision, development and training opportunities.

However, the agency's increasing focus on the professional development and competence of social work and support staff has led to the omission of training for them in anti-radicalisation.

Foster carers are also very well supervised and supported by the agency. Foster carers have individual and group support through their regular meetings. One foster carer told inspectors that, '[Staff are] always available to talk, they help when you get stuck.' The agency provides a wide range of training opportunities. However, foster carer take-up is not as good as the offer. The agency places importance on all members of the fostering household completing both basic and advanced training linked to the specific needs of children living with them. However, its training records do not always clearly show the most up-to-date or comprehensive record. This is an administrative issue. The agency follows up training plans at panel and at each review. Supervision of foster carers by supervising social workers is both supportive and challenging when it needs to be. The vast majority of foster carers achieve the government's training, support and development standards within timescales.

An effective panel, led by an experienced chairperson, makes informed recommendations about foster carers to the agency decision maker. This can include providing advice on the quality of assessments. However, decision making about approval, changes to approval between reviews, and annual review processes are not always efficient. Improvement is required in this area to ensure that the foster carer agreement is not issued before the decision is made by the agency decision maker.

Business relationships are well established with placing authorities. Strategic relationships with the Local Safeguarding Children Boards, police, and the child health and education personnel in the nine local authorities where children live, are less well developed. However, the agency has worked proactively, challenging when necessary, and ensuring that children have the resources they need to progress.

Effective internal and external independent monitoring ensures that the agency, the registered manager and the responsible individual are clear about the strengths and the weaknesses of the service they provide to children. The cycle of monitoring, review and improvement includes consultation with stakeholders, children and parents. The registered person is aware that the impact of this consultation is not well reflected in the reports. Plans are already underway to improve this. Children are actively involved in developments to help the panel view foster carers from the child's perspective. The organisation seeks independent critical challenge. For example, it took part in the Ofsted new framework pilot. The registered manager has taken action to meet previous requirements and recommendations. The agency now benefits from better information, more accountable decision making, better managerial monitoring, and improved training opportunities for staff and foster carers. This has resulted in an agency that is better set up to deliver a service that meets regulation and provides increasingly positive outcomes for children.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC036627

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