

Parallel Parents

Parallel Parents Ltd

Care Today Children's Services, Lansdowne House, 85 Buxton Road, Stockport, Cheshire SK2 6LR

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Parallel Parents Ltd is an independent fostering agency, which has been registered since 2003 under a previous inspectorate. The registration transferred to Ofsted in April 2007. The service operates from the registered office in the north-west of England. The areas the agency covers include Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Lancashire, East and West Midlands, Yorkshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire. The agency offers a range of foster placements, including permanent, long-term, short-term, parent and child, and disabled children with complex needs. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 202 fostering households, who are caring for 222 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 29 January to 2 February 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 23 May 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- Children feel safe and happy, and develop positive relationships with their foster families. This, in turn, gives them a strong sense of belonging and security. A number of children have stayed with their carers post eighteen under 'staying put' arrangements.
- Foster carers and staff demonstrate an excellent understanding of children's individual vulnerabilities and potential risks. They follow detailed safeguarding procedures to promote and support children's safety and well-being.
- Individual risk assessments are detailed and include strategies to manage and reduce risks. Risk assessments are continually reviewed and evaluated to ensure that they remain current and appropriate.
- Many children remain together with their brothers and sisters in placements, providing them with stability.
- Children and young people achieve excellent educational outcomes. Carers are excellent advocates for children and young people, and ensure that the children and young people can access the right support in their educational setting.
- Foster carers feel highly valued and part of the team providing support to children. Training and development opportunities enable foster carers to develop and enhance their skills and knowledge to provide effective support to the children they care for.
- The agency benefits from strong and inspirational leadership. The registered manager and regional managers know the children and foster carers extremely well, have high aspirations for them and ensure that the welfare of the child is central to the agency's ethos and practice.
- Effective monitoring of the agency enables the manager to understand the strengths of the agency and address any shortfalls in a timely manner.
- Out-of-hours support is provided by the agency staff who provide responsive support. This is highly valued by foster carers.
- Allegations and complaints are responded to effectively, with appropriate action being taken and outcomes of investigations used to inform future practice.
- External professionals commented that the agency works in partnership with them to promote extremely good outcomes for the children they have placed.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children enjoy exceptionally positive relationships with their foster families. They benefit from placement stability, with many staying with their carers post eighteen. One foster carer commented, 'This is their home, and it is their home until they are ready to leave. It doesn't matter what age they are.' Another foster carer said, 'Fostering has been life changing. We are so very proud of our children. They have turned out as well-balanced and secure young people.' Children also comment exceptionally positively about their experiences. One child said,

'I love them [foster carers] and cannot thank them enough. It is a great family home with loving and caring people. They have helped me with my education, life choices and financial advice. I won't call them foster carers, as I don't class this as care. They are our family. I am happy and everything is going great for me.'

Professionals also comment on the positive relationships between children and their foster carers. One social worker said, 'It is evident that the children have built a relationship with their foster carers and they can express their wishes very well, which is very positive for them.'

The agency's aim is to maintain a 'family feel' where all staff, including the responsible individual, know the foster carers and children well. The foster carers and children spoken with during the inspection and in the response that they had provided to the annual survey clearly confirmed this aim.

Wherever possible, the agency supports brothers and sisters to live together especially when it is in their best interest. When this has exceeded the fostering limit, exemptions are approved. As a result, this has supported children to remain together, thereby minimising additional anxieties of moving into a new home away from their siblings. Where the plan is for children to return to live with their families, this is extremely well planned with high levels of support. Foster carers continue to work with children's parents and all professionals involved throughout the transition period.

The agency ensures that matching is as comprehensive as possible. As a result, many children benefit from long-term, stable placements. Agency staff have an excellent understanding of their fostering families, and this provides additional knowledge to inform their placement decisions. The agency takes into consideration a range of matching criteria and includes the needs of the children who are already in placement. Wherever possible, prior to children moving in with the foster family, introductory visits are arranged. This enables the children to meet their foster families. When this is not possible, the agency ensures that a planning meeting is held within 72 hours of placement to make sure that information is shared to support the stability of placement.

Children benefit from good and improved health outcomes. Training is provided to

foster carers where there are additional healthcare needs, for example assistance with gastro feeding. The agency works closely with children to support their emotional health needs and access to additional therapeutic support. The agency works in partnership with specialist healthcare providers to support their foster carers in providing excellent care to meet the emotional healthcare needs of the children placed with them.

Children achieve excellent educational outcomes. Carers advocate effectively for children, ensuring that children can access the right support in their educational setting. As a result, a number have exceeded expectations, with some children going to university and further education settings.

Foster carers understand and support children to continue to maintain relationships with family, friends and other significant people in a planned and safe way. One placing social worker said, 'Carers are able to facilitate contact between children and parents, and they will go out of their way to help. This includes transporting children as well as supporting telephone contact.'

The agency holds several fun days throughout the year, in which children, their foster families and agency staff all participate. This strengthens the bond between them. Children say they have lots of opportunities to take part in a range of activities such as attending football and youth clubs, swimming and activities with their foster families. This helps them to develop their interests and sense of belonging.

The manager and staff ensure that the agency is inclusive and values the views and experiences of children and foster carers. They continue to develop the agency with research-led good practice embedded in the ethos of the agency, in addition to making sure the welfare and progress of children is at the forefront of everything they do.

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

Children feel safe and protected. Individual safer, caring family plans alongside strong and effective risk assessments are in place. These are discussed and evaluated on a regular basis with foster carers. Children's views are gathered in relation to their care plans and risk assessments. This enables the foster carers and agency staff to have age-appropriate discussions with children in relation to risks. As a result, children become increasingly safe. Foster carers provide stability and routine, and can easily identify, understand and manage children's risks. All foster carers complete safeguarding training, which is updated to reflect changes to safeguarding practice.

The agency understands the significance of information technology but also recognises the importance of educating children and foster carers in relation to online safety. Training to foster carers is provided to ensure that they understand the importance of parental controls on computer devices. Foster carers also have information on different ways to support children to access information technology in a safe manner.

Few children go missing in this agency. When they do, the agency responds to this well. Foster carers understand and follow clear reporting and recording procedures, working with other agencies tasked with safeguarding children. The agency takes part in multi-agency strategy meetings, as well as requesting return interviews from an independent person, to enable children to raise any particular reason for their going missing. The manager and regional managers have undertaken level five safeguarding training and have developed excellent monitoring systems to have an overview of children who are at significant risk of harm. This enables further joint strategies to be implemented to manage known risks.

Behaviour management training has enhanced the foster carers' knowledge and practice on managing children's behaviours. Restraint is used only when there is a significant risk of harm. The manager monitors any incidents of restraint to enable her to have an understanding of the reasons why it has been used and to identify any patterns or trends. Foster carer support workers also discuss and review the strategies implemented, as well as gain the views of the child involved. Support workers and supervising social workers provide additional support and guidance to support placements where children may be unsettled. The foster carers and children's social workers identify this as a particular strength of the agency in supporting children to remain in placement and therefore minimise disruption in their lives.

The agency ensures that complaints and allegations are fully addressed through detailed investigations, leading to clear outcomes with strategies in place to address any shortfalls in practice. It works in partnership with other professionals, including designated officers with the lead in safeguarding, to promote the safety and welfare of children. Following investigation, the agency arranges an early foster carer review to address additional safeguards, including training, increase in support and supervision visits or a possible change in approval. Review reports for panel are comprehensive and cover all areas of practice.

Foster carers receive three unannounced visits each year, one of which focuses specifically on health and safety checks. This does not preclude health and safety being discussed during regular supervision sessions. However, the unannounced visits act as additional opportunities to ensure that the home provides children with a safe, secure and comfortable environment for them to live in.

Recruitment of staff and panel members is effective. All appropriate checks are made as part of the initial application, including the consideration of previous work experience and any gaps in employment. References are obtained and verified, and disclosure and barring checks are undertaken prior to any staff starting work with the agency. The recruitment of foster carers is equally thorough. All required checks are completed prior to the application being presented to panel. Regional managers provide a comprehensive overview throughout the assessment process to ensure that this is the case. The additional safeguard for approval rests with the agency decision-maker who also reviews recommendations thoroughly prior to the approval of carers.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers are highly motivated and passionate about the service they provide. The manager is a qualified social worker and has been the registered manager of the agency since 2004. Throughout this time, she has overseen the development and growth of the service, while ensuring that the focus of the agency remains child centred. This is demonstrated by the children's progress, placement stability as well as the views of children, foster carers, agency staff and other professionals involved in the children's lives. Comments received from commissioners of the service include, 'We have worked with the agency for many years and are confident in their continued stability and delivering positive outcomes for our children in their care.'

The responsible individual provides effective support and oversight of the service. Foster carers and staff say that all leaders of the service, irrespective of their status, are approachable and put the needs of the children at the forefront of their practice. One carer said, 'I have worked as a foster carer for both the local authority and this agency. I can honestly say this agency is excellent. The manager knows the children so well and ensures that she attends all sorts of activities and functions throughout the year. The children really like her.'

The manager and the regional managers and staff are excellent advocates for children. They appropriately challenge and discuss with other professionals when they feel that the needs of children are not being met fully, for example when additional healthcare assessments and support are required to meet the emotional well-being of a child.

Children's care plans are live documents which are continually reviewed to reflect progress and emerging need. The manager and regional managers have a good understanding of all children placed and the progress they are making.

Training and development is a strength of the agency. All foster carers report that they have access to a range of training and support to meet their needs. This includes online, face-to-face and peer-group training. One carer commented, 'The agency have really advanced the training and development opportunities for all foster carers. This, linked with career progression, means as carers we feel valued and supported to fulfil our role exceptionally well.' An example of this is the support provided by the agency to help foster carers manage challenging behaviour. This has resulted in a decrease in calls to the police when young people have presented with challenging behaviours. Carers reported that they now feel confident in dealing with situations, as they have a range of appropriate strategies to manage these effectively. Staff also say their induction and training is excellent. They are encouraged to access additional training and development to enable them to enhance their skills, which the agency funds. An example of this is support workers studying for social work degrees. Several staff said the ethos of the agency is to enable everyone to achieve their absolute best, and that help is provided wherever required. One staff member said, 'The manager and responsible individual have encouraged me all the way and it is because of this company that I have achieved so much. I am proud to work for this organisation.'

Staff benefit from regular supervision and annual appraisals. Their supervision enables them to reflect on their practice, as well as update managers on the children in placement. Monthly team meetings and quarterly full-team meetings with training further underpins their practice.

Strong and effective monitoring systems are in place. Notifications are made in a timely manner to the relevant people, including, where required, the regulator. Updates to notifications evidence action taken by the agency to address any concern. This, along with detailed regulation 35 evaluation of the service reports, enables the regulator to have oversight of the service.

The leaders of the agency have regular discussions with commissioners to gain a good understanding of the range of placements required to meet the needs of children. This is reflected in their recruitment strategy.

The panel has been established for a number of years. It has a large central list of panel members to enable regular panel meetings to take place. This helps to manage the number of foster carer approvals and reviews effectively. The panel carries out highly effective quality assurance to make sure that approval of carers is in accordance with the safeguarding principles of the agency.

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: SC067795

Registered provider: Parallel Parents Ltd

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Inspectors

Sarah Oldham, social care inspector

Ceri Evans, social care inspector



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