

Parallel Parents

Parallel Parents Limited

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

This privately owned independent fostering agency was registered in 2003. The agency provides the following types of foster placements:

- emergency
- short term
- long term
- parent and child
- respite.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 248 approved fostering households, caring for a total of 321 children.

The agency has two registered managers. One has managed the agency since it was registered and the second was registered in December 2020. The service operates from one central office but covers a wide geographical area. This includes Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Lancashire, Yorkshire and the East and West Midlands.

This inspection involved both on-site and off-site inspection activity. Foster carers and children were enabled to take part by video and telephone calls.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 1 to 5 November 2021

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: 29 January 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The agency's practice is extremely child centred. All staff, including managers, know the children well. Decisions are made in the best interests of children. Agency staff act as excellent advocates for children and will challenge placing authorities if required. Children spoken to during the inspection clearly know the staff well, as they are regular visitors to children's homes and they see them at family activity days. Consequently, children feel that they can talk freely to them and they have confidence in them. One child contributed her views in writing, saying, 'I have been in foster care with Parallel Parents for two years, I am very lucky. [Name of supervising social worker] is great, she brings fun activities for us to do. She also spends time talking to me, making sure that I am OK and getting to know me.'

Children make significant progress while living with the agency's foster carers. They have access to a range of new experiences, such as going away on holiday. Children receive support to develop their individual areas of interest, for example, horse riding. These new experiences help build children's confidence and self-esteem. Children also receive support to attend university or to set up their own business. Children develop a sense of belonging. This is because the organisation invests in them and supports their plans for the future.

The agency achieves positive results in placing brothers and sisters together when this is part of children's care planning arrangements. Just over half of the children placed with the agency live with at least one sibling. Children receive support to see their family members regularly. The agency takes a holistic approach, taking into account children's views about the people who are important to them and promotes these relationships, in line with children's care plans. Staff and foster carers appreciate the significance of these family relationships. They enable children to have positive experiences with their birth family members. The agency will fund activity venues if required and staff will attend to support children and carers. This ensures that the time children spend with their families is positive, yet safe. This also helps children sustain a positive family identity.

The agency's matching of children to foster carers is of a high standard. This results in children being placed with carers who can meet their needs. Placement stability is a key strength of the agency. Children develop a sense of belonging living with their foster carers and feel part of the family. Many young adults have been able to remain living with their family under 'staying put' arrangements, and some have also been legally adopted by their foster carers. These permanent arrangements help children to thrive and fulfil their potential, with the ongoing support of their foster family.

When children do need to move on from foster care, they do so in a planned way whenever possible. Children have, on occasion, moved into the organisation's children's homes, but these are children's homes where staff they know work. As a

result, children benefit from consistent support. Also, in some cases, children have made the 'step down' from a children's home to foster care, with the children's home staff maintaining contact with children as they build relationships with their foster carers. These moves are managed seamlessly and in the best interests of children.

Foster carers feel extremely well supported by the agency. Feedback received from foster carers as part of this inspection process was overwhelmingly positive.

Comments received include:

- 'It's an amazing agency, with the best team of people.'
- 'You are made to feel that you are part of the Parallel Parents' family and they genuinely care about everyone.'
- 'I'm not sure what I would do some days without the support I receive.'
- 'I really enjoy being part of the team. It is an incredible agency.'

Supervising social workers and support workers are easily accessible to foster carers. They know their cluster of carers extremely well. Foster carers report that, in the event of an emergency, they can always speak to someone who knows about their situation and who can offer timely and helpful advice. This is reassuring to carers when they need assistance.

Foster carers and children have easy access to specialist advice if required. Headteachers from the wider organisation are able to offer advice and guidance on educational issues. Similarly, therapeutic support is available within the organisation. Foster carers and support staff demonstrate a real understanding of the impact of trauma and children's early life experiences on their current presentation. Foster carers are supported to provide the required therapeutic parenting to best effect.

The agency has an effective recruitment strategy and has grown since the last inspection. A very successful mode of recruitment for the agency is via word of mouth from existing carers. Applicants can meet with experienced foster carers early in the process, so that they have the opportunity to explore the reality of the fostering task with those experienced in doing it. Assessments are completed in a timely fashion by social workers who know the agency and its requirements. Independent assessors are not used, which means that the assessing social worker can be fully involved in the matching and support of the carers' first placement. This ensures that the placement is successful for all, and that new carers do not lose confidence at the start.

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

Children say that they feel safe and secure in their foster families. This is key to their progress. One child said, 'My carers treat me well and we are always laughing,' and another said, 'We feel safe, secure and loved.'

Supervising social workers see children regularly, so that they can monitor their progress. Children spoken to during this inspection had positive relationships with the agency staff and said that they could speak to them if they had any worries.

Unannounced visits, which involve children being spoken to alone, are carried out three times a year and take place at evenings and weekends, to ensure that the standard of care remains high even when a social worker is not expected to visit. Face-to-face visits to children and foster carers continued throughout lockdown periods, with agency staff being more imaginative in how they were carried out. This helped ensure that children were safe.

The identification and management of risk is highly effective. Children's risks are identified and understood before they move into their foster family. Robust risk management plans include strategies for foster carers to manage children's behaviour safely. Foster carers are proactive and remain vigilant to these risks. This ensures that children are responded to in the most effective manner and, consequently, their risks reduce over time.

Foster carers understand when they need to share concerns with the agency or the child's social worker. They work together with professionals to ensure that children are safe.

Children's behaviour is well managed by their foster carers, who receive specific behaviour management training. Carers only use physical intervention when a child is at risk of harming themselves or others. Incidents of restraint are rare, consist of low-level holds and are carefully monitored by managers. Foster carers can access specialist training at short notice, via the wider organisation, when required.

High-quality fostering assessments, with a focus on safeguarding, ensure that only those suitable are approved to foster. Furthermore, those approved are well prepared for the complexities of the fostering task.

The agency places training and development of new and existing foster carers at the centre of their practice. Leaders and managers are committed to ensuring that foster carers are equipped with the skills they need to provide safe and effective care for children. The relevant range of post-approval training includes work on attachment and trauma, internet safety and social media, gang crime, children's mental health and trauma-informed practice, ensuring that carers have the knowledge they need to deal with these issues. During the pandemic, carers have been able to access online training and social workers have delivered training on an individual basis when required, to ensure that foster carers had the skills required to care for children and sustain placements. Training is also offered to those in foster carers' support networks, ensuring that children are always cared for by those with an understanding of their needs.

Complaints and allegations are taken seriously and responded to effectively, in consultation with other professionals. Outcomes from complaints and allegations are

used to inform future practice, with early reviews of foster carers taking place to ensure their continued suitability.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers are highly motivated and ambitious for the agency. The agency now has two registered managers, to maintain the high standard of service delivery, a decision made due to the expansion of the agency and the volume of work. They are both suitably qualified and experienced. They are also supported by a quality assurance manager. Together they provide dynamic and enthusiastic leadership. They are visible within the agency and very familiar to staff, foster carers and children.

Together with the responsible individual, they are always looking to further develop the service to meet the needs of children. The opening of a fostering resource centre is part of a recent initiative in one region. This is designed to make the move into residential care, or step down to fostering, easier for children.

Workforce development is a strength of the agency. The agency invests in those committed to its ethos and values. Staff have been supported to undertake social work training as well as other specialist courses, such as therapy and autism. This investment motivates staff and confirms that they are valued. The agency has a low staff turnover as a result, which benefits children and foster carers.

Robust leadership is evident. Managers are visible and approachable. One foster carer said, 'It is amazing how you can pick up the phone and speak to the registered manager if you want to, without having to go through a hierarchy. She takes her time to listen to you no matter how long you need. We are made to feel important and valuable.' This is reassuring for foster carers.

Managers and staff work in collaboration with other professionals. Communication between the agency and social care professionals, including social workers and commissioners, is very good. As a result, the agency has built strong partnerships with them. One commissioner commented, 'The referral team shares that the agency is creative and provides person-centred support. This is viewed by us as proactive and responsive to need.' Managers will also challenge local authority decision-making when required; they are strong advocates for children.

The fostering panel provides a vigorous quality assurance role, ensuring that foster carers are only approved when its members are satisfied that all the necessary checks have been performed adequately. The agency presents all annual reviews of foster carers to the panel, providing an additional level of quality assurance. One of the registered managers acts as the agency decision-maker. While decisions are made promptly, she is not currently recording her decision-making process clearly. She is failing to list what documents she has considered or her own reasons for reaching her decision, to ensure that there is a clear audit trail of decision-making.

The agency has a comprehensive range of monitoring systems. This ensures that foster carers have the information that they need, such as delegated authority agreements, and that checks are updated when required. A comprehensive report on the quality of care and operation of the agency has recently been completed. This document highlights patterns and trends and helps drive improvement.

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

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that when reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision-maker should consider *Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM* [2009] EWCA 328 (Admin), in which the court set out guidance for the way in which an adoption agency decision-maker should approach a case, whether it is a decision based on the agency panel's recommendation or the independent review panel's recommendation. This applies equally to fostering decision-makers. The court said that it would be good discipline and appropriate for the decision-maker to:
 - list the material taken into account in reaching the decision;
 - identify key arguments;
 - consider whether they agree with the process and approach of the relevant panel(s) and are satisfied as to its fairness and that the panel(s) has properly addressed the arguments;
 - consider whether any additional information now available to them that was not before the panel has an impact on its reasons or recommendation;
 - identify the reasons given for the relevant recommendation that they do or do not wish to adopt; and
 - state (a) the adopted reasons by cross reference or otherwise and (b) any further reasons for their decision.

(The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services, paragraph 5.40)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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

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