

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 service operates from one central office but covers a wide geographical area. This includes Greater Manchester, Staffordshire, West Midlands and East Midlands.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 208 approved fostering households, caring for a total of 246 children. The agency provides emergency, short-term, longer-term, parent and child, and respite placements.

The agency has two registered managers. One has managed the agency since December 2020 and the second since May 2023.

Inspection dates: 9 to 13 December 2024

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: 1 November 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children are cared for by foster carers who know them extremely well. Children have excellent relationships with their foster carers and benefit from stable, long-term placements where they are fully included in their foster families' lives. This is a real strength of the agency. One child told inspectors: 'I am one of their own,' and another child said: 'It's just like everything I want as a family.' Many children stay with their foster families for several years.

The agency's matching of children to foster carers is excellent. Child-centred planning ensures that children are given as much information as possible about the people they will be living with before they move in, including meeting them first and visiting the house wherever possible. Similarly, foster carers are provided with good information about children. This results in children being placed with carers who can meet their needs.

Children are in good health or are being helped to improve their health or to manage lifelong conditions. Their health needs are identified and addressed, and children have access to local services. Children with complex health needs are provided with a high level of support, and additional support is offered to foster carers that can exceed expectations. For example, children with complex health needs have been cared for in their own home by the fostering agency's staff to give the foster carers a break.

Children attend school or other educational provision. They are learning and making good progress taking account of their starting points. Foster carers are ambitious for children and support children's learning and development at home and school. Regular communication takes place between foster carers and the child's education setting or school. This helps positive relationships develop, problems are more easily solved, and children make greater progress.

The agency supports children to have appropriate and carefully assessed family time, and contact with friends and other people who are important to them, such as previous carers. Staff work proactively and positively with parents and former carers to promote meaningful and safe contact and continuity of care where appropriate. One parent told inspectors that they have a 'fantastic' relationship with their children's foster carer, and they are invited to school assemblies and agency events.

Children have opportunities to express their views in a variety of ways to help achieve change and inform decision-making. For example, children said they would like to participate in age-appropriate activities. This is now in place. A group of teenagers fed back that they enjoyed going to an escape room as it helped them problem solve, communicate and work as a team.

The help and support provided to foster carers is exceptional. Foster carers are provided with a range of formal and informal support, including proper supervision, peer support, out-of-hours support and access to independent support. Foster carers say they are 'supported day and night' and 'at all hours when needed'. Drop-in sessions are provided by the agency's therapeutic practitioners and education lead. Foster carer support groups meet regularly and across the region. The high level of support helps foster carers provide the best possible care for the children they look after. This is a real strength of the agency.

Direct work provided by the agency with children and foster carers is of the highest quality and is supporting improved progress and outcomes for children. Agency staff spend quality time with children, understanding their perspectives, needs and experiences, leading to more effective support and care. A sensory needs practitioner works with children and their carers to identify interventions to put in place to meet a child's sensory needs within the home and school.

Case records reflect children's lives and the work that is carried out with them. The records reflect children's achievements and relate to the plans for their futures. The style and clarity of records increase children's understanding of what decisions were made while living with their foster carers and why.

Foster carers say that they feel part of the team around the child and are actively involved in planning for the child, and their views are valued by the agency. One foster carer said: 'I feel like I belong to a caring and effective family team.' This is echoed by staff, as one social worker told inspectors: 'We are all part of the jigsaw puzzle, and when all the pieces come together this provides the best care for the children.' Experienced foster carers will complete visits to prospective carers with social workers. Sons and daughters of foster carers are also supported to feel valued and part of the process; their views are ascertained and they are invited to activities.

Foster carers are provided with a wide range of training to equip them with the skills and knowledge to care for children. This includes access to specialist training and opportunities to gain qualifications. For example, foster carers and their social workers can complete the level 1 and level 2 in counselling course. Learning and development are ongoing, and experienced foster carers are involved in delivering training to other carers.

Prospective foster carers contacting the agency feel valued and welcomed by the agency. The process for assessment is timely and sensitive to the needs of the carers. Assessments demonstrate prospective carers' understanding of meeting children's needs and provide an analytical account of how the assessor reached their conclusion and recommendations.

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

Children's safety and welfare are promoted in all fostering placements. Staff ensure that foster carers are aware of the risks involved for individual children in different situations and support them to make well-thought-out decisions in partnership with others. Foster carers are trained in safer care practice, and the agency helps prepare foster carers for the potential impact of abuse and neglect on children's development. Individual up-to-date risk assessments address any known vulnerabilities for each child effectively and set out what action foster carers and staff should take to address the risks.

The number of incidents of children going missing from foster carers' homes is low. When a child goes missing, there is a proactive and coordinated response from foster carers and staff that helps reduce the harm or risk of harm to the child. They work alongside the police and other professionals where appropriate to locate children and provide support.

Social workers complete unannounced visits to foster placements at least annually. The visits take place at different times to ensure that the standard of care remains high even when a social worker is not expected to visit. Staff ensure that children have opportunities to speak to them without their foster carers.

Children receive help to manage their behaviour and feelings safely. Foster carers receive specific behaviour support training and can seek advice from the therapeutic practitioners. Foster carers use effective de-escalation techniques, and physical intervention is extremely low. This helps create a positive home environment where children can flourish.

Children are supported and protected when there are child protection concerns. Any information is shared with relevant agencies immediately, and staff liaise with other agencies to safeguard the child. Allegations or suspicion of harm are handled fairly, quickly and in accordance with statutory guidance. Support is provided to foster carers facing allegations.

Detailed health and safety checks are completed by social workers. This helps to ensure that foster homes are safe and secure for children with the necessary adaptations and equipment in place. For example, one foster home has been fully adapted to meet the complex needs of two children who have learning and physical disabilities.

The agency follows safer recruitment processes for foster carers, staff and panel members. This helps ensure that foster homes are a safe place for children to live. Careful recruitment also prevents unsuitable staff from being recruited and having the opportunity to harm children or to place them at risk.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The registered managers are suitably qualified. They are supported by an experienced quality assurance manager. Managers know the children and foster carers exceptionally well. They lead by example, and are ambitious for children, with high expectations of their staff to change and improve the lives of the children they are responsible for.

Managers are innovative and generate creative ideas to sustain the highest quality care for children. For example, the agency has developed a virtual memory bank so that children and the adults in their lives can store key moments and memories all in a secure place online. This helps support children's understanding of their identity and life story.

Staff report that they feel supported by managers and enjoy working for the agency. They are passionate about what they do and work hard. Foster carers say staff often go 'above and beyond' and 'the extra mile'. External professionals say staff 'work so hard' and 'are happy to help, even if it's gone out of hours.'

Staff receive regular supervision, and records demonstrate that supervision is of good quality with opportunities for reflection. Staff are supported to complete specialist training and achieve qualifications to further support children and foster carers. This is a real strength of the agency. Team meetings take place regularly, which allow for feedback and discussion. The staff's views are listened to, and their ideas are considered when reviewing any changes to care practices.

There are highly effective procedures for monitoring and reviewing the activities of the agency. This includes any serious incidents, allegations and complaints about the service. Managers meet regularly to identify any concerns about specific incidents, patterns and trends, and take immediate action. Managers use learning from practice and feedback to improve the experiences and care of children.

Foster carers receive regular and effective supervision from their social worker. This provides them with the time to consider and focus on the outcomes for children in their care. Foster carers receive a formal review annually and early reviews are held when needed. All reviews are presented at fostering panel, which allows for an important level of scrutiny.

The fostering panel is well run and promotes safe, secure and stable placements for children. Panel members are suitably qualified and recruited from a range of diverse backgrounds. The panel carries out a rigorous quality assurance function and promotes thorough assessments, training and support for foster carers. Recommendations are child-focused and underpinned with sound evidence.

The agency decision-maker takes account of the fostering panel's recommendations and makes timely, and appropriate decisions in line with promoting the welfare of children in foster care. The rationale for decisions is clear and child-centred.

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

Registered provider: Parallel Parents Limited

Registered provider address: Lansdowne House, 85 Buxton Road, Stockport SK2 6LR

Responsible individual: Sinead Lewis

Registered managers: Beverley Salt and Deborah Smith

Telephone number: 0161 477 5830

Email address: referrals@caretodayparallelpayers.net

Inspectors

Dawn Walker, Social Care Inspector
Sarah Probert, Social Care Inspector
Sarah Huntbatch, Social Care Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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