

# Priory Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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| <b>Unique reference number</b> | SC033934      |
| <b>Inspection date</b>         | 18/12/2012    |
| <b>Inspector</b>               | Suzanne Young |
| <b>Type of inspection</b>      | Full          |
| <b>Provision subtype</b>       |               |

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| <b>Registered person</b>       | Priory Education Services Limited                                                                |
| <b>Registered manager</b>      | Anthony James Brooks                                                                             |
| <b>Responsible individual</b>  | Helen Sharpe                                                                                     |
| <b>Date of last inspection</b> | 20/10/2009                                                                                       |

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Priory Fostering Services operates as an independent fostering agency as part of Priory Education Services Ltd. The parent company is based in Surrey. The agency is based near Malvern in Herefordshire.

The agency provides parent and child placements, placements for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, short-term, long-term and bridging placements. At the time of the inspection the service supports 29 foster families who care for 50 children and young people.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **outstanding**.

The fostering agency is very well managed and highly effective. All involved in the agency, managers, staff and foster carers are committed to fostering and to improving the outcomes for children and young people. The Registered Manager actively drives continuous improvements in outcomes for children and young people and in service provision through rigorous monitoring and quality assurance processes. The agency encourages a high level of participation with young people and foster carers in order to improve their service delivery. Young people significantly influence and contribute to the development of the service through participation groups and events. Foster carers also contribute to care planning and service delivery through effective partnership working with the agency and other professionals.

Children and young people live in well-matched, stable placements. There are very low instances of unplanned endings of placements. This is due to excellent matching and high quality support which sustains the placements. This is strength of the agency. The high quality support from family support workers and supervising social workers ensures children and young people in their care achieve excellent outcomes. Children and young people say they feel happy, safe and secure in their placements and are positive about the care they receive. Children and young people are making

outstanding personal progress in all aspects of their development. The quality of emotional and practical support given to young people approaching adulthood and in particular post 18 is exceptional.

There is one recommendation. This relates to the timeliness of foster carers' training.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- provide support and training to foster carers, including hard to reach carers; specifically, that they complete the Children's Workforce Development Council's (CWDC) training standards in a timely manner. (NMS 20.8)

### Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **outstanding**.

Children and young people receive an outstanding level of individualised care that meets their social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. They build excellent relationships with carers which enable them to make and sustain strong attachments with their carers and develop a positive self-view. Children and young people are happy in their foster placements and are treated as part of the family. One young person commented, 'My confidence has grown and I've got more of a social life, I'm hardly ever home anymore'.

Children and young people's needs in relation to their ability, ethnicity and identity are also being well met. Children and young people are appropriately matched with foster carers who can meet these needs. For example, three young people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds placed in the same foster placement are each having their own cultural needs well met. At the same time they are able to embrace each other's culture. Foster carers also work closely with birth families to develop their own knowledge and understanding of cultural differences.

Children and young people very rarely experience unplanned endings. Foster carers and young people have considerable support to prevent placement breakdowns. Support workers work on an individual basis with every child or young person who requests their support. The agency also has an in-house child psychologist who offers emotional and psychological support to young people and foster carers on a one-to-one basis. This support is available to all members of the foster family and can be accessed whenever it is needed. The agency also funds a mediation service to support placement and prevent breakdown. This ensures children live and grow up in safe, stable families which enable them to increase in confidence and self-esteem. One placing social worker said: 'Relationships with foster carers and young people are excellent based on respect and a sense of mutuality. Everyone is approachable.'

They strive for good outcomes.'

Children and young people are actively supported and enabled to share their views, wishes and feelings. They are fully involved in decisions about their care and participate in their reviews. They are also encouraged to contribute to the running of the fostering agency. They attend participation events where their views are gained and changes are made to the service as a result. For example, following their suggestions, the agency now uses emails as a method to improve communication with young people.

Children and young people's health and education needs are extremely well supported by their foster carers who are proactive and vigilant resulting in some excellent outcomes being achieved. Foster carers actively seek and engage with health professionals. This has immensely improved young people's confidence and self-esteem. Children and young people are healthy and are well supported to learn about healthy lifestyles. One placing social worker commented that a young person, 'has had a healthy glow since being placed.'

Children and young people have exceptionally good attendance at school and make outstanding personal progress in their educational achievements. This is because foster carers and staff provide them with excellent support and encouragement. Foster carers and support workers work together with teachers and will accompany and stay with children in school if this is needed. Young people who, at the start of their placements were underachieving and struggling with academic work, are now achieving well above average targets and are predicted to achieve high grades in national examinations. Children who struggle with behaviour in school and have been taught in isolation from peers, are now fully integrated in the classroom and incidents of violent and disruptive behaviour have significantly reduced. Achievements are recognised and celebrated within foster families and by the agency. Children and young people get letters from the agency congratulating them for winning prizes at school and they get rewards for positive school reports.

Young people have an exceptional level of support when they leave care and after they reach 18. The agency has 'Staying Put' arrangements for young people to help them develop skills they need to ensure further education and a smooth, well-supported transition into adulthood. Young people acquire wide ranging practical and life skills so they successfully attain independence. Several young people continue to live with their foster families after they are 18 and the agency continues to support many young people who have left foster care and are living in independent accommodation. Support workers continue to visit young people post 18 and provide emotional and practical support when this is needed. All children leaving care have full contact details of the agency and staff. They are all invited to attend social events and activity days, such as, ice skating trips and attending the Clothes Show. Staff and managers remain in full contact with care leavers, for example, they check out their whereabouts and plans for Christmas to ensure they are not going to spend Christmas alone.

One young person wrote thanking the agency stating: 'leaving care is scary enough

but the thought of not having foster carers or any other support to turn to when in need adds to the pressure. It means a lot to me to still have ... support it makes living alone a lot easier.' Another young person commented: 'this was my 3rd mother/baby placement in fostering and by far the best one. They have been very supportive. They helped and encouraged me to be more independent and ready to move on. Even though I no longer live with them anymore I know they are only on the end of the phone if I need them.'

## Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

The fostering agency recruits foster carers who can effectively meet the needs of the children they care for. Recruitment plans target areas where recruitment needs are identified. For example, the manager is targeting recruitment to recruit a more culturally diverse range of foster carers. The preparation, assessment and matching of foster carers is strong and leads to effective placements. The assessments of foster carers focus on the needs of children and are thorough and analytical. Prospective foster carers are very well prepared through pre-approval training. Once approved, prior to any placements being made, carers receive a good level of induction training which includes safer caring. This enables them to have a clear understanding of the complexities surrounding the fostering task and enables them to be well prepared to meet the needs of the children and young people they will care for.

Children and young people's needs are fully assessed, understood and shared with foster carers. Foster carers are provided with good levels of information to help them care effectively for the children and young people placed with them. Excellent matching of children's needs to carers' skills is taking place, with considered thinking. Foster carers and their families are fully involved in the matching process. One carer commented: 'I was asked to consider the young person I now have living with me; a pre-placement visit was held and we discussed various topics, my child was present and his views were taken into consideration'. This results in well-matched, stable placements.

Foster carers have an excellent working relationship with the agency and they work closely with other agencies and professionals. They are actively involved in planning for the children they care for and their views are highly regarded by managers and staff. One placing social worker commented about a foster carer: 'she is an effective advocate, it was soon apparent she was able to relate to young people at an emotional level'. Foster carers receive regular supervision and feel strongly supported by their supervising social workers. One carer stated, 'our supervising social worker has been fantastic very supportive and understanding throughout.' The work undertaken by the family support workers with the whole fostering household is a key strength of the agency. This enhances the stability of placements and results in low breakdown rates.

A varied programme of developmental training is available to foster carers. This

includes the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training standards in foster care and the introduction of online training. There is, however, a small minority of foster carers, particularly partners of carers, who have not completed the core training, including the CWDC training standards, within the required timescales. This has not compromised the welfare of children and young people, although, impacts on foster carers' development. The agency are fully aware of this and are further developing their on-line training to help them reach and engage with carers who find formal group training difficult to attend.

The fostering panel makes timely and child centred recommendations. It is robust and rigorous in its scrutiny of assessments and reviews. A good level of quality assurance function has been developed which ensures the quality of assessments are maintained and improved. The panel membership has a good level of independence and is well constituted with a range of qualified and experienced professionals.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **outstanding** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The agency has a strong focus on safeguarding which is proactive and creative. There are robust systems in place to ensure children and young people are safe. All foster carers have family safe caring policies. All children and young people have thorough and detailed risk assessments and behaviour management plans completed prior to placement. These identify the impact of any abuse or neglect and the actions to support the children and young people placed with foster carers to minimise risk. Unannounced visits are taking place regularly and, dependant on the level of risk, occur several times a year. Allegations against foster carers are handled appropriately and promptly. Recruitment procedures for new staff, including panel members and independent social workers, are robust.

Children and young people feel happy, safe and secure with their foster families. They feel their foster carers support them to feel safe from bullying and abuse and feel confident that their carers know how to respond to any events where they may experience bullying. Staff and foster carers receive regular child protection training and safeguarding is a central focus in their induction prior to any placements being made. This ensures foster carers and their families are fully aware of the procedures they need to take to keep children and young people safe.

The particular strength of the agency is the outstanding, on-going support, advice and guidance offered by support workers for children and young people who go missing or who start to exhibit risk taking behaviours. This significantly reduces risk and promotes a sense of safety and well-being. The agency has very low instances of young people going missing. Supervising social workers, support workers and foster carers work closely in partnership with other professionals and the young people. They provide a wraparound support which ensures recurrence of this behaviour quickly reduces. One placing social worker felt, 'this perseverance has led to the young person feeling more secure and accepted'.

The Registered Manager ensures foster carers and staff learn from any safeguarding issues or incidents when young people have gone missing and focuses on safeguarding issues relating to boundary setting and behaviour management. He discusses issues with staff and carers, using case studies at team meetings, and during support group meetings. All incidents are analysed to see if any safeguarding, training, or amendments to policy or procedure may be appropriate. This ensures safeguarding remains a central focus and good practice is constantly reinforced.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **outstanding**.

This is an extremely well-managed agency. The manager has a clear vision for the future development of the agency. This is because he is fully aware of the areas of strength of the agency. He has significantly developed the quality of foster placements and services provided. The manager and staff team are committed and proactive in wanting to continue develop the service in line with research and practice developments within the sector. For example, the manager has drawn on research, such as, theories on attachment, resilience and the impact of trauma to develop policies and inform practice. This has resulted in the development of the supervision staff and carers receive.

Systems have been developed which maintain a high level and rigorous level of monitoring which is evaluative and highly effective. The manager is in the process of further developing the already established quality assurance system to actively drive continuous improvements in outcomes for children and young people and in service provision. All of the previous requirements and recommendations from the last inspection have been met. The Registered Manager and staff team are all qualified and highly experienced. Staff are very well trained and supported. They are supported to undertake the social work degree and other associated courses. This raises the level of professionalism within the service and, as a result, service delivery. One supervising social worker commented, 'everyone is looking to improve. This is reflected in training which is good.' Another stated, 'the agency has good integrity.'

The agency has a stable workforce and staff retention is excellent. No members of staff have left since the last inspection and four staff members have been with the wider company for over ten years. Low turnover of staff results in improved understanding of carers and more stability for the young people placed in their care. A placing social worker said, 'The agency social workers are brilliant; they regularly communicate with me.'

The engagement of staff and fosters carers is integral to care planning and service delivery. Staff and foster carers feel highly valued and all feel as though they are working together as part of a team. For example, foster carers visit prospective carers and 'buddy up' with new carers to support them. They hold fostering parties

for interested friends and family, funded by the agency. They are involved in the recruitment of new staff and sit on interview panels. Young people and carers' birth children also significantly influence and contribute to the development of the agency. They have developed the young people's welcome pack and attended participation evenings to have their say about being in care and the way the service is delivered. As a result, improvements have been made in the way the agency communicates with young people. Feedback is also constantly gained by supervising social workers to ensure all young people's views regarding service development are obtained.

The agency has established strong and effective partnerships with other organisations and professionals. External professionals have made the following comments, 'I have nothing negative to say about them. They are one of our best providers'

## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure 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.

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 independent fostering agencies.