

Priory Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Suzanne Young
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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

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 and provides services primarily in Herefordshire and Worcestershire. The agency employs a small level of qualified and experienced social work staff. In addition two support workers are employed to work closely with children and young people according to individual need. Priory Fostering Services recruit foster carers from a wide geographical area.

At the time of the inspection the service supports 29 foster families including respite carers who care for 41 children and young people.

Summary

This was an announced full inspection during which all key standards were inspected. The standards relate to the outcome areas of health, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. All areas of the Every Child Matters framework were assessed.

Priory Fostering Services is judged as good overall with good outcomes being achieved in all outcome areas. The agency has some shortfalls in relation to records, training and monitoring which do not fully underpin the work of the agency. Actions and recommendations have been made in these areas.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has taken action to comply with the requirements identified at the last inspection. Foster carers are provided with clear procedures governing the consent to medical treatment for all children and young people at start of placement and are given correct information and guidance to promote their health and wellbeing. The agency follows clear procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff to ensure children are protected and ensures all reviews of foster carers are implemented within the required timescales. Foster placement agreements are in place for all children and young people and significant improvement has been made by the agency to ensure these are completed prior to or at the start of a placement of a child or young person with foster carers. Shortfalls however are still apparent especially when children are placed in an emergency. This however does not compromise safety as other supporting documentation is in place. This action will be remade.

All recommendations made at the last inspection have also been complied with. Appropriate matching and safe caring plans are in place. Staff and carers understand the changes in legislation with regard to smoking and all records are stored safely and confidentially.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children's development and health needs are very well met. The agency actively promotes children's and young people's health and development to ensure they receive health care which

meets their needs for physical, emotional and social development. These are being identified and met during referral and through appropriate matching with foster carers.

Foster carers ensure that children and young people placed with them are able to receive the medical care and attention they require by registering with doctors, dentists and opticians. Specialised health services are sought for children and young people when this is required. Foster carers, foster children and carers own birth children all have access to in-house psychotherapy services which can provide initial and ongoing advice and support. This is an excellent resource which helps to ensure all children and young people can have access to specialist psychotherapy help when needed.

Health care matters are discussed and recorded during foster carers' supervision sessions and in monthly foster carers recording. Carers maintain a running record of all medical appointments, medication given and any other health related issues appropriately. The agency has introduced a portable record for each child and young person which allows good quality information to be retained and shared to improve the health care provided to children and young people.

Foster carers are given clear guidance to help them promote children and young people's health and wellbeing. Training in health and hygiene issues is provided to foster carers during their pre-approval training. All foster carers receive regular first aid training and can access specialist health training if required.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children are kept safe through good safeguarding systems and practices. Safe-caring policies are in place and reviewed on the placement of a child or young person. Risk assessments for high risk activities and for identified need are also completed which help to ensure children are safeguarded within their placements and ensure the individual needs of every child is considered. The agency has good systems in place which ensure the appropriate recruitment and vetting of staff, foster carers and panel members.

The agency has a range of child protection and safe-caring policies. Some of these policies however are out of date and others refer to the wider organisation and are not specific to the fostering task. Clear safeguarding policies specific to fostering reduce the risk to the safety of children and young people placed.

A range of safeguarding and behaviour management training is available to staff and foster carers which is part of a two year rolling programme. Although safeguarding is covered during foster carers' introduction and through the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training, newly approved carers may not receive comprehensive training in these areas for a considerable period of time leaving children without full protection. The agency has also not provided foster carers with physical intervention training appropriate to the fostering task.

The agency ensures that foster homes are suitable for children and young people placed in them. It undertakes comprehensive health and safety checks and regular unannounced visits. Foster carers' homes are comfortable and friendly.

Foster placement agreements are in place for all children and young people along with other good needs-assessment and placement planning information. Significant improvements have

been made by the agency to ensure these are completed prior to or at the start of a placement with foster carers. Shortfalls however are still apparent, especially when children and young people are placed in an emergency. This however does not compromise safety as other supporting documentation is in place. Children and young people are well matched with their foster carers which enables their overall needs to be met.

The agency operates its own fostering panel which has been in operation since November 2007. The panel minutes demonstrate that a comprehensive quality assurance function is being provided by the panel and evidences that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes equality and values diversity, which enables the agency to meet the diverse needs of children and young people referred for placements. Staff and foster carers are aware of the importance of promoting individual needs within the foster placement. They are clear about how children's needs are to be met and address any issues that arise out of the child's ethnicity, race, disability, sexuality, faith or belief. There is a good level of understanding of diversity issues amongst staff and carers which permeates throughout the agency.

Each child and young person looked after by the agency is able to access a support worker to work with them which helps increase their self esteem and confidence. Foster carers can access interpreters and translators for children and young people who do not speak or understand English. The agency actively supports carers in helping children practice and celebrate their religion. Where appropriate children are sent cards to celebrate religious occasions and foster carers have actively celebrated Eid by holding parties. Support workers liaise with agencies on behalf of carers to gain information to provide information about differing cultures and religions.

Foster carers are provided with training on equality and diversity which includes training on the needs of unaccompanied young asylum seekers. Carers who are looking after children with specific health and cultural needs are well supported and aware of how to meet their needs. Some have undertaken additional training.

The agency actively promotes children's education to maximise their potential with good outcomes for children and young people seen. All young people currently have a school or educational placement. Foster carers and supervising social workers support children and young people's education through attendance at education meetings and liaison with schools. Foster carers also assist children and young people with homework and study facilities. Support workers employed by the agency provide transport to school when required and also offer support when children are excluded from school.

Children and young people's educational achievement such as school awards and certificate, sports awards and completion of life skills courses are regularly monitored by the registered manager.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency encourages children and young people to maintain and develop family contacts. The importance of maintaining positive contact with birth family and friends is discussed during the assessment process with foster carers, during supervision and through training. The agency also supports foster carers by helping with transport arrangements and supervising contact between children and their birth families where this is deemed appropriate. The agency has a room specially designed for the purpose of contact which can be used by placing authorities.

The views and opinions of children and young people are regularly sought by supervising social workers and support workers visiting and meeting regularly with them. The agency has developed consultative processes which allow young people the opportunity to express their views regarding the quality of care provided regarding their day-to-day care.

Children and young people are made aware of how to raise concerns or complaints through the young person's welcome booklet they are given at the start of a placement. The agency has developed good innovative practices to ensure children and young people who do not speak English or who have learning disabilities are aware of how to complain and are able to access the agency's complaints procedure. Two complaints have been made since the last inspection which have been dealt with appropriately.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers provide good support to young people in developing independence skills so that they are able to successfully move into independence. The agency ensures that young people are helped to develop the skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult living through regular foster carer supervision and training.

The agency has developed an independence living skills pack which includes a programme for foster carers to work with young people which covers all areas of independent living skills and can be used as evidence to obtain housing. Support workers work alongside carers and young people supporting them in this.

Foster carers also encourage and support young people to develop skills to manage their domestic life, education and to develop social skills. They support the development of the Pathway Plan and help young people to understand what it means.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has good management and organisational practices to support the fostering task. It is organised in a way which delivers an effective service to children, young people and foster carers with good outcomes for children and young people being achieved.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency ensures staff and foster carers are aware of their responsibility to provide equality of opportunity to all children and young people regardless of race, culture, gender, disability and sexuality. The agency ensures that all children and young people are equally able to participate and achieve their potential. Valuing diversity permeates all training events and work with foster carers.

The agency has clear lines of accountability which is known to staff and foster carers. The manager and staff are accessible to foster carers and young people. The staff team consists of the registered manager, an administrator, two full time supervising social workers and two support workers. A consultant has recently been employed to work alongside the manager in a quality assurance role and to deputise for the manager when needed. The consultant also provides professional supervision for the registered manager. Further administrative support is available when required.

Systems are in place to monitor the outcomes of care provided to children and young people. However there is a lack of formal analysis and evaluation to identify good practice and areas for development. This is important to ensure the quality of service to children and young people develops and improves.

Foster carers, young people and parents are able to understand the aims and objectives of the service through a clear statement of purpose, carers' handbook and various children's guides which are translated when required into different languages. The agency has a range of policies and procedures in place to ensure children and young people are looked after appropriately. Some of these policies however are out of date and are conflicting in advice and guidance. The agency is aware of this and are in the process of reviewing all its policies and procedures.

Assessments of foster carers are generally completed to a good standard and test the required qualities, competences and aptitudes of the prospective foster carers. The standard of assessments varies however between the different external assessors used by the agency. This has already been identified by panel members who have recommended a course of action to ensure this is remedied.

The agency benefits from a stable staff and carer group. Both staff and foster carers are well supported, through supervision and training which ensures that children's care remains appropriate. Foster carers are positive about the agency and the support they receive which in turn enables them to effectively support the children and young people who are placed with them.

The agency makes a commitment to the training and development of staff and foster carers with in-house training and contracted training services. The range of training offered to staff and carers is comprehensive with some shortfalls which have been identified under the staying safe outcome group.

The fostering service ensures that an up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each foster carer and child in foster care. Recording is organised around Every Child Matters outcome headings to ensure all those working with children and young people are focussed on improving the outcomes for children and young people. Policies are in place to ensure all records including computerised records are stored confidentially.

All foster carers have foster care agreements in place. These however do not include all matters required by legislation and are not routinely updated to reflect changes in approval status.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
22	ensure that all foster carers have a foster care agreement which includes all the matters as set out in Schedule 5 (Regulation 28(5)(b) Schedule 5)	31 October 2009
9	prepare and implement a written policy which is intended to safeguard children placed with foster carers from abuse or neglect and sets out the procedure to follow (Regulation 12)	31 October 2009
8	ensure that foster placement agreements are in place for all children at the time of placement and cover all matters specified in Schedule 6 (Regulation 34, Schedule 6)	31 October 2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure foster carers are trained in the skills required to meet the needs of each child and young person placed in their care. This refers to the provision of regular safeguarding and behaviour management training in and particular to training in physical intervention appropriate to the fostering task (NMS 9.2)
- ensure that an effective monitoring system is in place which contributes to improving the quality of the service provided (NMS 4.1)
- ensure the fostering service's policies and procedure and any written guidance to staff and carers accurately reflect the fostering task (NMS 1.6).