

Priory Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Dawn Bennett
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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 London. The agency is based near Malvern in Herefordshire and operates in the West Midlands. The agency provides parent and child placements, placements for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, short-term, long-term and bridging placements. On 25th January 2016 there were 65 children and young people in placement. On that date the agency had 38 fostering households, of which eight were approved between April 1st 2015 and 25th January 2016.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The majority of young people are making significant progress and achieving outstanding personal outcomes. Progress is continually measured and enhanced by research informed practice. Unplanned endings over the last three years have been consistently low. There were none for 2013-15 and there has only been one for the year 2015-16 so far. This is consistently lower than the comparator percentage for other independent fostering agencies over the same period. Placement stability for long term placements is also outstanding with the average being three years and two months. Young people are listened to, are safe and form fulfilling long-term relationships. Managers, supervising social workers and support staff consult with all young people and also undertake focused work with individuals. A high number of them remain living or in contact with their foster carers after their 18th birthday.

The management and staff team use robust, research informed assessment, preparation, training and panel procedures to ensure they effectively recruit and supervise foster carers. All foster carers speak highly of the managers and staff team who provide reassuring and practical support. Some, who have moved from other agencies, state the only reason they remain fostering and have sustained their long term placements is because of the 'compassionate insight' and 'significant input' that has been afforded to them and their families.

Foster carers enjoy being with young people. They are flexible but firm, emotionally resilient, open and honest communicators and are amenable to outside support. They work as part of a team to consistently and effectively safeguard and meet the very complex needs of young people.

Partnership work with other professionals is excellent. All are confident in the agency's ability to achieve consistent positive outcomes. They praise the excellent level of support the registered manager, deputy and staff provide to placements and the outstanding achievements of a diverse range of young people. The registered manager provides robust challenge to partner organisations where the needs of foster carers and young people are not being met. This ensures improvements to quality of care and outcomes of young people.

The management team are proactively involved in every aspect of this service. Their personal insight into the needs and aspirations of individual young people, foster carers and staff enables them to sensitively progress the service while keeping everyone on-board, engaged and inspired.

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The majority of young people make outstanding progress in most areas of their lives. The length and stability of placements is excellent. This is particularly impressive as some of young people who are now settled have previously experienced a high number of placement breakdowns and changes. All young people have positive relationships with their foster family which are sustained on into adulthood. A high number young people remain living with their foster family through staying put arrangements. Those who move on into independent living remain in contact with and continue to be supported by foster carers and staff. They are invited to family, as well as agency, events and continue to be visited by the agency's support workers. For example, all were visited with Christmas hampers.

Young people settle into their new foster home due to the dedication and understanding of foster carers and the support they receive from staff, managers and other professionals. There are a wide range of resources that support this process to be as smooth and positive as possible. Useful child friendly information has been designed by young people. The cover designs were chosen as a result of a competition including birth and looked after children and young people.

Young people flourish. They develop a strong sense of identity and experience a wide range of positive personal achievements. They are active participants in community based clubs such as cubs, dance, sea cadets and swimming. They also have a wide range of hobbies and interests which they pursue with their foster family and on their own. Young people are in excellent health. Foster carers ensure they are active, eat well and attend medical appointments. Any developmental delays or behavioural concerns are quickly identified and age appropriate routines are introduced. Where needed foster carers receive specialist training to meet young people's complex health needs. This has resulted in some exceptional outcomes. One young person has moved out of long-term hospital care into a family environment. Since moving she has been infection free for the longest period in her childhood. The majority of young people have outstanding school attendance and personal educational outcomes. All have appropriate educational placements. Support workers work alongside young people in the classroom where needed. Young people are active members of their school communities, attending and enjoying after school clubs. They represent them in sports teams and successfully contribute to events such as short story competitions. One young person has had his story published. Young people's future success is enhanced by their increased achievements. They successfully progress and surpass personal goals and aspirations.

Young people feel valued because their opinions are acted upon and their ideas are celebrated. For example, some young people who had lived with their foster carers for a long time fed back that they did not want to participate in group consultations or activities. Now managers and staff consult discretely directly with them and funding is given out on an individual basis for them to participate in activities with their family or friends. The management team are always open to supporting

individual's aspirations. For example, providing funding for a young person to pass his tractor driving test. The management team continue to develop ways in which they can ensure individual needs are met and young people can influence the service and care they receive.

Young people have a positive sense of identity. They form long term friendships and are active within their local communities. For example, one young person is playing rugby for his county. Young people continue to have contact with their family and maintain relationships which are important to them. Foster carers and support workers talk about and help them understand their past. They also celebrate their gender, heritage and sexual identity. For example, foster carers are supporting one African/Portuguese young person to learn Portuguese. This results in young people who are confident individuals with an informed sense of self which helps them move towards adulthood.

Young people make significant progress which successfully equips them to move on into adulthood. A young person comments: 'My foster carer has helped me through my life since I have come to her. She has taught me many things like washing up and cooking. She has also helped me with what I would like to be with life. She is always there for you to talk to as well as for a shoulder to cry on. She has made us part of her family and made us feel like a family. She never leaves us out of anything and if it wasn't for her helping I wouldn't be the person I am today.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency recruits foster carers who are child centred and resilient. A social worker comments: 'All of the carers are very proactive and advocate for the young people they have living with them. They are very committed to the young people they have aspirations for them and support them in all aspects of their lives.'

The process for preparing, assessing and approving foster carers is timely and rigorous. The registered manager and deputy manager are actively involved. For example, they undertake visits to all new foster carer enquiries. Assessments are analytical and focus on the competencies required to be a foster carer.

Foster carers are professional and knowledgeable. They undertake training alongside staff and panel members which ensures all practice is underpinned by the same research and theory. They also attend bespoke training and access specific research which ensures they meet the individual needs of young people. For example, using role-play to support a young person with Asperger's Syndrome to learn social skills. Foster carers also have access to a comprehensive package of on-line training. This is modular, can be completed flexibly at a time convenient to each foster carer and provides additional professional insight.

Foster carers undertake excellent partnership work with staff and proactively

influence the development of the agency. They contribute their views through area support meetings and regular questionnaires. They also receive home visits from the registered manager and deputy manager. These visits enable managers to personally consult directly about any issues or concerns which affect foster carers and their family.

Foster carers successfully support young people to achieve sustained improvements in their lives. They are enabled to do this because they can access excellent support systems. They provide support for each other through buddying systems. They receive high quality supervision and appraisals from staff. A chartered psychologist is available to them as well as staff and young people. He holds a monthly surgery, conducts educational and home visits and provides support over the phone. Support workers undertake direct work with young people. Foster carers describe these resources as 'invaluable'. They provide constructive challenge to practice, practical and emotional support and real insight into young people's experiences and behaviours. Foster carers are supported with practical as well as theory and research based solutions which enable them to manage and meet complex needs.

Foster carers are recognised and valued as a core member of the team around the child. The whole of the family is involved in assessment, reviews and supervisions. They all welcome and support young people who come to live with them. They are recognised as members of the family and participate in family holidays and activities. Respite care is not encouraged and is only supported if it is needed to sustain a placement. Foster carers proactively apply research based practice building up a child's emotional resilience through shared activities and interactions. These activities increase their self-esteem and resilience.

The chair and members of the fostering panel demonstrate rigour and make well-balanced decisions that safeguard young people. They also give thoughtful feedback which is effectively used to inform future training and practice. They have a wide range of personal and professional experiences. They continue their professional development. They attend training and review and appraise their own practice using case studies, enquiries and research. The agency decision maker reads all the papers in every case prior to making a decision regarding foster carer approvals. Her reports clearly evidence her decision making process.

Supervising social workers and foster carers ensure all young people's plans are regularly monitored and reviewed. Delegated authority is clear and an area which is chased up where necessary.

Matching results in sustained and successful placements. The management team, staff and foster carers effectively use research and their combined experience to ensure certain criteria are met to increase the likely success of placements. For example, the location of the foster carer preferably will be in county or just over the border and education will be within a certain mileage. Currently 54 young people are placed in county. Including specialist school placements, the average distance for foster carers to transport young people to school is 4.3 miles. These criteria result in foster carers being able to focus on the emotional well-being and stability of the placement rather than the logistics of transporting young people. It also means

young people stay within their communities and have easy access to family and friends.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Young people are safe and their well-being is promoted. In partnership with local authorities they are supported to take age-appropriate risks. Risk assessments take into account their individual circumstances and understanding.

Young people are effectively supported to learn new skills to manage their anxieties and inappropriate behaviours. Strategies are tailored to individuals and are informed by research and training. All young people, foster carers and staff have access to additional expert advice from a child psychologist whose services are paid for by the agency.

Carers provide secure environments with clear boundaries from which young people can explore and grow. A social worker comments: 'The foster carers are brilliant and have provided such stability in the face of some challenging behaviours. I am extremely happy that the young person is in that placement, because you can literally see the love that they have for him. Their commitment is exceptional.'

Young people with more complex risks such as self-harm, child sexual exploitation, safe use of the internet or going missing from care are proactively supported to understand risks. They are involved in discussions which identify the actions foster carers and staff then take to reduce risks. These include strategies in partnership with schools, local authorities and the police. These are successful in supporting most children and young people to stop harmful, high risk behaviours.

Foster carers and young people are well supported when going through crisis. Staff and support worker increased support, interventions and supervision when young people are unsettled. As a result of the Rotherham report the management team promote support workers long term work with young people. They undertake successful focused work which foster carers feel have a positive outcome. For example, helping young people understand the risks they face when they go missing from care and successfully supporting foster carers to reduce incidents.

A small number of young people who continue to display high risk behaviours are supported to move in a planned way onto placements that can meet their needs. When these placements have ended the management team is proactive in meeting foster carers, staff and local authorities to identify lessons learnt.

Foster carers and staff know how to respond to safeguarding allegations, risks from child sexual exploitation and children who go missing from care. The agency provides a range of training to staff and carers to further their understanding of high risk behaviours, attachment and how young people's previous life experiences affect their

behaviour. The agency continues to develop training to meet the changing needs of young people, staff and foster carers.

Allegations and disciplinary actions against foster carers are dealt with appropriately. Foster carers are given independent support while an investigation takes place. Referrals passed back to the agency from Local Authority Designated Officers are investigated robustly. In all cases foster carers go back to panel for their approved status to be reviewed. A comprehensive file audit is completed as part of any investigation to try and see if any issues could have been recognised at an earlier stage.

Staff, panel members and foster carers are recruited using robust procedures to ensure they are safe and suitable people to work with and have access to young people. Foster carers are involved in the recruitment of staff and in the training, assessment and support of foster carers.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The registered manager has been in post and registered with Ofsted since 2007. He is appropriately experienced and qualified holding a diploma in social work and a diploma in management studies. He and the deputy manager provide outstanding support to young people, staff and foster carers. All identify that the management team is the key strength of this agency.

The agency has excellent working relationships with partner agencies. The management team have a clear understanding of the requirements of all local authorities they work with. Recruitment of foster carers is strategic and well researched. Excellent focus is given to the knowledge and expertise of foster carers to meet the current and future needs of young people. The management team and staff team challenge local authorities where necessary and have procedures for escalating concerns with partner agencies for issues such as additional funding and education. A commissioner stated: 'They are an agency that go that extra mile. They don't give up on children. They give excellent support to foster carers and deliver a holistic service.'

Young people are provided with extensive opportunities and make outstanding progress. Foster carers and staff rigorously monitor and review the progress of individual young people. This information is gathered by the management team and used proactively at a corporate level to improve services and ensure the best outcomes. The management team continue to support initiatives that increase opportunities for foster carers and young people. For example, each young person has a five hundred pound holiday payment which supports the whole family to go on holiday.

There are robust quality assurance processes. As well as the registered manager's quarterly monitoring there is an annual three day independent quality assurance visit

and report. These systems identify the service's strengths and areas for continuing improvement. The management team actively meet and consult with foster carers, staff and young people and their views are acted upon. They continue to proactively develop the service. For example, they have recently moved away from an independent provider running the skills to foster training. This is now run in house by the staff team with the involvement of longstanding foster carers. The course continues to evolve and is influenced by research and feedback from foster carers.

Foster carers and young people are well informed. The statement of purpose and children's guides are clearly written and provide an excellent understanding of the service to those who read them. The agency endorses the Foster Carers' Charter and acknowledges the contribution made by foster carers to placement stability and to helping young people experience a safe and fulfilling childhood.

The management team welcome feedback and complaints. Issues raised are given careful consideration and used to improve future practice. A foster carer comments: 'They are the best agency for support. Other agencies are not a patch on them. You can have a moan, they listen and then they move things forward. They facilitate solutions. When you contact them it is always about how they can help you, so you can focus on the young people. Everything is dealt with quickly and fairly.'

Staff, managers and panel members are appropriately qualified and experienced. Each individual has an annual appraisal which feeds into a personal development plan. They attend a diverse programme of training which is enhanced by staff attending a range of external courses. The agency has a very settled work force with good retention. The satisfaction level and motivation of the staff is high. There are regular supervisions and team meetings. Reflective practice sessions are often based around a particular young person with all the staff team contributing opinions in an open and supportive atmosphere. Support to foster carers and outcomes for young people improve as a result.

The management team are proactive in using national research to inform practice and outcomes for young people. For example, in line with recent research birth children of existing carers are involved in the skills to foster course, welcome to attend training and always asked for feedback for carers' annual reviews. Supervising social workers also undertake a proportion of their visits to carers' homes after school hours with the express purpose of speaking to all young people.

In addition the management team have recently supported a panel member to complete some specific research looking at the effect of fostering on birth children within the agency. They are in the process of looking at the conclusions of this work to identify how this might inform future practice.

Overall the management team continue to have a clear vision for the agency. There are detailed plans for future development and continuing progress. Previous recommendations have been addressed and they are appropriately notifying Ofsted of key events. There is a well-informed awareness of areas for development and clear practice and strategies in place which are addressing them.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and to support services to improve.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.