

The Adolescent and Children's Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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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

The Adolescent and Children's Trust is a registered charity providing a fostering and adoption service in a number of independently registered offices in England, Wales and Scotland. The service is overseen by a board of trustees, a chief executive officer and a head of social work. The administrative and business headquarters are based in London. The Bristol and South West office provides a fostering service only, which covers the south west region of England. This service is situated in central Bristol with reception and office space for management and staff and space for training and meeting room purposes. At the time of this inspection there were 28 approved fostering households providing care for 26 young people. Five fostering households were visited and eight young people participated in this inspection. The service offers short term and long term care for young people aged between birth to 18 years. Two fostering households provide placements for a child and parent and a number of carers have specific skills in caring for children with a disability.

A Registered Manager oversees four supervising social workers, a children's resource worker and administrative staff.

Summary

This key announced inspection covered all the key standards that apply to a fostering service and found that the agency provides a good level of support for its carers and a good level of care for the young people accommodated. This is provided by a dedicated team of professionally qualified and well trained social workers who in turn, are well managed and supervised. A key strength of this agency is its flexibility to respond quickly and effectively to the needs of carers and young people. The agency needs to work with placing authorities to ensure that pathway plans are in place for all young people who need them.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are now in place for all staff and carers. The agency now has an individualised health record for each child placed. Foster carers keep this up to date and this is kept with the child and can be taken to any future placement. All accidents occurring to children are now recorded in an 'Incidents Folder'.

Foster carers are now asked whether they are smokers at the assessment stage, and if so, this is recorded and made known to the foster panel. Those foster carers who smoke are reminded of the agency policy forbidding smoking in the home or in front of young people. The agency now helps those foster carers to give up smoking, by putting on smoking cessation training courses.

The agency now has a system in place to ensure that placing authorities are reminded of their duty to provide young people with personal education plans and a record is kept of this reminder.

The agency now organises a monthly series of activity events for looked after children which also serve as consultation meetings where children can express their views or raise any concerns about the service. There is now also an annual event for foster carer's own children called

'Children who Foster' where they can express their views or raise any concerns. A quarterly newsletter for carers now keeps them informed about current events and developments occurring in the service.

The agency now encourages foster carers to undertake the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at level 3 in Health and Social Care for Children and Young People. They have six carers who have achieved this award and eight carers currently undertaking it.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

There are good systems in place to support the health and well-being of young people. The agency ensures that foster carers register each young person accommodated with a general practitioner, dentist and optician and that routine health checks are carried out on young people. These registrations along with the need for young people to have a balanced and nutritious diet are checked by the supervising social workers during their routine visits to the fostering households. All of these directions and guidance help to ensure that a young person's good health and development is properly promoted.

The agency has effective systems in place to chase placing authorities if they have not provided carers with full written information about a child's health needs at the time of placement. The agency provides each foster carer with an individualised 'Child's Health Record' book which they complete on behalf of each child placed and which the child will take with them to any future placement. This provides children and carers with a clear record of their health history. Young people attend an annual medical examination, the findings of which are reported to the annual looked after children review.

The agency will seek specialist support and advice in meeting the mental health needs of young people either through accessing support from the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service team or through an independent therapeutic care service. Foster carers may also consult the independent therapeutic care service for help and guidance in managing a particular child's individual need. The Registered Manager and the supervising social workers are mindful of their responsibility in promoting the sexual health of young people and this is checked during meetings with carers and young people. The service have referred young people to local support services who have expertise in supporting young people in this area. Extensive training is provided for foster carers and young people on maintaining healthy lifestyles including advice on the misuse of drugs and alcohol. Providing this level of specialist care and support ensures that excellent attention is given to meeting the individual health needs of young people.

The agency policy on smoking does not allow the young people to live in an environment where carers smoke. The agency positively promotes non smoking by providing carers with help and advice on smoking cessation and by arranging training events on smoking cessation three times each year. These excellent support systems help to improve the health of young people and carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency takes effective steps to ensure that young people placed are kept safe. The persons carrying on and managing the service, along with the social work practitioners and administrative staff are all experienced, appropriately qualified and have the required employment checks.

The process of foster carer recruitment, vetting, assessment, approval and training is rigorous and appropriate and designed to ensure that young people will be kept safe by responsible people who pose no threat to them. Clear agency health and safety guidance is in place with regard to the safety of households. Enhanced CRB checks are in place for all foster carers and members of their families living with them, where age appropriate. Applicants undergo a three day preparation course called 'Skills to Foster' as part of their training and which also stands as part of the assessment process. All primary carers have undertaken the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training course and six out of the 28 approved foster care households have NVQ at level 3 in Health and Social Care for Children and Young People. Both these training awards require carers to have a good knowledge of safeguarding children policy and practice and thus help children to be kept safe.

The fostering panel is properly constituted and benefits from members who bring a wide range of skills, knowledge and experience in fostering and childcare. This helps to ensure that social worker assessments are appropriately checked and ratified.

The matching of young people with carers is thorough and appropriate. Detailed information on a young person is provided by the placing authority. The Registered Manager and supervising social workers look for a potential 'young person/carer' match based on an appropriate matching criteria and all information is shared with the potential carer before an expression of interest is returned to the placing authority. Young people may undertake a trial visit and an overnight stay as part of their placement induction. The record of foster placement breakdowns is few in number and this indicates the robustness of the matching process by ensuring that young people are suitably placed.

The agency has clearly written policies on safeguarding children, bullying, complaints and action to be taken in the event of a child going missing. Carers and supervising social workers receive appropriate training in these policies. Risk assessments are in place on each child with regard to their safe care. Clear safeguarding policies and a good understanding of these policies helps to ensure that children are properly protected from harm.

There has been one complaint recorded within the past 12 months. Appropriate action was taken by the agency in response to this complaint. The agency notifies the appropriate authorities, including Ofsted, in the event of any serious occurrence.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The management, staff and carers come from a diverse range of racial and cultural backgrounds and the everyday practice of the agency values diversity. This is also enshrined in its policies on equal opportunities, equality, diversity and disability. The agency has carers with specialist skills in working with children with a disability, along with a number of single carers both male and female and a same sex couple. The office is designed so that it could enable wheelchair access. There are numerous visual displays, posters around the office which celebrate ethnic and cultural differences and other aspects of diversity. Carers and young people experience an environment where diversity is valued and equality promoted.

Young people are well supported in attending to their educational achievement. The agency ensures that personal education plans are in place for each child. If the placing authority have not provided a copy of this plan for the carers the agency has a system in place to remind them of their responsibilities to provide this information. Foster carers will attend school evenings and will liaise directly with schools. Although the agency does not have educational support workers, the agency does employ a resource worker who will provide help with educational support for a young person should this become necessary. The agency is in partnership with an approved educational organisation which supports young people with their literacy and their numeracy skills. Some pathway plans were not in place for those young people preparing for adulthood.

All fostering households are required to have a personal computer and internet access. The agency will provide carers with a laptop if they do not already have one and young people are encouraged to use them for educational purposes. Laptops must be kept in an open space within the foster household, are installed with suitable safeguarding software and carers and young person must sign their agreement to safe internet use.

All fostering households receive training which enables them to provide respite care for other carers. The service does not provide short term care for children as described in National Minimum Standard 31.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Contact arrangements between young people and their birth parents and siblings are discussed at placement planning meetings and the arrangements for contact are clearly spelt out in young people's care plans. These are subject to periodic review. The agency have their own individual placement agreement which confirms the contact arrangements in more detail. Foster carers support contact arrangements either by assisting with transport arrangements or where appropriate, allowing contact to take place within their home. Foster carers record contact visits appropriately. The Standards and Practice Guidance handbook for foster carers gives clear guidance on contact arrangements thus helping to ensure that children are fully conversant with the agreed arrangements about parental contact.

There are excellent systems in place to ensure that foster carers and their children and foster children are kept informed about the service and that allow them to express their views or raise concerns about the way the service operates. These include a quarterly newsletter for carers, periodic questionnaire surveys for both young people, carers and their children, an annual training briefing day for carers, monthly activity events for young people which also serve as a consultation forum and bi-annual activity events for foster carer's own children.

Looked after children may also raise any concerns and express their views about the service at their looked after care reviews, directly with their placing social worker, or the advocacy service available from their placing authority and at the annual reviews of their carers. Birth parents may raise any concerns about the service at the child's looked after care review, or with their placing authority or through the authority's complaints system. Where appropriate, birth parents are invited to attend a winter social event organised by the agency where they also have an opportunity to raise with agency staff any concerns they may have about the service.

These various avenues of consultation help to provide everyone with an opportunity to have their say about the operation of the service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service actively promotes the preparation and transition into adulthood through providing appropriate training for carers and young people and establishing good links with the Connexions service. Young people are given a financial incentive to attend this training. These additional payments help to provide young people with sense of economic well-being.

However, not all young people over 15 years of age have a pathway plan in place. During the inspection, the agency developed a system to ensure that placing authorities are reminded of their responsibilities to provide such a plan.

Carers are valued by the agency and well supported financially with enhanced rates if additional areas of care become necessary, if they care for children with special needs or provide a child/parent placement. Additional payments are also paid to cover birthdays, holidays, Christmas or other festivals and if their home is used for contact visits or looked after children reviews. Foster carers receive a fostering fee related to the age of the child placed, which is arranged in five age bands. Carers can receive an initial food and clothing allowance, which is discretionary. Transport costs for taking children to contact visits away from the foster home are claimed from placing authorities if they are over 20 miles. Foster carers also receive financial rewards following re-approval, completing qualification training plus payments to cover loss of earnings if they attend a training event.

These exceptional additional payments help to provide carers with economic security and give them a feeling of self-worth and value. One carer commented, 'We are given wonderful verbal and practical support in all aspects of our work.'

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. This is evidenced by the range of management, staff and carers from differing racial, cultural and gender backgrounds. The agency has clearly written policies on equal opportunities, diversity and disability and staff spoken to are well aware of the detail of these policies. The agency has carers with specialist skills in working with children with a disability. The fostering office has a room available that could enable wheelchair access. There are numerous visual displays and posters around the office which celebrate ethnic and cultural differences and other aspects of diversity are contained in published materials. The agency has access to a pool of translators. Young people stated that this positive promotion of equality and diversity provides them with a sense of self-esteem and to respect and value others.

The agency has a clearly written Statement of Purpose which outlines its aims and objectives. This was last reviewed in April 2010. There is also a young person's guide which is presented in a user-friendly format in two versions, for younger and older children. These provide children and young people with a wealth of information about the service. Both contain the contact details of Ofsted.

The responsible individual and the registered manager are both professionally qualified social workers and are registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). The registered manager has an appropriate management qualification. Both have many years experience in child care management and practice. Supervising social workers are supervised monthly by the registered manager. There are weekly team briefings and monthly team meetings which are appropriately minuted and recorded. Supervising social workers are appropriately professionally qualified and GSCC registered. They stated that their workload levels are manageable and that they receive appropriate training to carry out their role. Carers commented that they feel well supported by supervising social workers and management who they consider to have a high level of professional expertise.

The training strategy for carers is comprehensive. Carers interviewed and in completed surveys stated that they can access all training relevant to their role and feel well supported by supervising social workers and management. All carers are currently undertaking the CWDC training course and the agency encourage foster carers to undertake the NVQ at level 3 in Health and Social Care for Children and Young People. Six carers have achieved this award.

Administrative records are effectively managed by an administration manager and two administrative staff. The recording systems for carers, young people and staff personnel are clearly written, comprehensive and up to date. There has been an annual review of the overall service in line with Regulation 42 and Schedule 7. There is also an annual operational plan which further details the areas of service development. These include plans to include a mentor scheme for young people, monthly workshops for young people on achieving economic well-being and increasing the number of supervising social workers.

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
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Recommendations

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

- ensure that placing authorities are reminded of their duty to provide young people with pathway plans and that a record is kept of this reminder. (NMS 14)