

Action for Children: Family Breaks Devon

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC064273
Inspection date	15/06/2011
Inspector	Michelle Oxley
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

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Responsible individual	Andrew John McConnochie
Date of last inspection	14/01/2008

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

Action for Children Devon Family Based Short Break Service is an independent fostering service providing a short term and respite foster care service to children and young people with special needs, aged under 18 years, who live in Devon. The service is operated and managed by a registered charity, under contract to Devon County Council.

At the time of the inspection the service had 28 approved fostering households, providing a short breaks service to 50 children and young people who have a range of special needs, including complex medical needs, physical, sensory, or learning difficulties.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The service provides good quality care to children on a short break basis. The strengths of the service is the support provided to foster carers provided by agency staff who ensure that they are always available to offer guidance when required. There are excellent systems in place to support and manage the health needs of children including training to foster carers and good links with others concerned with the health care of children placed. The matching process is a carefully considered operation resulting in many long term stable placements for children. Areas for development involve the submission of an application to register a manager and ensuring that Ofsted are made aware of significant events. Good practice recommendations are made concerning accessibility to transport, the creation of a development plan, review of the foster carer handbook and further information made available in the statement of purpose.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection there were five good practice recommendations made. These have all been met as follows. Staff recruitment records are made available for inspection and now hold the required information. Increased training opportunities have been provided in relation to communication skills. Agency staff now carry out unannounced visits to foster carers. The quality of safeguarding training has been improved.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

There are excellent systems in place to support the health needs of children. Many children placed have complex medical needs and require individualised support. The agency employs a paediatric nurse who is responsible for overseeing all aspects of health care. The nurse works in close conjunction with other professionals connected to the care of children's health. These include the community nurse and the General Practitioner, which supports continuity of care well. He links with foster carers to provide them with training and to set out protocols for medical procedures. He offers a good deal of support to foster carers to enable them to deliver good quality health care. Foster carers receive training in the administration and management of medication and ensure that these are stored and handled safely. Foster carers also receive training in first aid. Records relating to medication are audited by the paediatric nurse.

The agency seeks the support of occupational therapists to determine the nature of equipment required for the appropriate care of children in the foster carer's home. Some carer's homes have been fully adapted to meet the needs of children who come to stay. Foster carer's homes visited were well maintained, comfortable and clean and provide ample space and facilities consistent with the needs of visiting children. Health and safety checks of the premises and vehicles are carried out every year at the foster carer's annual review. Children do not share bedrooms and the agency has a system in place to carry out at least one unannounced visit to the foster carer's home every year.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children's safety and welfare is promoted by the agency within fostering households. Foster carers receive training opportunities in safeguarding and safer care. Foster carers who provide placements to children who have disabilities are provided with training specifically on issues affecting disabled children. Many placements have been established over a period of years. Foster carers know children well. They are alert and demonstrate a good awareness for detecting any signs or symptoms which may indicate a concern for welfare. Foster carers know how to proceed should they have any concerns about a child placed with them.

There have been no incidents of children going missing from placement. Good risk assessments are in place to prevent this from occurring. Procedural guidance is in place for carers to follow should this occur.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Relations between foster carers and children placed with them are positive. Relationships are nurturing and supportive. Foster carers are able to demonstrate effective behaviour management strategies which serve to support children to develop socially. Foster carers are consistently provided with the necessary information including the placement plan, to help them to understand each child's circumstances prior to the placement commencing. Foster carers are involved in the process for reviewing the child's care needs. Foster carers receive training in positive handling.

Children are provided with a good range of leisure pursuits in line with their needs and interest. During this inspection, every child visited was occupied at the carer's home in a range of activities such as playing with sensory equipment, reading with the carer and using the computer. Foster carers are keen to expand children's experiences and endeavour to involve them in community activities. The agency offers some fun days out to local attractions, these are very much enjoyed by carers and children alike. Children's interests are well known to carers and these are met where possible, although in some cases children who use wheelchairs need a specialised vehicle which is not always available to foster carers and restricts some children's ability to undertake meaningful activities.

Foster carers work closely with children in order to develop their skill and independence. Foster carers who were spoken with were committed to ensuring that each child is able to reach their potential. Carers support children's individual skills development in a holistic manner.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The procedures for introducing children in to the foster carer's home are well thought out, well planned and sensitive. Agency staff pay a great deal of attention to ensuring that the process of matching children to carers is carried out carefully in order to ensure a successful placement. Carers and parents receive full information before the introduction process begins. Following this, children are introduced gradually, initially meeting carers and staying for tea until the child feels comfortable enough to stay overnight. Children are well cared for and their needs are met in stable placements. Children are treated as part of the carer's family.

Foster carers are provided with good up to date information which helps them to support children's development and ongoing needs. Care is personalised and promotes all aspects of their individual identity. Foster carers are responsive to children's views. The relationship between carers and children are well developed enabling children to effectively communicate their needs and views to carers. The

agency works in close conjunction with families and other professionals involved in the care of children and operates in a manner consistent with their views.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The aims and objectives of the service are clearly set out in the statement of purpose and are achieved in practice. The document is made available to foster carers, social workers, staff and parents. The document provides brief, but good quality information; however it omits contact details for Ofsted and the Independent Reviewing Officer. A colourful and child friendly children's guide is available to children, this has been devised using pictures and symbols.

The assessment process for prospective foster carers is well organised and rigorous. New carers are provided with good information about the assessment process and expectations are clearly set out. Relevant checks including: identity, health and criminal record bureau (CRB) checks are carried out and foster carers understand why these are required. Reports on suitability of new foster carers presented to panel are comprehensive and provide good relevant, detailed information. Careful vetting procedures are in place to assess the suitability of all those working for the service including, agency staff, foster carers and panel members. Records demonstrate that good recruitment practice is followed, including obtaining CRB checks for all personnel.

Policies and procedures are in place to direct the recruitment and operation of the panel. A central list of panel member is maintained which list members from the agencies shared panel. Panel make recommendations about approvals in a timely fashion. There are no unnecessary delays and prospective carers are informed of decisions promptly. Foster carers attend and participate in panel meeting. Written minutes are held of each meeting, the reasons for recommendations are set out. A medical expert sits on the agencies panel.

The suitability of carers to continue fostering is reviewed annually. Panel members are provided with good detailed information about the carer's ability to continue caring. Areas of concern or needs for additional support are identified early and result in the review of approval being carried out at the time the concern arises rather than waiting for the annual review.

New foster carers undertake induction training using the 'skills to foster' programme. An ongoing programme of training is made available to carers. All carers complete the Children's Workforce Development Standards for Short Break Carers. The review

process assesses the performance of each foster carer and identifies ongoing development needs.

The process of matching children to carers is excellent. Agency staff operate in a considered way ensuring that good detailed assessment information is provided in conjunction with families and other professionals. Decisions about potential matches are made on a whole team basis after careful review of all the available information. Foster carers are only approached if the team believes the match will be successful and will be able to provide a long term, short break service to children and families. Carers are provided with full information and are involved in the decision making process prior to the placement commencing and on an ongoing basis. The outcome of the process is successful with the majority of children having been in placement with their original carers for several years.

Foster carers consistently report that the level of support they receive from agency staff is excellent. Approved carers are supported by a named social worker. Supervision meetings are regular and are arranged according to the needs of children, additional requests for support from foster carers are responded to. Foster carers report that their social workers respond promptly to their queries or concerns and that the out of hours service is efficient and provides good support. In addition foster carers express satisfaction with payments, these are received in a timely fashion.

Information regarding policies and procedures is made available to foster carers. This is in the form of a handbook, with the purpose of providing guidance to foster carers. The handbook covers a good range of procedures although it has not been reviewed for sometime. Some of the policies are not consistent with the wider organisational policies which have already been updated.

The service is operated by two experienced well qualified and knowledgeable managers. They lead the service with commitment and demonstrate strong effective leadership. However the current manager is not yet registered with Ofsted in order to establish and verify fitness to manage. The agency is well organised and staff are effectively deployed in order to deliver good quality care and outcomes for children placed.

The service has been subject to some reorganisation in line with the demands of commissioners. This has resulted in period of change for the service which has had some impact on staff and carers alike. The management team have continued to effectively quality monitor the service and have successfully ensured that plans have been in place to lesson the burden of change for those working within the agency. A period of stability is now established and the managers have now begun to consider how best to drive the service forward. However there is currently no overall written development plan in place setting out future plans and taking account of monitoring information.

Staff are suitably qualified and competent in meeting the needs of children placed. Staff receive training opportunities consistent with their role. Staff receive regular

supervision with managers to support them in their role and to manage performance. An appraisal system is in operation for all staff, these identify future training and development needs.

There are good systems in place to protect children's welfare. Staff and carers receive training in safeguarding children and carers demonstrate the ability to respond swiftly to allegations or suspicions of harm. Written child protection procedures including a quick reference flow chart are made available to all foster carers; these are consistent with the Local Safeguarding Board policies and procedures. All concerns or allegations are reported to the Local Authority Designated Officer and the child's social worker. Concerns or allegations against foster carers are dealt with robustly, these are referred appropriately and their approval status reviewed promptly by the fostering panel. A written record of significant events verifies that relevant agencies directly connected to child welfare receive prompt reports of all significant incidents. However the agency has failed to provide this information to Ofsted.

The agency office and administrative systems are suitable to enable the service to meet the objectives of its Statement of Purpose. IT and communication systems are sufficiently robust and the premises have facilities for the secure retention of records.

The promotion of equality and diversity at the service is good. Staff and carers receive good training opportunities. The programme includes core training in equality and diversity. Foster carers and staff demonstrate a good understanding of the particular needs of the children who have disabilities in relation to wider society. Other training opportunities include understanding Islam, emerging sexualities, communication and promoting participation for children with disabilities. Specific training to individual carers is provided in areas such as communications skills. Social worker staff and foster carers provide care in a manner that is consistent with children's chronological needs.

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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg	Statutory Requirement	Due date
6 (2011)	notify the Chief inspector without delay of the name of any person appointed to manage the agency in accordance with the regulation and the date on which the appointment is to take effect (Regulation 6)	15/08/2011
36 (2011)	notify any of the events listed in Column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 notify the person or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. Oral notifications	18/07/2011

	must be confirmed in writing (Regulation 36).	
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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):

- continue to pursue improved access to transport for foster carers who are not able to obtain a suitable vehicle, in order to support children's opportunities for participation in leisure activities (NMS 7.2)
- ensure that contact details for Ofsted and the Independent Reviewing Officer are set out in the Statement of Purpose (NMS 16)
- develop a written development plan to inform the future direction of the service (NMS 18)
- review and update the foster carer's handbook. (NMS 21.10)