

Action for Children - South West Fostering Project

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Wilfried Maxfield
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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 Fostering South West provides fostering services for children who need permanent substitute family care and for whom adoption is not appropriate. The agency began to develop a specialist permanency fostering scheme in 2000. In 2006 it began to expand, due to changing demand, adding and recruiting foster carers who will provide short-term fostering for children.

Fostering South West generally recruits carers who live within a hours drive of Bristol, and provides placements for children and young people from seven local authorities in the South West. Twenty one full- time carers were approved at the time of this inspection. Twenty five children were placed with them.

Due to Local Authority demand the agency has expanded further and now operates Action for Children Fostering South West Peninsula. This branch is line managed by the Bristol office with a view to register an additional office in Exeter with Ofsted in the near future. The South West Peninsula service operates over a wide geographical area covering five local authorities in the South of the country. A total of eleven approved carers offer placements to a total of eight children and young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The agency has made outstanding progress since the last inspection. Foster carers, children and young people in placement, birth parents and external stakeholders provided excellent feedback about the service. The outcomes for children and young people across all of the outcome areas are judged to be outstanding. Children thrive in their placements and are being looked after by experienced, well trained and highly competent carers. Foster carers are exceedingly well supported and are in turn able to provide excellent levels of support to the children in their care. Placements are exceedingly well planed and care plans are reviewed and further developed to a very high standard. Training, support and supervision arrangements for social work staff are outstanding. This significantly contributes to this agency being able to provide the best possible service for children. The agency promotes an excellent culture of safeguarding and safe care for children. This could be further improved by implementing the safer recruitment and vetting practice outlined in the body in this report.

Improvements since the last inspection

The one action and three recommendations from the last inspection have been largely addressed. The action to implement safer care plans has been fully implemented. Plans are in place for all of the foster homes and are now of an

excellent quality. Good monitoring arrangements ensure ongoing performance. A recommendation to promote recording of the five outcomes in the Every Child Matters outcome sections has led to marked improvements in carers' recording. A further review of the service's recording formats is being planned for the near future. Regular review meetings with service and team managers ensure that foster carers are now more aware of time frames and other significant factors for filling vacancies. Equally, better communication with foster carers has improved the service's awareness and resulted in providing vital support to foster carers when children are out of school.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people thrive and develop in their foster placements. Experienced and well trained foster carers promote their physical, emotional and social development. Carers know the health needs of the children placed with them exceedingly well. Excellent placement plans support a professional and child-centred approach. Well designed strategies ensure an excellent focus on clearly defined health outcomes for children and young people. Children benefit from the agencies outstanding local knowledge and partnerships with health care agencies and professionals. Access to professional health services, doctors, health professionals and specialist services is excellent. Foster carers are able to support children with complex health needs and praise the agency for outstanding levels of support through training and supervision. Complex interventions are well managed including the safe and professional management and administration of medication. Supervising social workers are able to support placements by providing carers with excellent insight and an expert knowledge of children's psychological, developmental and physical health needs. Progress is regularly monitored and assessed.

Foster carers can demonstrate excellent advocacy on behalf of the children. Children's views are listened to and their views and wishes are taken into account and inform the agencies understanding and approach to their individual health needs. Older children are thought to keep themselves safe and are provided with a comprehensive amount of information and advice about health issues, sexual health, drug and alcohol misuse.

Children and young people live in foster homes which provide them with a nurturing, safe and comfortable environment. Homes are inspected and monitored regularly and are adapted to ensure that children's specific needs and wishes are accommodated. The agency supports an excellent approach to well- structured placements and a well balanced and active daily and weekly programme. Children and young people enjoy access to a range of activities which promote their overall health and well-being.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy safe and secure placements. The agency promotes a strong ethos and culture of safe and therapeutic parenting and provides a strong safeguarding framework for all fostering households. Children know how to keep themselves safe and have access to a range of support services and helplines should they want to discuss any concerns. Safer care plans are of an outstanding quality. Excellent provision of safeguarding training ensures that foster carers are knowledgeable and competent in safe care practices and are able to protect children from significant harm and abuse. Highly specific risk assessments identify specific safeguarding needs for the more vulnerable children.

The service works in effective partnership with other protection agencies. Children are protected and supported during safeguarding investigations. Allegations and suspicions of abuse are handled effectively and in line with the agencies strict policies and procedures. Managers and support social workers work closely with the Local Safeguarding Children's Boards in the geographical area of each fostering household; all safeguarding processes are consistent with local procedures. Foster carers and staff have an excellent knowledge of safeguarding and safe parenting practices.

Children rarely go missing. The foster carer handbook contains a comprehensive missing from care policy. All foster carers have received and know the content of this policy and are able to implement the current procedures in relation to children going missing. Good data collection identifies possible clusters and trends and monitors and evaluates the overall numbers of incidents.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy positive relationships with their foster family. Excellent placement planning ensures that effective and positive strategies are in place for children who display challenging behaviour. A new and comprehensive framework for supporting the behaviour of children demonstrates an excellent commitment to supporting foster families through training, supervision and the availability of psychological support.

Foster carer households are provided with outstanding levels of support and encourage children to participate in positive and stimulating leisure activities. Children enjoy developing their interests and grow in confidence and skills.

Children are fully supported to achieve their educational potential. Carers give the highest possible priority to children's educational needs. Foster carers receive outstanding levels of training and support to enable them to help children realise their educational aspirations. The agency monitors educational attainment and

individual progress on an ongoing basis and can evidence excellent academic outcomes for children and young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people's views are taken into account in a systematic way and their views and wishes are seen as vital to inform and influence future service developments. The agency follows an excellent multi-level approach to ensure that children have many opportunities to communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. Children are provided with excellent information to encourage them to seek help and advice if needed, to establish contact with external advocacy services and to enable children to complain if they so wish.

The agency supports children to maintain contact with their parents and all other people who play a significant part in their lives. Foster carers are given excellent levels of logistical support. Good placement planning ensures that carers are enabled to work with the birth family in a positive and constructive way. A thorough approach to risk assessment makes sure that foster carers know about specific circumstances and follow agreed protocols to be certain that any restrictions on contact are in the best interest of the child.

Children are welcomed into the foster home and are included in the planning of possible placements in a way that is appropriate to their age and level of understanding. Good information sharing allows for informed and considered placement decisions. Pre-placement meetings are held to achieve the best possible level of information sharing and to manage a careful introduction between child and carer. Children are included in the decision-making process and are given good information about the prospective foster home. In the vast majority of cases children are able to visit before a placement decision is made.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The agency promotes young people's moves into independence and makes comprehensive arrangements to support young people to make a successful transition. Foster carers are encouraged to ensure that young people can become more confident and build life skills throughout their foster placements. Excellent independence plans are in place from the age of 15. Support for care leavers is outstanding. Young people ready to leave care are provided with strategies to support them to move into their own accommodation and prepare for work or higher education. There is excellent support for young people who want to remain in school or college and for those who want to consider possible work options.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding and is integrated into all aspects of the service. The agency's approach to ensuring that children, young people, and their families, are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promotes equality is outstanding. Children and young people are provided with excellent levels of personalised care specific to their needs. Social workers and carers have an excellent understanding of children and young people's backgrounds and respect and celebrate their individuality and differences. The fostering service listens to children's and young people's views and wishes at every opportunity. Foster carers benefit from regular equality and diversity training promoting an excellent understanding of good practice in line with current legislation. Information on how the service aims to promote equality and diversity is contained in outstanding detail in all of the agencies policies and other documents.

The agency currently supports a range of foster carers who have been recruited and assessed to an exceedingly high professional standard. Carers provide children and young people with an outstanding quality of care. Outstanding commitment to planning and proactive management ensures an effective and long-term strategy to recruit and assess carers. All enquiries of prospective carers are treated fairly and without prejudice. The assessment process focuses on the skills and aptitude of applicants and their capacity to care safely and responsibly and is conducted in a rigorous yet open and transparent way.

The fostering panel provides a highly effective quality assurance function and promotes the welfare of the children in the care of the agency at all times. The excellent knowledge, experience and level and range of expertise of panel members means that competent recommendations and decisions are made for all children, including those with the most complex and diverse needs.

Children benefit from excellent procedures and practice designed to match them to the most suitable and competent carer. Pre-placement planning is excellent and carers are provided with detailed information about children's backgrounds.

Foster carers and staff have an excellent understanding of the aims and objectives of the fostering service. The agency has a clear Statement of Purpose which explains what services it provides and outlines, in good detail, how the service intends to meet outcomes for children and young people. An excellent Children's Guide has been developed with the help of children and is available for all of the children and young people prior to placement.

The agency is managed by a very experienced and highly professional and competent team of senior managers. The current team have the appropriate skills, experience and have recognised professional qualifications and competence to deliver an outstanding service. Members of staff and foster carers speak highly of the team and praise their focus on outcomes for children and their ambition to achieve

the best possible welfare and child care practices.

Good recruitment and vetting practice prevents unsuitable people having access to children. There is careful selection of staff, foster carers and fostering households and members of the fostering panel. The agency benefits from the centralised services and safer recruitment practices and policies of a large nationwide charity. Vetting processes generally follow all elements of the relevant standards and regulations. However, in a sample of files not all of the individual employment histories contained a satisfactory written explanation for any gaps.

Children and young people benefit from foster carers who are given excellent support and training to develop skills essential to their role. The agency supports carers to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's training standards in an exemplary fashion. Foster carers work in close partnership with their individual support social workers and praise their dedication and attention to the children's care and best interests. Foster carers are provided with an excellent handbook which covers essential policies and procedures, such as those relating to safeguarding, and contains a wealth of other relevant information. Carers know how to complain and are supported to make a complaint about any aspect of the service.

Support and supervision arrangements for social work staff are outstanding and enable social work staff to provide the best possible service for children. All staff receive excellent levels of support including professional formal one-to-one supervisions at regular intervals. Supervisions have an exceptionally strong focus on the work with individual children. Social work staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually. Training needs are assessed regularly and opportunities for professional development and learning are good. Capacity and workloads of support social workers are monitored and evaluated at regular intervals.

The agency is managed effectively and delivers a service which meets the needs of its users. Good data collection and evaluation ensures that the activities of the service are always monitored and controlled. Children's outcome reports collate vital information about the quality of children's placements and are monitored for any concerns and for forward planning purposes. Foster carers' and children's files are clear, up to date and contribute to staff and carers' understanding of children's needs and increases carers' ability to support children. Appropriate safeguards are in place to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. The offices used by the fostering service are adequate. The processing and payments of allowances is good.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that all employment histories are verified and include a satisfactory

written explanation of any gaps in employment. (NMS19)