

TACT - The Adolescent and Children's Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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

The Adolescent and Children's Trust (known as TACT) is a charitable, independent fostering agency governed by a board of trustees with day-to-day management being undertaken by a senior management team. TACT operates in England, Scotland and Wales and has eight area-based offices: East Midlands; Birmingham; Liverpool; Neath; Bristol; Leeds; Edinburgh; and East London.

The East Midlands office, located in Kettering, Northamptonshire is the subject of this inspection. Social work staff are divided into two teams, one covering the Fens area and one the Shires area. The East Midlands service provides a range of fostering placements as well as undertaking foster carer assessments, approvals and ongoing supervision and support of carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

TACT has extremely robust systems and practices for the recruitment, assessment and approval of foster carers. A high priority is placed on ensuring that young people's identified individual care and support needs are carefully matched to foster carer skills. This promotes good placement stability, and young people are generally enjoying positive and lasting placements and are achieving positive outcomes.

Foster carers speak very highly of the supervision, support and training they receive to equip them to provide such positive placements for young people. A number of foster carers consider this to be 'the best fostering service there is'. Records examined and discussions with foster carers and agency staff demonstrate that the service is very child centred. There is a real focus on ensuring that young people grow and develop within their placements and progressively acquire the independence and social skills to support them in making positive transitions into adulthood. The agency has comprehensive and effective systems for consulting with carers and young people to provide them with good opportunities to influence agency practice and development. Carers say: 'They are always looking at ways to improve the service they provide.'

Young people feel safe and highly valued within their placements and comment: 'I have had the very best years in my life here.' Their health care needs are fully addressed and they are encouraged and supported to achieve their full educational potential.

Not all foster carers are achieving the Training, Support and Development Standards within the required timescales. Not all foster carers are currently complying with the agency's stated expectation that information concerning young people must be

stored securely. Some foster carers are clear about what decisions they can make, in relation to the young people in their care, without needing to seek consent but in some cases, the decision-making process is either unclear or inappropriate. The agency has begun to acquire copies of the Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols from all the local authorities it works with but several have not yet been obtained and shared with foster carers.

The agency has recently made an error of judgement in allowing its fostering panel to consider a foster carer application for another fostering agency. The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 do not permit this practice.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection of this service was in February 2008. One requirement was identified for the agency to maintain a young people's register, which included all required information. At the time of that inspection the agency was not including discharge addresses when young people moved on. The register is now wholly appropriately maintained.

Three recommendations were made and all have been fully implemented. The agency now ensures that carers always have consent to medical treatment when young people are initially placed. The agency also ensures that placing social workers approve the contents of individual safer care policies compiled by the carer and supervising social worker. At the time of the previous inspection, recruitment files did not always indicate that gaps in employment history were being fully explored or that there was appropriate consideration given to potential risks when Criminal Records Bureau checks for staff were not clear. Recruitment files examined during this inspection, and discussion with the Registered Manager, demonstrate that recruitment processes are robust and appropriately promote the safety of young people.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Young people's individual health care needs are discussed as part of the initial placement meeting and the agency endeavours to obtain all relevant health information, from placing authorities, to pass on to foster carers when a child is placed. In some cases health information is not provided in a very timely way so agency social workers complete a health plan proforma, with the carer, to ensure their awareness of the action they need to take, from the outset of a placement, to maintain young people's good health. The agency ensures that all carers have signed consent to emergency medical treatment, at the time a child is placed, so that they can access timely medical intervention should a child require it. Carers are supported and encouraged to access training opportunities specifically geared to help them to actively promote the physical, emotional and psychological health of looked after children. Carers say: 'The courses we attend help us to make sure young people develop healthy lifestyles'; and, 'The allowances we receive help us to give young

people a very good standard of living'. Young people said that their foster carers always or usually provide them with sound advice about how to stay healthy. Where young people require input from specialist health professionals, their foster carers support them well to access such services. Some young people have regular input from the child and adolescent mental health service or from a psychologist. In some cases the agency has negotiated sessions with the psychologist for foster carers, to support them in managing young people's presenting attitudes and behaviours and to better equip them to help young people deal with potentially damaging life experiences.

Foster carers maintain daily records to detail any health appointments attended and additionally keep records of the administration of medication. These records are regularly examined by their supervising social workers to ensure that young people's health care needs are being prioritised. Regular supervision visits incorporate full discussion of how carers are meeting young people's health care needs and the records of these discussions are used well to inform reports for young people's looked after children reviews.

The fostering agency provides older young people with a manual of information to prepare them for leaving care. The manual incorporates good information covering topics such as drug and alcohol misuse and smoking. The agency additionally operates a six-session life skills course for young people aged 15 and over. One of the sessions, which was taking place during the inspection, focuses on health. Young people complete a first aid certificated course as well as learning about the importance of retaining healthy eating habits, and of keeping medical appointments, when they move into more independent living situations and begin to take full responsibility for their own health care.

The carer assessment process incorporates full consideration of what accommodation is available for fostered children. The panel robustly considers this information in determining how many young people a prospective carer can be approved to provide placements for. Bedroom sharing is only considered for same sex siblings under the age of four and is always subject to a full risk assessment. Supervising social workers carry out an annual health and safety assessment of every carer household, as part of the annual review process. This ensures that those households are properly monitored to ensure that they consistently provide a safe environment for young people to live in. In addition, the agency ensures that every carer household receives an unannounced visit every year to monitor that consistently good standards of care are maintained. These visits always incorporate a tour of the household, including looking at young people's bedrooms to ascertain that they provide appropriate personal space. Checks are made to ensure that foster carers have a current driving licence and appropriate MOT and insurance cover, as part of the initial approval and annual review process, so that the agency can be certain that young people are safe when being transported by their foster carer. Carer households provide young people with a very homely environment, with a good range of toys and games to stimulate and motivate them to learn and to enjoy their leisure time.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers routinely receive training on how to promote young people's safety. All foster carers work with their supervising social workers to prepare a safe caring policy to reflect how household practices will specifically promote the safety of the young people accommodated. Each time a new child is placed in the foster home the policy is updated to reflect their specific needs. Young people feel safe in their placements. They feel well cared for and are happy. They feel able to talk to their carers should they have any worries or concerns and feel that their carers listen to what they have to say and support them through difficult times. None of the young people report being bullied. Young people comment: 'I've never had it so good'; 'I have had the four happiest years ever'; and 'I feel happy and really wanted here'.

The agency is able to demonstrate that, where allegations or complaints have had any child protection implications, staff have liaised closely with all relevant professionals and shared information appropriately. In such instances the agency has prioritised the safety of young people while ensuring that its foster carers have been able to access independent support and advice.

The agency provides carers with sound advice and information about how they should respond should a child go missing from placement. Foster carers are very clear about their reporting responsibilities when this happens and of the requirement to record any action they take. The agency ensures that the potential for young people going missing forms part of the risk assessment completed when matching them to a placement. Carers work to develop positive relationships with the children they care for so that they are unlikely to go missing. There are very few instances of young people missing from placements. The agency has begun to acquire copies of the Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols from all the local authorities it works with but several have not yet been obtained and shared with foster carers.

A very thorough matching process, incorporating robust risk assessments, ensures that young people's safety is highly prioritised from the commencement of their placement. Supervising social workers have weekly telephone contact with carers and visit them frequently to continually monitor their capacity to provide safe placements for young people. These visits incorporate regular discussions with the young people in placement to confirm that they continue to feel safe and well cared for.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency, and its foster carers, place a high priority on supporting young people to enjoy education and achieve well. When considering referrals, the agency takes full account of how young people's identified educational needs can be met as part of the matching process. Wherever possible, efforts are made to enable young people

to remain in educational placements where they are already achieving well. The agency's expectations of its foster carers, with regard to supporting young people's educational attendance and achievement, are clearly stated in the foster carer agreement and in individual placement agreements. Foster carers say: 'The agency makes their expectations clear and offers us very good support to meet them.' Foster carers feel well supported in their dealings with young people's schools and feel that the agency shows a positive interest in young people's progress: 'They take a real interest in our boys and their achievements.' The agency holds an annual event where young people's achievements are officially recognised and rewarded. Foster carers always attend meetings at young people's schools and their supervising social workers attend with them when they need support. Young people are very positive about the support they receive to achieve well and about the help they get with school work: 'I have had extra tuition and that really helped'; 'I've been on a university open day to help me think positively about further education'; and 'We talk together about working hard for the future and I'm actually doing it.' Some young people have made significant progress in moving from the point of exclusion to their teacher commenting: 'I no longer recognise this child. She has just come so far.'

Initial placement planning meetings consider young people's presenting behaviours and the competence of carers to manage these appropriately. The agency undertakes a written risk assessment, as part of the matching process, and this identifies any support or additional training carers may need in relation to meeting the young person's individual needs. Foster carers are provided with good training to support them in managing challenging behaviours and on techniques for de-escalation. Carers say that training on attachment, and on working with traumatised children, has given them real insight into why some of the children they care for display difficult behaviours, while behaviour management training has better equipped them to manage those behaviours positively.

Young people have good access to a range of activities. Largely these are arranged and facilitated by individual carers but the agency also regularly organises activity days for looked after children and carers' own children. Carers especially value the appointment of children's resource workers and say these workers have established excellent communication with young people in identifying their preferences for organised activities: 'The young people's support is great. We have a resource worker who really involves them in planning activities. The activities are always well organised and great fun.' Young people also value these activities: 'I love the fact that they always organise fun things for us kids to do.' Young people are additionally being supported, by their carers, to engage within their community: 'My eldest has trophies for helping locally with river clearance and rubbish collection.'

Some particularly positive work has been undertaken with asylum-seeking young people who have been extremely well supported to move positively through school and college and into employment. The carers who have supported this progress say that they 'could not have managed it without the guidance and great support TACT provided'.

At present there is a lack of clarity in respect of delegation of authority to carers.

Recent legislative guidance has highlighted strongly that foster carers should be given the maximum flexibility to take decisions relating to children in their care so that those children feel part of the family. The agency has recognised that changes in legislation require them to be more proactive in clarifying the permissions delegated to carers, by young people's parents and placing authorities, and has prepared a comprehensive proforma document, addressing this, to be completed at the point of placement. This has yet to be implemented. Some foster carers are clear about what decisions they can make without needing to seek consent, but in some cases the decision-making process is either unclear or inappropriate. Some carers say they are unable to authorise overnight stays with friends or relatives and some say they are even unable to take a fostered child for a haircut without permission.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has a real dedication to ensuring that young people are provided with good information about what fostering means for them and to providing them with opportunities to express their views about their care. Young people feel confident that their carers listen carefully to their views: 'We always discuss and agree things together'; and 'They listen to my opinions and really take notice because I'm part of this family.'

The young people's guides provide them with excellent information, in very accessible and age-appropriate formats, about what being fostered involves and about their rights. There is good information about how they can make a complaint if they are unhappy and about how they can access independent advocacy services should they require extra support. The agency employs children's resource workers who work closely with young people to ensure that they are able to influence practice. Young people are supported to attend relevant external events, for example, a resource worker is accompanying a young person to take part in a parliamentary debate about leaving care and young people have been taken to Ofsted and the British Association for Adoption and Fostering consultation events, to help them influence policy decision making. Both fostered children and carers' own children are asked for their views at the time of the carer's annual review. Comprehensive reports are prepared for young people's looked after children reviews, to detail their progress in placement, and carers support young people to attend their reviews and make their views known to professionals. The provider organisation circulates a children's newsletter to keep them informed of what is happening within TACT and organises a range of participation and activity events.

Foster carers speak very positively about the agency's processes for consulting with young people: 'They really do take the views of young people and have a dedicated worker to coordinate this'; and, 'The children love the newsletter and are always sending in comments.'

Initial placement planning clearly identifies any racial, cultural or religious needs and clarifies how carers will ensure these are met. Contact arrangements are also

discussed. Where appropriate, carers will transport young people to contact with their families. The foster carer and placement agreements clearly reflect the agency's expectation that carers will promote and support positive contact visits for young people in their care. In some cases, carers have been proactive in helping young people to really move forward in establishing positive relationships, especially with siblings placed elsewhere, through making contact informal and fun for the children.

The agency places great emphasis on careful and appropriate matching. This is very clearly demonstrated in the very high level of placement stability. Wherever possible, placements are well prepared for with young people making visits to the family home before moving in and receiving good information about the foster family. Carers say that they generally receive good information about children before, or at the time of placement. There are some instances where placing authorities are slow to provide relevant information and the manager is proactive in following this up and, where necessary, will inform young people's independent reviewing officers of issues regarding proper information sharing.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers have a sound awareness of their role in helping young people to progressively acquire social and independence skills to equip them to make positive transitions into adulthood. Carers feel that the support and training TACT provides, and the fostering allowance they receive, support them well in providing young people with positive life and social experiences: 'We have a lot of training and generous allowances to help us to equip young people for life's challenges'; and 'Our eldest moved at 19 into independent living. TACT were very supportive in helping us to challenge the local authority to provide appropriate support.'

TACT operates a 'Skills for Life' training package, presented by the resource worker and a supervising social worker, for young people aged 15 and over. The course comprises six elements and operates over six days through the year. A range of topics are covered from money management to maintaining a healthy lifestyle and keeping yourself safe. Young people achieve certificates to recognise the learning they achieve through this course, which builds a portfolio of skills to support them in moving on to further education or employment. TACT additionally provides older young people with a care leavers manual containing a range of useful information to support them in making positive transitions into adulthood and independence. Young people feel that they are supported well, by their carers, to prepare for independence and to move on positively: 'We talk about my future all the time. I want to join the police and my carers are helping me to do just that'; and 'I will be leaving foster care soon and I really want to thank my carers and TACT. I couldn't have done this without them.'

Foster carers have access to training on preparing young people for care leaving and many carers continue to offer informal support to young people who have left placement. The agency provides placing authorities with an option to retain a foster

placement for a young person post 18, at a reduced rate, whereby agency workers will continue to support the carers but will not provide direct support to the young person.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. At the point of placing a young person, the agency fully clarifies any specific individual needs in respect of race, ethnicity, sexuality or disability, and ensures that carers receive appropriate information and support to enable them to meet those needs. Both social work staff and foster carers are expected to undertake equality and diversity training to raise their awareness of the need to value individuality and respect difference. Young people feel that they are treated fairly within foster homes and say that carers treat them as part of the family. There are very good examples of carers supporting young people, from various backgrounds, to achieve well within education and to move positively into adulthood and successful employment.

Processes for the recruitment, assessment and approval of foster carers are exceptionally sound. Form F assessments are diligently completed and constitute a qualitative assessment of potential carers' skills and attributes for fostering. The fostering panel meets each month to consider carer approvals and relevant annual reviews. Panel minutes reflect robust consideration of all business placed before them and panel members are searching and thorough in their questioning of assessors and prospective foster carers. There are clear policies and procedures governing panel constitution and practice.

The agency has made an error of judgement in allowing a newly registered fostering agency to present a foster carer application for approval to its fostering panel and in presenting a recommendation for approval to the TACT agency decision maker for ratification. The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 do not permit the agency's fostering panel to consider another fostering agency's business. This situation has been fully addressed outside of this inspection process.

The agency's Statement of Purpose fully clarifies the agency's constitution and aims and objectives. The children's guide is available in a range of colourful, age-appropriate and informative formats. Young people are provided with excellent information about what fostering will mean for them, what support they can expect from their carers and the agency, and about the independent support they can access should they be unhappy.

Staff recruitment processes are sound. Appropriate checks are undertaken to ensure that staff are suitably qualified and experienced and do not pose a risk to the safety of young people. Social work staff are split into two teams serving different geographical areas. The management structure has, until very recently, involved the Registered Manager being designated as team manager for one team. The other area team manager has been on long-term sickness. The agency has additionally had

to cover the long-term sickness of one of its social workers. Over the last 12 months a lack of clarity has developed about lines of accountability and there has been some fragmentation within the team. While staff have retained strong identification with their area team, their identification with TACT East Midlands service, as a whole, has been slightly lost. Some inconsistencies have developed in recording practices and these have been exacerbated by the introduction of an electronic recording system. Senior management within the organisation have recognised the need for a management restructure to reaffirm the Registered Manager's overall managerial responsibility and to clarify team leadership responsibilities. There have been appointments of deputy area managers, with overall management responsibility of both teams lying clearly with the Registered Manager. There is clear evidence that the manager has begun to focus on implementing wholly consistent working and recording practices and on establishing very clear lines of accountability. It is a demonstration of the dedication and professionalism of staff that these internal issues have not impacted on the high quality supervision and support provided to foster carers.

Staff are provided with regular, professional supervision and feel that support from colleagues is invaluable. Social work staff have access to good training opportunities to ensure that they are able to provide high quality support to carers and young people.

Foster carers receive an exceptionally high level of individual support, and good quality supervision: 'The staff are fantastic, you can ring any time and someone will always help'; and 'The out-of-hours service is amazing, you never feel guilty or silly for ringing, they can't do enough to help you to help the children.' Carers are especially positive about the support they receive from their named supervising social worker, with many saying that they have had invaluable guidance and advice, during their supervision sessions, to help them to promote young people's positive growth and development. Placement stability is very good because the agency is dedicated to matching young people's needs carefully to foster carer skills.

Foster carers receive good quality pre-approval training to prepare them adequately for the fostering task. One carer, who reports that 'everything covered in the training was in this one placement', also notes that 'the support we received here was outstanding'. The carer concludes: 'This has been one heck of a placement but one we would not have changed for the world and these lovely children are finally ready to move on to their permanent long-term foster homes.' All carers have a personal development plan. Records demonstrate that carers are consistently encouraged to access training, which is specifically targeted at improving their skills to manage the very individual issues of the children placed. The agency offers a range of learning programmes, using social work staff and carers to facilitate training, where appropriate, as well as external experts. Staff and carers are also able to access a wide range of e-learning programmes available through the British Association of Adoption and Fostering, the Social Care Institute for Excellence and the Open University. Agency staff are encouraging and supporting carers to complete the Training, Support and Development Standards but, currently, the required timescales are not always being met.

Staff are provided with robust administrative support by a knowledgeable and experienced team. All files, relating to young people, staff and carers, are securely stored and are generally well maintained. Carers retain daily records relating to individual placements and these provide young people with sound records of the time spent in foster care. Foster carers are not always complying with the agency requirement to store information about young people securely. Carers help young people to keep memory boxes so that they will have a selection of keepsakes from their childhood to take with them when they move on from placements.

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
27 (2011)	ensure that they must not approve a foster carer, or present an assessment to the agency's fostering panel, unless this fostering agency has completed the assessment of the carer's suitability to foster. (Regulation 27(2(a))	30/11/2011

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers are supported to make reasonable and appropriate decisions, without having to seek unnecessary consent. Ensure that they are clear about the decision-making capacity delegated to them, for example in relation to children's capacity to stay overnight with friends or go on school trips (NMS 7.4, 7.7, Volume 4 Chapter 3)
- obtain copies of the Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols and procedures covering all areas where foster homes are located, and from which referrals are accepted, to ascertain that these are all compatible with the agency's procedures and that action taken is fully compliant (NMS 5.6, 5.7)
- ensure that all foster carers comply with the agency's stated expectation to store records relating to young people securely (NMS 26.2)
- ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within the required timescales. (NMS 20.3)