

Action for Children Fostering

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

Action for Children is an independent fostering agency based in Middlesbrough. The agency has regional office bases in Sheffield and Hull and is developing an office on the Wirral. The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide specialist foster placements for children with more complex needs. It provides a specialist foster care scheme in collaboration with a specialist therapeutic agency and a short-breaks scheme for children with disabilities.

At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing a family placement service to around 50 children and young people with 58 foster carers. In addition to the Registered Manager the agency employs three team managers, fostering social workers and administrative support staff based in each office.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This is a highly child focussed agency. It is extremely well managed, operated and monitored in a way that produces outstanding outcomes for children and young people across all areas.

The agency recruits, assesses and prepares foster carers very well. It provides them with excellent training and support. Foster carers are very well managed and their work with children is very well directed and supervised. The agency takes great care in matching children with those carers who are best suited to meet their needs; it provides excellent ongoing support to maintain placement stability. This means that children are safe, thrive and are happy in their foster homes.

The agency works very well with placing authorities and other agencies who support the children. It has access to a range of therapeutic services and support for children and their carers. This, coupled with detailed individual knowledge of the children who are fostered and their needs, ensures that young people receive timely, clearly targeted and individually relevant services. As a consequence young people are able to come to terms with their past lives and make significant progress.

Managers, staff members and foster carers are committed to improving young people's lives. The agency has a very strong culture of consultation with children and a clear focus on involving young people in their own care and the operation of the agency. Outcomes for health, education and those related to the preparation for adulthood are significant.

One recommendation is made as a result of this inspection. This relates to

placements being in line with the carer's terms of approval at the time the placement is made for those children placed with foster carers for a short break.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has addressed the recommendations made at the last inspection. These related to elements of foster carers' training and the need to ensure that the agency's practice was sufficiently well monitored across all geographic areas. These matters are now areas of strength and help ensure that outcomes for children are positive.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children receive excellent support to be healthy. Young people's files contain comprehensive information about their health and any specific needs they have. These are informed by the detailed knowledge workers have of young people and their needs. The agency works effectively with placing authorities to ensure that young people receive any health support or interventions they require. Foster carers receive training in a range of health matters; assessments consider their ability to raise children and promote healthy lifestyles. Children's health needs are considered as part of the process of matching them with foster carers; arrangements for delegating consent for medical treatment are clearly agreed.

All children receive prompt access to primary health services and any specific or specialist health need is assessed and met promptly. Access to specialist mental health services where young people need this is outstandingly well facilitated by the agency. A specialist, intensive foster care scheme is operated jointly with an organisation providing multi-disciplinary therapeutic services and support. This arrangement also provides all the agency's children and foster carers with specialist support, counselling and therapy wherever this is needed. This translates into extremely positive outcomes for children.

Children's emotional health is improved significantly during their placements. For example, the care and therapeutic support has not only had a major impact upon one young person's emotional well-being and ability to function within a family, but has also had a dramatic impact on the young person's physical health and development. The young person's foster carer described the young person as having 'blossomed in every way' because of the health support and care provided.

Foster homes are safe places to live and are assessed for their suitability for children to live in. Safety and suitability are monitored on an ongoing basis during supervisory visits and at foster carers' annual reviews. Carers are provided with any specific aids or adaptations they may need for a young person.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people living with the agency's foster carers receive excellent protection and very strong support for their welfare.

The assessment and preparation of foster carers is a robust process which ensures that they are suitable people and able to meet children's needs. The ongoing monitoring and management of carers is undertaken with rigour. Training is provided to carers to help them deal safely with children's behaviour.

The agency uses detailed knowledge of its carers to support the arrangement of extremely well-matched placements which meet young people's needs. Risks are carefully assessed for each placement. Young people are provided with written and pictorial information as well as verbal information about prospective foster carers, so that, wherever possible, their move can be a positive choice. This helps in the promotion of positive and beneficial relationships between young people and their foster carers. Young people's ongoing safety is further assured through training and the safe care policies, risk assessments and health and safety checklists that are regularly reviewed and updated at foster carers' supervision meetings and reviews. The supervision of foster carers is clearly focussed on ensuring that young people's needs are being met in placement. As a consequence, placement stability is excellent which helps to provide consistent and secure, nurturing care for children and young people.

Young people have a clear voice in this agency. Consultation with children and their involvement is threaded through the entire agency's practice. Supervising social workers spend a lot of time working with and getting to know young people; this helps promote their safety and well-being by giving them opportunity to raise any worries or concerns they may have.

Children are protected from the risks of going missing from care. Clear policy and procedural arrangements are in place but rarely needed. The success of the authority's robust matching processes, the quality of ongoing support for children and their foster carers and the quality of relationships between children, their carers and the agency's workers mean that children rarely go missing from their foster placements. Any occasions when this does occur are dealt with safely and well.

Young people feel safe and well cared for in their placements. They are extremely well satisfied with their foster carers. For example, young people said things like, 'I love my family' and 'I think my foster carers are great'. One said that their foster carers have 'turned my life around'.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Young people and children are supported to achieve. Supervising social workers spend a lot of time with young people, establishing good relationships with them. Foster carers receive training in managing young people's behaviour and have access to support and advice as well as therapeutic input for the children they care for. One young person said, 'my carers understand me and know how to keep me calm'. This high level of support helps carers to parent and nurture the children placed with them and helps to maintain the stability of placements.

The agency and its carers are ambitious for children. Children receive excellent support to develop new interests and develop social and emotional confidence. Foster carers understand the need to offer and support children to participate in varied interests that will keep them healthy, broaden their experiences and teach them new skills. Young people take part in a wide range of activities including football, drama, dancing, swimming, drama groups and uniformed organisations as well as less formal activities with their carers.

Activities are based on children's preferences and are often arranged to help young people address some of the issues they face. For example, young people benefit from being able to socialise with other people and from seeing improvements to their own self-esteem. Foster carers include young people in their own family activities and celebrations which help them to feel accepted. The agency runs activity sessions for young people, also using this time as an opportunity to consult them. Arrangements for consent for outings and activities are clearly identified when placements are made, so that young people do not have additional barriers placed upon their activities because they are looked after.

The commitment of this agency to the educational achievement of its fostered children is exceptional. It works very effectively with placing authorities, schools and the organisation that provides therapeutic support services, to ensure that children are placed in the correct school for them and receive very good support. For example, work is done with teachers individually or in groups to help them to understand the needs children may present as a result of their early trauma or insecure attachments.

The agency keeps excellent information, which is updated regularly, about the educational progress of its young people. This is constantly monitored to promptly identify any concerns. This monitoring is done in the context of the latest national research into the matters that help children achieve best at school. The agency measures its practice and that of its carers against this and takes remedial action to address any issues identified. Consequently, children's progress is known and any additional support or intervention needed is identified and implemented at an early stage.

Foster carers receive training in educational matters and their practice in this area is

guided through their own supervision sessions. Highly effective joint working means that educational issues are viewed holistically to ascertain whether support is needed elsewhere in children's lives. For example, intensive therapeutic input with children is considered in conjunction with the carers and schools and its impact across all areas of children's lives is monitored. Young people are provided with a range of additional tuition or schooling to help them succeed. Young people's achievement in education is recognised and rewarded by the agency at celebration events. This helps promote young people's expectations of their own achievement.

As a consequence of the agency's work to support education, outcomes for children in this area are excellent. For example, achievement at GCSE is significantly above the norm for looked after children. This is particularly positive given the very complex needs of the young people when they are placed with the agency. One young person is achieving educationally at a level that could not have been predicted when placed with the agency; others are on educational pathways in which they can best succeed. One young person said that before being placed with these carers, 'I was just messing around, now I know I'll be able to get a good job, I've a good education'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The views of young people in this agency are central to their own care and the operation of the service. They are listened to and their views are taken into account. The service knows well the children it works with and takes time to develop good relationships with them. Children are, wherever possible, provided with information about their prospective carers. Their views and those of their foster carers are sought and reflected in their own plans of care. Children's views also taken into consideration at reviews of their foster carers. This helps ensure that placements continue to meet their needs.

Young people have significant input into the operation of the agency. For example, young people, including some who are no longer placed with the agency, are involved in the recruitment and interviews of new staff, the recruitment of foster carers and their preparation training. The agency's panel asks every applicant to foster, questions devised by young people.

This strong focus on children's involvement demonstrates the value placed upon individual children. This is further demonstrated by the excellent work done to help them come to terms with their past lives and current situation. Strong relationships with supervising social workers, mean that young people always have a worker they know well and who they can talk to. Foster carers are well trained to understand children's feelings and needs. For example, work to promote children's attachment is provided individually and in more general training. Workers and carers undertake life story work with children; this is supported by the specialist psychological expertise of the agency which provides therapeutic services to children. Some of this work is very sensitive and complex, but is having extremely positive outcomes for the children

concerned.

The good quality of support to children in foster placements helps promote a high level of placement stability. Careful work is done to ensure that placement moves are avoided where possible and that any moves are only made in a planned manner that takes into account the feelings of the children concerned.

Young people's contact with their families is very well supported. Foster carers understand and support contact arrangements, both practically and emotionally.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people and their foster carers have very positive relationships. Carers are very well supported in their work with and care of young people. The fostering agency provides young people with excellent support to help them prepare for and move on into independence.

The agency and its carers work to help young people gain the skills and maturity necessary to live as adults. Children are supported to open bank accounts and manage their money. Foster carers work with young people to help them acquire independent living skills. This is being formalised further with the introduction of the agency's 'Key to the Door' programme, which includes a checklist of all the skills necessary to live independently and support plans to help young people achieve these. The agency's highly effective monitoring processes keep track of the work done in this area and the outcomes being achieved for young people, identifying any additional input necessary.

Staff liaise with placing authorities to ensure that young people have appropriate plans in place to help them in their transition to adulthood. The fostering agency encourages young people to remain in foster care as long as possible and works effectively with placing authorities to this end. The agency works positively with its carers to find ways of enabling them to continue to foster, whilst providing ongoing support to older young people. For example, it is proactively considering the future approval terms of carers who are likely to continue to provide care to a young person during their breaks from college. Foster carers demonstrate a significant commitment to their foster children as they grow up. For example, there are a number of foster families who continue to support previously fostered young people, long after they have left their care.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

This is an extremely well managed fostering agency with highly effective organisational arrangements at strategic and operational level. This promotes the achievement of excellent outcomes for children.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Young people receive a highly individualised service based on an excellent knowledge of their own needs. Training and support reflects carers' individual situations and the needs of the children they foster. The service carefully monitors the outcomes it is providing for children to ensure that the disadvantage they face is reduced. Very good relationships with children promote their capacity to achieve. The fostering agency uses well-prepared and trained carers who are able to promote equality and challenge discrimination. The agency works flexibly and creatively to provide placements for young people which are able to meet their needs and are culturally appropriate.

The fostering service has effective recruitment arrangements in place that includes anonymised input from fostered children. Initial screening is robust and ensures that only people likely to be suitable progress through the assessment process. Assessments are robust in checking the suitability of applicants to foster and in assessing applicants' ability to care for the agency's children. Foster carers are very well trained and supported through the supervision and review process and have their own support groups. The agency is thorough in its review and support of carers, addressing any practice issues effectively to ensure that young people continue to receive good care.

Decision-making processes are robust. The fostering panel is comprised of experienced people with an interest in fostering. It gives close consideration to the cases it hears and makes clear recommendations along with the reasons for these to the agency decision maker. In turn, the decision maker makes prompt and clear decisions, based upon case records and the minutes of panel's deliberations.

The agency works well with local authorities to ensure that young people are cared for in well matched and nurturing environments. Foster carers receive good information about those children to be placed with them. The agency endeavours to make planned placements wherever possible. Even where placements are made with little notice, meetings take place and all available information is shared. This ensures that all parties are fully informed and that arrangements are clear.

The agency's Statement of Purpose clearly and accurately sets out its aims, objectives and how it operates; this is reflected in the service's procedures and practice. The agency has a comprehensive, well presented and accessible young people's guide which includes all the required information.

The agency is exceptionally well managed. Working relationships with placing authorities and partner agencies are highly effective and there is a clear focus on meeting the needs of each young person. Staff and managers retain a clear focus on the well-being of each young person and demonstrate a drive to improve the lives of the children concerned. For example, the agency's well developed monitoring processes focus on outcomes for children as well as the work completed. Consequently, workers are able to focus their work on achieving key outcomes for young people. For example, one foster carer said the staff team are all 'fantastic' and that they feel 'fully supported and empowered to reach my full potential and the

potential of each young person'.

The work undertaken by the agency is well considered. Respite care is provided to carers and their young people on a planned basis; this support can also be provided where difficulties arise in a placement. When such arrangements are made, they are carried out with a clear focus on young people's needs. However, they are not, in every situation, undertaken with the certainty that they are line with the carer's terms of approval.

Recruitment procedures in relation to staff, panel members and foster carers are robust to help ensure the safety of young people. Staff members have the qualifications, skills and experience necessary and benefit from effective supervision and management. Workloads are monitored to ensure that the service continues to provide a high quality service to children.

The agency has clear arrangements to receive notifications from foster carers of any significant events and for dealing with these and referring on to other agencies when required. Processes for handling allegations or concerns about safeguarding are clear and well understood by staff members.

Records are of good quality and well maintained. Files contain clear evidence of decision making and management supervision and monitoring. This ensures the high quality of records and the direct work undertaken. Agency records are retained securely. Foster carers maintain good records, submitting these to the fostering service. Consequently, records are effective in helping to plan, implement and review the care provided to young people and would help children in later life to understand their past lives.

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 fostering activity is consistent with the 2011 regulations and national minimum standards. Specifically, that the impact on a foster carer's terms of approval is considered before placements are made. (NMS 25.3)