

Action for Children Fostering South East

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Action for Children is a family placement project run by a national charitable organisation. The service is one of several fostering services registered with Ofsted.

At the time of the inspection there are 42 approved foster carers looking after 43 children.

Action for Children offers a range of families to meet the needs of young people that have experienced difficulties and disruption.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **inadequate**.

The service is judged inadequate in quality of care, safeguarding and leadership and management. Outcomes for young people are however adequate.

Many areas of weakness are as a result of poor system management and quality assurance. Mechanisms for measuring outcomes and practice are absent or not being managed consistently or adequately. However, it is the poorly managed systems which provide practice oversight that are inadequate rather than any resulting unsafe outcomes. With the exception of a number of poor pre-panel reporting and checks, young people are kept safe by foster carers that are motivated and dedicated.

Young people are being supported and adequately looked after by carers who understand their role and the expectations placed upon them by the service. Systems of monitoring the service set out in regulation 35 and schedule 6 of the fostering services regulations have not been effective in either identifying areas of shortfall or improving the quality of foster care provided by the service.

Management of this service has been intermittent, due to a change in manager and subsequent illness. Systems and management and practice that was previously robust and effective, have lapsed and management and practice oversight have

failed to address this.

It is clear that the management and senior management are expediting changes and improvements swiftly and effectively. At the completion of this visit, a detailed and comprehensive plan had been drafted and was being acted upon.

The director and senior management of the service are taking immediate and comprehensive review of the service to address shortfalls identified during this inspection.

Areas for 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 person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
11 (2011)	ensure that the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency is protected; this refers to vehicle insurance cover (Regulation 11 (a))	30/09/2012
15 (2011)	ensure that the fostering service provider promotes the health and development of children placed with foster parents (Regulation 15.1)	31/10/2012
16 (2011)	ensure that the fostering service provider promotes the educational achievement of children placed with foster parents and implements a procedure for monitoring the educational achievement, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster parents (Regulation 16.2 (a))	31/10/2012
21 (2011)	ensure that all persons employed by the agency receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal (Regulation 21.4 (a))	31/10/2012
35 (2011)	ensure that the registered person maintains a system for (a) monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and (b) improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency (Regulation 35.1)	31/10/2012
28 (2011)	ensure that a review takes place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 28.2)	31/10/2012
28 (2011)	ensure that when undertaking a review, the fostering service provider must make such enquiries and obtain such information as it considers necessary in order to review whether the foster parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent's household continues to be suitable (Regulation	31/10/2012

	28.2 (a))	
3 (2011)	ensure that the fostering service provider produces a written guide to the fostering service, the children's guide, which includes the address, including email address, and telephone number of the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 3.3 (c))	31/10/2012

Recommendations

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

- ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year (NMS 21.8)
- ensure that when children placed out of authority go missing, the manager of the fostering service follows the local RMFHC protocol. They also comply with, and make foster carers aware of, any other processes required by the responsible authority, specified in the individual child's care plan and in the RMFHC protocol covering the authority responsible for the child's care (NMS 5.7)
- ensure that a written record is kept by the fostering service detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person (NMS 24.5)
- ensure that the panel provides a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel (NMS 14.2)
- ensure that the panel chair's written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that the children's guide includes a summary of how they can find out their rights, how a child can contact their Independent Reviewing Officer, the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how to secure access to an independent advocate (NMS 16.4)
- ensure that records are clear, up to date, stored securely and contribute to an understanding of the child's life. (NMS 26.0)
- ensure that in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision maker should consider Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM [2009] (Volume 4 Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Section 5.40)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

Young people have a prominent voice and their views and comments are valued by the carers and the service. This results in young people expressing their views and

feeling empowered to contribute to their care. Young people benefit from having positive views about the quality of their foster placements and their relationships with their foster carers. The service encourages young people to participate in some elements of the services they receive. Young people participate in decisions about their foster homes, their rooms and express their views to carers. Young people say they are safe and comfortable in their foster homes and feel able to express choices about their day-to-day care. Young people say that they are well looked after and made to feel part of the family. However, they feel less engaged with influencing the actual operation fostering service.

Young people are healthy and they say that they routinely attend the core health services. This ensures young people's routine health is effectively monitored. Young people's carers promote good healthcare and give them good health advice to promote healthy lifestyles. Young people are provided with wholesome nutritious meals. They say that their meals are healthy and enjoyable. Carers encourage healthy diets and will accommodate more specialist and varied diets in accordance with both individual choice and planning. Carers promote young people's education through support and guidance. Young people say that carers attend their schools or training provider and seek to support and drive their educational opportunities. Carers attend parental consultation sessions and support schools and plans. Young people are well supported in their education and this results in stable and consistent school attendance.

The service records details and events related to education that are communicated from carers and other agencies. There are examples where oversight has been in place and the service has provided monitoring and support. In these examples the service and carers have established education plans or services that have clearly benefitted the young people. However, the service has not implemented a consistent approach or procedure to monitor the educational achievement or the educational attainment of the young people. Inconsistent monitoring does not support robust support for young people's education.

Young people enjoy contact with their family and friends and both the service and the carers ensure that all planning and support is provided to establish and promote this.

When young people are preparing for adulthood and independence, carers help young people plan and develop programmes of support and guidance to assist them in this preparation. This provides young people with the necessary skills and confidence to prepare for the successful transition into adulthood.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **inadequate**.

Young people benefit by being looked after by carers that are consistent in their lives. Support from the carers has resulted in them feeling satisfied and well supported by the service and the care that they receive.

Carers say that the staff are always available on the telephone for advice and more practical support. The service has retained a core group of long serving foster carers and young people are well supported by carers that are motivated, experienced and able to provide stability.

The fostering panel has on many occasions functioned effectively and conducted business well. However, the panel lacks consistently in its quality assurance functions to ensure improvements in assessments. Assessment reports presented to the panel frequently lack sufficient detail and information; this has led to delay of recommendation. Annual reviews have recommended approval of carers and people have subsequently been approved without completed checks. Some reviews have not been completed within annual review timescales; matters that were raised as a concern in one panel have apparently not been considered a concern in the following panel. This inconsistent approach does not support a robust panel and may result in carers being approved when they are not suitable.

Some panel reports and recommendations have been inconsistent and have been made in the absence of robust and clear analysis of information. This has resulted in a somewhat muddled identification of key points, themes and areas of assessment that have been taken into consideration by the panel.

The service has not yet adopted the Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM (2009) principle, detailed in the children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4 Fostering Services.

The principle seeks to promote evaluative decision making and move away from a signing off of panel recommendations. The agency has developed its own basic checklist instead of the evaluative Hofstetter process. This has resulted in less evaluative decision making, and less evidence of critical analysis Oversight of decisions is less effective as a result.

Young people are looked after by carers that have been effectively matched by the service. The matching process provides the staff and social workers with an opportunity to gather information and consider needs in a planned and consistent manner. Resulting matches are generally successful and lead to long term and stable placements.

Foster carers have a range of training programmes available. However, there is insufficient rigour in managing poor attendance, resulting in inadequate development for some carers. While foster carers consider supervision supportive, records fail to support a clear, effective discussion, analysis or agenda likely to promote professional development.

Young people are not as well supported by those carers who do not continue their professional development or attend essential training related to their caring role. Carers feel one-to-one social work support could be more focused on their day-to-

day coping skills and abilities. Some feel that supervision does not always capture the more subtle pressures on carers.

Young people are supported by carers that are motivated and supportive of young people's rights. Carers are very clear on their role as advocates and demonstrate that young people's needs are paramount.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **inadequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

To ensure that young people are not bullied or exploited, the service promotes an anti-bullying philosophy, which is articulated through training, guidance and carer's supervision. Young people are confident and aware of their rights and expectations to be safe and feel safe. Carers are proactive in this area and provide appropriate oversight and advocacy for the young people.

When young people go missing or become absent without permission, carers are aware of their roles in the safeguarding procedures. The service has in-house guidance and training in this important area. However, social work staff and the manager are not conversant with the Run Away and Missing from Home, Care protocols (RMFHC) and how this impacts or influences their in-house protocols. When young people are absent or missing they are better protected, and supported, when there are clear and consistent practices deployed to search, report and recover them.

Young people are kept safe by effective recruitment and vetting of all new agency employees. However, foster carer checks, post approval, are not robustly monitored.

The service instigates such enquiries to obtain information they consider necessary in order to review whether the foster parent continues to be suitable. However, there are examples where checks are not being completed and approval is granted in the absence of these checks. This leaves necessary person checks left incomplete and young people are left less safe.

All young people are provided with a young person's guide to inform them of the fostering agency and the services and care that they will receive. However, the young people's guide does not contain adequate information on the Children's Rights Director, independent reviewing officers, and the Chief Inspector. This could make it more difficult for young people to make representations or complaints.

Allegations and disclosures related to safeguarding are reported and action is taken in accordance with local authorities safeguarding procedures. However, on one occasion the impact of an event had not been managed effectively. The service failed to act on subsequent recommendations from the panel chair. The service had not managed this matter adequately, and neither in accordance with its own guidelines or safe care practices.

Accidents are recorded along with health interventions and treatments. However, there is no evidence that they are monitored, assessed or reviewed. This service has not managed to make the minimum of at least one unannounced visit to all carers' homes and only achieved 80% of unannounced annual visits.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **inadequate**.

The matching process ensures placements are made that consider the young people's needs. Matching considers the range of needs that the young person has and the skills and experience of the prospective carer to meet these. Placement planning and placement agreements demonstrate comprehensive planning and support for each placement. In most cases, good links have been made with community services such as health and education, which support young people's welfare and educational development.

Foster carers are motivated and act to support and promote the welfare of the young people. Young people say that they are encouraged and guided to consider and think about their health and life choices. The fostering service supports carers to make appropriate decisions with, and for, the young people. Young people feel supported by this and are consulted appropriately. However, although there are plans to introduce guidance, the service has not yet adopted the Foster Carer's Charter. This has left carers unaware of the Charter's overall aim is to make sure that all children in care have greater stability, less upheaval and a better chance at a stable family life.

Although carers manage young people's day to day healthcare through routine appointments, the service management does not provide monitoring oversight. The service records individual events and episodes of healthcare, but does not monitor or evidence any assessment, promotion, or quality assurance within this process. This results in the retention of records, but an absence of effective healthcare management.

Monitoring systems and process are not effectively managed and current practice does not provide adequate oversight of carers. Training for carers is not being consistently achieved with some carers not receiving the training identified for their professional development. Poor systems of monitoring have failed to address this over a significant period of time.

The previous reviews of the Statement of Purpose and children's guide have not been notified to the Chief Inspector in accordance with the fostering regulations. This does not allow the Chief Inspector the opportunity to assess any changes or reviews and how they may impact on care.

Recommendations from the panel to address training have not been successful and

failed to address this. Quality assurance functions of the panel have recently been introduced, but there is no evidence of the benefit of this currently available.

The supervision of carers does not consistently reflect effective support or monitoring and in some examples, it is ineffective as a means of supporting the carer to develop and progress. Staff supervision does not consistently provide examples of professional oversight and development and also fails in some areas to address advice and recommendations from the panel. Staff supervision does not detail the time or the duration of the session in accordance with the national minimum standards. One staff member had not received an annual performance appraisal.

Carers' vehicle insurance does not cover business use and the arrangements in place do not provide appropriate insurance cover for some of the current activities. However, this matter was acted upon during the inspection and addressed promptly.

Young people's records provide detailed information that may contribute to an understanding of their lives. However, files were somewhat unwieldy, containing duplicate information, and other documents are often misfiled. This makes navigation of information complicated, time consuming and unreliable.

Shortfalls are evident in key systems and areas of practice in accordance with the national minimum standards and regulations. Quality assurance monitoring of the matters set out in Schedule 6, and for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency is inadequate.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for independent fostering agencies.