

The Adolescent and Children's Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Date of last inspection	03/04/2008

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Adolescent & Children's Trust (TACT) is a charity and an independent fostering agency. The head office is in London and there are nine regional offices across England, Scotland and Wales. The Liverpool office covers the North West of England. The agency provides emergency, short-term and permanent placements for children and young people. This branch has 42 approved fostering households and there are 50 young people in placement.

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 **good**.

The fostering agency is effective and children and young people make good progress when placed with the agency's foster carers. The agency undertakes thorough analytical assessments of potential foster carers with a strong emphasis on safeguarding. Only those that they feel can safely and competently undertake this sensitive task progress to approval.

Foster carers are well supported in relation to access to relevant training, as well as by regular, high quality supervision visits from qualified and experienced social workers. Generally, foster carers say that they feel part of the professional team and speak highly of the fostering agency. They demonstrate a good understanding of the needs of the young people that they care for.

Matching is a strength of the agency and children and young people experience stable placements as a result. Unplanned endings are rare and many short-term placements have culminated in permanency for young people. Young people say that they have positive relationships with their foster carers and feel part of their foster family.

Two requirements have been made. These relate to the agency's processes for changes of approval status and the need to notify Ofsted of significant events. A further four recommendations about: placements outside of the approval status of

foster carers; increased detail in decision-making processes; training for members of the fostering panel, and increased scrutiny of records kept by the agency. However, the manager of the agency demonstrates a commitment to drive forward improvement. There is a clear focus on the delivery of a good quality service which produces good outcomes for children and young people.

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
28 (2011)	write to the foster parent that they propose to revise the terms of, the foster parent's approval, (a qualifying determination) together with their reasons and a copy of any recommendation made by the fostering panel; and advise that they can make written representation to the fostering service provider and apply for a review by an independent review panel (Regulation 28 (7) (a) & (b))	28/02/2013
36 (2011)	ensure that all events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 are notified without delay to the bodies indicated. (Regulation 36(1))	28/02/2013

Recommendations

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

- ensure that each person on the central list is given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the fostering service's fostering staff (NMS 23.10)
- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with policies and to identify patterns and trends; specifically, that records are completed of all involvement with foster carers; contain accurate dates; that files contain all the required information; and are updated accordingly. Immediate action should be taken to address any issues identified (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that a child is only placed with a foster carer whose terms of approval match the child's circumstances, except in an emergency (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 3.3)
- ensure, in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, that the

agency decision maker lists the material taken into account in reaching their decision; identifies the key arguments; is satisfied that the panel has properly addressed the arguments; is clear if they have had sight of any additional information; and identifies their own reasons for their decision. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 5.40)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people feel that they are consulted about their care. They are encouraged to participate in their own reviews and provide input into their foster carers' reviews. Supervising social workers routinely speak with young people in placement when they visit the foster home. The organisation also employs children's resource workers to consult with and encourage the participation of young people. Organised events have included outdoor activities focused on improving self-esteem, and an arrangement with a local football club focusing on developing independence and transition to adulthood. However, at the time of the inspection the post in this region was vacant.

Children and young people say that they feel safe and well cared for in their foster placements. All young people said that they are treated as part of the family. One young person commented, 'I am really happy that I am living here. I feel part of a family that loves me.'

Young people are well matched with foster carers who are able to meet their needs. This is a particular strength of the service. One social worker commented, 'I feel lucky that I am not put under pressure to make inappropriate placements.' Social workers know their families well and appropriate placements are made. This results in stable and settled placements, with few young people experiencing an unplanned ending to their placement. Many young people who were originally placed on a short-term basis are now enjoying permanent placements with these families. Some carers have progressed to seeking legal permanence for children and young people placed with them. Many children have also been enabled to grow up alongside their siblings. These factors lead to an increase in security and stability for young people and help ensure that they are able to fulfil their potential.

Children and young people attend school regularly and are making good progress, with some achieving particularly well in national qualifications. Foster carers are good at supporting young people to attend schools that are often some distance away from their homes, as this has provided some continuity for young people. However, young people in permanent placements who have expressed a wish to move school have been supported with this. Young people say that this is what they wanted; it has helped them feel part of their foster family and enabled them to make friends in the locality. In addition, the Liverpool branch of TACT piloted a 'paired reading' project to support the educational achievement of young people. Foster carers attended a training programme and learnt how to engage young people on a 1:1 basis, using reading as a medium. The outcomes for children and young people were

very positive, both in relation to their education and in terms of the development of attachments with their foster carers.

Young people are well supported in their transition into adulthood. The agency works with the placing authority to provide a 'Staying Put' scheme so that young people can stay in their foster placements after their 18th birthday; carers have on-going support from the agency and this ensures that young people can receive this additional support if they need it.

Children and young people's health care needs are addressed well by their foster carers. They see appropriate health care practitioners and the agency is pro-active in supporting carers to help young people access the services they require. Supervising social workers address the issue of delegated authority with local authorities, so that foster carers are clear about their decision making ability on a day-to-day basis. The agency is good at pursuing this issue, so that young people are able to feel part of their foster family.

Quality of service

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

The agency recruits a suitably diverse group of carers in terms of their age, ethnicity and relationship status. The agency has a substantial number of carers who have fostered for them for a number of years and who report high levels of satisfaction with the support they receive. The agency's recruitment strategy ensures that they are targeting recruitment to meet the current demand from local authorities. One foster carer commented: 'we are very happy with TACT and we have recommended other families that we know to approach them, when they have expressed an interest in fostering'. The agency currently has sufficient carers to meet demand and, through recent monitoring of local authority enquiries, has a good understanding of current and future needs.

The preparation, training and assessment of foster carers is thorough. In the initial stages potential applicants are given clear information about the reality of fostering and the assessment process itself. They are given time to assimilate this information and seek further clarification without undue pressure. The assessment process has a clear focus on the whether the applicants will be able to meet the needs of children and young people requiring placement. The agency has recently introduced critical thinking and analysis to their assessments. This reflective approach ensures that completed assessments are comprehensive and contain good social work analysis. The agency has a small number of independent assessors who are able to work when required in order to progress applications in a timely manner. The Registered Manager supervises these staff directly, ensuring the quality of assessment is maintained.

The fostering panel is correctly constituted and includes individuals with a personal connection to fostering. Panel members receive an annual appraisal so the agency can address any performance or training issues. However, panel members have not

had the opportunity to attend an annual training event with the agency's staff for over a year. The panel Chair is suitably qualified and experienced. However, the panel is currently without a vice-chair and its membership is not large, which could potentially lead to the panel experiencing problems in being quorate. The agency has a good process in place for the agreement of panel minutes that avoids delay in the decision-making process. However, currently it is not clear what documents the agency decision maker has considered; whether he is assured that the panel has addressed all relevant issues, or giving his own reasons for making the decision.

The fostering agency provides its carers with a high level of support and supervision following their approval. This ensures that carers have access to the advice they need and that children and young people receive a good standard of care. However, they do not always maintain detailed records following each visit. Supervising social workers keep in regular contact with their families and provide a 24-hour duty system in case of emergency. One foster carer commented: 'I have been well supported in my role as a carer and I have no issues. The team are great.' The agency has recently introduced support group 'clusters' that are geographically based. These smaller groups are working well as foster carers have less distance to travel and are able to develop support networks to assist each other when required.

Foster carers have access to a wide range of post approval training and they update their personal development plan annually. Regular core training courses offer subjects such as safe care, recording, diversity and managing contact. Uptake of training is good and both carers, for those in a partnership, are encouraged to attend. The agency reimburses for loss of earnings to enable attendance for those in employment. The agency expects all foster carers to complete the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) standards in foster care. To date, 74% of carers have achieved this, with the remaining working towards completion within their first year of approval.

The standard of record keeping by foster carers is very good, with detailed records kept of daily events, contact, and education or health issues. These provide a clear chronology and help inform decision making. Foster carers also keep memory boxes for young people so that children have mementos of their time in placement. This ensures that these memories are kept alive for young people even when they move on. There is specific training about caring for black children, which carers must complete prior to the placement of a black child. This ensures that foster carers are aware of the pertinent issues and are best able to deliver a high standard of care. One social worker recently commented for a foster carers review: 'the carer has been able to provide a loving and stable home environment. She is able to understand the young person's complex needs and manage the behaviours in a loving and caring manner. This has helped X to start forming secure attachments and develop in self-confidence.'

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people are safe and feel safe living in their foster placements. Both the agency staff and foster carers receive regular updated training on safeguarding. All foster carers complete a safe caring policy and these are now comprehensive documents. It is a regularly updated, 'live' document, which is shared with young people. This ensures that appropriate safeguards are in place to address any presenting behaviours by young people and that both foster carers and young people do not place themselves in vulnerable situations.

Every household has an annual health and safety risk assessment and the agency follows through any necessary actions. Additional risk assessments are also undertaken when the need arises. Examples include the use of swimming pools and trampolines. Pet assessments also happen routinely, and dog assessments are completed by an independent agency. This ensures that children and young people are appropriately protected from hazards in the home.

The agency ensures a minimum of two unannounced visits to each foster home annually. However, the supervising social workers will undertake these more frequently if they are concerned about the level of stress the family is experiencing at a particular time. They carry out routine supervision visits at different times of day, to ensure that the family is observed together on a regular basis. This also includes the opportunity for individual discussions with foster carers' own children, to enable them to express any concerns. These measures provide the agency with reassurance that the needs of young people are being met appropriately.

Foster carers have information to update their knowledge when required. For example, they have training on the risks of social media and information about the protocol to follow in the event of a child going missing from home. This ensures that foster carers are aware of the current thinking and know the correct procedures to follow if required.

Children and young people receive information about how to make a complaint in their children's guide to fostering. They also have access to the children's resource worker, when an individual is in post, who visits to explain the children's guide and is available for contact throughout the young person's placement. Young people have been able to access an independent advocate to help them address issues that they wished to challenge in their care plan. Young people all said that they would feel confident in accessing help to make a complaint should they wish to do so.

Allegations are handled sensitively and appropriately. The agency works well with other agencies in these circumstances and the welfare of young people is promoted. The agency has an arrangement in place with other independent fostering providers in the area to offer independent support to each other's foster carers in such an event. While appropriate action has been taken in these circumstances, Ofsted have not always been notified of these events or there has been some considerable delay in this process.

Leadership and management

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

While the leadership and management of the fostering agency is judged to be adequate, there are some good elements. The Registered Manager is appropriately qualified and experienced, providing a high level of leadership to the team. Staff receive regular supervision, that provides opportunity for constructive challenge, as well as a learning environment where development needs are addressed. Staff have a protected half day a month for reading and updating their knowledge. They also receive an annual appraisal of their performance, which includes a personal development plan for the year ahead. Staff say that they feel empowered and are confident to express their opinions in this supportive environment.

However, some aspects of day-to-day management and monitoring are not sufficiently rigorous and have resulted in some inconsistencies in practice and recording. Some files did not contain all the required or updated information. The last inspection recommended the development of a system for auditing records. A system was developed and implemented. Subsequently, the agency introduced an electronic records system and separate database to monitor assessments, approvals and assist with matching. The system developed requires revision to ensure that the Registered Manager is able to use it effectively. A recommendation relating to monitoring is consequently made at this inspection as this issue is not fully resolved.

While the fostering agency undertakes annual reviews of foster carers, the process for these is confusing. The foster carers first, fourth and seventh review is chaired by an independent reviewing officer, employed by the agency for this purpose. The report of the review for the first and seventh review is then presented to the fostering panel and follows the agency's decision making process. However, the supervising social worker undertakes all other reviews and these, along with the fourth review, are not presented to the fostering panel. At one such review, a foster carer's approval status had been amended, but the agency decision making process was blurred. There was no evidence that the agency had written to the foster carers about this qualifying determination or given them the opportunity to appeal. In addition, the change of approval category had resulted in a child in placement being outside of the foster carers' approval status. The agency had not identified or addressed this issue.

The fostering agency works well with those that commission its services. One commissioner commented: 'TACT are a valued partner who have provided a high quality and efficient service. Whenever any concerns have arisen they have been dealt with efficiently and appropriately in an open and honest way.' This is essential and positive multi-agency working, The agency is also pro-active in challenging poor social work practice when they feel it is affecting outcomes for young people.

The fostering agency has a development plan in place and is keen to sustain improvement. The Registered Manager has a good understanding of the strengths and areas that require development in the service. Internal monitoring reports are

completed that help inform the Board of Trustees about the work being undertaken by this office. The agency has a clear and accessible Statement of Purpose, as well as children's guides, that have been developed age appropriately. Since the last inspection in 2008, the agency has grown and now employs two additional social workers and two additional administrators. The fostering agency has addressed all the recommendations made at the last inspection, with the exception of a shortfall auditing, which has been partly addressed.

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.