

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 agency is one of several fostering services this organisation has registered with Ofsted. Action for Children offers a range of families to meet the needs of young people that have experienced difficulties and disruption.

At the time of the inspection there were 50 approved foster carers looking after 36 children.

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**.

This agency provides good standards of safe and well-managed care for young people, which improves their opportunities and outcomes. Relationships are close and respectful between carers and the young people, which results in positive behaviour from the young people.

Carers are very well supported by supervising social workers and as a result carers are confident and motivated. Surveys returned from foster carers confirm that they are positive about the support they receive from the agency

Training for carers is well planned, implemented and managed and enhances carers' skills and abilities.

Supervision equips foster carers to understand their role and remain competent in safeguarding young people and promoting their welfare. Young people benefit by being looked after by carers that are clear about their roles and responsibilities and young people further benefit from the high expectations carers place upon them.

The importance of education is understood by the carers and all young people's education is supported and promoted well. Carers form and maintain good relationships with schools and this further supports young people's learning

opportunities and achievements. Foster carers celebrate young people's attendance and achievement and young people take a pride in their achievements, resulting in improved learning outcomes.

Good health is promoted by carers and through successful engagement young people understand the importance of healthy diets and exercise and also the importance of making good lifestyle choices. Young people's health is well maintained and sustained as a result.

Social workers are competent and provide good standards of supervision and oversight of the carers and the placements. This results in young people being looked after in safe and well-maintained households where they feel part of the family.

The agency has strong leadership and oversight, which results in prompt action being taken to address any shortfall in the service or area requiring development. A review of the agency began at the end of 2012 and as a result far reaching and fundamental improvements have taken place. Areas of improvement are most visible in the supervision of carers and staff and improved systemic and practice oversight. Improvements in the quality of care have appropriately focussed directly on the young people and as result young people's outcomes have improved.

Comments from social workers included comments such as, 'excellent placement and outcomes, carers have good insight in child's life and are very supportive', 'carers are engaged and work hard putting the young person first' and 'proactive at promoting education and health and made a real difference in these areas.'

Carers promote young people's learning regarding developing their life and independence skills, but this is not always consistent and clearly planned. Less formal systems of support in this area may hamper young people's opportunities to map their skills against their subsequent pathway planning.

The functions and performance of the fostering panel and panel members has been reviewed resulting in a greater focus on making clear recommendations and decision making. Supervision and appraisal of panel members has also been put into place and provides a more formal and professionalised forum. Minutes are not always as effective at capturing the panel deliberations, but this is an area where there has been some progress and the emerging minutes are much improved.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- confirm that the panel chair ensures 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 there are comprehensive arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence. This includes appropriate training and support to foster carers caring for young people who are approaching adulthood. Arrangements are consistent with the young person's care plan, including their placement plan, pathway plan and transition plan for children with disabilities and special educational needs. (NMS 12.3)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Young people's wishes and feelings are valued and their contributions are encouraged in all aspects of the agency. Carers promote young people's voices and support them to express their views in discussions and more formally in statutory reviews.

The fostering agency carries out surveys and questionnaires for both carers and young people and takes action to accommodate their views and opinions. Young people are therefore able to express themselves and influence the fostering agency. Young people's contact arrangements, free time and day-to-day care have all been influenced by young people's views.

Young people are happy within their foster families; they feel valued and part of the family. Young people have a positive view of foster care and have formed and sustained respectful and successful relationships with their carers. Young people are also positive about their futures and feel supported to achieve within their learning and education and to maintain good health.

Young people are kept safe and feel safe and are looked after by carers that know how to safeguard and promote young people's welfare. Placements are typically stable and young people make good progress to develop a positive self-view. Young people are happy in placement and form and sustain good and productive attachments with their carers.

Young people benefit from being well supported to maintain contact with their family and friends. Carers support the young people in promoting this aspect of their lives. Carers plan practical arrangements for contact and provide emotional support to young people.

Young people benefit from good attendance at school and good educational achievements, in some cases achievements have exceeded expectations. Young people are well supported in their education by carers who support their learning and work proactively with their schools. Learning and achievement is celebrated by carers and young people say that they feel a real sense of achievement when they do well.

Good support with routine and more general health has resulted in young people

being healthy and staying healthy. Core services from the GP and dentist are rigorously attended. Other matters such as healthy living, diets and more specialist advice on lifestyle choices are supported and monitored within healthcare planning. Young people's education and health are effectively monitored and promoted within the agency.

Carers support young people to learn and develop skills that will assist them in adulthood and when they move on. Young people benefit from assistance with learning skills which include budgeting, cooking and self-care. Although formal support for pathway planning is in place, support prior to pathway planning is not as well evidenced. This may result in a less clear assessment of young people's abilities and the skills that they have acquired prior to formal pathway planning.

Quality of service

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

The fostering agency recruits a range of skilled and competent foster carers to provide for the individual and diverse needs of the young people. The recruitment process is conducted with a clear focus on the qualities and attributes of carers to meet the needs of the young people.

The preparation of carers through training and guidance is also well focussed on young people's needs. Carers are approved through established and competent panels that make recommendations based on detailed assessments. This results in young people being cared for by carers that are most likely to meet their needs in a sustained and planned manner. Panel minutes generally detail points of discussion and deliberations well, however, in some more minor examples minutes are less detailed, which could hamper prompt decision making.

Carers feel part of a team and they are motivated and committed to meeting the young people's needs. Matching is well organised and training and support is provided for carers to ensure that emerging needs are addressed.

Young people benefit from feeling engaged and consulted in their care and the matching process. Young people's wishes and feelings influence their care positively.

Carers feel that supervision supports them well and enables them to develop both professionally and also maintain focus on the young people's needs. Good quality supervision is regularly provided to carers and is increased if any matter is more urgent or pressing. Foster carers are actively involved in planning for the child or young person and their views are valued by the fostering agency. Carers feel that they are more able to understand young people and develop their care through the support that they receive through supervision sessions.

Carers understand the young people's rights and effectively promote their wishes and feelings. This results in young people being confident to express themselves and voice their opinions.

Young people behave positively and are well supported in this by carers that are trained and knowledgeable about the needs of young people. Young people and carers' birth children are consulted both through the agency's supervisory support, and also more formally through the use of surveys and questionnaires. Young people and birth children express positive opinions of satisfaction with the services that they receive.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Young people are well looked after by carers that understand their need to be safeguarded and protected from adverse risks. Training has been successful in providing carers with a sound knowledge of safeguarding. All aspects of safeguarding, such as anti-bullying and child exploitation, is understood by carers. Carers are clear about their responsibilities through their training and use of the comprehensive and clear procedures to address any suspicion of abuse or harm; this means carers are well able to keep young people free from harm.

Carers are well aware of signs and symptoms of bullying from the training and guidance provided by the agency. Young people say that they feel safe from bullying and abuse both in and outside the foster home. Young people understand that their foster carer is there to support them and keep them safe. This helps young people to have confidence in their carers and settle within their placement.

Carers understand where young people maybe more vulnerable and young people's care plans and assessments make clear where risk is most likely. In addition formal risk assessments are carried out on all young people and these are monitored effectively through regular case tracking. Young people's vulnerabilities are therefore understood and planned for; this keeps young people safer and adults more vigilant.

All carers are further supported by core training. Training effectively provides carers with an understanding of the key areas of young people's broader and more individual needs. Supervision provides further support and enables carers to consider the more diverse needs of their particular young people.

To ensure carer's homes remain safe and suitable, social workers carry out regular unannounced visits to them and carry out health and safety checks. Any areas in the home that causes concern are addressed through prompt action planning. This results in good standards being maintained and young people being kept safe in their foster home environment. Carers are aware, through their own supervision and training, of the impact of any abuse or neglect and how this may increase risks.

Young people rarely go missing from care. Carers and young people say that this is because difficulties and problems that may result in them going missing are talked through and discussed with them. Young people say that carers are there to help them and that they feel that they can raise any matter that troubles them with their

carer. Carers are aware of the help and support that is available should a young person go missing and follow the robust procedures which are in place to address this. In the event of a child going missing, the agency has an out-of-hours and on-call service to ensure prompt, searching, reporting and recovery is achieved. Good liaison and partnerships have been established with the local police which results in prompt and effective action to address any incident of absence.

Young people say that they can also talk to people independent of the agency, their social worker or their family members, should they need external support or guidance. Young people are aware of how to complain and are confident to make representations. The respectful and trusting relationships between carers and young people promote an openness and transparency in raising concerns.

All staff in the agency are employed and managed through an established and robust recruitment and human resources team. All foster carers are employed after rigorous checks and references are completed. These well-managed employment practices keep young people safe from contact with inappropriate people.

Leadership and management

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

The arrangements for matching and placing young people are well planned, implemented and monitored. Following a rigorous matching process, plans for the placement are arranged to ensure carers are prepared and suitable for the young person. Careful planning promotes young people's individual and more diverse needs and carers are more able to meet the young people's needs as a result.

Following the placement decision a plan is developed around the carer's placement agreement and this is maintained through supervision and review. Progress is effectively monitored thorough a tracking system developed by the agency. Progress is tracked and managed to meet expectations and this results in young people's plans and the goals being successfully met.

Foster carers are integrated within the agency and valued as part of the team. Carers say that they feel engaged and motivated because their views and opinions are valued. Satisfaction surveys are successfully used for carers and young people and action may be taken as a result of comments and views.

Young people benefit from their carers being actively involved in the agency and young people feel that their views and feelings are communicated better as result. Both carers and young people are able to influence the fostering agency through this successful engagement.

The Registered Manager maintains effective monitoring of the agency through Regulation 35 systems. Matters are successfully monitored at appropriate intervals, improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. The current system is well managed and comprehensive and this results in close and effective

oversight of the agency with prompt action taken to improve the quality of care for young people.

At the previous inspection in August 2012 requirements and recommendations were made in a number of areas. The agency has since carried out an extensive, comprehensive and far reaching review of the agency and practices within the agency. The focus has been very clearly aimed at improving outcomes for young people and developing systems and practices that provide effective overview and quality assurance.

The agency has used information from practice and learning from research positively to improve services for young people and staff. This is exemplified in training for carers and the supervision processes. Any complaints are used as an opportunity to learn and develop the agency.

The last inspection raised shortfalls related to: safeguarding; the promotion of health and education; training and supervision; the monitoring systems that support quality assurance; some functions of the fostering panel and guidance and information for young people.

The comprehensive review has resulted in improvements in practice within the agency and improved outcomes for young people. Safeguarding is now rigorous and includes systemic oversight of supervision practices, training and maintaining welfare. This has resulted in close scrutiny of each young person's planning and outcomes. Young people's care planning and risk assessments are well monitored and carers' homes are visited regularly and comprehensive environmental risk assessments are carried out. The impact of behaviour upon risk is regularly assessed within supervision and review. Young people are well cared for and safeguarded by these rigorous and sustainable practices.

Carers' training and supervision has been reviewed. Carers are well supported through effective supervision practices and training to develop their professional role. Each carer's training and development is effectively monitored through their annual appraisal. Leaders of the agency have adopted the Foster Care Charter, in consultation with foster carers, and are meeting these commitments.

Training is more focussed on the carer's skills and abilities and how these can improve how the needs of their particular young person are met. While core training provides for key areas of practice, more specific and specialised training is provided for matters such as communication and special needs.

Improvements in file recording within personal files have resulted in clear, up-to-date files, which are stored securely and contribute to an understanding of the young person's life. Improved and updated young people's guides have increased young people's understanding of their rights and expectations.

The fostering panel has also been reviewed and clearer lines of accountability, the implementation of supervision and more rigorous appraisal have improved the panel's functions significantly. This results in better accountability and skills

assessment of the panel members. Panels are more formal and business focussed and reviews are completed on time supported by well written social worker reports. Panel minutes have improved, but in some minor examples minutes have not always evidenced all elements of the meeting. The current review is addressing this matter and improvements are emerging.

The manager and staff have developed effective relationships with the local authority and health and education services. This has resulted in young people being supported or referred on promptly and receiving services that improve their outcomes. Carers are aware of their role in liaison and partnership with community services and how their support benefits young people. This agency has demonstrated significant and sustained improvement since the last inspection in August 2012.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.