

TACT Fostering (Yorkshire)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Stella Henderson
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Service information

Brief description of the service

TACT Fostering (Yorkshire) 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 Leeds branch covers Yorkshire and Humberside. The agency provides emergency, short-term and permanent placements for children and young people.

There are currently 29 approved carers looking after a total of 25 children and young people. The agency has recruited 11 new fostering households over the last year. This is the agency's first inspection.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This is a well-managed agency that puts the diverse needs of children and young people at the centre of its operations.

Children and young people live in safe fostering households. They are suitably matched with foster carers who undergo thorough and timely assessments. Children and young people are made to feel welcome, loved and part of the fostering family. They experience secure, fulfilling attachments in very stable placements. This enables them to achieve good and in some cases, given their starting points,

exceptional outcomes across all aspects of their development.

The agency sets high expectations of its foster carers in terms of competence, commitment and integrity. Foster carers strongly feel that they are respected as fellow professionals. They are key players in 'the team around the child'. They feel that the support they receive gives them confidence to work with and where necessary challenge partner agencies on behalf of children and young people.

The manager provides visible leadership and effective monitoring of the agency. This, together with an experienced and suitably qualified team, impacts favourably on outcomes for children and young people. The operation of the panel and agency decision maker plays an important role in this process. This ensures that only those who can offer support, stability and safety to children and young people are approved as foster carers.

Two requirements and two recommendations are set to address minor procedural shortfalls. These have no impact on the safety or welfare of children or on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Some had already been identified by the provider as areas for improvement. Work is therefore already underway to address these and drive forward further improvement in these matters.

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
24 (2011)	ensure that the fostering panel makes a written record of the reasons of its recommendations (Regulation 24(2))	16/12/2013
35 (2011)	improve the system for monitoring matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals and ensure the system referred to in paragraph (1) provides for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents and their placing authority. (Regulation 35(1)(a)(3))	16/12/2013

Recommendations

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

- review the composition of the fostering panel to achieve a considerable element of independence from the fostering service (Volume 4, Fostering Services Statutory Guidance, paragraph 5.2)

- provide the independent foster service's provider/trustees board member or management committee members written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every 3 months. This is with specific reference to points (a) to (c) of this standard. (NMS 25.7 (a-c))

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The child's journey gets off to successful start because of careful matching and forward planning around their diverse needs. A commissioning officer described the agency as being 'very pro-active and focusing on the child.'

Children and young people benefit from secure, stable and in many cases long term foster placements, often with their brothers and sisters. They settle in well with foster carers but are supported to maintain contact with birth families. This provides them with the foundations they need to develop positive attachments and resilience, make the most of their learning opportunities and relate well to others. It also prepares children and young people well for permanence through adoption, rehabilitation with family or special guardianship orders.

Children and young people are fully integrated into their fostering families and local communities. They are included in family events, holidays and activities. This offers children and young people a chance to cultivate friendships at home and school. It also provides them with a diverse range of experiences, such as horse riding, cycling, football and netball. Children and young people also have a sense of being part of the wider TACT fostering family network. From this secure nurturing base children and young people are able to thrive and prosper.

Health outcomes improve for children and young people fostered with this agency. For example, immunisations are brought up to date where necessary. Remedial dental work is undertaken where necessary, children put on weight and improve their diets. Those who require specialist services receive prompt referrals. There is an emphasis on keeping healthy through play, exercise and other activity.

Older adolescents are helped to take responsibility for their own health needs with respect to sexuality, substance and alcohol misuse and smoking. Young people confirm that they have a say in decisions made about them. They also say they are helped to gain the practical skills which are needed for independence.

Very few young people choose to go missing from their foster homes. Risks identified with possible child sexual exploitation are well-managed and reduced through effective partnership working with young people, their foster carers, birth parents and professionals. As a result these risks are greatly diminished.

From early infancy to late adolescence, children and young people are successfully supported in all aspects of their learning and education. For some this means

achieving emotional equilibrium which then provides them with the platform for learning. For others this means the achievement of formal qualifications to prepare them for work or further and higher education.

The good progress that young people make is recognised by partner agencies. For example, one young person fostered with the agency was deemed to be the biggest achiever by their local authority in the last academic year.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Foster carers are drawn from all sections of the community. This enables the agency to fulfil its commitment in the Statement of Purpose to provide a range of foster carers who can meet the diverse needs of children and young people.

Fostering assessments are comprehensive and analytical. Applications are thoroughly scrutinised by the fostering panel whose central list comprises suitably experienced and qualified individuals. It is balanced in terms of age, gender and ethnicity.

The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers is effective and timely. A newly approved foster carer noted, 'we were very happy with the process and the pace it went at. It was comprehensive and clear to the whole family.'

Post-approval training and support equips foster carers with the skills they need to help children and young people overcome adverse experiences and achieve good outcomes. One foster carer commented that training, 'has helped me to deal with and understand and then face the challenges that fostering can bring.'

Foster carers are pro-active and confident in fulfilling their role within the agency. They feel empowered to challenge other professionals where necessary to improve outcomes for children and young people. For example, one foster carer succeeded in overturning a decision to exclude a young person from school.

Foster carers are often given additional support in the early days of a placement. This ensures children and young people get off to a good start. The extent to which children and young people are progressing, meeting placement objectives and achieving improved outcomes is an integral component of supervision. A helpful pro-forma provides a baseline assessment and delineates these objectives. This is used by staff and management to regularly monitor progress and development of children and young people and identify any emerging risks.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The safety and well being of children and young people is central to the agency's operation. Children and young people say that they feel safe in placement. They

know who to speak to if they are not happy and report that they are free from intimidation and bullying.

Foster carers understand how previous neglectful or abusive experiences can impact on children and young people's development and behaviour. They report that support from their supervising social workers and training has been effective in this respect.

Foster carers are particularly enthusiastic about a new mandatory training package Fostering Changes. They say that this is highly effective in helping them to better understand and have an immediate impact on children and young people's behaviour.

Children and young people rarely feel the need to go missing from their foster homes but the agency is alert to this vulnerability and any potential risks. Where young people choose to leave their foster homes without consent, and particularly where there is a danger of child sexual exploitation, the agency works effectively with safeguarding agencies to reduce such risks.

The agency also works directly with young people to find a solution which balances their need for safety and right to independence through, for example, shared care arrangements.

A range of other internal mechanisms serve to ensure children and young people are protected. This includes unannounced visits to foster carers, regular direct staff contact with children and young people and thorough vetting of staff and panel members.

The fostering panel functions well to ensure that children and young people are looked after only by those suitable to do so but panel minutes do not record the reasons for recommendations. However this is an administrative shortfall that has no direct impact on young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency is efficiently and effectively managed by a Registered Manager who has been in post for just over a year. With support from the staff team, she robustly monitors children and young people's progress and the quality of care they receive. As a result, children and young people fostered by this agency achieve good outcomes.

In this first year of operation the manager has established a culture of reflective practice which seeks to improve practice and learns from concerns or challenges, such as where foster carers may have been deregistered.

This is an agency that is held in high regard by other professionals. For example, a

placing social worker described the agency as being 'absolutely fantastic!'. Commissioning officers of local authorities commented that the agency provides appropriate placements, is 'open and responsive' and that the quality of the professional relationship is 'really good'.

The manager keeps abreast of sector developments to further good practice. The suitably qualified and experienced staff team are provided with regular supervision, constructive challenge and annual appraisals. This ensures they keep up to date and understand the legal requirements underpinning their work.

There is a strong sense of team purpose which greatly benefits children and young people and values foster carers. This is demonstrated in the individual and collective support given to foster carers, such as by providing a prayer room during training events.

Foster carers are therefore able to contribute to good outcomes for children and young people because of the quality of the support they receive. One foster carer noted, 'I can contact anyone 24/7 even just to ask a question if needed. This gives us peace of mind.' Another commented that, 'our supervising social worker and the manager have contacted us out of hours to check if we were okay with a new, difficult emergency placement.'

Some minor shortfalls are identified in this inspection. The manager undertakes a considerable amount of consultation with young people and their carers and receives feedback from commissioners and placing authorities. Their views are not always captured within monitoring procedures, although it is clear that their opinions carry weight. Quarterly reporting to senior management consists of a number of separate reports, but does not fully address the national minimum standard.

A central list has been established during this first year of operation. This is sufficient to ensure that panel is always quorate, but relies on agency membership to make it so. This does not breach any regulation or standard. However it means that the panel does not yet have the level of independence from the agency that is indicated by the guidance and spirit of the regulations.

These shortfalls, already identified by senior management as areas for development, have no impact on the safety and welfare of children and young people. Neither do they have a negative effect on the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Requirements and recommendations are set however in order to support the provider to comply with regulations and statutory guidance and drive forward further improvement.

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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.