

# Action for Children: Family Breaks Devon

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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| <b>Inspection date</b>         | 28/07/2014      |
| <b>Inspector</b>               | Heather Chaplin |
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| <b>Setting address</b> | Whipton Childrens Centre, Hill Lane, EXETER, EX1 3JP |
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| <b>Telephone number</b>        | 01392 464728                                |
| <b>Email</b>                   | familybreaks.devon@actionforchildren.org.uk |
| <b>Registered person</b>       | Action for Children                         |
| <b>Registered manager</b>      | POST VACANT                                 |
| <b>Responsible individual</b>  | Stacey Burnett                              |
| <b>Date of last inspection</b> | 15/06/2011                                  |

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Action for Children is a national registered charity which provides a wide range of services for children and families. The charity operates independent fostering services as part of its wider remit.

Devon Family-Based Short Break Service provides short term and respite placements to children and young people under 18 years who have a range of medical, sensory or learning difficulties, and who live in Devon. This part of the service is operated under contract to Devon County Council.

Fostering South West Peninsula, which was formerly part of Action For Children's Fostering South West service, operates mainstream fostering placements for children and young people who may be from any local authority. In January 2013, this service merged with Devon Family-Based Short Break Service.

The functions of administration, recruitment of foster carers and staff and access to therapeutic services are shared by the mainstream and short breaks provisions. Most foster carers provide either a short break or mainstream fostering service, but not both. However, some children and their foster carers have progressed from short breaks to mainstream fostering, in order to meet individual children's needs.

At the time of this inspection, the service has 19 approved short breaks fostering households. These foster carers provide a service to 38 children and young people who have a range of complex needs. There are 24 mainstream carers, including family and friends, looking after 15 children and young people.

### 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**.

The service provides exceptionally child-centred care to children who may have complex behavioural needs, physical, sensory or learning disabilities. Children and young people live in safe, supportive and nurturing foster homes. They develop good relationships with their foster carers. Children who receive a short break service look forward to their visits to their fostering families. The outcomes for the vast majority of fostered children and young people across the service's two remits have improved significantly in relation to their starting points.

There have been very few safeguarding concerns, but when they arise, robust investigations are carried out in consultation with the local area designated officer for child protection (LADO). Feedback from the LADO confirms that safeguarding practice is good.

The fostering panel is business-like and effective. The service uses the fostering panel appropriately as a valuable quality assurance measure to help safeguard vulnerable children.

The service has a clear, well-constructed marketing and recruitment strategy. Foster carers interviewed during the inspection come from diverse backgrounds. They are well prepared, trained and supported. This means that foster carers have a wide range of skills in working with children and young people who have complex needs.

The fostering service employs highly skilled and experienced social workers, who conduct thorough, detailed and evaluative assessments in a timely manner. Staff and managers at this service both contribute to, and are informed by, current practice-based research; for example, in parent and child assessments and therapeutic parenting. This acquisition of the latest information benefits children, young people and foster carers and has led to a rating of outstanding for quality of care.

Foster carers were all positive about the assessment process and their social workers. The fostering panel provides constructive feedback and the service always receives this positively. This means that the service is a learning organisation that strives for continuing improvement.

The service values its foster carers and manages their work in a professional and supportive manner. Foster carers confirm that their views are sought on children and young people's plans and progress in placement, and identify the service's support of their work with young people as an outstanding element in a generally good service.

Children's views are highly valued, and this is evident in day-to-day practice. For example, young people were actively involved in designing the attractive, new young

person's guide. The service has a participation strategy, which includes utilising young people's views in marketing, and during the recruitment of foster carers and staff. Young people are also actively involved in foster carers' training.

Relationships with other agencies are very positive. Feedback from social care professionals is good. The service is clearly valued by commissioners and other stakeholders.

The rating for leadership and management is 'requires improvement' because there is no Registered Manager in post. The last manager to be registered with Ofsted left the post in September 2013. The service wrote to Ofsted detailing the interim management arrangements, all of which were robust. The proposed new Registered Manager was appointed in February. She is qualified, experienced and has proved to be a highly effective leader, but personal circumstances prevented her from submitting her application to Ofsted.

Despite staff and management changes in the past 12 months, the quality of service has been sustained. The present manager has led the service very effectively in the intervening period, but it has now become an urgent priority to register a new manager. A long-standing member of the social work team has very recently been appointed to the post, to start in early September.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that the fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for those working for the fostering service, which includes identity checks. (NMS 19.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people receive good quality information, which can be adapted to suit their individual needs. This helps young people to understand what to expect when they move into their foster home. Information can be presented in different formats to meet individual communication needs.

Children and young people are exceptionally well looked after, in line with their care plans. Young people in long term and short break placements feel settled, happy and 'at home' with their foster carers. One young person commented that she gets on well with her foster carers and really likes it there; 'I like the house...it just feels right and good.'

Short break carers interviewed provide very sound and stable placements for young people. Young people form positive good attachments with their carers. They remain with the same family on each short break, which provides security and continuity.

Young people have made very good progress in learning to keep themselves safe and reducing risks. Although some young people still take risks on occasion, they are developing insight and benefit from clear guidance from their foster carers.

Many young people have formed strong attachments to their foster carers. For example, one young person who originally received a short break service, was able to remain with his foster carers following the death of his mother. This young person is now very much part of the fostering family on a long-term basis. He has received a great deal of support from his foster carers, which is helping him to adjust to his loss.

Some young people benefit from 'staying put' arrangements, when these have been agreed by the placing authority. One young person explained that their local authority had agreed to support her in remaining with her foster carers for at least another year while she was in education. Young people whose authorities have not yet agreed such a plan, benefit from strong advocacy from the agency to enable them to remain with their carers after the age of 18, if this is the best way to meet their needs.

Young people are very well supported to enjoy contact with their birth families when this forms part of their placement plans. They have access to information about their personal histories and receive support to understand this information. Young people are encouraged and supported to practice their own cultural and dietary traditions when they wish to do so. This helps to ensure that young people develop a positive identity.

Young people are supported and encouraged to contribute their views and influence their day-to-day care. For example, young people have participated in choosing decorations for their bedrooms and in planning involvement in sporting activities. Young people have access to their independent reviewing officers, advocates and to Ofsted to enable them to seek external support if required. Young people are aware that they can speak to an adult if they are concerned about anything.

There have been very few complaints by young people. They know how to raise concerns, and when they have done so, these are looked into effectively.

Young people who experience difficulties with their behaviour receive consistent, effective support to reduce risk-taking or offending. For a very small minority of young people, this remains an issue, but in response to sound advice from their foster carers, they are beginning to take some degree of responsibility for their actions. The risks for these young people are carefully evaluated. Young people in short breaks placements are looked after safely, in line with their risk assessments and care plans.

Young people and their foster carers receive very good support from an external therapeutic service, a registered adoption support agency called Psychology Associates. This service is commissioned by Action for Children to provide psychological support to carers, as well as consultation to staff and managers. This ensures that young people receive skilled and prompt therapeutic intervention.

Almost all children and young people attend education or training, and benefit from the educational resources available to them. Some young people have made exceptional progress in their education. For example, one young person has achieved 12 GCSEs and is in her second year at college. This young person has plans to go on to university.

Some young people with very challenging behaviour were on the brink of losing their school place when they were first looked after by this service, but with increasing stability and confidence, they have been able to sustain their school places.

Children and young people are fully absorbed into their foster carers' family life and enjoy contact with their friends. They enjoy a full range of age-appropriate activities and benefit from involvement with their foster carers' interests. For example, some young people who receive short breaks, enjoy going to see the foster carers' working draught horses. Others are encouraged and supported in sporting endeavours. For example, one young person in a long-term placement has achieved a very high standard in their chosen sport.

Young people who took part in the inspection benefit from strong and supportive relationships with their foster carers. For example, one young person had experienced a series of placement breakdowns before the start of their present placement. Their present placement has now been sustained for 11 months, which is the longest placement they have had. This has enabled the young person to benefit from consistent support, which is beginning to have a positive impact on their life.

Young people who use short breaks services are provided with any equipment and adaptations through the placing authority. The fostering service advocates for these needs and ensures that foster carers have access to appropriate resources.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service has a detailed and robust marketing plan with clear targets for recruitment of mainstream foster carers. Recruitment of short-breaks carers is on hold at present, until the outcome of the current retendering exercise is known. The current range of carers is very diverse, which helps to ensure that children's unique individual needs are met.

The service provides excellent quality support and training for foster carers, which is tailored to individual young people's needs. This applies equally across the short break and mainstream fostering services. Assessments are exceptionally thorough,

leading to well-constructed, effective reports with detailed evaluation. This ensures that the strengths and any vulnerabilities of each fostering family are fully understood.

The panel chair confirmed that the quality of reports presented to the fostering panel is generally very good. She commended the social work team on their professionalism and willingness to receive constructive comments about assessments and reports. This shows that the service is open to development and continues to strive for improvement.

The agency's professional links with Psychology Associates ensures that foster carers receive exceptionally good support. Supervising social workers have worked for some time with psychologists from this service, and consequently, have learned a great deal about specific therapeutic methods. They can now apply these methods to support their fostering families. Some foster carers said that they had received a number of sessions with the psychological service in order to discuss strategies for working with their children in placement. They found this input invaluable in developing new strategies and refining existing skills to help them work effectively with young people.

Staff and managers have participated in research, for example, through the Dartington Hall Trust Research In Practice initiative on parenting assessments. Practice-based research is also at the core of the therapeutic parenting techniques taught to foster carers. Children, young people and foster carers therefore benefit from current research within a sound legislative framework.

External agencies regard the service as highly child-centred and responsive. They commented on the exceptional quality of support offered to individual children and foster carers. An example was given of a child whose needs have in the past been difficult to meet, who has now been sustained in their placement for five years. The supervising social worker's exceptional skills and experience and the quality of the foster care provided, have been instrumental in bringing about this positive outcome.

Foster carers encourage and support young people to engage in family activities. Social workers commented that young people love going to their short breaks and really benefit from this. Foster carers with long-term placements may receive respite care, if their placements are particularly challenging. This decision is made only after careful assessment, and the young person is fully involved in any plans for respite care.

Foster carers confirmed that their training and development needs are exceptionally well met. They can request any training that they need. One foster carer said that the agency has offered to provide training to further his professional development. External professionals also commented that foster carers are very knowledgeable and well trained. For example, all foster carers have now achieved their training, support and development standards, and receive any additional training required for their role. This ensures that young people are cared for by skilled, experienced carers who value continuing learning and professional development.



The service consults foster carers and values them as an important part of the team around the child. Foster carers feel valued and committed to the service and are dedicated to the work. Foster carers' views contribute to the placement planning process. On occasion, there have been communication issues between local authority social workers and foster carers, but the fostering service has been instrumental in resolving any issues in the best interests of children in placement.

The service has a highly-effective panel which produces well-considered and carefully-evidenced recommendations. The panel has a strong quality assurance and safeguarding role, which helps to ensure that the quality of decision-making by the agency remains high. The panel has a professional independent chairperson who has substantial experience in fostering and adoption. Although the panel is not currently diverse in terms of ethnicity, the service is mindful of this and ensures that the recruitment process promotes equal opportunities.

The panel is particularly robust in its reassessment of existing foster carers for their annual reviews of approval. The panel chair sees this process as testing the hypothesis that they formed when the fostering family was first approved. This considered approach helps to ensure a continuing high standard of care for children and young people.

Foster carers said that they receive very good quality information from the service prior to placement. The service has strenuously pursued information awaited from placing authorities.

Detailed knowledge of each foster carer's skills and abilities means that so long as the agency has all the necessary information about a child, matching is generally effective. The service works hard to ensure that foster carers can meet young people's needs well. There have been very few placement breakdowns and in some instances where there has been a disrupted placement, the young person has been able to remain within the agency. This provides continuity for young people in terms of education and support.

The fostering service ensures that carers' and children's reviews are conducted in a timely manner. This ensures that children are cared for by safe, responsible and appropriate foster carers, and that their changing placement needs are addressed.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Foster carers and staff are well trained in child protection and understand the need to safeguard children at all times. Foster carers spoke about how they help young people to engage with age-appropriate activities, some of which involve taking some assessed risks. All carers have a very good understanding of how to help young people to keep themselves safe, and the behaviours that make some young people more vulnerable than others. There is also a good level of child protection expertise

on the fostering panel, which helps to inform safe recommendations.

Placement plans are clear and contain extensive documentation to describe each child's safeguarding needs. Risk assessments are very well written, regularly reviewed and cover all areas required for the child concerned.

Foster carers are fully aware of the risks associated with going missing and the associated potential for offending and suffering significant harm. They understand their duty to record and report any incidents. For example, one foster carer alerted the agency and social worker to a series of concerning risk factors, which might have indicated possible sexual exploitation.

Most young people who previously went missing, no longer do so, but a very small number still engage in this behaviour. This is addressed strenuously with them, and effective work takes place alongside the placing authority and the police to provide a coordinated approach. Young people receive excellent advice and support to help them to make wise decisions.

Foster carers had a great deal of insight into how trauma and disrupted attachments may impact on young people's neurological functioning. This helps foster carers to respond appropriately to any young people who may have attachment issues and engage in behaviour that places them at risk.

The service has good relationships with commissioners, LADOs, social workers and other agencies, and works collaboratively with them to meet young people's safeguarding needs. This helps to provide a high quality, consistent service to young people in long-term and short breaks placements, and facilitates effective support for foster carers when there are safeguarding issues.

The agency promotes safe care practice through good quality supervision, training and support to foster carers. The service completes at least one unannounced visit to carers every year, and ensures that the home environment reaches the required standards of safety and comfort. Any animals kept in the fostering family are risk-assessed to ensure that they are suitable to have contact with children. Foster carers' supervision has taken place monthly, and provides welcome and valued support for the tasks required.

Staff recruitment is exceptionally well managed. Staff files are well organised, audited and contain all the requirements detailed in regulation. For example, reference verification is particularly robust, with a detailed account of the telephone conversation to establish the referee's identity. Any gaps in employment history are followed up and the results recorded. However, there is no evidence on panel members' files that identity information has been retained, and there were no qualification certificates on the files examined. Although the service does check identity in order to obtain Disclosure and Barring Service checks, this information is not routinely kept. A recommendation has been made.

The service promotes a culture of openness and learning, which supports safe care

practice. For example, there is a whistle-blowing policy and any allegations made against carers are investigated fairly and robustly. The service is underpinned by the organisation's well-written policies and procedures, which are implemented nationally to help safeguard children and young people.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The service has very good relationships with the local authorities in the south west region. Managers work effectively with commissioners through meetings and provider events, and also work with the local authority's quality assurance team to ensure that the service continues to deliver what is required. A representative from the National Health Service commissioning team, who commissions short breaks, has been invited to participate in staff interviews, which helps to foster good relationships with that body. The service works in an open and transparent way with individual social workers to manage professional boundaries and promote individual young people's needs.

The service has been well managed on a day-to-day basis, and has had a manager in post continuously since the last inspection, but there have been several leadership changes over that period. In March 2012, a new manager was registered by Ofsted. Nine months later, the service moved part of its mainstream fostering provision from Bristol to be merged with the short breaks service operating out of Exeter. The new manager managed the merged services until September 2013, when she resigned.

Interim arrangements were put in place and a new prospective manager was appointed, who is still in post. This person is very much respected and has worked extremely hard and successfully to bring about positive outcomes for children, foster carers and staff. Various circumstances arose which made it impossible for her to submit an application to Ofsted to be registered.

The service took urgent action to address the situation and a new prospective Registered Manager has just been appointed. She is also an experienced, highly-respected member of staff and is due to take up her post in early September. Discussions took place during the inspection of the urgent need to submit an application for this person to be registered, as the service has now been without a Registered Manager for nearly 11 months. It is for this reason alone that leadership and management have been rated as 'requires improvement'.

Throughout the management changes, the service has been managed effectively. The most recent post holder has worked particularly well with foster carers to ensure that they know who she is, so that they can ask for advice when the social worker is not available. This visibility has been welcomed by foster carers, who all speak highly of the manager.

The service uses an electronic data management system to monitor and obtain an overview of service quality. A senior manager is closely involved and was present for

much of the inspection. He has extensive knowledge of the service, despite having a large geographical area to cover. This has helped to ensure continuity through the various changes of manager and has resulted in consistency of provision for children and young people. The service has a comprehensive business development plan, which addresses safe growth and effective resourcing, in order to ensure sustainable service delivery and financial viability.

The service provides a self evaluation and quality improvement report twice a year. There are monthly divisional management team meetings and the new responsible individual has instigated a bimonthly, two-day team manager and fostering coordinators meeting, where managers examine trends and patterns in service demand and delivery. The service has submitted a dataset form, which provides the regulator with important information.

The service ensures that foster carers and young people have a voice, through effective consultation and promoting communication. There is a good quality Statement of Purpose and children's guide to the service, which provide clear information for young people, parents, social workers and others. Some minor details were updated in these, and other policy documents, during the inspection.

Managers filter, analyse and seek to understand trends in demand for the service, so that they can target foster carer recruitment effectively. The RI has introduced service leader forums, which focus on competition, recruitment and needs. The service is aware of and responds to current and past research. For example, training for staff and foster carers on attachment is based on well-established and researched techniques.

Although there have been many staff changes over the past year, the agency is now fully staffed. Staff feel very well supported and are pleased that they have a well-established manager in post. They receive good quality, regular supervision from the present manager. Their appraisals include feedback from staff and foster carers.

The social work team for the mainstream fostering service has several new appointees, but all are very experienced. They have received a very thorough, well organised induction. Staff are pleased that there is a great deal of training available. They are enthusiastic and highly motivated. This helps to ensure effective, high-quality practice.

There were two requirements from the last inspection, both of which have been addressed. Notifiable events are now being sent to Ofsted as required. The other requirement was in relation to the need to inform Ofsted of management changes.

Four recommendations were made at the last inspection. All have been addressed. Specifically, the service's Statement of Purpose has been updated and now includes previously missing information. The service now has a development plan, and the foster carers' handbook has also been updated. Short breaks foster carers now all have appropriate transport for disabled young people, to help them to participate in the community.



## 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.