

The Adolescent and Children's Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Established in 1993, the Adolescent and Children's Trust is a registered charity providing fostering services in nine independently registered offices in England, Wales and Scotland. The London office also provides adoption services, and is the administrative headquarters. The charity is overseen by a board of trustees and the Director of Children's Services and Quality.

The Bristol and South West office was established in 2003. It provides a fostering service in Bristol, Gloucestershire, South Gloucestershire, Bath and North East Somerset, Wiltshire, North Somerset, Somerset and Swindon. Foster carers may look after children aged between birth and 17 years, from placing authorities all over the country. Some young adults over the age of 18 remain with their foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements.

At the time of this inspection, there were 45 approved fostering households, providing care for 38 young people. The service offers both long and short-term placements.

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 service has been rated good because it provides excellent quality care for children and young people with highly complex needs. Many children in placement are older teenagers, who have experienced considerable instability and trauma before being placed with TACT. Compared with their starting points, almost all of these young people have achieved very positive outcomes, irrespective of their unique individual needs.

Consequently, the overwhelming majority of placements are secure, stable and have brought significant benefits to the young people.

On the rare occasions when the service has, after all possible efforts, found that it could not keep a teenager safe because of their risk-taking behaviour, the situation has been addressed with other agencies swiftly and effectively. This has ensured that young people are supported to remain with their foster carers whenever possible, that they are not subjected to unnecessary moves, and that their welfare and safety are paramount.

Foster carers are recruited from a diverse range of ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds. This provides a good choice of placements for children and their commissioning authorities. The service's Statement of Purpose accurately describes its functions and provides good quality information for prospective foster carers, parents and placing authorities. This helps to promote effective placement planning, which in turn benefits young people.

The agency welcomes, supports and values prospective foster carers. Foster carers are extremely well prepared through extensive training and detailed, timely assessments. They confirm that they receive exceptional post-approval support to help them to fulfil their professional potential. This results in the service employing a pool of knowledgeable, skilled and experienced foster carers from diverse backgrounds and cultures, which maximises the chances of a positive match for young people needing placements.

After placement, high-quality training, supervision and consultation with external therapists ensures that foster carers continue to build on their knowledge and are treated as an integral part of the professional team around the child. This level of support, together with their exceptional personal qualities, helps to ensure that young people are maintained in stable placements.

Young people confirm that their views are central to TACT's plans and decision making. They welcome the opportunity to contribute to the service's development and enjoy being part of a formal consultation process. TACT's role in parliamentary committee and consultation work empowers young people by enabling them to contribute to government policy development.

The fostering service has established very positive relationships with commissioners, social workers and other external agencies to ensure that there is the best quality information available to foster carers and young people before and during placement.

The agency is well managed by an experienced, qualified Registered Manager. The manager is temporarily absent from work, but the deputy manager is leading the service very effectively. For example, staff feel very well supervised and supported; all the agency's functions are operating smoothly and service monitoring is managed effectively.

The single recommendation from the last inspection, which concerned retaining evidence that Pathway Plans had been requested, is now met. There is one regulatory shortfall from this inspection in relation to obtaining and recording full recruitment information about panel members. The systems in place for staff recruitment are robust, but with panel members' files, the service has not achieved the same high level of recording.

In addition to the shortfall in recruitment information, panel members' training records and appraisals have not been placed on their files in a timely manner. Panel members have no contact with children and young people, so these shortfalls do not impact on safety and welfare. A requirement and a recommendation have been made.

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
20 (2011)	ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. In particular, this relates to the requirement to obtain the necessary recruitment information for panel members. (Regulation 20 (3) (c))	31/12/2014

Recommendations

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

- monitor all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies. In particular, the Registered Manager must ensure that panel members' files contain up-to-date training records and appraisals. (NMS 25.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people are well prepared for their new placements, because before they move, they receive informative welcome packs from their prospective foster carers which include photographs and welcoming messages. They also receive clear, accessible information from the service. In most situations, there are carefully planned introductions, so that young people can see where they are going to live and learn about the fostering family's lifestyle.

Young people are moved to respite carers only when necessary; for example, if the foster carer is unwell. Foster carers show extraordinary resilience, even when experiencing serious health problems. Young people are protected from the impact of any move through recruiting respite carers who are known to them if possible.

Children and young people feel safe in secure, stable placements. Although many children are traumatised from life experiences and find it hard to trust anyone on arrival, over time, they begin to develop relationships with their foster carers' families and with their peers. This helps children to become resilient and gain in self-confidence.

Every young person receives an annual award for their progress. Awards are given for a wide range of achievements, from learning to manage a chronic medical condition, to a major life event such as going to university. This shows young people that their contribution is valued and helps to increase their self esteem. Young people also enjoy a wide range of activities and opportunities to meet other looked-after children. This enables them to talk together and share their thoughts with other children who understand their situation.

Some children are placed together with brothers and sisters, when this is in line with the placing authority's plans. This helps to maintain strong family relationships and a sense of identity. Many young people enjoy positive contact with their families, although their unique personal circumstances mean that this is not possible for everyone.

Young people may stay with their foster carers beyond the age of 18 years, provided that the local authority is in agreement. For example, one young adult continues to live with, and have an important role in the fostering family, at the age of 23. 'Staying put' arrangements ensure that young adults benefit from stability and support beyond their childhood years, just as they might have done if they were not looked after.

In consultation with their social worker, young people receive advice and support on accessing personal file information. This ensures that they have the necessary knowledge and understanding about their histories and identities to place their experiences in context.

Children and young people's views are positively sought and welcomed. They are

consulted frequently through meetings with their social workers, the foster carers' supervising social workers and the agency's surveys, so there is plenty of opportunity to contribute ideas or raise any concerns. Young people can share their views through local events, which feed information through to the service's regular Young People's Champions meetings. Young people can cite examples of positive changes that have taken place in response to these meetings; for example, making sure that the service remembers fostered children's birthdays, and re-instating a major activity called 'the Big Weekend'. Young people are aware that TACT takes an active part in government consultations and value the fact that their views play an important part in this process.

The overwhelming majority of children and young people have managed to reduce previous risk-taking behaviour. For example, most young people who had a history of going missing, have learned strategies to deal with the feelings that previously caused them to run away. Those who are most at risk are looked after by foster carers who have considerable skill and experience in working with young people who go missing, or who are particularly vulnerable to sexual and other forms of exploitation. These carers receive specific training and support to give their young person every chance of keeping safe.

Young people who do not respond to advice and guidance on this subject, are invited to a meeting with the agency, social worker and the police missing young persons' officer, to discuss how the risk can be reduced. Some benefit from specialist support from organisations with skills in working with young people at risk from sexual exploitation; for example, Barnardo's Against Sexual Exploitation (BASE) project. This ensures that young people have every possible chance to learn strategies in how to take control over their lives and improve their personal safety.

Children receive help and support to achieve their potential in education, health and other areas of their lives. For example, they receive a healthy diet and exceptionally good therapeutic support from an independent therapist and a local adoption support agency. They also have access to child and adolescent mental health services when appropriate.

Children are fully included in foster carers' lives. They are accepted with tolerance and understanding, and experience resilient, dedicated, emotionally intelligent care. Children live with foster carers who promote a wide range of stimulating and educational activities, such as sports, horse riding and learning survival skills.

Almost all young people are in education, employment or training. At the time of this inspection, there was only one young person not in education. In this instance, the young person, foster carer and social worker have been working to address this. Young people who are struggling at school receive good quality support through the service's links with Catch-Point, an adoption support agency, or from their own local authority's virtual school. This helps children with specific difficulties to integrate into education.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service demonstrates outstanding quality of care, informed by highly effective consultation and research. TACT has dedicated staff who work with young people to ensure that their views are communicated to government committees and the Department for Education. This means that young people can make a direct contribution to policy making. In addition, the service is actively engaged with researchers from the University of Bath to discuss how they might work together to increase knowledge. For example, one project is focusing on how foster carers use information technology to promote young people's safety and ensure secure recording techniques.

Foster carers are recruited from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, which means that the service often achieves close cultural matches to meet children's needs. Foster carers are passionate about their work and enthusiastic about their training and development. For example, foster carers said that they were attracted to the agency because of the high level of support and supervision offered, day and night, throughout the year. Some foster carers explained that when they had sought advice out of hours, the response was calm, clear, logical and appropriate. Foster carers therefore have confidence in the service and feel very well supported to care for young people with very complex needs. This helps to achieve sustained improvement in the quality of service and in outcomes for young people.

Foster carers confirm that their preparation and initial training is exceptionally good. This means that foster carers have considerable insight into their children's difficulties and helps them to support young people through the challenges that they face. The agency's assessment process are robust and clear. Social workers are reliable, knowledgeable and exceptionally supportive.

Form F reports are of a good standard; comprehensive and contain detailed analysis. This ensures that the fostering panel is presented with high quality information on which to base their recommendations.

Foster carers show exceptional insight into young people's perceptions about being looked after away from home. They anticipate challenges and appreciate the respective roles of the fostering service and the local authority in helping to resolve these. Foster carers work well with social workers to support young people with important transitions in their lives; for example, when teenagers return to education after a long break.

Foster carers welcome young people of all backgrounds and cultures into their families. They include them in family activities and work exceptionally hard to meet their needs. They form good relationships with parents whenever possible, and work in partnership with them to help young people to keep safe. This is beneficial when some young people are absent from their placements, because parents feel comfortable enough to ring the foster carer and report that the child is with them.

The service has a dedicated placements officer, whose role includes helping foster carers to receive respite care when they need a break. Respite carers may well be friends or neighbours of the fostering family, and they are subject to the same recruitment and assessment processes. Respite carers receive all the necessary information about the child and meet with the foster carers, so that there is effective communication about the young person's needs. If this service was not provided when needed, it would be very difficult for foster carers to sustain their placements and would increase the currently small number of disruptions.

Foster carers' views are sought in all areas of development. They are consulted about local authority referrals for placement and are supported to write the expression of interest submission themselves. This helps to provide placing authorities with good quality, first-hand information about what the foster carers have to offer the child.

Ofsted did not receive any surveys from foster carers or young people this year, but the service's own customer standards survey for 2013-2014 shows that the Bristol office scored 10 out of 10 for customer service. There were numerous positive comments from foster carers, including 'wonderful, can't praise the office highly enough and wouldn't want to work for any other agency', and 'fantastic staff...always there when needed'. Feedback from young people about their activities and fun days is exceptionally positive.

The fostering service has an effective panel, led by a skilled and experienced chair. The panel is currently less diverse than it has been in the past, due to recent changes of membership. The service is well aware of this and is addressing the need to recruit more minority ethnic members. The panel exercises an effective quality control function, which brings challenge and scrutiny to the service to drive improvement. The panel makes sound recommendations and identifies strengths and vulnerabilities in applicants to help inform effective decision-making. Panel minutes are detailed, fair and balanced. They draw out key points very well to form an accurate and comprehensive record of the meeting. The agency's decision maker is a highly experienced, qualified social care professional who makes timely, robust and well-recorded decisions.

The service expects detailed information from potential placing authorities about their children requiring placement, and if this is absent, this is challenged appropriately. The agency seeks to ensure that foster carers have sufficient knowledge and understanding of children's needs, so that they can make an informed decision about whether to accept a placement.

The agency has a 'preferred provider' status for a number of local authorities. Commissioners value the agency's honesty and openness in identifying potential foster carers. They commented on the agency's realistic responses to requests for placements. Because these are accurate and positive, this increases the chances of a good match. This in turn contributes to young people's stability in placement and reduces the risk of an unplanned ending. The service's customer surveys from commissioners included comments such as, 'my experience of the Bristol office pre-

placement searches has always been very positive; they respond promptly to searches and are available to answer any queries or questions regarding carer matching.'

Children and young people have good quality, clear placement planning information, which is held on an electronic online system for improved efficiency. Children and young people receive reviews as required and if any information about a child is missing from the record, the agency actively seeks this.

Local authorities and external organisations such as Catch-Point enjoy working with TACT and report very positive and productive working relationships. External professionals spoke about the high quality social work and management skills within the service, the foster carers' commitment and excellent communication. Foster carers are well aware of their legal responsibilities and understand the relevant requirements for delegated authority for each young person.

Foster carers and the agency advocate strongly on behalf of young people who are experiencing discrimination or a lack of understanding from other services and schools. This ensures that young people are empowered and have someone to help them to fight for their rights.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The rating for this outcome area is entirely due to shortfalls in panel members' recruitment information. Staff recruitment is robust and all other areas of safeguarding practice are good.

The agency places children's safety at the centre of its work. Children say that they feel safe in their foster placements. Even those with acute attachment difficulties feel relatively secure with their foster carers. Many young people take risks when they first arrive in placement, and the agency has achieved some very good results in helping the majority to reduce these risks over time.

Children and young people receive good quality information and support about staying safe. They are helped to understand how to use computers, the internet and texts appropriately and are supported if they have any difficulties.

Some young people do continue to go missing after being in placement for some time, but the vast majority have reduced the number of incidents since their arrival. They receive a great deal of support, information and advice to guide their decision-making. Multi-agency meetings take place, where professionals involved and the young person themselves work together to evaluate the risks and decide on how the situation can be improved.

Foster carers and agency staff have a very good understanding of the risks around going missing and potential child sexual exploitation. They are alert to signs of abuse

and sensitive to young people who make disclosures. Foster carers understand the impact of neglect and abuse on child development and attachment and respond to children accordingly, showing considerable insight into their difficulties.

Children and foster carers understand how to raise any concerns or complaints, but those interviewed have not had to do so because the manager and staff ensure that there is good communication at all times. There have been two complaints in the last 12 months, both of which have been dealt with effectively.

Young people's risk assessments are well recorded and provide an effective tool for foster carers and the agency to evaluate and minimise risk. The reported incidence of children and young people going missing appears to be relatively high, but this is due to the service sensibly taking the view that it is better to over-report, by including children who are late back to their placements because they are at known locations.

There have been two referrals to the local authority designated officer, resulting in one child protection enquiry in the last year. In that case, the agency worked effectively with other services to ensure that information was shared appropriately to safeguard children.

The recruitment and assessment of foster carers places a strong emphasis on safeguarding. This includes checks on adult members of the household and previous partners. Foster carers receive good quality training and clear agency guidance on safe care practices. The service undertakes an annual risk assessment of each foster carer's household, to contribute to their reviews. Pets in the household are also assessed thoroughly, to ensure that they are safe to be with young people.

Staff recruitment files are well ordered and contain all the information required by regulation. This shows that the service recruits only staff who have been fully checked and confirmed as suitable to work with children. Panel members' files are not maintained to the same good standard. For example, identity information is not retained; there were no qualification certificates on any of the files sampled and there is no employment history for the panel chair. Other panel members have gaps in their employment history. A requirement has been made.

In addition, although panel members do receive an annual appraisal and training alongside the social work staff, evidence of this is not recorded on their files. A recommendation has been made.

Staff are very competent and knowledgeable about child protection, through regular training and management support. The agency has a clear safeguarding policy, reviewed annually, which helps support children and young people in staying safe.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Both the Registered Manager and the deputy manager hold social work qualifications and are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). They also hold level 5 awards in leadership and management and managing practice learning. The service is therefore managed by well qualified, experienced and highly skilled people who have a good track record over time.

The service's Registered Manager has been in post for 11 years, but has been off work for four weeks because she is temporarily unwell. Ofsted has been appropriately informed about the manager's absence. The deputy manager has strong leadership skills and is currently managing the service. She facilitated the inspection process knowledgeably and efficiently, supported by the service's excellent administration team.

Leaders and managers ensure that the service puts on a large number of interesting, fun events each year for fostering families, including looked after children and young people. Community engagement is actively promoted; for example, through the young people's annual awards ceremony and other group events.

The agency's managers monitor individual children's progress very effectively. For example, the deputy manager was able to produce statistics and detailed analysis of missing-from-home incidents very quickly and efficiently. She is fully aware of all the major issues impacting on children and their carers and was able to cite actions that the agency has taken to help young people to keep safe and drive improvement.

The social work team told the inspector about numerous improvements that the service has made since the last inspection. For example, they said that communication with foster carers and children has improved. The service now produces newsletters for carers and for children. They have appointed a placements officer and foster carers' representatives. There is also a children's resource worker in post, who organises events, poetry and drawing competitions. Social workers say that the service has improved children's opportunities to participate and they are 'really getting somewhere with young people's engagement'. Children who foster alongside their parents are now included in all the groups and events. There have also been significant developments in policies, procedures and electronic recording, which have improved efficiency. The service's deputy manager has further ideas for continuing improvement, and it is clear that this is not a service that stands still.

The fostering panel plays a key role in service monitoring and improvement. For example, the latest panel report to the service noted that more than 20 disruption or placement support meetings were held in the year ending 31 March 2014. These meetings are requested to identify additional support for carers, alert local authorities to specific concerns about young people, address the needs of young people who self harm or going missing, and other areas of concern which may require decisive action.

The agency produces an annual review of the fostering service. The report summarises the service's activities for the previous financial year and identifies any areas of improvement and for further development. For example, the latest report

shows that none of the assessments conducted in that year took longer than six months to complete. 10 households were taken to panel for approval, and all 10 were approved.

The report noted that there has been an increase in the number of children with complex traumas placed. There was also an increase in parent and child assessment placements and requests for placements for sibling groups of three or more. The service is responding to this challenge by recruiting more foster carers and maintaining the ethnic and cultural diversity which is one of its strengths.

Other strengths identified include the quality of training. This was corroborated by foster carers and staff, and accounts for the large number of foster carers who attend training events. One event that was observed during the inspection was extremely well subscribed. Some courses have to take place in larger premises nearby, due to the high demand. This enthusiasm for learning is extremely positive.

The agency has an effective Statement of Purpose and very high quality, attractively produced children's guides. These provide all the information required to help children and adults understand the scope and nature of the service.

The agency constantly seeks feedback from foster carers and children in order to improve the quality and range of its service and activities. Any complaints are welcomed as a learning exercise and are always acted upon. The sole recommendation made at the last inspection has been fully addressed.

Social work staff are all qualified and registered with the HCPC. They receive regular, good quality supervision and many commented on the managers' 'open door' policy. This makes managers highly accessible and enables staff to seek support whenever they need it. Staff also receive regular appraisals.

TACT is now good at keeping Ofsted informed of any significant events under Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011. Earlier this year, there was an issue with notification timeliness and the quality of recording. The inspector asked the service to address this, and there has been a positive response. Notifications are now recorded appropriately and are sent in a much more timely manner.

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.