

TACT - The Adolescent and Children's Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Ros Chapman
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Setting address THE ADOLESCENT & CHILDRENS TRUST, 27 STATION ROAD,
KETTERING, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE, NN15 7HH

Telephone number 01536 411 410
Email kettering@tactfostercare.org.uk
Registered person The Adolescent and Children's Trust
Registered manager Barbara Taylor
Responsible individual Andrew Elvin
Date of last inspection 27/10/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

TACT (The Adolescent and Children's Trust) is a charitable organisation which operates across England, Scotland and Wales. This branch, which is one of eight, is located in Kettering, Northamptonshire. It provides short-term, long-term, emergency, and parent and child fostering placements. On March 31 2015 there were 107 children and young people in placement. On that date the agency had 76 fostering households, of which seven were approved between April 1 2014 and March 31 2015.

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 agency is a good service overall and is child-focused at every tier of its operation. It has significant strengths in many areas. Of particular note is placement stability, which results in long-term placements, staying put arrangements, and for some children and young people, legal permanence through special guardianship orders and adoption. Consequently, children and young people have happy, stable lives, build positive and secure attachments and are able to redress some of the trauma and negative experiences they have had. Their experiences, progress and outcomes are outstanding. Many children and young people achieve over and above what was expected of them educationally and emotionally. One young person said: 'I love my carer because he sorts out most of my problems and he helps me lots more than my birth family did.' Another said: 'They are nice and kind and support me in everything.'

Children's and young people's participation is also an area of strength. Children's champions inform agency developments and their views also feed into national consultations about the experiences of children in care. Young people who are involved in these systems speak very positively about the way their contributions are valued, as well as the skills they have developed as a result of these opportunities. The agency as a whole is passionate about increasing the contribution children and young people make to the service, for example, in recruiting and training foster carers.

Foster carers speak highly of the service. They feel well supported and this enables them to support the children and young people in their care. One foster carer said: 'It is a pleasure to work with professionals who are hands on, have excellent communication skills and who treat the carer as one of that team. The relationship is very important and by being part of that team, any issues that may arise are solved efficiently and effectively.' Their contribution to children's and young people's lives is recognised by placing social workers, who comment very positively about the work they have done. One said: 'I am impressed with the quality of care and level of understanding the carers are able to demonstrate to the young people they support.' Another stakeholder commented: 'This is a superb placement; the carers are brilliant and have turned things around. I can't praise them enough.' Foster carers and the agency work very effectively in partnership with local authorities and other stakeholders. This ensures there is a good understanding of the needs of local authorities in relation to placements, but also that appropriate support is utilised to meet children's and young people's needs and keep them safe.

The agency is staffed by committed, child-focused, enthusiastic, qualified and experienced workers at all levels. Stakeholders comment that supervising social workers respond, 'at the drop of a hat'. Managers are keen to develop the service and they provide a strategic lead as well as accessible support.

The agency had a number of staffing difficulties in the last year but despite this, it has continued to provide a service of good quality to carers and children. However, certain aspects of monitoring, which have resulted in some of the shortfalls identified, have been less robust as a result. Areas of improvement include ensuring Ofsted is notified of any significant events, providing up-to-date first aid training for all foster carers, developing the safeguarding policy to include risk from radicalisation, improving decision-making processes in relation to foster carer approvals and ensuring all panel members have references taken up before they commence their appointment.

Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
ensure that if any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must notify without delay the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36(1))	25/09/2015

Recommendations

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

ensure that foster carers receive sufficient training in first aid (NMS 6.7)

ensure the decision maker takes account of all the information available to them when making a considered decision (NMS 14.9)

ensure all members of the central list have references checked to assess their suitability before taking on responsibilities (NMS 19.1)

ensure the fostering service's safeguarding procedure is in line with Government guidance, with particular reference to the risk from radicalisation. (NMS 22.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people have, in many cases, made outstanding progress in many areas of their lives. Their experiences of being in foster care are excellent; they access a variety of opportunities and their participation in all aspects of their lives is highly valued. They are extremely well cared for in stable and safe placements that meet their needs and where they blossom and thrive. One young person said: 'This is the best placement in my life.' One social worker commented about a child: 'The difference is so profound, it is amazing.' Another said: 'She is a completely different child, she has made brilliant progress. She is confident, active, looks well, a massive improvement.' When asked 'what is the best thing about being in foster care', a young person replied, 'my foster carers'. Another said: 'My carer understands me and when I need help she tries her hardest to help me, I am also happy where I am and I feel safe.'

A significant strength in terms of experiences, progress and outcomes is placement stability. There are very few unplanned endings, and at 4% last year, this is below the national average of 8%. Another significant strength is the longevity of placements, with approximately half lasting over two years, and some into adulthood through staying put arrangements. Additionally, special guardianship orders and adoption are supported if these are in the children's best interests, and there have been a number of these. One such carer commented: 'TACT helped me take on the local authority; they were 100% behind me.' Another said: 'TACT has been supportive with the special guardianship order. They are not concerned commercially; they put the interests of the child first.' Such placement stability has a significant positive impact on children's and young people's emotional security, their sense of belonging and general well-being, enabling them to make progress.

When placements are planned, children and young people usually visit the prospective foster carers prior to moving in so they know what to expect and can ask any questions. They are provided with information and photographs where possible, so they settle in more quickly. This system is currently being developed further through child-friendly profiles which are stored electronically and emailed out to social workers to share with the children and young people prior to placement.

Foster carers are committed to meet children's and young people's cultural needs, which, given the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, is an important aspect of the service. Stakeholders and young people confirm that religious and cultural needs are known, understood and met, including access to mosques, halal food and an understanding to the importance of festivals. For example, a foster carer of a different religious background to the young person placed with them understood the importance of parents giving Eid money and provided that to the young person; this was really appreciated and demonstrated the value that the carer placed on the young person's heritage. Young people with additional needs comment that they are seen for who they are and not their disability, and therefore develop a better sense of self.

Children and young people have numerous positive experiences and opportunities to develop and have fun, both as a result of their foster carers and also the agency. They are very much part of family life; they go on holiday with their foster carers, they are encouraged to develop their interests such as music, dance, drama, sporting activities such as swimming, and seeing friends. There are social events for families, theatre trips, and outings, all of which are well received. They take part in activities organised through the agency such as the big weekend and the little weekend, which provide opportunities for socialising with other foster children, developing new skills and having fun.

The agency undertakes a lot of direct work with children and young people, both individually and through group activities. For example, a number of children and young people took part in 'a play in week' about bullying, which they performed to staff, social workers and their foster carers. The participants benefited enormously from this experience, and this has led to other theatrical opportunities. The children's resource worker is dedicated to promoting a whole range of activities and opportunities so that value is added to their lives and their voice is heard, for example, through DVDs and CDs they have produced about their experiences. The children's resource worker is a real asset to children's participation and inclusion as well as the direct work, such as bereavement counselling, she has undertaken, which has had real benefits in improving outcomes such as emotional well-being.

Participation and consultation are real strengths; children's and young people's views are taken very seriously and it is a priority for the agency as a whole. The weight placed on this is shown by the responsible individual's own involvement in the children's champions group, and plans to develop mentoring and inclusion in other parts of service delivery such as skills to foster training and carer recruitment. Their views are used to influence policy at the highest level through engagement with the All Party Parliamentary Group on children in care. Young people feel valued, listened to and know their opinions count. Young people also develop presentation skills and increased self-confidence through being part of the children's champions groups. On a more local level they are asked their views through surveys, foster carer reviews, their own reviews and through the children's events.

Children and young people are supported to maintain family links so they sustain relationships which are important to them and understand their past and their identity. Foster carers demonstrate a very inclusive attitude towards the birth family and are respectful of their role. They are keen to facilitate contact arrangements for the benefit of the children and young people and advocate on their behalf if arrangements fall down. One stakeholder said: 'The carers are very good at promoting contact; they go out of their way to include the parents.'

Children and young people are healthy and they are not currently engaging in risk-taking behaviour such as going missing, offending or drug and alcohol misuse. When this does arise, the agency takes appropriate action to minimise risk. It takes a proactive approach through the skills for life programme which includes sessions on substance misuse and sexual health. It also covers other independence skills to enhance the work that foster carers undertake with the young people who are

approaching adulthood.

Children and young people have excellent school attendance, with many attaining 100%, appropriate educational placements, and some are achieving above expectations as they settle and engage. One review report noted: 'excellent attendance; so much progress; above target; an absolute joy.' Some of the young people are going to university and have ambitions for their future, which is a real achievement.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency provides placements for children and young people with a range of complex needs. This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people, who currently comprise just under 20% of all placements. In recognition of the challenges that some children and young people bring, the agency has developed training and support to manage this more effectively. This includes consultation with a clinical psychologist, a support group with psychological input, direct work provided by the children's resource worker, as well as specialist training in attachment. Placement stability and positive outcomes demonstrate the success of attracting, approving and supporting appropriate foster carers. One social worker commented: 'I have struck gold with these carers.' Another said: 'There is an excellent standard of care, plenty of opportunities to socialise and do activities.'

The process for preparing, assessing and approving foster carers is thorough and timely. The assessments are analytical and focus on the competencies required to be a foster carer. They are generally of a good quality; the small number which have been identified as needing further work have led to a re-evaluation of how to improve the system by increasing face-to-face supervision of independent assessors.

Support and supervision of foster carers are areas of strength. Supervision is very regular and child focused. Carers value the opportunity to share their concerns and comment that their supervising social worker provides appropriate challenge where necessary. Carers feel really well supported. They say: 'There is always someone available'; 'the training is excellent and of a high quality'; 'I am really impressed'; 'it is fantastic, brilliant'; and, 'the agency is absolutely superb, it is first class.' They comment that the out-of-hours support is also quick to respond. They are pleased they chose TACT; they like the ethos and the fact that profits are ploughed back into the agency to provide services for children. One foster commented: 'TACT is personal; they know us, it feels like home. We are a team, and it's not a problem it's a situation.' Carers have also commented that they have felt exceptionally well supported in relation to special guardianship orders. One former foster carer said: 'TACT was 100% behind me although they lost a carer as a result.'

Foster carers complete the training, support and development standards within timescales unless situations such as lack of placements prevent this. Many foster carers undertake an impressive range of training and this has been expanded in

response to carers' requests. They are able to talk about the positive impact that training has had on their practice. Although first aid is a core piece of training which every foster carer undertakes, it has not been consistently updated and currently only 62% of foster carers have an up-to-date first aid certificate.

Foster carers are very committed to the children, speak very positively about them and treat them as part of their family, for example, by going on holiday together. Respite care is not encouraged; it is only supported if it is needed to sustain a placement.

Matching is another area of strength, which results in placements that are successful in meeting the needs of children and young people and are sustained. There is a clear process which the duty social worker follows, supported by managerial oversight. Social workers of children already in placement are always consulted. The agency obtains further information from local authorities prior to making a placement decision, where this is necessary. Introductory visits take place where possible in planned placements, to give it the best chance of success.

The fostering panel comprises members with a good range of personal and professional experiences, which enables them to have a thorough understanding of the fostering task. For example, members have backgrounds in health, education, psychology, social work, providing foster care and personal experience of being in care. They add rigour to the process and demonstrate that they provide challenge to the agency when the quality of work has fallen below expected standards on a small number of occasions. The administration of the fostering panel is timely and the minutes are of a good standard to reflect the discussion and enable the decision maker to make an informed decision. The decision maker does not currently read all the papers in every case prior to making a decision regarding foster carer approvals. Consequently the decision-making process lacks robustness as not all the information available is taken into account and there is an over-reliance on the rigour of the fostering panel.

The agency and the carers fully support reviews and other professional meetings such as personal education plan meetings. This promotes the sharing of information about children and young people, as well as advocacy, thus enabling decisions to be made on full information. Social workers and independent reviewing officers comment on how well the supervising social workers know the children and young people and value their contribution. Delegated authority is clear and an area which is chased up where necessary.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children's and young people's safety and well-being are promoted in a number of ways. They are enabled to take appropriate risks, according to their individual circumstances and needs. This is carefully managed through thorough risk

assessments and safe care plans which are regularly updated. Two unannounced visits a year, seeing children alone and thorough foster carer reviews undertaken by an independent person add further robustness to a safe service.

Children and young people usually meet the children's resource worker shortly after placement to go through the children's guide with them. One element of her role is to ensure that they understand their rights and who they can contact if they wish to raise a concern. In addition to the children's resource worker, their own social worker and independent reviewing officer, they have access to the foster carers' supervising social worker who speaks to them alone at least once every 12 weeks. Independent advocacy is also promoted where necessary. Children and young people feel listened to and able to voice their concerns. They are also made safer through the direct work which takes place in relation to substance misuse and internet safety, to give them the tools to keep themselves safe.

The agency is in the process of providing a 12-week course for carers to further their understanding of attachment and how children's previous life experiences affect their behaviour. This has run on three separate occasions so far and has been described by carers as 'awesome'. Its impact on their understanding has been significant, and it enables them to respond to and support children and young people more effectively.

Currently, children and young people going missing from placement is not an issue. However, foster carers demonstrate a clear understanding of what to do should this happen, and have written guidance to supplement their knowledge. They also know how to respond to allegations. Allegations against carers are dealt with appropriately and carers are given independent support while an investigation takes place. The agency has a clear understanding of the role of the local authority designated officer, and recent incidents demonstrate that their expertise has been utilised appropriately. One stakeholder commented that the agency is not collusive and has an open attitude to any concerns, which are investigated thoroughly: 'TACT responded quickly and objectively; I was impressed, they took it seriously.'

The safeguarding policy has been recently updated and staff have had training in how to manage the risks from child sexual exploitation. However, the policy does not include how to identify and manage risks from radicalisation, and although staff understand this issue and have provided written guidance to foster carers, its formal inclusion in the policy would enhance this further.

Staff and foster carers are recruited using robust procedures to ensure they are safe and suitable people to work with and have access to children and young people. However, there is no evidence that one member of the fostering panel had two references provided prior to appointment, in line with usual practice. The risk from this deficit is minimised as there is no direct contact with children or young people and the person concerned is a registered member of a professional body.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Good

The agency has developed effective working relationships with partner agencies. Commissioners, contracts managers and placements officers speak highly of the service. One described the agency as, 'positive and helpful; we have good working relationships'. Other comments include, 'they work very closely with us', and, 'they are responsive, communication is good, the placements are really stable, and they are open to discussion and negotiation.' Regular communication ensures a good understanding of the requirements of local authorities, and the agency is therefore able to assist with sufficiency, enabling children and young people to be placed in appropriate and local foster placements. A stakeholder said: 'They are forthcoming in helping us.' In addition, there are internal systems to consider all referrals so that future recruitment can be appropriately tailored to meet those needs.

Leaders and managers at all levels are extremely child focused. They know the children and young people in placement very well and have a good understanding of the progress they are making. This is regularly monitored and discussed in supervision. Current systems for monitoring and tracking progress and outcomes are being further improved to make them more systematic and provide easier access to the information which is stored.

There are a number of systems for monitoring the quality of the service that take place at all levels and are used to improve the service. The responsible individual is actively involved in meeting carers, staff, children and young people and knows the service well. He has clear plans to continue to improve young people's participation through mentoring and alumni. Customer service standards and satisfaction are reviewed nationally. There are regular monitoring systems which feed into senior management reviews and board of trustee meetings. The latter includes young people who were formerly fostered with TACT foster carers so they can provide a really meaningful contribution based on personal experiences. All review systems include comments from young people, social workers and foster carers as appropriate.

The statement of purpose and children's guide are clearly written and comprehensive documents which provide a good understanding of the service to those who read them. The Foster Carers' Charter is easily accessible on the website and reflects the service offered. Carers feel they can express their opinions and the agency responds positively to them. This is facilitated through a foster carers' representatives group as well as on an individual basis.

Staff, managers and panel members are appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. Supervision is reflective and enables staff to consider casework decisions and how to improve the support they offer. They have access to external training as well as internal courses which enables them to offer a competent and effective service to foster carers and children. Staff feel well supported by regular supervision and accessible managers. The last year has seen some difficulties in relation to staff sickness, but despite this, staff have continued to provide a service of high quality so that carers, children and young people have not been disadvantaged. Staff are very committed to the children and young people in foster care and go out of their way to

ensure they provide the best possible support.

Notifications have not always been made to Ofsted as required; there have been occasions when Ofsted has not been informed of a serious complaint, a child protection investigation and outcomes of incidents. However, the agency notified all other agencies at the time, and took immediate appropriate action, so the children and young people were protected from potential harm. This shortfall has been rectified by retrospective notifications.

The agency has met the requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection. The fostering panel only considers this agency's work. Foster carers have completed the training, support and development standards within timescales, they understand the importance of keeping records securely, the missing from care protocols are available and they demonstrate a clear understanding of the level of their delegated authority. The service has therefore improved as a result.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 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.