

Action for Children Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Action for Children is an independent fostering agency based in Middlesbrough. The agency has a regional office base in Sheffield which it is moving to Doncaster. The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide long and short term foster placements. It also provides some specialist therapeutic foster placements for children with more complex needs in partnership with a therapeutic organisation. At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing a family placement service to around 54 children and young people with around 57 fostering families. In addition to the registered manager, the agency employs two team managers, eight fostering social workers and administrative and support staff based in each office.

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 good fostering service which provides a high quality of service to its young people and foster carers. As a result of the agency's good practice, it delivers improved outcomes for young people during their time in foster care.

The agency recruits and approves carers in a way that ensures their suitability and aptitude to care for young people. The agency's panel and decision making process is rigorous and provides good scrutiny of and feedback on, the agency's work.

The agency provides foster carers with very good individual support after they are approved. Carers are well managed and supervised. The provision of training for foster carers has been improved recently as it was deemed to have become repetitive and not sufficiently based on carers' individualised needs. Training is now good, although the

agency is not yet engaging effectively enough to ensure that all carers undertake the offered training.

The good support and supervision provided to foster carers helps them work with young people in way that improves young people's lives. It ensures that young people are safe and that they receive the care they need.

The agency works very effectively with placing authorities when young people are being matched and placed with their foster carers. This, and the high levels of placement support provided means that young people grow and progress in stable and settled placements. Young people have a clear say in their own care. The agency's social workers know them well and provide them with strong support for decision making. Young people have input into the way the agency works.

Over the last two years the agency has experienced an unsettled period. There have been a number of management changes and the staff team has experienced higher than usual levels of staff sickness. During this time new work processes and electronic recording systems have been implemented. This has led to some management shortfalls over this period. The agency has suffered from a lack of consistency and direction, as well as inconsistent management of foster carers. There have also been some weaknesses in the monitoring and day to day management of the agency, particularly the quality of recording and the monitoring of practice. The current registered manager has begun to address these issues since she has been in post and improvements are apparent. However, progress towards improving these shortfalls has not been as quick or effective as it should have been because the agency does not have sufficient management systems or capacity for its size, nature and complexity.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that where required, the children's guide is available through suitable alternative methods of communication. Specifically, that information is presented various ways to be accessible to the range of young people placed (NMS 16.1)
- ensure that foster carers receive the training and development they need to carry out their role effectively. Specifically, that work is done to increase the take up of training relevant to foster carers' individual needs (NMS 20)
- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service. Specifically, that this monitoring ensures that all recording is complete, of high quality, accurately filed and that immediate action is taken to address any issues identified by this monitoring (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that the fostering services is managed effectively and efficiently, delivering a service which meets the needs of its users. Specifically, that the agency has sufficient management capacity to ensure its effective day to day control. (NMS 25)

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

Judgement outcome: **good.**

Young people fostered by this agency make good progress. The staff and carers are committed to achieving good outcomes for them. As one foster carer said, 'The focus is always on the young person. Help is always available.'

Young people benefit from living in stable, well-supported placements. The agency works effectively with placing authorities to ensure that young people and their carers are prepared well when placements are made. The agency works hard to match young people with carers who are suitable to meet their needs. It ensures that placements are made in a planned manner wherever possible, even when in very short notice situations. Information sharing is good, so placements begin in a positive way.

This effective work with placing authorities and the agency's strong support for young people in placement means that young people make good progress in their stable placements despite the complexity of some of the young people placed. Young people develop really good relationships with their foster carers that nurture them and help them grow and mature. For example, one young person said, 'I think that they are good when I am injured or upset. Plus they help me manage my anger.'

High levels of support and advice for foster carers help support the stability of placements of even the most complex young people. For example a carer said that the 'placement could have ended at any time in the last two years without the support we have received'. The agency operates in partnership with a multi-disciplinary therapeutic organisation and can offer specialist therapeutic placements where these are necessary and agreed with the placing authority. This helps to support stable placements for the most complex young people

Young people have a real voice in their own care and the agency advocates strongly on their behalf where necessary. Supervising social workers know young people well and carers and agency staff ensure young people's voices are heard. For example in situations where young people have disagreed with local authority plans to move them from their foster carers the agency has involved independent advocates and worked with the local authority concerned to ensure young people's views are listened to.

Young people are consulted about their care and involved in aspects of the running of the agency. Young people were involved in revising the agency's complaints guide and some young people have taken part in staff interviews including that for the recently appointed team manager. The agency's children's guide is available in different formats intended for older and younger children and those with communication difficulties. However, these are nationally produced to set templates and none are sufficiently child-friendly, accessible or personalised.

The positive outcomes achieved for young people vary depending on the young person and their situation. For some, maintaining the stability of their placements and preventing their life chances deteriorating is a significant positive outcome. Other young people make progress that exceeds their expectations. For example, one young person

in college, with a part time job and thinking about his future said, 'I wouldn't of believed I'd do as well as I have'.

Young people access all the primary health provision and any specialist service they require. The support for young people's educational achievement is good and this means that young people make significant progress in this area. Supervising social workers support carers at school meetings and reviews to ensure young people receive the support they need. For example, one carer described the significant progress made by a young person after support from the agency helped them to negotiate a school move for the young person.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good.**

This agency provides a good service to its foster carers, young people placed and the local authorities it works with. This is based on its child focus and understanding of the needs of fostered young people.

The agency keeps its recruitment activity under review based upon its strategic plans and capacity. It responds to all enquiries promptly and initial screening is robust. This means that enquirers and the agency can decide early in the process whether they wish to continue. Consequently, few applicants withdraw or are counselled out after the assessment process begins. Assessments of prospective foster carers are generally insightful, evaluative and of good quality. The agency's rigorous panel and effective decision making process provide an additional check on the quality of applicants and the assessments carried out. Recent assessments have been carried out in a timely manner with no undue delay. This means that applicants' suitability is clearly and promptly checked and scrutinised without unnecessarily deterring applicants.

The agency provides its foster carers and the young people they care for with good levels of individual support. Support is available by phone and in person at any time, day or night. A period of management and staffing instability in the service over the last two years led to some inconsistency in support because of changes in workers supporting carers. Notwithstanding this, carers report that the individual support for them and their young person remained good throughout the unsettled period. A lot of effort has been made to resolve this in the last nine months and the situation is now much improved.

The agency's processes for foster carer visits, supervision and review are effective. It provides carers with regular supervision and this helps to monitor, guide and support the care they provide to young people. Records of supervision have a separate section to capture the outcomes being achieved and progress made by young people. This information is used to keep placing authorities informed and to help monitor progress and achievement. Foster carers' continued suitability to foster is robustly reviewed annually, taking into consideration the views of the young people and their social workers as well as those within the agency.

The great majority of the agency's foster carers have completed their Training, Support and Development workbooks with the remaining carers working towards this. The agency has worked to improve the quality and range of training provided to foster carers over the last six months. Before this, carers reported and the agency acknowledged, that training had become somewhat repetitive and was not sufficiently well based upon

carers' needs. Training is now good and much more relevant. A group of carers listed current training provision as one of the best things about the agency. Recent training has been provided in eating disorders, attachment, social networking and sexual exploitation. Required training, including safeguarding and first aid is provided on a rolling basis. The agency is working with foster carers to develop individual personal development plans to help identify future training needs more effectively. However, the take up of training by foster carers is not sufficiently high. Despite the work to provide relevant, high quality training in key issues, fewer than half the agency's carers attend each course. This means that not enough carers are kept up to date with key issues affecting young people's wellbeing.

The agency supports foster carers to be a full part of the team working with the young person. It ensures that they are able to speak up for the young person in their care and have a say in important decisions about their life.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good.**

The agency keeps young people safe and young people feel safe and well cared for by their foster carers. Young people have access to information about how to express any concerns they might have and are supported to contact independent people if they need to.

Young people are placed with foster carers who are well matched to their needs. Good placement support is provided to help ensure that young people remain safe and have their wellbeing promoted. Young people's risk assessments and individualised safe caring policies are updated regularly and foster carers' supervision monitors the safety of, and progress made by young people. The agency provides good information to placing authorities and this helps them to monitor the wellbeing of the young people they are responsible for.

Foster carers are trained in safeguarding both before and after approval and the agency has provided carers with good recent training about sexual exploitation of young people and the risk from social networking, and how to manage these.

The agency works with some very complex young people, some within therapeutic placements. Therefore, some foster carers may have to physically intervene in response to a young person's behaviour to prevent them harming themselves or others. The agency only permits this where there is multi-disciplinary agreement and where foster carers have the required training. This is monitored closely and arrangements are kept under review to help keep young people safe.

At times young people leave their foster placements without authority. This is well monitored and recorded by the agency and the correct steps are taken to keep young people safe. The agency works well with placing authorities to keep them informed and to follow the relevant procedures. The agency treats every incident seriously but does not record these incidents accurately. The agency's records showed that 16 young people had been missing from placement. In fact, none had been missing, but were absent without authority as their whereabouts were known. This cautious approach by the agency is understandable but could lead to more serious incidents of young people going missing being overlooked among records of a number of other incidents.

Recruitment processes for foster carers, staff and members of the central panel list are robust and thorough. Thorough suitability and background checks are undertaken and good evaluation of applicants' attitudes and aptitudes take place.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

This agency has been subject to an unsettled period over the last two years. It experienced a number of changes in management which led to some inconsistency in its strategic direction and internal policies. At the same time the agency experienced a higher than usual level of staff sickness. During this period some of its systems changed. For example, it moved from a situation in which foster carer recruitment was managed nationally to one where it is managed at branch level. Work allocation within the team changed and a new electronic recording system was implemented. Additionally, a change in foster carers' terms and conditions occurred during this time and this impacted on the quality of relationships between carers and the agency. These factors led to a deterioration in the quality of some of the work done by the agency. For example, both detailed monitoring by the agency and its recording deteriorated, training for foster carers became less relevant to their needs and somewhat repetitive, and the quality of communication with foster carers deteriorated. One foster carer summed some of this up by saying, in a survey, that the agency should 'listen to its foster carers more, pass on information better, guide foster carers in the way that it would like things done.' More positively, the individual work with foster carers during this time remained good. A carer said, 'The communication between us and our supporting social worker is always good. However, further up the management system it is not good.'

Since the current Registered Manager was appointed the agency has worked hard to improve its management. A new training programme has been developed based on carers identified needs and this has been very positively received, and work to improve communication has been undertaken through meetings, cluster groups and newsletters. However, carers continue to feel a lack of direction and secure management. One carer summed this up by saying the agency is 'crying out for a leader who will get to know us'.

The detailed day to day monitoring of the agency's practice and recording is still not sufficiently developed. Some key work done with carers around their management of a young person's behaviour was not recorded in the carer's supervision notes. Records of therapeutic sessions taking place and the outcomes of these are not retained on one young person's file. Reports from some young people's reviews are not retained and there is no evidence to confirm whether or not these took place and no evidence of the agency contacting the local authority for copies. In some cases information is misfiled, and there is a lack of clarity and accuracy in some records. For example, the agency has recorded a number of instances of young people being missing when they actually were absent without authority.

The Registered Manager has implemented systems to improve the monitoring of the agency's activity but these have not yet been sufficiently effective. Although it is clear that improvements have occurred, progress has been hampered by the manager's broad span of control. The service operated from three sites and this has just recently been merged into two. One of these offices is to move in the near future but the two remaining sites are still geographically remote and the Registered Manager has other

responsibilities in the organisation as well as leading this agency. This means that the agency does not have sufficient capacity or monitoring and information systems in place to fully support effective and secure management.

Staff supervision and appraisal systems are effective and staff members undertake training that helps to maintain and develop their skills. Where weaker performance is identified the agency takes appropriate action to guarantee it continues to deliver a good service. The agency has an appropriate business development plan in place and presents realistic periodic monitoring reports to the agency senior managers.

The agency makes appropriate notifications to Ofsted and ensures that appropriate action is taken in response to any significant events that take place.

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, inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.