

Action for Children: Fostering Wessex

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Action for Children Wessex Fostering provides fostering placements for a variety of young people, many of whom have been involved in anti-social or criminal activities. The aims of the service include a reduction in re-offending behaviour and improved family and social relationships. Placements include long-term welfare placements, remand placements, alternative-to-custody placements, post-custody placements and intensive-support placements for young people who have become involved in serious and persistent offending. The service works closely with placing authorities and youth offending teams in the Wessex area.

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 agency successfully delivers a range of placements to children and young people specialising in preventative intervention, remand fostering and intensive fostering which provides an alternative to custodial sentences or secure accommodation. The agency provides safe and secure family placements and through tailored support enables children and young people to experience positive attachments and relationships with others. As a result, children and young people experience stable placements. This provides them with the foundation to make outstanding progress in their social and educational development and the majority do not return to previous offending or harmful behaviours.

The agency trains their carers in an evidenced-based approach, which places emphasis on supervision, structure and boundaries. This provides children and young people with the support and skills necessary to disrupt their harmful behaviours and

make positive choices. Carers and staff use innovative and creative strategies to support children and young people to make progress and reward their achievements. This increases children and young people's self-esteem resulting in exceptional progress in their behaviour, education and social skills.

The agency uses a holistic approach to provide support to both the children and young people and their families. Carers and project workers provide direct support to children and young people to enable them to learn the skills necessary to make positive change. The employment of a family consultant ensures that all those important to the children and young people are involved in their care, provide a consistent message and can celebrate in their achievements. This provides children and young people with the stability and confidence to make positive choices resulting in excellent improvements in their relationships and reduction in missing and offending behaviour. The majority of children and young people with a history of offending behaviour do not commit any further offences representing a significant achievement.

Managers, staff and carers are highly aspirational for the children and young people they support and are extremely committed to making a difference to children and young people's lives. Carers are respected as professionals in their own right and ensure that their knowledge and understanding of the child or young person is shared effectively during care planning and reviews. Extremely skilled staff and managers, who recognise the importance of listening to their views, support carers and young people. Their views are valued and used to improve the quality of the service and the experiences of children and young people.

The agency works effectively with their partner organisations to ensure children and young people are provided with the specialist advice and support they need to make positive changes to their behaviour. Other professionals spoke very highly of the service, its carers and staff and of the outstanding progress, children and young people make within its care.

The agency's recruitment, assessment and training of carers ensures that they have the capacity and skills to meet the diverse needs of the children and young people they care for. In most cases assessments are exploratory and analytical evidencing that the carers recruited have the ability to support children and young people to achieve positive outcomes. However, assessments and the panel process need to be improved to ensure that they robustly challenge carers' capability to follow safeguarding processes in order to protect children and young people.

The agency is maintaining its high performance in most aspects of service provision. Although this inspection has identified some areas for improvement this has not affected the agency's ability to safeguard children and young people. This agency continues to provide a good standard of care, which supports children and young people to achieve excellent outcomes.

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
25: Functions of fostering panel The fostering panel must oversee the conduct of assessments carried out by the fostering service provider. Specifically, make sure there is robust exploration of previous safeguarding practice in roles which involved working with children or vulnerable adults before making recommendations about an applicant's suitability to foster. (Regulation 25 (4) (b))	05/05/2016

Recommendations

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

The provider must ensure that the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for. (National Minimum Standard 14.8)

The provider must ensure it can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. This includes DBS checks. (National Minimum Standard 19.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people are able to build strong, trusting relationship with their carers who understand their needs and know them well. Children and young people say they feel part of the family and feel safe and well cared for. Children and young people say that they enjoy their placement and that it is providing them with the stability and security they need to make positive changes and progress.

Children and young people have access to a variety of support provided by carers and the agency's project workers. The project workers work independently with the child or young person through weekly activities that are structured around the child and young person's targets. This enables them to develop their skills and achieve their goals. The support provided by the project workers has been instrumental in supporting children and young people to reflect on their behaviours and make changes. This has resulted in them reducing their challenging or harmful behaviours.

Project workers provide a further person who the child or young person trusts and confides in. Project workers also regularly advocate on the child or young person's behalf. For young people who are moving on from the service, project workers work alongside carers to support young people to develop their independence skills and confidence. This has assisted young people to obtain placements in further education or employment and to move on to independent living successfully. Young people continue to benefit from the support of project workers after they have left the service. This provides them with consistency alleviating some of the anxieties that may be caused by moving on to an independent setting. This additional support has provided young people with the confidence to continue with the positive changes they have made and not return to previous harmful or offending behaviours.

When appropriate, carer's support children and young people to have contact with their families. This promotes a sense of identity and belonging. A strength of this service is the engagement with children and young people's families and the support provided to them. The family consultant has been instrumental in supporting children and young people and their families to repair their relationships and to support parents to develop their skills. In many cases, children and young people have been able to return home to their families. Within their families they continue to feel supported not to return to previous harmful or offending behaviour as their parents are more able to provide consistent structure and boundaries.

The agency uses a research-based programme alongside the skills, knowledge and intense support from carers to address negative behaviours including offending, absconding and violent behaviour. Staff and carers work together to design innovative strategies to encourage children and young people to reflect on and understand their behaviour. This supports them to understand their behaviour's impact on others and themselves, motivating them to make positive changes. Carers and staff use creative ways to reward and reinforce positive behaviour. As a result, children and young people display less aggressive and violent behaviours and reduce their missing and offending behaviour.

Children and young people are encouraged to lead healthy lifestyles. Carers and project workers provide education on healthy diets and exercise as well as the harm smoking and the use of illicit substances can cause. Carers have supported young people to reduce and cease these behaviours representing significant achievement for some children and young people. Children's and young people's mental and emotional well-being is supported and improved through staff liaising closely with children and adolescent mental health teams. The focus on children and young people's emotional health enables them to gain a more positive self-view and develop stronger emotional resilience resulting in improvements in their behaviour and interactions with others.

Children and young people make exceptional progress in education because of the support provided by their carers and agency staff. The carers and the agency's supervising social workers liaise regularly with schools and the local authority virtual headteacher to ensure all children and young people receive their education entitlement. Where necessary the agency has taken action to challenge the appropriate authorities to ensure this is achieved. Education is valued and promoted within the agency. Consequently, children and young people's engagement in education increases and so does their confidence. As a result, they go on to obtain qualifications in a variety of subjects. This enhances their future opportunities in adulthood and many later obtain further education placements or employment whilst in the service.

Children and young people's interests and hobbies are promoted and they are often matched with carers who share similar interests which promotes successful placements. There is a variety of activities provided by the agency to support children and young people's engagement and to encourage them to express themselves, develop their social skills and extend their network. 100% of the children and young people who took part in the agency's survey responded that they could take part in things they enjoy.

Through the excellent support provided by the agency children and young people, learn to make positive choices. They are supported to engage in education and to develop their social and independence skills. They learn to regulate their emotions leading to a marked reduction in incidents of challenging behaviour. Through the consistent support and boundaries provided by carers, children and young people do not return to previous harmful behaviours such as substance misuse, missing or offending behaviours. As a result children and young people are able to make the most of the opportunities provided to them and achieve outstanding outcomes.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency provides placements to children and young people who have complex and challenging needs. The assessment process ensures that only carers who have the capacity and skills to meet children and young people's needs are employed. The success of the assessment process and support to carers is reflected in the stability of placements and the progress children and young people make. However, assessments of carers in some cases did need to evidence further exploration of

issues to ensure carers have the capacity to safeguard children and young people.

The agency's panel provides regular feedback on the quality of information contained within assessments and reviews of carers. It has made several suggestions to improve practice and the agency have been receptive to this. Panel provides regular scrutiny of carers practice and regularly makes recommendations for carer's professional's development. This supports the agency to improve the quality of service it provides to children and young people. However, there have been some instances where panel members have not robustly challenged the information contained within assessments that may inform how a carer addresses safeguarding concerns once approved. This could lead to inappropriate adults being approved as carers. However no evidence of this affecting the agency's safeguarding practice was identified at this inspection. Overtime the panel has reduced in size leading to a deficit in experience relating to the youth justice system, health and education. The chair and agency are aware of these deficits and taking action to address them.

The agency ensures that children and young people are carefully matched to their carers to promote a successful and stable placement. Staff work tirelessly to ensure that they obtain as much information as possible on the child or young person from the placing authority. When necessary they will also contact the child or young person's school, family and health professionals to ensure they have enough information to inform the matching process. The agency use their matching process effectively and when a good match cannot be identified, they will not place a child. This emphasises that the agency is child focused.

Carers are provided with regular training to meet the varying needs of children and young people placed in their care. The agency trains its carers in a research-based approach that provides them with the confidence and skills to successfully support children and young people to overcome their difficulties and make a positive difference to their lives. Carers receive regular supervision visits, which encourage them to reflect on the child or young person's needs and behaviour. Supervising social workers also encourage reflecting on the carer's own practice and how this can be improved to better support the child. A focus of supervision is how children and young people's progress could be further supported and developed. Each carer receives at least two unannounced visits a year, demonstrating the agency's effective quality monitoring. However, carer's training and development has not always been discussed within supervision, which may have led to opportunities being missed. The agency has taken action to address this and going forward is providing carers with a detailed training calendar and development plan.

Carers are viewed as professionals in their own right and are integral to the team around the child. Carers work effectively with their supervising social worker to review each child's or young person's progress and to successfully implement strategies to support them to progress. Carers have used creative and innovative strategies to inspire children and young people's engagement with their care plan and encourage progress. Carers attend reviews and high-risk strategy meetings and successfully advocate on behalf the child or young person they are supporting. Carers ensure their child or young person's voice is heard whilst sharing their expertise on the best strategy to support or protect them. Carers and supervising social workers regularly challenge other agencies when children and young people

have not been provided the service that they require.

Supervising social workers ensure that carers are aware of their role and responsibilities around delegated authority. Both carers and supervising social workers work with the placing authority to ensure decisions remain fair and appropriate so the child or young person is not disadvantaged by their care status. Carers are able to have breaks between placements. The agency ensures that carers only take respite when it is in the child or young person's best interest. The agency ensures respite placements do not adversely affect the child or young person. This is achieved by providing respite placements locally, in order for them to continue attending school and to maintain contact with their social networks.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people are able to build trusting relationships with their carers, supervising social workers and project workers who provide them space and time to air any worries or concerns they may have. They know how to complain and any dissatisfaction with the service is taken seriously and fully investigated. Children and young people are kept up to date on any investigation and informed of the outcome and any actions taken. Staff ensure all allegations against carers are referred appropriately to the local authority. Any action taken as a result of allegations is carefully thought through to ensure any decision made is in the child or young person's best interest.

Children and young people's risk assessments and carer's safer care plans ensure carers are aware of all the potential risk factors for a child or young person and what actions they need to take to minimise them. Risk assessments and plans are continually monitored for their effectiveness and regularly updated after incidents to remain current. Carers support children and young people to take age-appropriate risks. They are supported on an individual basis by the project workers to develop their awareness and understanding around risk and how to protect themselves. This additional work has made a substantial difference to children and young people's lives as many of those who come to the service with a history of offending and absconding no longer engage in these behaviours.

All staff and carers have undertaken safeguarding training and take their duty to protect extremely seriously. Carers, supervising social workers and project workers work closely to advocate on children and young people's behalf and raise concerns regarding risks to the local authority, police and other relevant agencies. The agency is responsive and ensures high-risk strategy meetings are arranged when necessary and all agencies work together to protect the child or young person. Carers and staff work closely with other professionals to ensure children and young people receive support to address their offending, challenging behaviour and substance misuse. This has been successful with many children and young people reducing or stopping their use of illicit substances.

Children and young people do go missing. Staff and carers implement local protocols and are proactive in trying to find children and young people who are missing. Carers, supervising social workers and project workers work with the child or young

person to establish the reasons for their missing in order to take action to reduce and prevent incidents in the future. The agency regularly liaise with the placing social worker to ensure children and young people have the opportunity to speak to an independent person on their return so that strategies can be implemented to discourage and reduce incidents from occurring in the future. Carers and staff are very aware of the signs of child sexual exploitation and escalate these concerns to the appropriate professionals. Risk assessments are clear on the action carers should take to help children and young people reduce their absconding and their risk of child sexual exploitation. This has proven to be successful.

Some assessments do not sufficiently evidence the exploration of areas in an applicant's history that may have implications on their ability to follow guidance and take action to safeguard children and young people. An example of this was not challenged within the panel process. This may mean some carers who are approved may not have the skills or ability to take appropriate action to safeguard children and young people. However, this was not found to have any impact on the protection of children and young people during this inspection.

The recruitment records of staff and panel members do not reflect best practice, as many of the required checks have not been evidenced. The manager is aware of this and is taking action to address it.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The management team is extremely experienced and competent. They lead by example and ensure the agency's ethos puts the child first. They ensure all children and young people are provided with the structure and resources to make positive changes to their lives but also to have fun and try new things. This ethos flows through the agency and children and young people are supported to achieve exceptional progress. Managers create a culture where children and young people feel able to achieve and are praised and rewarded when they do.

Staff and managers are extremely passionate about making a difference to children and young people's lives. They have excellent relationships with placing authorities and their partners in the youth offending service and education. All professionals spoken with as part of this inspection were extremely complimentary about the services ability to support children and young people to improve their outcomes. This is because of the specialised service the agency provides and the excellent understanding of the needs of the children and young people who require its support. As a result, children and young people make significant progress resulting in excellent outcomes.

Managers and supervising social workers hold weekly meetings to track children and young people's progress. The agency's outcome tracker supports this. These tools allow managers to keep abreast of children and young people's placement success and respond quickly to areas of concern. Managers are proactive and implement the necessary changes or escalate concerns to the local authority to ensure children and

young people receive the support they require to progress. Managers take action to ensure all appropriate authorities are informed of relevant notifiable events.

Children and young people, carers and other stakeholder's views are central to the service. The agency regularly obtains feedback through a variety of sources to improve their service. Managers monitor and quality assure all aspects of their work to ensure children and young people receive a service of high quality. Managers are responsive and address any concerns quickly to ensure children and young people receive an improving service. They are aware of where improvements need to be made and have action plans in place to address them. This ensures all children and young people's experiences of the service are positive and they are enabled to achieve excellent outcomes.

Managers monitor the recruitment of carers and this has been developed further by the employment of a marketing and recruitment officer. This has allowed for the recruitment of carers to be a focus of the agency without it affecting the quality of support offered to existing carers. The agency has a clear recruitment strategy in place to ensure carers with the skills and ability to meet children and young people's needs are employed. Managers and staff have a wealth of experience in this specialised service, which ensures carers, and young people receive the support they require. All carers spoke very highly of their allocated worker. Supervising social workers also receive regular supervision to reflect on their practice and feel supported by a strong, approachable management team. Where poor practice has been identified, managers act swiftly to address any issues to ensure carers and children and young people are not impacted.

A committed and dedicated team supports children and young people. Managers have successfully instilled a culture where young people are at the centre of the agencies practice. Managers, staff and carers are highly aspirational for children and young people and strive to ensure they have the support and opportunity to achieve exceptional outcomes.

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.