

Action For Children Fostering

Action for Children

Cargo Fleet Offices, Middlesbrough Road, South Bank, Middlesbrough TS6 6XH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Action for Children is an independent fostering agency based in Middlesbrough. The agency also has a regional office in Doncaster. The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide long- and short-term foster placements. At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing a family placement service to 48 children and young people with 52 fostering families.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 May 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 9 December 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children and young people receive good-quality, nurturing care that enables them to experience a stable home life in which they thrive.
- The promotion of children's and young people's safety and well-being is integral to the recruitment, assessment, approval, training and supervision of foster carers. This helps foster carers to manage risk and keep children and young people safe.
- The effective matching of children and young people with foster carers supports high placement stability.
- Most children and young people are positively engaged in education. They are making good progress and have realistic aspirations for the future.
- Children and young people are involved in a wide and diverse range of fun activities that enrich their lives.
- A new responsible individual and manager, and the recruitment of staff across the agency are improving the strategic direction of the service. This is providing better support for foster carers and staff.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Improve missing from home records so that they consistently show whether the child or young person has had the opportunity to speak to someone independent following their return.
- Review all written risk assessments so that they include all of the risks and strategies to minimise risk, and update them with sufficient urgency so that they remain current.
- Make sure that ratified panel recommendations are acted on quickly.
- Improve monitoring activities to enable good strategic oversight of children's and young people's experiences and outcomes. Therefore, ensure that all recording is complete and of high quality and appropriately filed, and that immediate action is taken to address any issues identified during the monitoring process.
- Review the current electronic systems to ensure efficient and robust administrative structures that effectively support the needs of the service.
- Provide counter-radicalisation and extremism training for all foster carers and ensure that panel members receive safeguarding training.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Children's safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placements. Children are

protected from abuse and other forms of significant harm (e.g. sexual or labour exploitation). (National minimum standards, standard 4.1, page 14).

In particular, ensure that all written risk assessments include all known risks and strategies to reduce risks updating them with sufficient urgency so that they remain current.

- Where a child goes missing and there is concern for their welfare, or at the request of a child who has been missing, the fostering service arranges a meeting in private between the child and the responsible authority to consider the reasons for their going missing. (National minimum standards, standard 5.9, page 16)
- The fostering service provider's decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel and, where applicable, the independent review panel, within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes. (National minimum standards, standard 14.9, page 31)

In particular, ensure that ratified recommendations are acted on quickly by the independent fostering agency.

- There is a good quality learning and development programme, which includes induction, post-qualifying and in-service training, that staff and volunteers are supported to undertake. The programme equips them with the skills required to meet the needs of the children, keeps them up-to-date with professional, legal and practice developments and reflects the policies, legal obligations and business needs of the fostering service. (National minimum standards, standard 23.1, page 47). In particular, ensure that foster carers receive training on radicalisation and extremism and that panel members receive safeguarding training.
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service. (National minimum standards, standard 25.2, page 50).

In particular, 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.

- There are efficient and robust administrative systems, including IT and communication systems. (National minimum standards, standard 27.1, page 54). In particular, review the current IT systems to ensure that they effectively support the needs of the service.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children's and young people's life chances improve through the good-quality, emotionally nurturing and reliable care that their foster carers provide. Consequently, they thrive within safe and secure boundaries. Well-considered matching arrangements provide compatible unions between foster carers and children and young people. This results in shared interests that support some exceedingly good, trusting relationships that underpin high placement stability. One professional said: 'The carers for my young person are absolutely brilliant. They provide a huge range of opportunities to him and go above and beyond to ensure that he is fully supported in all aspects of his life. He is very happy there and plans to remain there until he's 30, unless he gets a motorbike! His only complaint is that he would like a dog (they go on several holidays a year and this is not feasible).'

Respite care is well planned and promotes continuity of care with approved foster carers whom the children and young people know.

Foster carers know the children and young people really well. They understand the difficulties that they face in their lives and show compassion and empathy towards them. One foster carer said, 'He has coped with a lot.' Most foster carers can meet children's and young people's individual needs. They make sure that children's and young people's holistic needs are met by accessing additional services so that their progress is not disadvantaged.

Children's and young people's exposure to a range of positive opportunities broadens their outlook. Their involvement in a wide range of activities provides fun and enjoyment, and enriches their lives. These activities range from horse riding, martial arts, going to see premium football teams, attending pop concerts, going on day trips and relaxing at home. A foster carer said: '(Name of the young person) arrived with low self-esteem, a little bag and one pair of shoes. Since she has come into our home, she loves fashion, music and has opportunities to do lovely things for herself.'

Children and young people have access to good primary and specialist healthcare services. This promotes their ongoing health and helps them to deal with trauma. Consequently, their sense of belonging increases as they talk more about their experiences.

Children's and young people's educational attendance and achievements result in some good outcomes. This includes the support to learn English and maths provided to young people seeking asylum. Children's and young people's hard work is celebrated and rewarded, no matter how small the achievement. Barriers to children's and young people's educational progress are discussed with education providers to seek suitable resolutions. Young people think ahead about their future career options, and show an interest in occupations such as the forces, fire service, hair and beauty, and animal care. Their independence skills are enhanced by travelling to and from their educational provisions without support and doing tasks

at home. This builds confidence in their abilities. Children and young people have the option to remain with their foster carers until they reach 18-years-old, should this option be in their best interests. This provides them with a family for life. No young people have taken up this arrangement yet.

Children's and young people's foster carers and the agency advocate on their behalf to ensure that their best interests are fully integrated into their daily lives. A social worker said, 'Carers have been great advocates for my young person.' Children's and young people's participation in activities improves how the service operates, for example their involvement in the recruitment of staff. Furthermore, a group of young people accepted an invitation to meet the education select committee. The event did not go ahead, due to the election call. However, the young people contributed to discussions about the future education of children and young people in this country. One young person said that he had a great day out in London, and an interesting guided tour of the House of Parliament and the House of Lords.

Foster carers and the agency ensure that children and young people remain in touch with their identity and heritage by supporting contact arrangements with their family and friends.

New foster carers express satisfaction with the assessment process. They embrace the training and support provided throughout. A foster carer described the assessment process as 'thorough, in depth and really good'. Scheduled business meetings and reignited cluster groups provide opportunities for foster carers to speak up about agency issues and share their experiences with like-minded people.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children and young people are cared for within a learning environment that priorities their safety and welfare. Trained foster carers understand the individual risks that children and young people may encounter in their daily lives. The strong and caring relationships between children and young people and foster carers enable foster carers to effectively safeguard children's and young people's vulnerabilities, for instance the associated risks of internet safety, bullying, discrimination and child sexual exploitation. However, foster carers have not received training to enhance their awareness about the dangers and impact of radicalisation or extremism. Professionals raise no safeguarding concerns.

Young people do not go missing from home often. On the few occasions that they have absented themselves, foster carers follow the agreed reporting procedures and inform the agency when they return home. Young people are telling their foster carers where they have been, which is testament to the strong, trusting bonds, and this helps to locate them, should they go missing again. However, the agency does not always record whether return home interviews with an independent person take place. This could impede the level of management oversight of any patterns and trends that inform protections plans and missing from care protocols.

Children's and young people's access to the complaints procedure enables them to exercise their right to complain. A foster carer said, 'He knows he has a choice about

making a complaint.' Allegations are shared with the appropriate agencies, including the designated officer for the local authority. The process takes the voice of the child seriously, supports carers and ensures a timely outcome. Any subsequent learning points taken up by the agency promote high-quality standards of care and safety for children and young people. Serious consequences, such as deregistration, loom over foster carers who fail to adhere to the agency's high standards.

Foster carers show high levels of resilience when working through difficult times with some children's and young people's challenging and risky behaviours. Their behaviour management and therapeutic training, along with therapeutic support from the trained therapists commissioned by the agency, helps to effectively manage a range of challenging behaviours. A social worker said: 'There continue to be challenges in respect of his behaviour. However, these carers are getting a really good level of support from the Chrysalis therapist who is currently involved. He is very flexible in working with the family.' For some children and young people, caring for animals helps them to self-regulate their behaviour. A professional said, 'The stables have been an amazing distraction, keeping her calm.' Foster carers rarely use physical intervention. When this is needed, the details are shared with the agency. This supports transparent practice and enables the agency to support foster carers to prevent a further incident.

Suitable recruitment and vetting of staff and foster carers minimise the opportunities for unsafe adults to expose young people to risk. Foster carers understand how to 'whistle blow', and have done so without fear or favour.

Not all written risk assessments include all of the risks. For example, information about children and young people who have threatened suicide does not feature in the documents. Neither are the strategies to minimise risks recorded. Not all risk assessments are updated with sufficient urgency to ensure that they remain current. No negative impact on the safety and welfare of children and young people is born out of these shortfalls.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The last inspection judgement of requires improvement was a result of the agency's struggle to provide a consistently strong and stable service. However, the actions taken since then demonstrate an aspirational fostering agency that is starting to show results. A service restructure in April introduced a new responsible individual to the agency. She comes with a clear vision about service developments. Her appreciation of the agency's strengths and weaknesses supports the new manager to implement improvement plans. The new manager is suitably qualified and experienced. He is committed to upholding the agency's child-centred values and ethics, ensuring that children and young people receive the best possible care and protection. He is making good use of opportunities to improve service delivery, for instance meeting with other fostering managers, attending an Ofsted fostering event and seeking to secure the relevant qualification to assist him in his role. Both the responsible individual's and the manager's applications are currently with Ofsted.

The management infrastructure is improving. This has been due to the recruitment

of permanent team managers who are either already in post or due to start. The recruitment of supervising social workers is providing stability and consistent support to foster carers. Improved communication between managers and staff across the two offices raises expectations and ensures accountability in roles and responsibilities. An independent professional said: 'I can see the management development move on. There are more robust systems. Building relationships with carers is good and staffing stability is good.' The management accepts that more work needs to be done to regain the confidence of all foster carers. This is because not all foster carers have felt supported. One foster carer said, 'I got a bit disillusioned, with so many managers, but on the whole the team is very good.' Another foster carer said that the support on offer is 'better now'.

Managers, staff and carers welcome the strengths of the agency, following a period of uncertainty. A manager said that the measures taken are 'paying off'. A foster carer said, 'It's top notch now.' A supervising social worker said, 'There is always someone to talk to and share practice.' The agency is one that learns lessons from poor practice. Staff listen to the feedback from other professionals in order to improve. They also track children's and young people's progress to ensure that foster carers can continue to meet their needs and have the right support when they need it.

Regular and accessible training opportunities enable foster carers to use models of caring for children and young people that stimulate therapeutic thinking. The training builds on foster carers' personal development plans and promotes a skilled workforce. Foster carers said, 'The training is excellent' and 'Brilliant'. Foster carers use their learning to influence how they care for children and young people.

The positive comments made by commissioners and other professionals about the agency are indicative of the child-focused relationships that the agency seeks to engage others in. Staff's attendance at childcare meetings contributes to children's and young people's care plans. One social worker described the quality of the communication with the agency as 'second to none'.

The fostering panel has recommended a number of good foster placements that have offered many children and young people a stable family life spanning several years. The suitable level of scrutiny, challenge, advice and deliberation between all panel members ensures a fair process that informs the recommendations made by them to the agency decision maker. However, not all ratified recommendations are acted on quickly by the agency, for example making a Disclosure Barring Service referral about a deregistered foster carer. Although panel members' professional backgrounds involve safeguarding children and young people, they have not received safeguarding training through the agency.

Foster carers' continued suitability is independently chaired, taking into account the views of children and young people, where possible, and other professionals. The reviews go to panel at six-, 12- and three-year intervals from the date of the approval, and this provides a robust oversight of foster carers' fitness.

The statement of purpose is under review to ensure that it remains current. The

children's guide is available in age-appropriate formats. A further update will bring it in line with the senior management and staffing changes.

The current information technology system is slow to respond to the demands of the service, which makes for an ineffective system. Furthermore, some records are missing from the system or are misfiled. Records such as matching documents vary in quality. Not all action plans include timescales to ensure a clear focus on improvement. These shortfalls are administrative, but could lead to drift if not promptly attended to.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

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Jacqueline Malcolm, social care inspector



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