

Action for Children Fostering South East

Action for Children

Dundee House, 23– 26 Albion Place, Ramsgate, Kent CT11 8HQ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Action for Children is a family placement project run by a national charitable organisation. The agency is one of several fostering services that this organisation has registered with Ofsted. Action for Children offers a range of families to meet the needs of young people that have experienced difficulties and disruption.

At the time of the inspection, there were 28 approved fostering households looking after 30 children.

Inspection dates: 4 to 10 July 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: 20 May 2013

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Foster carers provide a high standard of care that is sensitive to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of each child. They are committed to and passionate about the service they provide.
- Staff and foster carers quickly identify any emerging risks to the safety and well-being of children and young people, and they respond effectively.
- Children and young people who disclose past negative experiences are given caring, nurturing support during the investigation process.
- Strong and effective assessments of potential foster carers ensure that the fostering panel is provided with the information and analysis necessary to make sound recommendations.
- The fostering panel is well managed and provides the expertise needed to ensure that only suitable foster carers are approved. Partnership working with the agency is highly effective.
- Leadership and management are strong, and changes within the organisation are managed well. Weaknesses in the service are identified, and development plans drive forward continuous improvement.
- Foster carers receive consistently good support from managers and staff. Their views on how the service should develop are valued.
- There are excellent opportunities for children and young people to participate in the activities and services provided by the wider organisation.
- Overall, children and young people make good progress across many aspects of their lives. The importance of achieving well in education is promoted, and some young people have made significant progress in this area.
- Staff and foster carers advocate strongly for children and young people, to ensure that they receive the services that will promote their health and emotional well-being.
- Innovative approaches are taken to helping children and young people learn about the risks they face in their communities and how to keep safe.
- The agency ensures that staff and foster carers receive training that focuses on practice-based research and guidance on best practice.
- New monitoring systems are proving effective in identifying any shortfalls in good practice.
- The agency is committed to developing practice to improve the outcomes for children and young people.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development

- Some foster carers have not completed required training.

- Greater use could be made of panel to review the safety of foster homes in the light of changes to occupants.
- The safe matching of children in placement could be better evidenced.

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

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet 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
<p>The fostering provider must prepare and implement a written policy which provides for consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12(2)(e))</p> <p>Specifically, inform the child's placing authority social worker of any allegations made against a foster carer in a timely manner, and assess the potential risks to children remaining in the foster placement after an allegation has been made.</p>	22/09/2017
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17(1))</p> <p>Specifically, ensure that foster carers receive training on the administration and recording of medication and that foster carers undertake refresher safeguarding training in accordance with the agency's expected timescales.</p>	22/09/2017
<p>The registered person must provide the chief inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. (Regulation 35(2))</p>	22/09/2017
<p>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 without delay notify the person or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 35(1))</p>	22/09/2017

Recommendations

- The employer is fair and competent, with sound employment practices and good support for all its staff and volunteers (National minimum standards 24.1).

Specifically, ensure that staff are aware of the policy and guidance relating to the potential for conflict of interest between themselves and foster carers.

- Entries in records, decisions and reasons for them, are legible, clearly expressed, non-stigmatising, distinguish between fact, opinion and third party information and are signed and dated (National minimum standards 26.5).

Specifically, ensure that records are kept of the decisions, and reasons for them, in respect of matching children with particular foster carers.

- Reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster (National minimum standards 13.8).

Specifically, ensure that the fostering panel has the opportunity to review carer's approval when other adults move into the foster carer's home.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children and young people enjoy a positive experience of family life in their foster placements. Overall, they build positive, trusting relationships with their foster carers and develop a growing sense of stability and consistency in their lives. All young people spoken to during this inspection confirmed that they are happy in their placements and feel supported by their foster carers. One inspector observed the nurturing and attentive care given by the foster carers to a young sibling group with complex, and sometimes demanding, needs.

Foster carers speak passionately about supporting the children and young people they care for, and demonstrate a commitment to providing stable placements. The majority of children and young people respond positively to the care they receive. Over time, they develop closer attachments to their carers, and this has a positive effect on their emotional well-being. Most children and young people begin to make progress across many aspects of their lives. They learn the skills to manage behaviour more effectively, and many have made significant progress in terms of their education. One young person was presented with an award from his local authority for the educational progress he made over a school year.

Children's and young people's educational progress can be attributed to the efforts made by staff to engage education professionals, and to the ways in which the foster carers advocate to ensure that children and young people attend the provision best suited to their needs. Most young people are successful in gaining the college, and in some cases university, placement of their choice.

Children and young people are given opportunities to express their views on a wide range of issues. This includes the care they receive and the way in which the agency develops. Through the youth group and other participation activities, young people develop many skills that boost their confidence and self-esteem and prepare them for adulthood. For example, one young person has given speeches to adult audiences on the work of the organisation. Young people involved in these activities told the inspectors that they feel listened to, and their views are valued. The complaints system and information about advocacy services are easily accessible, and this further ensures that children's and young people's views are heard.

The health and well-being of children and young people are prioritised, and foster carers take an active role in promoting healthy lifestyles. However, the agency does not currently provide foster carers with training on the administration and recording of medication. Therefore, the potential for medication errors to occur is not being fully addressed.

The mental health and psychological well-being of children and young people are strongly promoted. Staff work positively with mental health professionals, and advocate strongly for children and young people to receive the services they require. This includes making representations to the child and adolescent mental health

service. One young person said that the reason she had done so well in her placement was that 'the social worker and my foster carers helped me find the right therapist'. The well-being of foster carers' birth children is given equal importance. They have access to support and training to help them achieve a better understanding of why children who are fostered may have different needs from their own.

The agency ensures that children and young people have access to a wide range of stimulating leisure activities. There have been outings, such as one to the Harry Potter studios, for children and young people, foster carers and staff. It is events such as these that led one carer to comment, 'It sometimes feels everyone involved with the agency is like a big family.' Children and young people have enjoyed adventure holidays, and one young person spoke enthusiastically about attending the Queen's 90th birthday celebrations in London.

The agency has developed a range of materials for foster carers to use in helping young people to gain age-appropriate independence skills. These materials take account of young people who have additional needs. Supervising social workers offer foster carers guidance on how to promote young people's independence and monitor the progress being made. Many foster carers remain in contact with young people after they have left the placement, and this ensures that young people continue to receive emotional support as they take the next steps towards adulthood.

Staff take a proactive approach to ensuring that children and young people are welcomed sensitively to their placement. They facilitate carers' visits to the child or young person prior to admission wherever possible, and are tenacious in ensuring that placing authorities provide all relevant background information where this has not been forthcoming.

Staff and foster carers place the needs of children at the centre of their practice. This ensures that the care they receive is sensitive to their background histories and cultural identities. For example, one young person was given the advice and support needed to observe the requirements of her religion without this having a detrimental effect during school examinations. Children and young people are valued and treated with dignity and respect. As a result, they achieve stability in their lives and become more emotionally resilient.

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

There is a strong commitment from all staff and foster carers to safeguarding the welfare of children and young people and protecting them from harm. Staff have a detailed knowledge and understanding of the particular needs and vulnerabilities of each child and young person, and this is shared with foster carers. As a result, safeguarding concerns are quickly identified and shared with relevant professionals. For example, foster carers became aware that a young person had the potential to become influenced by extremist views, and took prompt action to ensure that risks to the young person were minimised.

The children and young people spoken to during this inspection were unanimous in expressing the view that they feel safe in their foster homes. Children and young people stated that their foster carers listen to them, and all could identify an adult they would speak to about any worries or concerns they may have.

Generally, there is a good standard of risk assessment and risk management. Foster carers confirmed that risk assessments, completed by the supervising social worker in partnership with the placing authority social worker, are consistently shared with them. Consequently, foster carers are familiar with agreed strategies for preventing children and young people from coming to harm. Foster carers are vigilant in terms of identifying new risks and are quick to seek advice and guidance from their supervising social worker. One foster carer identified that his response to a young person's challenging behaviour may have veered from best practice guidelines, and this resulted in a reassessment of the risks and de-escalation strategies in place.

The inspectors identified one case where the usual standard of risk assessment was not maintained. A risk assessment was not undertaken in respect of the safety of children remaining in placement, following an allegation being made about the foster carer. There was also a delay in informing the placing authority social worker that an allegation had been made against the foster carer, although it was not the child looked after making the allegation. This was an isolated case and is not indicative of a widespread failure to report safeguarding matters to the relevant authorities.

Other cases reviewed by the inspectors demonstrate that child protection matters have been promptly reported and staff have demonstrated excellent partnership working skills. This has ensured that sensitive plans have been implemented to support children who have made disclosures of historic abuse. The sensitive support and guidance given to a child by one foster carer was acknowledged and praised by court officials.

Strong and effective action is taken to reduce the potential for children and young people going missing from their foster placement. This includes engaging other professionals, such as police liaison officers, to identify the most effective measures to reduce missing patterns and reduce risk. Agreed protocols for responding to missing episodes are consistently adhered to, and the agency takes a proactive approach to ensuring that local authorities meet their responsibilities for arranging independent return home interviews, when a young person returns to their foster placement.

There are effective measures in place to ensure that children and young people are given the information and support needed to keep themselves safe. This includes educating children and young people about the risks associated with the internet and social media sites. Innovative practice has ensured that some young people have learned about the negative impact of bullying and discrimination on the grounds of race and sexuality. Two young people gave a speech to their peers at the agency's youth group, describing the traumatic experiences they had been subjected to on their journey to the United Kingdom.

Children and young people are given support and encouragement to help them to

maintain positive behaviour, by foster carers who are trained to adopt effective de-escalation techniques. Foster carers are aware of the importance of maintaining consistent boundaries when caring for children and young people who have often experienced disruption and uncertainty in their lives.

Safe recruitment procedures are implemented to minimise the potential for unsuitable staff to be employed by the agency. Background checks are completed before new staff are appointed, although in one case the inspectors were not able to establish whether gaps in an employee's career history had been fully accounted for, as documents were not available. The interview process for staff is strong, and includes an exploration of the candidate's values and motivation for working with vulnerable children and young people.

Safeguarding the welfare of children and young people and protecting them from harm are prioritised when recruiting and inducting new foster carers. The assessment process focuses on the potential carers' current understanding of child protection matters, and identifies at an early stage areas for development. Ongoing training and opportunities to reflect on practice issues ensure that foster carers' skills and knowledge in relation to keeping children and young people safe build over time. Supervision and monitoring of foster carers' performance, which includes a minimum of two unannounced visits per year, ensure that foster carers' professional development needs are identified, and that their homes remain a safe environment for children and young people to reside in.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Over the last year, there has been an organisational restructure, which has resulted in the fostering service becoming more integrated into the wider organisation's management and performance monitoring processes. The change management process has been efficiently implemented, and managers and staff recognise the benefits the changes have brought. For example, the registered manager, who is a qualified social worker and experienced manager, did not have line management responsibility for a team leader prior to all the changes being made. Therefore, he was not in a position to directly manage concerns relating to the team leaders' performance. Senior managers recognised this as a weakness in terms of lines of accountability, and rectified the situation.

As the fostering service becomes more integrated into the organisational structure, established systems, being used in other services, are being introduced to monitor the quality of care being provided. These are proving effective. For example, a case file audit by the organisation identified that one child's targets, progress and outcomes were not being measured and recorded. Action was then taken to review whether the child's needs were being met. This demonstrates that the organisation has high aspirations for the children and young people it cares for.

One shortfall was identified in terms of how the agency is monitoring the quality of care provided. Review reports have not been provided to Ofsted. It was also established during this inspection that Ofsted has not always been notified when a serious incident has taken place.

Leaders and managers work effectively with placing authorities to ensure that there are clearly defined plans for ways in which children's and young people's needs will be met. This includes arranging timely disruption meetings to restore stability to placements which are experiencing difficulties. A commissioning manager for one placing authority said, 'The agency has a very good understanding of our plans for the child; at monitoring meetings, it is clear that the manager knows the children well.'

Discussions with managers and staff during this inspection demonstrated that careful consideration is given to the needs of children and young people, and the skills and abilities of foster carers, prior to making a placement. However, records are not kept of the decision-making process when matching children with foster carers, and therefore the rationale for the placement is not always evident.

Since the organisational restructure, leaders and managers have been highly effective in identifying the strengths of the service and areas for development. There are comprehensive development plans, which provide an insight into how the agency intends to grow and secure continuous improvement. The agency is currently focused on developing a therapeutic model of foster care. Additional funding has been secured to drive this initiative forward, and the training that foster carers will need to practise the therapeutic model is now being delivered.

Overall, the agency provides a good range of training opportunities for foster carers, staff and panel members. However, this does not currently include training on the recording and administration of medication. Many of the training courses available reflect current developments in social work practice, and are focused on keeping children and young people safe. An example of this is training now being delivered on disguised compliance.

Agency staff consistently report that they feel well supported by leaders and managers. However, the inspectors identified that there is not well-established guidance for staff to address the potential for a conflict of interest between colleagues. Managers and staff receive high-quality supervision, which enables them to reflect on their practice and identify their professional development needs.

Support for foster carers is excellent. They receive timely supervision and are able to access advice and guidance whenever needed. Foster carers value the support groups that are available to them, and welcome the opportunity to discuss practice matters with their peers. A new role, known as 'foster care ambassadors', has recently been introduced. One ambassador described the role as being a 'conduit' between the leadership and management team and the foster carers. He described how this line of communication has ensured that managers know the views of foster carers, and information regarding agency development has been shared.

The inspectors identified one case where the registered manager had not taken steps to ensure that the foster panel reviewed the approval of carers, following a young adult moving into the foster carer's home. The adult concerned was previously fostered by the carers. This oversight can be partly attributed to agency

staff and the foster carers knowing the young adult well.

The fostering panel is a strong and effective forum for ensuring that purposeful assessments of foster carers are undertaken, and monitoring their professional development through annual reviews. Members come from many different backgrounds and offer a wide range of knowledge and expertise. The panel chair is highly experienced and provides effective leadership. The panel actively engages with the agency on a range of issues. The panel chair expressed the view that engagement would be further improved by occasional formalised meetings with senior managers from the agency, and this proposal has received a positive response.

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

Unique reference number: SC038534

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