

Action for Children Family Breaks Devon & Fostering Southwest Peninsula

Action for Children

8 Powderham House, Park Five, Harrier Way, Exeter EX2 7HU

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Action for Children is a national registered charity which provides a wide range of services for children and families. The charity operates independent fostering services as part of its wider remit.

Family Breaks Devon is a short-breaks service for children in Devon who have disabilities. This part of the service is operated under contract to Devon County Council and is based in Exeter.

Fostering Southwest Peninsula provides foster families from Somerset to Cornwall to children and young people from any local authority area who have experienced significant trauma. It also provides a child-and-parent fostering service for the assessment of parenting capacity.

The functions of administration, recruitment of foster carers and staff and access to therapeutic services are shared by the mainstream and short-breaks provisions. The two services also share a registered manager. The fostering panel is also shared with Action for Children's fostering service in Bristol.

At the time of this inspection, the Exeter-based service has 11 approved Family Breaks households. These foster carers provide a service to 25 children and young people who have a range of complex needs.

The Fostering Southwest Peninsula service has 26 fostering households looking after 23 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 February 2018

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 28 July 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: Good

Enforcement action since last inspection: None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- The children and young people form strong attachments to their foster carers. This includes young people who have had difficulty in forming secure attachments in the past.
- The fostering service is extremely child focused. Children's needs are at the centre of all its work, including the training and support offered to foster carers. For example, foster carers receive one-to-one bespoke training from a registered paediatric nurse to enable them to meet children's complex healthcare needs.
- Foster carers said that the agency supports them exceptionally well. They commented that fostering social workers go above and beyond what is expected and respond swiftly in a crisis.
- The fostering service works closely with an outstanding adoption support agency, Psychology Associates, to provide children, foster carers and staff with clinical psychological consultation and support.
- Exceptionally high-quality training and support enable foster carers to sustain relationships with children who are extremely traumatised. Action for Children is currently seeking university accreditation for its attachment training for foster carers and staff.
- The service's practice is informed by current research. For example, in partnership with Psychology Associates, the registered manager and team have participated in original research to implement and evaluate a course designed by a leading figure in the study of attachment. The course resulted in statistically significant increases in foster carers' well-being and in their ability to reflect on their practice.
- This fostering service works exceptionally well with other agencies to help children to have a voice. In April 2017, the service worked collaboratively with another independent fostering agency to support young people when they gave evidence to the Parliamentary Education Select Committee on fostering.
- Safeguarding practice is innovative and child centred. The agency's safeguarding lead, who brings a wealth of recent practice and training experience to the role, collates and disseminates the latest research information to enhance the staff's and foster carers' work.
- The fostering service is exceptionally well managed by an experienced, qualified registered manager. She is calm, reflective but also decisive in a crisis. The manager supports her staff and foster carers exceptionally well. One foster carer described the manager as 'an absolutely amazing person' who will 'drop everything and respond' in a difficult situation.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The fostering service should ensure that, at the point of recruitment, all panel members have a fully documented employment history on file, with any gaps in employment accounted for.

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

Recommendation

- Ensure that the fostering service 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. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. In particular, ensure that a full employment history is obtained for all members of the fostering panel. (National minimum standard 19.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

This inspection covered two services. One of these is a professional short-breaks service for children who have disabilities. This service provides an invaluable lifeline for families and children.

The Fostering Southwest Peninsula service provides high-quality foster care for children who have experienced trauma and abuse in their lives. The children using this service have often experienced disrupted attachments and harmful relationships during their early lives.

Both services are exceptionally child focused and provide outstanding outcomes for the children and young people. A strong ethos of therapeutic parenting ensures that the children and young people feel loved and valued. One child commented, '[My foster carers] make me feel safe and I love them, like they are the family I have always wanted to be in... They make me feel special. I like that feeling, because it makes me find out the person who I am... I have finally found this girl that has always been inside me.'

The agency's chosen model of therapeutic parenting specifically addresses the children's attachment difficulties and works on relationships, which are key to building confidence and resilience. As a result, even children and young people who have previously struggled to form and sustain attachments, have developed strong and enduring relationships with their foster carers. Consequently, almost all of the children and young people make impressive progress in comparison with when they first arrived in their foster families.

One child commented, 'I have achieved a lot of things since I have been here... It has been good living where I am living, because I have done a lot of things.'

Another young person is starting to make sense of his life experiences. He is placed with very warm, empathic foster carers. He has received help with his life story. The young person is now calmer and happier. He has started to confide in professionals about his early life experiences. The young person's behaviour has stabilised, and his placement and educational future are now much more secure.

A young woman, whose school thought that she was unable to read at the age of 14, is now at university. Her foster carers have helped her to engage well in education and she is now pursuing a career in physical education.

Foster carers receive very high-quality training, which is tailored to the needs of each child or young person. For example, the agency employs a paediatric nurse who provides bespoke training for Family Breaks foster carers to help them to meet the children's sometimes complex medical needs. The fostering service has an agreement with Psychology Associates, to provide psychological consultation and

training to help foster carers and staff to understand children's and young people's emotional and behavioural needs.

Children's and young people's views are at the centre of the agency's planning and development. There are many opportunities for the children and young people to tell their foster carers' social workers if they have any concerns.

The agency consults with children, as well as foster carers, on a regular basis. The inspector saw some excellent examples of direct work with children who have disabilities. The agency supports foster carers to use visual timetables to help the children and young people who receive short breaks to become more independent in personal care. This helps the child as well as their wider family. The agency also helps children to support each other. One child asked if he could attend training in Makaton so that he could communicate with another child who visits the same fostering family.

This helps the children and young people to express their views and contribute to the agency's development. The agency also arranges advocacy for any child or young adult who would benefit from this.

Together with another independent fostering agency, staff supported some young people to travel to London to give evidence at the Parliamentary Education Select Committee on fostering. This made a valuable contribution to the Select Committee's work.

Young people from Action for Children's fostering services participated in a bid for funding to develop a new digital children's guide. The bid took the form of a 'Dragon's Den'-style pitch to senior leaders. A large corporation recently agreed to fund this work. This will result in further improvements to the quality of the information available to children and young people who are coming to live with the agency's foster carers.

The agency organises high-quality events which the children and young people find rewarding and fun. These include a 'train ride to Christmas', a zip-wire experience and other social events in the school holidays. Foster carers said that the agency provides 'lovely Christmas meals' and welcomes the foster carers' birth children to social events.

The agency has a professional marketing team, which targets certain areas and groups of people. There is a coherent marketing strategy, which focuses on specific groups each year to meet the needs of children awaiting placements. This is an improvement since the last inspection, because there are now dedicated staff to undertake this work. They have recruited seven foster carers in the last year, all now undergoing assessment.

In addition to its own staff, the agency commissions independent social workers to carry out some of the assessments of prospective foster carers. This generates some variation in Form F reports, but those examined during the inspection were all of a good standard. Form F reports are clear, with good analysis to show how the

applicants' strengths and their life experiences have influenced their parenting styles.

The agency provides a professional social work service to support its own foster carers. The social workers were universally praised for their thorough, professional and non-judgemental approach. One foster carer commented:

'[I am] always able to contact my social worker with any queries, concerns. [They are] always on hand to visit if needed, give advice and emotional support... visit the house if there are any major issues, assist with all issues that arise promptly...'

Some foster carers reported that their social worker and the registered manager had gone over and above what was expected in order to support them through a crisis. A foster carer said that one young person left their care at the age of 21 to return to their family in a distant part of the country. This broke down and the young person returned to the foster carers' home. The registered manager approached the agency's senior leaders and said that they needed to raise money so that this vulnerable young adult could be supported and would not have to live on the streets.

Five young adults benefit from 'staying put' arrangements. These arrangements require financial investment from the agency, because they are not funded in the same way as foster placements. The agency recognises how important it is for young adults who have grown up in care to maintain stability in their lives. Being able to stay with their former foster carers is an important way to achieve this.

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

The agency is innovative in the way in which children and young people are protected. Senior leaders have ensured that the latest research in safeguarding practice is disseminated to staff and foster carers. This helps them to respond positively to some very challenging situations that can arise with some of the children and young people.

Children and young people, some of whom are severely traumatised and have never felt safe before in their lives, said that they feel secure in their foster families. One young person who responded to the Ofsted survey said, 'I am always supported, so I never feel unsafe.' Another commented, 'They [my foster carers] are always there for me.'

For some children and young people, their past experiences can make it difficult to trust adults. A small number of teenagers, in spite of having very positive relationships with their foster carers, continue to take extreme risks with their safety.

The agency never moves a child or young person unless it is essential for safety. Staff and foster carers work together as a team to enlist the support of other agencies to help keep these young people safe. For example, the clinical

psychologists at an adoption support agency provide foster carers and staff with individual consultation sessions. This increases knowledge, confidence and resilience. These exceptional levels of support, training and planned regular short breaks help foster carers and staff to manage extreme behaviour.

One foster carer said, 'Action for Children has been vital in helping to understand the emotional complexities of the children in your care, which then enables you to help the children more.' This approach means that the agency has a very low rate of unplanned endings to placements.

The agency prepares very detailed, comprehensive risk assessments with sensible strategies. The safeguarding lead is currently reviewing risk assessments to make them more creative and contextual.

Research-informed practice helps social workers and foster carers to increase in confidence, so that they can make high-quality judgements about children's safety. This means that children and young people can be involved in finding creative strategies that help to reduce the risks to them and to others.

The agency uses a toolkit developed by the Police Chiefs' Council and the Children's Society, to help them to identify and work with any children who may have been trafficked for the purposes of criminal exploitation. This toolkit informs the agency's approach to children and young people who are missing and who may be exploited at various levels. As a result, the agency has been instrumental in helping to identify developing risks of criminal and sexual exploitation. For one young man, the agency's work helped the placing authority to identify new factors which were not previously regarded as areas of risk.

The agency supports carers to work with very difficult situations. Children have been able to return to foster carers who did not think they could cope. This is due to the agency remaining calm in a crisis and insisting on not moving children unless there is a very good reason to do so.

For example, one foster family was traumatised when a young person set a small fire in their room. It is impressive that the foster carers and the agency worked together to help rehabilitate the young person back after a three-month break with alternative carers.

Planned short breaks are built into placements so that the foster carers do not become exhausted. The agency is careful with language and does not use the negative term 'respite care' for the foster carers' short breaks. The preferred term conveys acceptance that parenting children who have complex difficulties is a more-than-full-time, professional job.

It is rare for a child's placement to end suddenly. In one example, the child concerned had never experienced any nurturing care. The agency decided to offer this child a family environment, where he could benefit from a therapeutic parenting model. This plan was well intentioned. There was a reasonable chance that it could have helped the child. The child showed unexpected behaviours that had not been

discussed with the agency prior to the placement. This caused the agency to realise very quickly that the situation was not going to work. The placement was brought to planned conclusion.

The agency responds very swiftly and appropriately to safeguarding matters. The registered manager and staff work closely with the placing authorities and the local authority designated officer for child protection to follow up any allegations and concerns.

The agency uses its fostering panel well. Any matters requiring panel involvement are always referred promptly for review and recommendation.

Only two foster carers have been de-registered since the last inspection. The agency responded extremely quickly to concerns. Clear, decisive action protected a young adult who was placed with this foster carer. The young adult was removed immediately and placed with another foster carer within the same agency.

Although the agency could have chosen to de-register the main carer and hand the matter over to the relevant adult services team, it made a strategic decision to maintain the foster carer's approval for a period of time, even though there was no young person in placement with them. This was to ensure that the young adult who had lived there, received appropriate support from staff that she knew, while suitable plans were made for her future.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

When the last inspection took place, there had been no registered manager in post for 11 months. The agency now has a registered manager, who is well qualified and has many years of experience in fostering. This is a significant improvement.

The registered manager's calm and thoughtful style of management and focus on reflective practice has had a highly beneficial effect on the children and young people who use this service. The manager's child-centred ethos is reflected in the agency's written material and language. Staff and foster carers feel that they are treated as professionals at all times.

The registered manager is very well supported by a highly skilled and experienced senior leadership team. Management monitoring is informative, and managers know each child or young person in detail. This enables them to be aware of the progress that the children and young people have made in all areas.

The fostering panel is shared with another registered service in Bristol. The panel meets monthly, alternating between the two areas. The panel minutes are exceptionally clear and concisely written. They tell the story of the meeting in a factual and non-judgmental way. The panel asks appropriate questions of the foster carers and staff. Recommendations are supported by logical reasons. This means that it is possible for an external reader who was not present at the meeting, such as the agency decision maker, to understand the detail of the process in reaching a recommendation.

The panel has an experienced chair, who is pleased with how the members work very well together. The agency has recruited a diverse group of members for the central list, with different genders and professions represented. Independent members include those with experience of growing up in care.

The registered manager is fully aware of the strengths and areas for development in her team. Constructive reflection on practice is a high priority for the agency. The manager supports her staff in their continuing professional development. The agency's registered paediatric nurse explained that he was about to undertake an assignment to help maintain his registration. Staff are very well supported to attend conferences and other external training to extend their knowledge.

The registered manager prepares quarterly reports on the agency's conduct and progress. These reports are detailed and show that managers carry out audits of the service in order to be aware of areas for development.

The agency keeps well managed, audited accounts. The latest report highlighted a small monetary deficit of income over expenditure earlier in this financial year. This slight deficit in early 2017-18 has, through careful management, been converted to a modest surplus in the second half of the year. This allows the service to invest in recruiting more foster families.'

Foster carers, staff and managers all commented on the registered manager's excellent relationships with other agencies and her ability to challenge in a correct and professional manner. The manager and staff rigorously challenge other organisations' decisions when they compromise children's best interests.

For example, notifications made to Ofsted show that there are occasions when the police do not sufficiently prioritise some young people when they go missing. The agency provides the police with evidence to support their view that all of these young people have some degree of vulnerability.

This is an inclusive service. Children who have disabilities are a very high priority and the sole focus of the family breaks service. The agency recruits foster carers from a diverse range of backgrounds, including single people and same-sex couples.

The agency works closely with other organisations and has links to social care research organisations to promote creative and leading-edge thinking in managing children's complex needs. During the inspection, the agency's managers provided numerous examples of the service's interest in research.

The staff files inspected were in good order and contained all the information required to help keep children and young people safe.

The single recommendation from the last inspection has been met, which was about verifying staff references. One new recommendation has been made. This is because there were some minor shortfalls with two panel members' recruitment files. Specifically, these panel members, who do not have face-to-face contact with

children, had incomplete employment histories on their files. This was remedied by the following day.

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 differences 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: SC064273

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