

TACT Fostering - East Midlands

The Adolescent and Children's Trust
27 Station Road, Kettering, Northamptonshire NN15 7HH
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

TACT (The Adolescent and Children's Trust) is a charitable organisation which operates across England, Scotland and Wales. This agency, which is one of nine independent fostering agencies in England, is located in Kettering, Northamptonshire. It provides short-term, long-term, emergency and parent and child fostering placements.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had 65 approved fostering households and 97 children placed with its foster carers.

Inspection dates: 14 to 18 January 2019

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 **good**

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: 3 August 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- Children, some of whom have very complex needs, make exceptional progress because of the extremely high quality of individualised care and support provided by their foster carers.
- Placement stability is a major strength, with nearly half of the current placements being of over two years' duration.
- A real commitment to making the best matches is a significant factor in successful placements, and the rate of unplanned endings is low.
- Foster carers receive an excellent standard of support and access to relevant training. These are major contributory factors in the positive outcomes that children achieve. This includes access to a psychotherapist, the use of the children's resource worker and highly committed and skilled supervising social workers.
- Proactive and challenging safeguarding practice, underpinned by a research-based approach, minimises the risk of harm and children become safer as a result.
- Strong leadership and management, well-supported and highly motivated staff and a child-focused ethos ensure that children's needs remain at the heart of the service.
- Excellent partnership working and appropriate information sharing ensure that children receive a consistent approach to their care and support.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The agency must re-evaluate its current policy in relation to some aspects of staff recruitment to ensure that this is consistent with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.
- The minutes of the fostering panel must provide an accurate list of the panel members who attended each panel meeting to ensure that there is evidence of quoracy. In addition, the social worker representative should not have any connection to the cases being presented to the panel to assure absolute independence.

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 within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>(1) The fostering service provider must not</p> <p>(a) employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless the person is fit to do so.</p> <p>(3) For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person</p> <p>(a) is of integrity and good character,</p> <p>(b) has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work they are to perform,</p> <p>(c) is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform, and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1.</p> <p>Regulation 20 (1)(3)(a)(b)(c)</p> <p>This relates to when a person has previously worked in a position whose duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults, verification, as far as practicable, of why the employment or position ended.</p>	<p>29/03/2019</p>

Recommendations

- The panel chair ensures that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. (National minimum standard 14.7)

This relates to ensuring that the list of attending panel members is accurate.

- Fostering panels are intended as multi-disciplinary bodies with a considerable element of independence from the fostering service. (The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 4: Fostering services, page 38, paragraph 5.2)

This relates to the social worker panel member having independence from the line management responsibility for any of the cases presented to the panel.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The children placed with this agency's foster carers have complex needs. Some have previously been in residential care and most are over 10 years old. The agency's foster carers are also currently providing care for 11 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Despite these complexities, children, particularly those in long-term placements, are making exceptional progress in many areas of their lives. This is because foster carers provide an exceptionally high quality of individualised care and support because of the agency's excellent supervision, support and training. An independent reviewing officer commented: 'The placement is absolutely fantastic.' This view was echoed by several stakeholders.

Children are very happy with their foster carers. One child said: 'They are very understanding and very supportive. I know they are there when I need them. I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for them.' Children feel part of the foster family. One child said: 'It is absolutely lovely. It's like I was their own child.' This sense of belonging enables children to become more emotionally secure, increases their self-worth and they become more confident. This in turn helps them with their engagement in education and with developing their social skills.

A significant factor in children having such positive outcomes and experiences is placement stability. Over 46% of children have lived with their foster carers for more than two years. The percentage of unplanned placement endings is well below the national average. For the year 2016/17, only 3% of children experienced unplanned endings compared with the national comparator of 12%. A strong commitment to children, excellent matching and placement support are significant factors in this stability.

A particularly outstanding practice is the employment of a psychotherapist who works flexibly with supervising social workers and foster carers to support placements. He works directly with individual foster carers to help them understand the reasons for a child's behaviour and presentation. In addition, he provides extensive training so that foster carers have a strong theoretical underpinning for the strategies and approaches that he suggests. Several foster carers commented very positively about this service. One foster carer said: 'TACT have been brilliant, always contactable. The psychotherapist was amazing and helped me understand. There is no way I could have got through it without them.'

The employment of the children's resource worker has also proved highly effective in supporting placements as well as improving children's participation. The agency places a high premium on obtaining the views of children to improve the service, both at a national and local level. Nationally, there is a children's champion's group that meets with senior managers to represent the views of children. The residential weekends, although activity-based, also promote participation and consultation. TACT is developing a new project that is working with care leavers to improve the

support available to them, as well as engaging them in developing the service. This includes mentoring children in foster placements and providing a care-experienced person for fostering panels. Although it is in its early stages of development, it shows the agency's commitment to improving the lives of children and participation.

On a local level, the children's resource worker obtains the views of children individually for foster carer reviews and on wider issues. He organises group activities for children, birth children and foster families, and he also works individually with children, for example, to build up their confidence or skill set. One child said: 'The activities are great.' Children appreciate the opportunity to meet with other fostered children and to make friends. Older children can develop their independent living skills on a course provided by the agency, which also includes certificated first aid training. This supplements the work that foster carers do in helping children to become more independent in an age-appropriate way.

Foster carers are fully engaged in promoting children's education, health and emotional needs. All the children have educational placements and are doing well. Some children have gone to university. Others are at college or they are reaching their potential in other ways. The agency is very proud of children's achievements and always recognises them by way of a voucher and a card. This includes achievements such as being the most improved student.

Foster carers always ensure that children maintain relationships with people who are important to them. They demonstrate a lot of empathy towards birth parents and some welcome birth family members into their homes in order to promote positive contact.

Children are encouraged to develop their interests and hobbies, and as a result they make friendships, develop their skills and improve their self-confidence. Children who lacked confidence and hardly spoke when they were placed with their foster carers are now able to act as youth leaders and champion the cause of other children in foster placements. They have part-time jobs, attend college and are developing their independence.

The foster carers who care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are particularly skilled at helping them to settle into life in this country. They understand their trauma, they meet their cultural and religious needs and they support them through legal processes. The foster carers are excellent advocates for the children. An independent reviewing officer said of one such placement: 'The placement is fantastic. I have been impressed throughout with the foster carers' awareness and understanding of his needs. They are very clear about what he is going through.' A young adult recently spoke about his experiences as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child in a TACT foster home. He said: 'My foster carer didn't just give me a place to live but she gave me a place in her heart. TACT and my foster carer were the main people who put me on the right path.' This person is now happily married, a parent and is a graduate.

Foster carers receive a warm and prompt welcome when they contact this agency. Many comment that they chose TACT because it is a charity and they like its child-

focused ethos. They also appreciated the honesty and openness of the staff that they spoke to when they had an initial visit. The preparation, assessment, pre- and post-approval training ensure that foster carers understand the fostering task and are fully equipped for the role.

Supervision and support are highly valued. One foster carer said: 'They are a brilliant bunch of people to work with. They return calls straight away. I never have to chase them. Our supervising social worker is brilliant. I cannot fault them.' Foster carers receive regular supervision visits that are child-focused, structured, supportive and challenging. All but one foster carer has achieved the training, development and support standards within the expected timescales. A range of relevant training and research-based workshops ensure that foster carers can meet the varied needs of the children placed with them. The review process is thorough, and a number of reviews are carried out by independent reviewing officers to add an additional tier of objectivity. This is planned to be strengthened further by all reviews being chaired by an independent person.

Matching is a real strength. The agency is completely committed to ensuring that children are only placed with carers who can meet their needs. The agency always seeks additional information to inform the matching process, and carers confirm that there is no pressure to take a child if they feel they cannot meet their needs. Clear and detailed documentation demonstrates the lengths that the agency goes to, to ensure that the placement is supported from the outset.

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

Children become increasingly safer as a result of the proactive safeguarding practice of this agency. If children go missing or engage in other risk-taking behaviour such as self-harm, the agency is proactive in working with the child's placing authority to develop a consistent approach to minimise risk. It challenges the local authority if it appears not to be acting swiftly or in the child's best interests, and it continues to do so until it has a satisfactory response.

Children are protected from harm because they live in safe and secure foster homes and are cared for and supported by foster carers who understand their needs. Foster carers are very well trained in all aspects of safeguarding, including on sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, self-harm and extremism. This, in conjunction with comprehensive written guidance, ensures that they are equipped with the tools to recognise risk and to respond appropriately. This knowledge is enhanced by research-informed practice, particularly in relation to attachment and brain development that provides foster carers with a greater understanding of the reasons that lie behind children's behaviour. This understanding is supported by other training to help foster carers de-escalate situations of challenging behaviour. A responsive and accessible out of hours service is available to provide additional advice and guidance if required.

Risk is assessed well, and each child has an individual safe care plan that is updated when other behaviours emerge. This provides foster carers with specific guidance to

manage risk effectively and children become safer as a result. Currently, there are very few incidents of children going missing from their foster homes. However, there are very clear protocols to follow if this does occur and foster carers are proactive in reporting their concerns. The agency is rigorous in requesting and pursuing return home interviews from the local authority.

The recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers have a strong focus on ensuring that only foster carers who are safe and suitable are considered to care for children. There are comprehensive checks and references, unannounced visits when children are in placement and children are seen alone every 12 weeks to ensure that they can voice any concerns in private. Birth children are also seen alone to give them the opportunity to raise any worries with the supervising social worker.

The agency has a very clear understanding of its responsibilities to respond to allegations against foster carers or concerns about standards of care in the foster home. All concerns are reported promptly to the relevant designated officer and the agency complies fully with any advice and guidance. It provides thorough reports of all investigations into standards of care issues. Although no foster carers have been deregistered for this reason this year, the fostering panel will always make a recommendation if a carer resigns prior to a formal consideration of deregistration. The agency commissions an independent assessment to provide an objective comprehensive report to inform the fostering panel. This action keeps children safer as it provides full information to inform any future application to be a foster carer.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

A well-established, experienced and qualified registered manager, ably assisted by two deputy area managers, provides effective and strong leadership for this agency. The child-focused ethos permeates throughout the service and ensures that staff and foster carers are ambitious for children to achieve the very best possible outcomes.

The agency is well staffed with appropriately qualified and experienced social workers, a children's resource worker and enthusiastic and friendly administrative staff. Supervising social workers demonstrate a high degree of motivation and commitment to the families who they supervise and the children who are in placement. They know the children well and it is very clear that they are passionate about ensuring that they make the best possible progress. Supervising social workers have manageable caseloads, and this enables them to provide high-quality and responsive support to the foster carers. Staff benefit from reflective and regular supervision. They feel very well supported by accessible managers, and this mirrors the support that they can give to foster carers. Staff have good access to a training and development programme that is responsive to their needs as assessed in their performance reviews. The learning and development officer is proactive in sharing information, and the agency is a member of a research-based group.

Monitoring arrangements are strong across the agency as a whole. The responsible individual has well-established systems for regular reporting and feedback and he knows the agency well. Locally, the managers have a good oversight of the work of

the agency. They monitor and audit case files on a regular basis, children are discussed in supervision and team meetings and their progress is monitored regularly, including by use of the outcomes tracker. Managers know the children very well and they take action if children's outcomes are not being progressed in a timely way.

The agency demonstrates a desire to learn from things that have not gone as well as hoped for. Managers are not complacent, and they are keen to listen to constructive feedback and to use it to improve the service. For example, a young person made a comment about the appropriateness of the children's review form. This was responded to immediately and the form has now been amended in line with the suggestions. Similarly, the fostering panel has fed back comments about the variable quality of assessments. This has also been addressed and systems have been developed to improve the quality assurance of the work.

There are excellent links with commissioners to ensure that the agency knows the types of fostering placements required. The agency also evaluates all the referrals for placements and the reasons why it could not meet the request. This enables the manager to work with the central business development unit to tailor the recruitment of foster carers to the needs of the local authorities. Commissioners are very positive about the agency's commitment to good matching, its openness and transparency and its willingness to learn.

Partnership working is very well developed. One stakeholder said: 'TACT is fantastic.' There is excellent communication between supervising social workers and children's social workers. Supervising social workers attend all meetings and reviews whenever possible, they provide good-quality reports for reviews and, because they know the children well, their contribution is valuable. These positive relationships do not prevent the agency from challenging other stakeholders when necessary. For example, a supervising social worker escalated a concern to a child's independent reviewing officer when a child was being disadvantaged because required information was not provided in a timely way. Similarly, when children's passports have not been forthcoming, the agency has escalated this to a senior manager.

The agency's fostering panel has a strong focus on safeguarding and is rigorous and appropriately challenging to ensure that children are placed in secure and safe foster families. It gives constructive feedback to the agency on the quality of work before it. This has resulted in an improved system to assure the quality of assessments more effectively. The panel members have a range of relevant experience, including a care-experienced person. The panel minutes are thorough and give a good account of the business of the panel, the discussion and the reasons for the recommendation. However, on one occasion, the membership was recorded incorrectly but this was not identified through the quality assurance systems. As a result, the panel's quoracy could not be assured. In addition, there are occasions when the social worker representative has line management responsibility for the cases being considered. This is a potential conflict of interest.

Staff and panel members are recruited safely. However, TACT's policy regarding previous employment checks is not fully consistent with the Fostering Services

(England) Regulations 2011, which require verification of why any employment with children or vulnerable adults ended 'as far as reasonably practicable'.

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: SC043094

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