

TACT Fostering – North West

The Adolescent and Children's Trust
2 Green Lane, Stoneycroft, Liverpool L13 7EA
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT) is a charity and an independent fostering agency. The head office is in London and there are 11 regional offices across England, Scotland and Wales.

The Liverpool office covers the North West of England. The agency provides emergency, short-term and permanent placements for children and young people.

At the time of the inspection, there were 33 approved foster carers caring for 53 children and young people.

The registered manager has been in post since May 2015 and he was registered with Ofsted in May 2016.

Inspection dates: 4 to 8 March 2019

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: 19 October 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:

- Leaders and managers and agency staff are passionate and committed about improving the experiences and outcomes for all children.
- The quality and effectiveness of the service have continued to develop since the last inspection in 2015.
- The agency benefits from strong and effective leadership.
- Children live in safe and stable placements in which they make good progress due to being matched with the right foster carers, with whom they develop positive relationships.
- Children benefit from being able to live with their brothers and sisters.
- Children enjoy a wide range of activities and hobbies. This helps them to develop their social skills and improves their self-esteem and confidence.
- High risk-taking behaviours, for example child exploitation, substance misuse and self-harm, rarely occur. When such incidents do occur, the foster carers and the agency staff take suitable action to minimise harm and prevent a reoccurrence.
- When children are missing from home, foster carers take the necessary action to ensure their safe and prompt return home. Missing-from-home procedures are followed, and the agency takes effective action to make sure that independent return home interviews are carried out
- Foster carers, and the children they care for, receive high levels of support. This includes regular sessions with the agency's psychologist. New foster carers are prepared well for taking on the role.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Despite many positive changes being implemented since the last inspection, the agency plans to develop the service further and improvements need to be embedded and sustained.
- Recording and monitoring of records, for example some children's and foster carers' records, reflective staff supervision and safeguarding training for foster carers, need to improve.

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

Recommendations

- The manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (NMS 25.2)

In particular, this refers to recording children's experience and progress, appropriate details of unannounced visits, reflective supervision, safeguarding training of foster carers and ensuring that looked after children's documentation is in place at the earliest opportunity.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The majority of children lead happy, stable lives and build positive and secure attachments. Foster carers and the agency staff know each child exceptionally well, which helps them to ensure that children's needs, safety and welfare are central to their practice. The child-centred approach of agency staff and foster carers is clearly evidenced in the children's comments about their experience. For example, one child said, 'Foster care is much better than I expected it to be. My foster carers have really helped me.'

Children develop a strong sense of identity and experience positive personal achievements that build self-esteem. For example, one child who struggles with speech and language receives regular support in the form of speech and language therapy, and his foster carers implement the necessary strategies and techniques to support the child's speech and language development. Consequently, the child's confidence and communication have improved significantly.

Children and young people maintain family links and sustain relationships which are important to them. Foster carers are skilled in helping them understand their past and to develop their own identity. Children have positive friendships and are active within their local communities. For example, a foster carer has done some excellent work in establishing links with the Eritrean community for the children in her care who have an Eritrean heritage.

The health and development needs of children are met well, with children attending routine health appointments, such as the dentist, and receiving specialist services such as child and adolescent mental health services and sensory assessment services when necessary. However, the agency could improve how it captures children's specific health information, such as the use of health passports and obtaining copies of statutory health assessments.

Children's progress and positive outcomes are evidenced in foster carer files, such as supervision records. However, children's records do not always demonstrate the very good progress and positive outcomes that they have made when considering their starting points. Verbal updates, outcome trackers and carer review checklists are shared at looked after children's reviews, to ensure the effective sharing of information and to promote good partnership working.

The agency has clear strategies to promote the participation of children in the development of the service. Children's participation has significantly improved following the recruitment of the children's resource worker in October 2017. This has resulted in the children's participation group being reinstated and it now meets regularly. Children have enjoyed a range of activities, such as a pizza and chill night, movie and popcorn afternoon and a weekend away. The children's resource worker has developed initiatives that give children the opportunity to speak freely about what is important to them. Children have shared their views, wishes and feelings on

issues such as: how much pocket money and other allowances they feel they should receive; what words and phrases they think should be banned or rephrased by professionals working with them; and their views about respite care. Children have also been provided with information to raise their understanding of pathway plans and 'staying put' arrangements. The agency is developing the service further with plans to support and develop the skills for those children preparing for independence and those who are willing to become peer mentors. These initiatives provide important opportunities for children's voices to be heard in the knowledge that they can influence what happens in their lives.

Children develop a strong sense of identity and experience positive personal achievements that build self-esteem. The agency has invested in developing a therapeutic approach to the care provided to children. The PACE model of care is embedded throughout the agency, with good examples observed of staff and carers putting this into practice. This approach is helping to provide a safe and consistent level of care that is improving children's outcomes. Confidence in carers and children has increased due to the PACE training and regular support that they receive from a PACE registered practitioner. One foster carer said, 'The PACE training and support is amazing, it has helped us to see things from other perspectives and to reflect and approach things differently. We have a much more therapeutic approach now.'

Children enjoy a range of social and recreational activities, such as attending football and dance clubs, school and scouts' trips and going on holiday with their foster families. As a result, children benefit from opportunities to socialise with peers and realise their talents and interests.

Long-term planning, permanency and placing sibling groups together are key strengths of the agency. A high number of children benefit from achieving permanence, which is very much promoted and supported in the best interests of children. A high number of children have been in their foster placements for several years. Furthermore, a sibling group of six children were able to live together due to the agency successfully recruiting foster carers who could provide this stability for them. Several young people have remained living with their foster families on 'staying put' arrangements beyond the age of 18 years.

Matching is effective, which is reflected in the number of long-term successful placements of children. A placement development manager for a placing local authority said, 'The agency is very accessible and always respond well to referrals, ask relevant questions and make suggestions. They do not just take information on face value, and the agency always consider the needs of children and the ability of carers.' Despite this, the level of detail in matching and risk assessments completed prior to children being placed with foster carers is inconsistent. However, this has not resulted in inappropriate matching for children, to date.

Children's education is supported by the agency and foster carers who contribute to personal education plans for children and have a good understanding of children's targets, progress and attainment. The agency tries its best to secure copies of children's personal education plans and education, health and care plans. When any barriers to a child's learning arise, foster carers and agency staff respond quickly to

make sure that any additional needs are identified and provided for. This response results in improved attendance at school and children exceeding expectations in education. For example, one child's attendance was around 60% prior to moving into his foster placement and he now has 100% attendance. Additionally, children who were not expected to be entered for examinations such as GCSEs and SATs have now made enough progress to be entered for these examinations. Consequently, children make very good progress in their education and the majority achieve above expectations as they settle and engage. This, in turn, enhances their future life chances.

The agency supports foster carers well through regular supervision, 24-hour support, a carer representative, a range of training and development opportunities and regular therapeutic support groups. Carers spoke highly of the agency, their supervising social workers and all the staff who work at the agency, reporting that there is always someone available when needed. They confirmed that the agency values them as professionals. One foster carer said, 'If it wasn't for the agency, I would have left fostering years ago. I really can't fault this agency. They have supported me through thick and thin.'

The fostering panel is well established and is chaired by an experienced professional. The agency recognises that the panel would benefit from being more diverse and is taking steps to address this. The fostering panel continues to review its practice to ensure that it makes balanced, well-informed recommendations to support the agency's decision making.

Form F assessments are comprehensive and support safer carer recruitment. There was one occasion when an assessment lacked rigorous exploration of the applicant's family history, although this was swiftly picked up by the agency's panel and the assessment was deferred until the panel felt a comprehensive and rigorous assessment had been completed. This assessment had been authorised by another manager in the agency as suitable for approval, despite the shortfalls in the assessment. However, since this time no further assessments have been deferred due to insufficient exploration, which demonstrates improved scrutiny prior to assessments being approved by managers and presented at panel.

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

Children feel happy, safe and secure in their foster homes. This was reflected in the comments of one young person when they said, 'Everything is fine. I have not got a care in the world. If I were worried, I would talk to my foster carers.'

Children's safety and welfare are a priority of the agency, with staff and foster carers being alert to and managing risk very well. Foster carers are provided with safer caring family plans that reflect the diverse needs and personality of each child. Safer caring family plans identify individual risks and provide a good overview of behaviours. Additionally, safer caring family plans include strategies for preventing or reducing harm. Safer caring family plans are reviewed and updated appropriately as risks change.

The agency deals with allegations and complaints well. Concerns are quickly shared with relevant professionals, which prompts multi-agency discussions and investigation. Early foster carer reviews and panel discussions are held when necessary to identify any additional safeguards, such as a change in approval, additional training or supervision, or an increase in unannounced visits. The agency reflects well on any concerns raised and constantly seeks to improve practice as a result.

All staff and foster carers receive ongoing safeguarding training and development opportunities, raising their understanding of the risks that children face. Webinars have been shared with staff and foster carers about a number of issues including child exploitation, 'thinking the unthinkable', use of social media and placement disruption. The therapeutic support approach strengthens foster carers' understanding of trauma, which is often presented in children's behaviour. This approach contributes to the staff and foster carers being alert to potential risk and understanding their roles and responsibilities in helping and protecting children.

The agency rigorously vets staff and panel members before they are appointed. The robust safer recruitment practice and management of poor performance demonstrates that only the most suitable staff are employed at the agency. As a result, children's safety and welfare are enhanced.

High risk-taking behaviour of children such as child exploitation, substance misuse or self-harm is rare. When such incidents occur, safeguarding procedures are followed, and the agency plays a key role in multi-agency safeguarding meetings and works in partnership with safeguarding professionals.

When children are missing from home, the agency and carers respond quickly. Foster carers follow clear reporting and recording procedures and take steps to ensure children's prompt and safe return home. The agency takes appropriate action to make sure that children receive an independent return home interview to consider the reason why they were missing and the risks they faced during the time that they were missing. Foster carers and agency staff work alongside the police and placing social workers, in educating young people about the risk that they place themselves in when their whereabouts are unknown.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency has highly visible and approachable leadership throughout the service. The registered manager is an inspirational, forward-thinking and highly effective manager. He is dedicated to improving the lives of the children in the agency's care. The registered manager has taken suitable action to address the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection. Furthermore, he continues to take measures to drive the service forward, which has resulted in the continued progress and development of the agency. The agency is clearly on a positive journey and inspectors identified some outstanding elements throughout the inspection.

Although the agency number of foster carers has remained at 33, the agency has prioritised the retention of its long-standing, good and experienced foster carers.

This focus has resulted in a minimal but expected number of foster carers leaving the agency. The foster carers who have left the agency have left due to retirement, personal circumstances and to offer children and young people permanence, such as 'staying put' arrangements. Recruited foster carers have filled these gaps and helped the agency to expand over a wider geographical area.

Since the last inspection, a focus has been placed on improving children's participation and foster carer support. The agency now employs a full-time children's resource worker, and foster carers, staff and panel members receive PACE therapeutic training and monthly support from a consultant clinical psychologist, which enhances continuity in the care provided to children. These initiatives have resulted in significant help and support being made available to children and foster carers. Participation of children has increased, and foster carers can provide children with a therapeutic home environment. Consequently, this has helped to improve outcomes for children.

Staff feel incredibly supported by the registered manager and each other. Staff morale is very good. Staff benefit from regular training and development opportunities, practice meetings, professional supervision and annual appraisals. Staff supervision records demonstrate that supervision enables staff to discuss the needs of foster carers and children and consider their continuous professional development. The registered manager has completed reflective supervision training which has helped him and staff to reflect on their practice during supervision sessions, although staff supervision records do not always show this.

The agency's statement of purpose describes the agency's aims and objectives. It is available on the agency's website, as well as being provided to all interested parties. The agency's children's guide is available in two age-appropriate formats, for younger children and older children. A DVD accompanies the children's guides. The children's guide provides information to children about the agency, being fostered and how to make a complaint. This ensures that children and stakeholders have a clear understanding and expectations of the agency from the start.

The monitoring and quality assurance of the service could be strengthened to ensure that records, reports and assessments are consistently completed to a high level with detailed information. In addition, the quality assurance processes should ensure that the agency receives children looked after documentation at the earliest opportunity. Some records are detailed and 'tell the child's story' in full, but some records have limited detail to demonstrate the starting point and progress made by children.

The recording of unannounced visits is variable, and this is something that is currently being addressed. Records of unannounced visits do not always include whether children or their bedrooms have been seen, the time of the visit and the general atmosphere of the family home. This is something managers recognise as an area for development. Furthermore, the training matrix completed for foster carers' training does not clearly demonstrate that all foster carers are up-to-date with safeguarding training.

The agency now has an independent reviewing officer to chair foster carers' annual reviews. The independent reviewing process has resulted in a more consistent approach, with the independent reviewing officer having a good understanding of the agency, its ethos, aims and objectives. The registered manager attends all annual reviews, and this helps him to identify themes and trends, areas of good practice and areas for development.

The registered manager, staff and foster carers work collaboratively with other professionals and family members. This helps to ensure that there is a consistent approach to the care provided to children and means that their needs are being met well.

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: SC047548

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