

Action for Children Family Breaks Devon & Fostering Southwest Peninsula

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

Assurance visit

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is operated by a national registered charity which provides a wide range of services for children and families. The family breaks service currently has 10 fostering households and 18 children. The Fostering Southwest Peninsula fostering service currently has 22 fostering households, three fostering households providing planned breaks only and 19 children.

The service provides a range of fostering services. These include a short-breaks service and short-term, long-term and emergency care, for children who may have complex care needs.

Visit dates: 24 to 25 March 2021

Previous inspection date: 5 February 2018

Previous inspection judgement: Outstanding

Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred

practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings from the visit

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

The care of children

Many children have lived with their foster carers for a long time. They feel loved, cared for and have a sense of permanence. Children are carefully matched with foster carers and other children already living in the household. Feedback from foster carers and professionals was extremely positive about the agency, the care that children receive and the progress that children are making.

During COVID-19 restrictions, foster carers have received support from their supervising social workers either virtually or face to face, according to need and an assessment of risk. Foster carers report they have been well supported by the agency during this time. Effective support is available to foster carers during office hours and out of hours.

Foster carers work effectively with a range of education, psychology and healthcare professionals to ensure that children receive the services they need.

Foster carers' logs are generally comprehensive and will inform children in the future about the time they spent living with their foster carer. However, these logs are not always submitted in a timely manner. This is important, so that supervising social workers are kept up to date with any concerns arising. This shortfall is not always challenged in supervision sessions.

On some occasions, children have had to suddenly leave a fostering home due to concerns about their foster carers. Careful and sensitive preparation for this potentially confusing and frightening upheaval in a child's life is not always undertaken. One child was told by their foster carer to pack their suitcase as they were moving that day to live with another foster carer. This child was then collected by a local authority social worker they did not know, to be taken to their new home with little explanation or preparation.

Foster carers report they have very good relationships with their supervising social worker and they value the support and availability that is provided. However, supervising social workers do not always challenge foster carers, display vigilance or show professional curiosity when there are concerns about the care of a child placed with a foster carer.

Foster carers, agency staff and managers know the children in their care well and are knowledgeable about the progress they are making. This information is documented in outcome trackers and used to inform placement planning meetings.

The safety of children

Incidents of children going missing are rare. When this does happen, foster carers confidently use the agency's missing-from-care procedures and take the appropriate action to find out where children have been and what they have been doing.

The agency safeguarding procedures and policies are comprehensive. If there is a safeguarding incident, a thorough review takes place and any learning is implemented. Foster carers are held to account through this process, deregistered if necessary and reported to the appropriate safeguarding authorities. On one occasion, the agency did not report a safeguarding incident to the relevant safeguarding professionals in a timely manner. Consequently, Ofsted was not notified within the required timescales.

Foster carers benefit from receiving clear guidance about how to manage a child's behaviour. The use of restraint is minimal. If it is decided that restraint needs to be used, then this is documented in a child's plan and the foster carers receive the appropriate training so that they can hold the child safely in accordance with their plan.

The set-up of parent and child assessments requires greater precision and management oversight to ensure that safety and care arrangements for babies, particularly in relation to safe sleeping and supervision, are sufficiently addressed. In the case looked at, a letter of instruction was not provided. The placement plan did not inform the parent of the questions about their parenting ability or demonstrate enough how the assessment and review process to measure progress would be carried out in conjunction with the local authority. The associated documents did not assist in making sure the information was clear, although the manager is in the process of tackling this shortfall. When incidents of concern happened, the foster carer acted with extreme vigilance and was in close communication with the supervising social worker. Multi-agency discussions and decisions took place immediately when the baby was at risk of harm during the assessment.

The agency has a policy to carry out parent and child assessments only when other children are not in the home. This prioritises children's safety and well-being.

Leaders and managers

The registered manager is experienced, appropriately qualified and well respected by foster carers and staff. The agency has recently appointed a quality assurance manager to further improve management oversight. New initiatives are being embedded, including a project to improve how the agency seeks the voice of the child and uses this information to ensure that children's voices are heard and acted upon.

Recruitment procedures for panel members are effective and comprehensive. New staff have been recruited in response to the staff vacancies that had arisen in the

agency. This action will help to ensure that foster carers have consistent and appropriately qualified support.

The agency’s statement of purpose is regularly updated, is published on the agency’s website and has been sent to Ofsted. This document contains clear information to placing authorities, staff and foster carers about the aims and functions of the agency.

Leaders and managers have monitored the effects and impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on foster carers and children and have kept any negative impact to a minimum. The agency has been flexible in relation to foster carer medicals and virtual visits. A temporary medicals policy has been implemented effectively.

The fostering panel provides a comprehensive quality monitoring function. Panel meetings are being held virtually and meet the regulations in relation to panel members and quality of decision-making. To further improve the functions of the panel, the newly appointed quality assurance manager is undertaking work with the panel to improve the quality and oversight of assessments and panel discussions.

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>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>is intended to safeguard children placed with foster carers from abuse or neglect, and</p> <p>sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The written policy must include a statement of measures to be taken to safeguard any child before making parent and child arrangements with that foster parent.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for—</p>	<p>30 April 2021</p>

<p>the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider,</p> <p>notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider, to the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b) (2) (3)(a)(c))</p>	
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster carers is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that supervising social workers demonstrate professional curiosity and vigilance when undertaking supervision visits to foster carers.</p>	<p>30 April 2021</p>

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that when a placement is ending, foster carers and the fostering service should work with the child’s social worker and others to help the child to understand why they are moving, and should support the child through their transition to a new living situation wherever that may be. (‘The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations volume 4: Fostering Services’, page 14, paragraph 3.5)
- The registered person should ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Meetings should have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer’s work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child’s needs, taking into account the child’s wishes and feelings and offer support and a framework to assess the carer’s performance and develop their competencies and skills. The frequency of meeting for short-break foster carers should be proportionate to the amount of care provided. Foster carers’ files should include records of supervisory meetings.
(‘Fostering services: National Minimum Standards’, 21.8)

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC064273

Registered provider: Action For Children

Registered provider address: 3 The Boulevard, Ascot Road, Watford,
Hertfordshire WD18 8AG

Responsible individual: Debbie Tomlinson

Registered manager: Phyllida Brown

Inspectors

Tina Maddison, Social Care Inspector
Sarah Canto, Social Care Inspector

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