

Action For Children Fostering

Action for Children

Cargo Fleet Offices, Dormor Way, South Bank, Middlesbrough Road, South Bank, Middlesbrough TS6 6XH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Action for Children is an independent fostering agency based in Middlesbrough. The agency also has a regional office in Doncaster. The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide long-term and short-term foster placements. At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing a family placement service to 40 children and young people with 34 fostering families.

The manager registered with Ofsted in August 2017.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 17 to 21 January 2022

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: 15 May 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The majority of children make good progress in stable and secure fostering families. The agency uses a digital tool that allows the foster carers to produce a digital welcome pack for the children and key professionals. This ensures that the children are able to see the fostering family and the home in advance, to support their placement choices. This makes the children's transition easier and helps them to settle.

The agency has introduced and embedded a new therapeutic model since the last inspection. This has been welcomed by the majority of the foster carers and the staff. Children, as a result, receive care and support from their carers, and the staff who are trained and supported by psychologists. This enables the children to make progress in a nurturing and therapeutic environment, promoting their well-being.

Children are carefully matched and welcomed into fostering families. As a result, they build positive relationships and emotional attachments with their carers. This helps the children to develop a sense of belonging to their fostering family. A clinical psychologist's initial assessment, supported by the foster carer, supervising social worker, the child's social worker and other key professionals, informs the matching process and the care plan.

During the COVID-19 restrictions, foster carers and the children were encouraged to take part in, and enjoy a range of agency-run participation events. This enabled friendships to develop among the children. However, the foster carers do not always access the support that they are provided with, as they do not consistently attend their support groups. They, and the agency recognise this, and see this as an area for improvement.

Foster carers, with support from the agency and school staff, have enabled the children to continue with their education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Foster carers are strong advocates for the children, and they have adapted positively throughout the periods of COVID-19-related restrictions. This has ensured that the children attend school where able, or they are home-schooled. Foster carers implement creative educational timetables that support the children to learn and have fun. One carer mentioned 'Fun Fridays', where they and the children enjoyed fun at the beach. These activities help the children and their carers to maintain their emotional and physical well-being.

The agency provides planned short-term breaks for the children and their foster carers as appropriate. However, several carers acknowledge that this has not been consistent and, in some cases, has not been available. This oversight could lead to children's placements breaking down as the foster carers do not receive sufficient time to recharge. The agency is aware of this shortfall, and recognises that this is an area for development.

Children and their carers access the agency's online digital resource to access information about the service. This resource also enables the children and their carers to express their views safely and hear about the other children's experiences in care and inspirational stories. While children also receive a copy of the children's guide, so that they know what to expect, this document does not make any reference to the current Children's Commissioner for England. This oversight prevents the children from having access to this useful resource for support.

'Staying put' arrangements are used well. Several children have a plan to remain living with their fostering families. The agency has a dedicated member of staff who provides the children with guidance and practical help for when they move on to independence. Children benefit from this additional support as they have been helped to prepare for interviews and supported to write a curriculum vitae. This has helped some children to gain employment.

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

Children's risks are known by their carers and are managed well through the care team, so that the children become increasingly safe. Individual safe care policies provide the foster carers and the children with guidance and expectations on how to keep safe in the home.

Children rarely go missing from their fostering families. When this does occur, foster carers notify all of the relevant professionals and follow the child's missing-from-home protocol. Children and their carers maintain contact via the telephone and text messages. The foster carer ensures that any information gained is recorded and shared with professionals. This supports safe care. The agency works closely with the child's social worker and the foster carer to find solutions. This often involves working with the children to support sleepovers with their friends. Good care planning, which involves conducting relevant checks, promotes the children's welfare and ensures that they spend time with their friends.

Foster carers are supported well through high levels of supervision via their agency social worker. The foster carers report that the stability of the staff, and the widespread support that is offered from all levels of the agency, has improved over the last 12 months. The majority of foster carers spoken to, and written testimonies from them, are extremely positive about the personal support and accessibility of staff and management.

Staff ensure that the children are seen on a regular basis during supervisions of the foster carer, the fostering household and in unannounced visits. This has continued throughout the COVID-19 restrictions. Children have participated enthusiastically, often remotely via electronic devices. One child spoke about showing her bedroom via this method. As restrictions lifted, then returned and then lifted again, the staff have been able to resume face-to-face supervisions. Staff have ensured that both systems detail safe care, progress, and the views of the child. Supervision recordings are thorough and well written.

Staff and their carers know the procedures for responding to concerns about the safety of children. However, incidents of a serious nature are not always reported in a timely manner. This means they are not then notified to Ofsted as set out in regulations. This limits Ofsted's ability to scrutinise the actions taken by the foster carers and the agency to ensure that the children are increasingly safe.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The last inspection judgement of good was a result of a service restructure. A new responsible individual and a new manager have implemented a series of positive changes. However, the foster carers and the staff noted a challenging time prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as some foster carers and staff had left. Over the last 18 months, there has been momentous change, and stability among the staff and the foster carers has returned.

The manager and the responsible individual are now embedded in this service and delivering good outcomes for the children. This is supported by the implementation of the new therapeutic model of practice that is now in place. This is threaded through the staff and the foster carers' recording, as well as in the children's care planning and a comprehensive training package.

The leadership and management team has a clear vision and ambition for the service that provides good-quality foster carers for children. Foster carers spoke highly about the improved communication with the agency, and the support that they now receive from their supervising social worker. A carer said: 'The set-up is brilliant now; it is a million miles better than before. It is not disjointed. It is not "them and us" any more.'

Managers and staff are very good at listening to the foster carers, and they have embraced the implementation of a therapeutic model of practice. Staff said that the manager is 'an empathic leader' and that he 'values the input, opinion and contributions of his team'. Staff added that there is 'a culture of mutual appreciation and support, wanting the best for each other, our carers and children.'

Staff receive regular supervision of their practice, and the management team ensures that the staff's well-being is also monitored. The supervision process is supported by an agreed agenda and a comprehensive overview of the foster carers and their safeguarding practice. This shared agenda enables practice reflection to take place and ensures that effective communication and relationships are promoted.

The leadership and management team has good monitoring systems in place. The agency has appointed a quality assurance manager. This is a positive step forward, with the intention of improving the quality of the agency's foster carers and the support and training that is provided for them. There are also quality systems in place to track the children's progress right through their journey with their fostering family. This enables the agency and the manager to understand and identify any areas for improvement that support positive outcomes for the children.

There are gaps in the overall membership of the fostering panel. It does not fully cover the needs of the service in its representation of society and relevant backgrounds to the foster care role. This limits its evaluation and analysis of items that it receives and potentially affects the quality of the recommendations made.

There is a shortfall in the quality assurance process of the final panel minutes. The issue of corrections to poor spelling and minor grammatical errors needs to be addressed. The leadership and management team is aware of issues relating to the panel and is taking steps to address them.

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 ensure that the fostering panel has sufficient members, and that individual members have between them the experience and expertise necessary, to effectively discharge the functions of the panel. (Regulation 23 (7))</p> <p>This specifically refers to the diversity of the panel membership.</p>	24 March 2022
<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 persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36 (1))</p>	24 February 2022

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the panel chair quality assures the written minutes to avoid any spelling errors. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 14.7)
- The registered person should ensure that the children's guide details the correct information in terms of the current Children's Commissioner for England. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 16.4)
- The registered person should ensure that peer support, foster care associations and/or self-help groups for foster carers are encouraged and supported consistently. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.4)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers are provided with breaks from caring as appropriate. These are planned to take account of the needs of any children placed. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.5)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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: SC036242

Registered provider: Action for Children

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

Responsible individual: Debbie Tomlinson

Registered manager: Paul Goodwin

Telephone number: 01642 249 452

Email address: fosteringmiddlesbrough@actionforchildren.org.uk

Inspector

Michael Dack, Social Care Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2022