

TACT Fostering - East Midlands

The Adolescent And Children's Trust

Innovation House, Coniston Court, PO Box 137, Blyth, NE24 9FJ

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 is one of nine independent fostering agencies in England. It provides short-term, long-term, emergency and parent and child fostering placements.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had 41 approved fostering households and 60 children placed with its foster carers.

Inspection dates: 19 to 23 February 2024

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: 14 January 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Foster carers build strong, trusted relationships with their children. They make remarkable progress due to the skill, dedication and commitment offered by the carers and the supporting TACT team. The manager carefully considers the needs of children before making a commitment to care for them. This ensures that children have the best opportunities to be cared for by carers who have the right skills and knowledge to look after them well. Children grow and develop in their foster families and are accepted for who they are. This means that children live with their carers for long periods, many until they reach adulthood and beyond. As a result, children have the stability and emotional security they need as they remain part of the family.

The manager and her team ensure children are sensitively welcomed into their foster families. They receive information in a timely way to help them settle in. Where children have recently arrived from different countries work is carried out immediately to help them settle into the community and meet people from their specific heritage. Carers receive ongoing, bespoke support to ensure children's cultural needs are met.

Young adults benefit from TACT Connect which is a lifelong service that can be accessed by anyone who has previously been cared for by TACT. It offers opportunities for people to extend their network, access advice or just to know they are held in mind. There was a lovely example of one young person who spoke about how important the TACT birthday card is to her when she receives it each year. This service can be a lifeline for care experienced people in times of need.

The manager provides creative responses when fostering family circumstances change or become more complex. She always puts the children first whilst also considering the needs of the carers. This means that children have remained with their carers, brothers, and sisters even in the most challenging circumstances. Evidence of practice in this area is consistently child centred and innovative.

Foster carers speak with considerable love and warmth about children. They are excited about their achievements. Carers share in children's joy and help them through sad or difficult times. As such, children develop resilience and learn how to cope with life events. One social work professional spoke about a child who had developed an 'I can do this attitude' which he had gradually built with the foster carers. This is helping him to achieve things that have exceeded everyone's expectations.

Children have busy lives and take part in a range of activities. They have holidays, day trips and also many activities arranged by the agency. They attend clubs after school which helps them to learn new skills and build self-confidence. Engagement and participation is a unique and meaningful part of the service. The focus is on all

children in the foster family having the opportunity to come together and have fun. Activities are responsive to what children enjoy and are varied enough to pique the interests of children. Children's feedback says they value these times, and the opportunities mean a lot to them.

Children's health needs are well met. Children with additional needs and disabilities receive excellent, highly individualised care. For example, detailed communication plans are developed for children who do not communicate verbally. This helps them to express themselves at home and at school. Carers are attuned to children's individual ways of communication and work hard to understand and meet their needs. One child is now able to say sentences which is a significant achievement. Disability benefits are well managed to ensure children have equipment and experiences to reach their potential.

The agency has a specialist education service which ensures that children do not experience drift in their education plans. Educational professionals support in accessing the right provisions for children. Children make exceptional progress with close oversight from TACT. Attendance is excellent for many children, and they are very rarely excluded. Children often go on to further education such as university or apprenticeships. The manager does not settle for second best in the aspirations she holds for children's futures. This enhances their life chances and ability to achieve economically in the future.

The manager ensures that assessments of prospective carers are thorough with in depth consideration of carers strengths and vulnerabilities. Safeguarding is a priority throughout and any complexities are well understood before a final decision is made about suitability. Assessments are undertaken sensitively and there is good diversity amongst applicants. New carers are made welcome and are well inducted into their role. Carers say that the quality of training is very good and flexible to meet their individual needs.

Foster carers are not always recording information about children in a helpful way. The quality of foster carers logs is mixed. The manager recognises this and has started work on making improvements. This is not yet effective. Whilst there is training in place, supervising social workers are not regularly discussing with carers how to write child friendly records. This is important because children may want to read them now or in the future.

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

Children are safe. There are very few serious incidents because children are so settled, and their carers protect them from harm. Risks and vulnerabilities are well understood by the manager and supervising social workers. The manager has a good oversight of accidents, illnesses and any safeguarding issues affecting children. From this they can understand any worrying themes or patterns that need strategic action. Safe care plans and risk assessments are detailed and well considered. This

helps children to live their lives in safe ways and develop their own risk awareness. Children develop their independence because of this.

The manager is innovative in their approach to safeguarding. They know how important factors such as stability, continuity of education and meeting children's emotional needs are in keeping children safe. They also keep abreast of developments from research and practice to inform their work. For example, contextual safeguarding and trauma informed practice. This blend works successfully to ensure that risks to children are kept to an absolute minimum. Where harmful situations do arise, the manager enlists help from external agencies to ensure children receive specialist services. The work of the agency in keeping children safe is commendable.

Foster carers look after a considerable number of older children who can be impacted by contextual safeguarding issues as they become more independent. However, children are rarely missing from home which shows how secure children are in their foster families and how well the agency understands how to protect children from this type of harm. The agency provides regular training regarding exploitation. Where online risks were identified for one child the manager took swift action in developing a safety plan to reduce the risks immediately. The agency is making an exceptional difference to children's safety.

Children have trusted adults to talk to, they can share their worries knowing they will be listened to. Carers have the skills and knowledge to manage children's distress well without using physical interventions. One child has been held by a carer to keep him safe from harm however this has close oversight from the manager to ensure this is in the child's best interests. There is excellent support from in-house psychotherapists who work with carers to develop therapeutic parenting skills. This has had an enormous impact on children's quality of life and stabilised placements where there were emerging difficulties. Carers really value this support which is readily available.

Foster carers receive outstanding support to care for children when in hospital. One carer told me that if a foster carer cannot be with the child, then the supervising social worker steps in. As a result, the child has support all the time. This shows how much children's well-being is valued by the team.

The manager handles allegations or suspicions of harm very well. She ensures that the relevant authorities are informed, and thorough investigations are undertaken. The manager works effectively with the fostering panel to consider whether carers remain suitable to foster. It is positive that where possible, carers have been supported through the allegations process and continue to care for children. Detailed development and support plans help carers to work on the areas of concern in constructive ways. This helps to retain carers where it is safe to do so. Equally, the agency does not hesitate to de-register carers who are not suitable. The manager shares information responsibly with safeguarding agencies and other fostering services to ensure children are safe.

Staff are recruited safely through robust recruitment processes. The requirement from the last inspection has been met.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

There is an impressive and inspirational manager. She is ambitious for the children, carers, and the agency. The manager has an unwavering commitment to provide children with the best care possible which she instils into her team. She models the ethos of the agency. Carers and staff spoke unanimously of her empathic and informed approach which she uses to benefit children. Her oversight of the service is remarkable, and it is evident she knows each child in detail. This is driving the agency forward in what is already exceptional practice. Carers describe the manager as 'fantastic' and 'amazing' as do professionals working alongside TACT.

Leaders and managers know that to maintain high standards for children they need to look after their carers and staff. As such, everyone's wellbeing is a priority. There are good staff working conditions and carers receive a responsive package of support. For example, a discretionary monetary fund is available at the point of need. The many initiatives in place create a culture of caring for each other. This ensures that resilience is bolstered throughout the service.

The manager leads by example which motivates her team. Staff enjoy working for the service and feel proud to say they work there. Supervisions are thorough and take place regularly. They offer staff opportunities to discuss their wellbeing and their professional development. All cases are discussed which prompts staff to think about areas of concern. Collaborative planning informs staff about actions required to further support families and children.

Leaders and managers navigate wider children's services with clear purpose and drive to make sure children make progress in all areas of their lives. They work exceptionally well with external agencies to ensure children receive specialist help when required. When there are shortfalls or delays in accessing services, the manager intervenes to address any barriers. She does not all she can to avoid delay. If a child is in need, then provision is made, often by the agency's own services. This means that children do not wait because wider services are under pressure. This is a unique offer which children of all ages benefit from.

The manager has a good understanding of current challenges. This is currently the recruitment of new carers. There is a clear recruitment strategy following analysis of the current approaches. The agency monitors established systems to ensure they remain fit for purpose, making changes where necessary. The manager has enhanced the relationship between the recruitment and social work teams to ensure all staff understand changes in the fostering market. Managers recognise their best asset is their carers and 'word of mouth' recommendations are effective. They are maximising this approach by training carers to become ambassadors to promote the agency. This again is another example of innovative approaches to challenging situations.

The panel is made up of highly skilled, confident, and experienced members. They make carers and new applicants feel at ease when attending panels and work in a sensitive way when dealing with emotive issues. The panel works closely with the manager to ensure that fair and proportionate recommendations are made in response to concerns, and they are rigorous in their approach. They have clear expectations of the agency who respond well to panel's recommendations. The panel chair is an impressive leader who ensures that the panel is reflective. They take part in regular training some of which is jointly attended with the agency. This has been beneficial in terms of ensuring everyone has a continued shared value base and understanding of developments in practice.

Carer reviews are thorough and chaired by experienced reviewing officers. Reports for annual reviews are reflective of the lived experiences of foster families and evidence collaborative working with the carers. Minutes of meetings are thorough and give clear rationale for their ongoing approval. When recommendations are made these are listened to and acted on by the agency. This enables the agency to ensure that carers remain suitable to continue to foster.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements.(Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards, page 52, paragraph 26.6).

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: SC043094

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