

Action for Children Fostering South East

Action for Children

10 Great Queen Street, London WC2B 5DG

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Action for Children is a nationally registered children's charity providing a range of children's social care services. Action for Children Fostering South East is one of a number of registered branches that provide a range of fostering placements for children and young people. At the time of the inspection, this branch was providing placements to six children, and it had seven approved fostering households.

The manager was registered with Ofsted in February 2013.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 July 2024

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: 18 October 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children receive a good standard of individualised care and support from foster carers who are committed, well trained, and well supported by the agency. As a result, children make good progress in their foster homes. One professional commented, 'The foster carer has been exceptional in helping the child reach their full potential.'

Most of the children are in settled, long-term placements that provide them with a sense of belonging, stability, and security. Children feel a part of the foster carers' family, and importantly they feel loved and cared for. One child commented, 'I feel safe here. I am treated like family, I feel happy.' Another child said, 'There is always someone to go to, she (the foster carer) makes us feel like her own. She has taught me many skills and lessons. No foster parents will ever compare.' Foster carers speak very positively and proudly about the children's achievements and progress. One carer said about her foster child, 'He is integrally part of our family, and we love him.' Children's achievements are also recognised in an annual rewards ceremony, which makes children feel valued and promotes their self-esteem.

Children generally make good progress at school. For example, one child who was three years behind in her academic attainment and had a history of poor school attendance has now caught up and attends school every day. Foster carers always attend personal education plan meetings, supported by either the supervising social worker or the manager, so that they play an active role in information-sharing and planning.

Children's health also improves as a result of better diet and exercise, but also because foster carers are diligent in making sure children access all the medical appointments they need. One social worker commented, 'There has been a noticeable change in the child's physical, emotional and health presentation.'

Children make friends, develop hobbies and interests, and are encouraged to develop independence skills such as cooking and tidying their bedrooms, all of which will stand them in good stead when they move on to independence. Foster carers are also supportive with any family time arrangements and develop good relationships with the children's birth family, where this is appropriate and in the best interests of the children.

There are a number of opportunities for children to have a voice. Children are encouraged to take part in participation events, and they can be young ambassadors. Children's views are canvassed regularly by supervising social workers in addition to those collected for the foster carers' annual review. This has been encouraged by the national quality assurance manager and is now embedded in practice.

A real strength of the agency is the transitions worker, who plays an important role in supporting children as they grow older. She provides both practical and emotional assistance and is an additional point of contact for a young person if they need help or guidance. She described her role as providing 'a bridge and safety net for young people, because when they reach 18 years old, they can either fall or fly'. She is instrumental in facilitating participation and engagement, so that young people have a voice both in their personal lives and in the wider community. For example, one young person was able to give her opinion on the role of the independent reviewing officer to the recent national care review and met with a member of parliament. This was extremely empowering.

A dedicated referrals officer has oversight of all referrals. Any referral that may be an appropriate match for the agency's foster carers is discussed with the manager and supervising social worker before taking it further. There is also opportunity to discuss referrals with the psychologist, which provides a good foundation for working with the foster carer going forward. Foster carers produce very child-friendly information about themselves and their home, which is shared with the child, and most placements are well planned with introductions prior to placement. However, when a child is placed alongside a child already in the foster home, the decision-making about this is not as clearly recorded as it should be, including the consent of the local authority of that child already placed.

The foster carers' therapeutic approach to providing care is enhanced by regular consultations with a clinical psychologist. This has been a positive development since the last inspection and one which is really valued by the foster carers, as it provides them with a deeper understanding of why children are behaving and reacting as they do, as well as suggestions for managing this in a trauma-informed way. This contributes towards placement stability because it increases carers' capacity for compassion. One professional, speaking about a foster carer, said, 'She is attuned to the child's needs, and the remarkable progress they have made is evidence of the high standard of care. The nurturing and supportive care has been instrumental in the child feeling valued and understood.'

Placement stability is good and stability meetings are held to try and provide extra support if the placement is starting to become at risk of disruption. Despite this, there have been a small number of unplanned endings. Wherever possible, the transition to a new placement is done in a planned way to minimise the disruption.

There have been no recent assessments of new foster carers for this agency. However, the wider agency has a well-thought-out system for ensuring that assessments are thorough and consistently carried out. The national quality assurance manager has oversight of all assessments to ensure that, as far as possible, foster carers are recruited and assessed thoroughly and safely.

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

Children feel safe and secure in their foster homes. In most cases, they become safer and their risk-taking behaviour decreases. For example, children who have

been at risk of sexual exploitation and grooming are now much safer. Foster carers have a good understanding of online safety and take appropriate measures to minimise the risk of harm.

Some children do go missing from their foster homes on occasion, but foster carers are very clear about how to respond to this and take appropriate action. If children's risks cannot be managed safely, the agency will work with the local authority to agree an appropriate plan, which may include a planned move to a resource where the risk can be mitigated.

Foster carers have a clear understanding of their responsibilities to safeguard children. They have access to a wide range of relevant training and written guidance to carry this out effectively and are well supported by their supervising social workers. When children are engaging in risk-taking behaviours, there is evidence of good partnership working to share information and provide additional support and services to try and minimise this. Because foster carers parent in a therapeutic way, they show a depth of understanding about children's risk-taking behaviour and how best to safely manage the risk.

Safeguarding is given a high priority. The wider service has a safeguarding team that has oversight of all safeguarding concerns, which provides an additional layer of scrutiny and thereby promotes children's safety. A principal manager has specific oversight of all the fostering services and is available for advice and support, as well as providing a monitoring role to ensure that any concerns are managed effectively. This team has recently undertaken a piece of work in relation to safeguarding situations and produced a report with useful recommendations for improving practice.

Risk assessments are always carried out and reviewed regularly in relation to emerging risks. These are thorough and show whether risk has increased or decreased. Safer care plans provide clear guidance in relation to keeping children safe in the home, and the foster home's safety is considered through a detailed health and safety assessment and fire plan. In one instance, there was no written risk assessment in relation to children sharing a bedroom. Although this had been carried out in relation to another situation, the decision-making and recording of this aspect of care could be more robust.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency is well led and managed by a very experienced, appropriately qualified registered manager, supported by the fostering service manager. The manager is very committed to ensuring that children achieve positive outcomes. Because of the size of the agency, the manager is very hands-on and knows the children and the carers very well. He has positive working relationships with partner agencies such as local authority social workers, but is not afraid to challenge if a child needs a service that should be provided. The manager and the supervising social workers are active participants in professionals' meetings and reviews so that they are fully informed of children's progress and can actively contribute to future plans.

All staff feel very well supported. They have regular, recorded, and reflective supervision that enables them to discuss their work and their professional development, in addition to any unscheduled discussions. In addition, there are regular team meetings that enable staff to feel a part of the agency as well as the wider organisation. There is very much a sense of team, whatever a person's role might be in the organisation. Staff have access to relevant training to ensure that they are effective practitioners and can support the foster carers and children well.

Foster carers feel very well supported to deliver good care. One foster carer said, 'There is always someone there.' Another foster carer commented, 'My supervising social worker is fantastic, and the manager is very proactive in getting support.' Foster carers are well trained, regularly supervised, attend regular support groups and they have access to an out-of-hours service which provides advice.

Annual reviews are carried out in a timely way and overseen by a manager independent of the agency, which adds a level of scrutiny and robustness.

Monitoring is robust at all levels. The manager's review of the quality-of-care report is very detailed and considers both achievements and learning. The responsible individual, who is the head of fostering, has effective oversight through supervision of the fostering managers and regular reporting. She, in turn, provides detailed reports to the board of trustees to enable them to carry out their functions effectively. This includes oversight of the financial viability of the agency.

The agency has good systems for feedback, both informal and formal. The foster carer ambassadors meet regularly with the responsible individual and the fostering service manager to raise any concerns or give ideas to develop practice, and there is evidence that these are taken seriously.

Foster carers' recordings are becoming more child focused and written with the child in mind, including some of the children's own contributions. This will provide a child with a more understandable and positive record of their time in foster care, should they choose to access their records in the future. If carers need reminding about any aspect of recording, this is followed up in supervision with support and training provided, in recognition of the importance of record-keeping.

The recruitment of foster carers has been an issue and there has been a decreasing number of fostering households for a number of reasons, none of which are due to dissatisfaction with the agency. This has been, and continues to be, addressed through a variety of means and there has been some success, with a number of applications in the pipeline.

The fostering panel is robust. The panel chair is very experienced and knowledgeable, and the membership includes people with personal and professional experience of fostering, which informs their scrutiny. There is a professional and effective relationship with the agency to aid development and improve practice. The agency decision-maker makes an informed and timely decision about foster carers' approval and their continued suitability to foster.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that there is careful pre-placement planning, including consideration of the impact on any children already living in the foster home. Consent to such a placement must be given by the fostering service provider and any other responsible authority with a child already placed with the foster carer. This will require consultation with the social worker of any other child placed in the foster home. ('The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 4: Fostering services', page 14, paragraph 3.2)
- In the foster home, each child over the age of three should have their own bedroom. If this is not possible, the sharing of a bedroom is agreed by each child's responsible authority and each child has their own area within the bedroom. Before seeking agreement for the sharing of a bedroom, the fostering service provider takes into account any potential for bullying, any history of abuse or abusive behaviour, the wishes of the children concerned and all other pertinent facts. The decision-making process and outcome of the assessment are recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards,' paragraph 10.6)

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: SC038534

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Inspector

Rosemary Chapman, Social Care Inspector

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