

Action for Children Fostering South West

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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Setting address	Horner Court, 637 Gloucester Road, Horfield, Bristol BS7 0BJ
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Registered person	Action for Children
Registered manager	Ms Joanna Killick
Responsible individual	Mrs Stacey Burnett
Date of last inspection	14 September 2011

Service information

Brief description of the service

Action for Children is a nationally registered charity providing a range of children's social care services. Action for Children – Fostering South West provides fostering services for children and young people who need substitute family care, and for whom adoption is not appropriate.

Fostering South West recruits, assesses, prepares and approves foster carers who live within a one-hour drive of Bristol. It provides placements for children and young people from nine local authorities in the south west. An independently chaired fostering panel makes recommendations for foster carer assessments to an agency decision maker. There are currently 36 children and young people living in 24 fostering households.

A team manager oversees the work of 2.8 full-time equivalent supervising social workers and one participation officer. The agency mainly uses sessional workers to conduct foster carer assessments. The agency has a contract arrangement to provide professional therapeutic support to its fostering team and its foster carers.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement, where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met, and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards, but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards, but these are not widespread or serious. All children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The overall effectiveness of this independent fostering agency is good. However, one area of the quality of the service requires improvement. This is training carers in the use of physical restraint, when care plans have identified this as necessary to meet the needs of the child or young person who has been placed.

The agency generally provides long-term and stable placements for children and young people with challenging and complex needs. Children and young people enjoy good relationships with their carers, and say that they feel safe and well looked after. However, the agency must ensure that children and carers are always appropriately matched.

The agency is successful in finding and recruiting carers who can provide foster placements for children and young people with additional needs, who might otherwise be difficult to place. Foster carer assessments have rigour and the fostering panel provides greater scrutiny of these assessments. However, the foster panel would benefit from a panel member with educational experience and expertise.

Foster carers are well supported by supervising social workers. The foster carers say that they visit regularly and are always available to support them, and that good out-of-hours support is also available. Regular carers' forum meetings, access to professional therapeutic services and good training opportunities give additional areas of support to carers. These help to ensure that children and young people are cared for by carers who are skilled and competent.

The managers of this agency regularly monitor and reviews the quality of the service provision. There is evidence that they consult carers, young people and stakeholders in the production of their quarterly written reports about the service provision, and that the points raised are acted on. One example of this is the introduction of a professional therapist who will be available to carers on a monthly basis.

The recommendation of the previous inspection has been acted on. Now, all personnel files clearly define the reasons for any gaps in employees' service histories.

Areas of improvement

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets 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
'17.—(1) The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them.' Specifically, training in the area of restraint. (Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, Regulation 17 (1))	01/04/2016

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- The fostering service provider should ensure that fostering panels include a member with educational expertise, (volume 4, 'Guidance and regulations', paragraph 5.8)
- The fostering service provider should ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carers can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs. ('National minimum standards', 15.1)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people are generally good because the majority of placements are stable and long term. Additionally, the agency is able to recruit carers who are able to provide placements for sibling groups. This helps to give children and young people a sense of security and consistency. Relationships between carers and the children and young people are sound, and they say that they enjoy living with their carers. One young person said, 'My foster carers have really helped me through some difficult times. They're terrific.'

Prior to a placement being made, children and young people are provided with easily accessible information about their proposed foster homes. This is contained in child-friendly profiles and CDs of fostering households. This helps to give children and young people a real choice about which families they are going to live with. The agency quickly makes placement plans in consultation with placing authorities, children and young people, and birth families where appropriate, and these plans spell out how children and young people's needs will be met. This helps them to understand the 'how' and 'why' of their care. However, in one case where younger siblings required an emergency placement, the matching was described by placing authority workers as 'far from ideal' in terms of both the race and gender of the children, and their match with the carers with whom they were placed. This does not ensure positive outcomes for children and young people.

Children and young people benefit from the agency's provision of a participation officer who regularly meets with them, both individually and in groups, and consults them on their feelings about their care. Additionally, the participation officer arranges monthly group events to places of interest to young people. These include activities such as rock climbing, summer barbeques and visits to the pantomime. This improves their life experiences and gives them access to activities that they may not otherwise have the opportunity to engage in. One young person told the inspector, '[the participation officer] is really cool. There's always something going on and we get to say what activities we want to do.'

The general health of children and young people is supported by foster carers. They ensure that they are registered with a general practitioner, optician and dentist, and that routine check-ups are carried out. The emotional well-being of children and young people is supported by the provision of a professionally qualified play therapist who has many years of experience in fostering work. The therapist provides clinical supervision for the fostering team and will see foster carers individually, as required.

Children and young people make good progress educationally in relation to their starting points. All but two young people are in mainstream education full-time. Foster carers all attend personal education plan meetings and this allows them to have a voice in the way that pupil's premiums are spent in support of young people's

education.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The quality of service provision in this independent fostering agency requires improvement, because foster carers are not always provided with the training they need to care effectively for children and young people. One fostering placement had an unplanned ending. This was due, in part, to the foster carer's lack of training in physical restraint. However, the recruitment, preparation and training of foster carers is otherwise of an extremely high standard. Carers are recruited by a marketing and recruitment officer, on the understanding that children placed are unlikely to be under five years of age. They may be older, and may have greater needs than those of children and young people who are placed in mainstream foster care. This allows the agency to provide placements for children and young people who have more complex and challenging needs, and who might be otherwise difficult to place.

Preparation training for carers is comprehensive and covers the key areas of fostering work. This includes training on safeguarding, attachment theory and responding to challenging behaviour. Carers report that ongoing training is readily made available, and this allows them to update their core skills and enhance their understanding of fostering. Training is also made available at the regular carers' support fora. The overwhelming majority of carers have undertaken the training, support and development standards or, if they have been recently approved, they are undertaking them.

Foster carers enjoy good relationships with their supervising social workers, who they say visit regularly and are always available when needed. They say 'there is good out-of-hours support and somebody is always there when I need them'. Foster carers are given free membership of the Fostering Network. As previously stated, foster carers can access the play therapist and consult them on matters related to individual young people. All of these resources help to maintain placements, and give children and young people stable and long-term care.

Foster carer assessments are seen to be of good quality, and are both descriptive and analytic. Panel minutes indicate that the panel looks deeper into issues that are not clearly spelt out in the assessments, and this demonstrates that it carries out rigorous quality assurance. The panel membership includes a range of relevant people including people with direct experience of fostering, and a member attends who has medical expertise. The panel would benefit from a panel member with educational expertise.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The safeguarding of children and young people by this independent fostering agency is good. This is evidenced by the effective vetting and recruitment of staff, panel members and foster carers. This ensures that unsuitable people are not employed who might have unsupervised access to vulnerable children and young people.

Supervising social workers, the participation officer, panel members and foster carers all receive training in safeguarding children, and this is regularly updated. This ensures that they will know what action to take should a child disclose abuse, or if they behave in such a way as to suggest that they might have been abused.

Supervising social workers conduct at least two unannounced visits to fostering households annually. Systems are in place to ensure that the quality of foster care is subject to regular scrutiny, and foster carers' approval status is reviewed annually by panel or more often if any concerns arise. This helps to ensure that children and young people are kept safe.

The agency has clear policies on safeguarding children and on dealing with complaints, and these are regularly reviewed and updated. Children and young people are given a range of information material which tell them where they can go if they need help. One young person told the inspectors.

I feel really happy and safe here. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I would certainly know where to go to get help. AFC [Action for Children] give me lots of leaflets and stuff about that.

The agency notifies the regulatory body and appropriate authorities if a child or young person may be subject to abuse, or engages in behaviour that may put them at risk. There is evidence that the agency will update risk assessments in these cases, and this helps to keep children and young people safe. The agency has a protocol in place about the action to be taken, contacting the police in the event of a child or young person going missing. The agency regularly liaises with the Local Authority Designated Officer, who confirmed that there is effective and collaborative working between the two agencies.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The leadership and management of this independent fostering agency is good. Although the registered manager of the fostering team was on sick leave at the time of the inspection, evidence was seen that they have the appropriate qualifications and experience. Suitable interim management arrangements have been put in place.

The commissioning officers of placing authorities reported that working relationships with the managers of the service are highly effective:

I meet with (the registered manager) monthly. There are good levels of communication from this agency. Good partnership. I have no concerns about the quality of the foster carers and I feel they are well supported by the supervising social workers. The manager ensures that we have good profiles of foster carers, and child-friendly profiles are made available when requested.

Placing social workers and independent reviewing officers also commented favourably on the quality of the working relationship with the agency. They reported that supervising social workers attend children's and young people's reviews, and actively contribute to them.

The managers of this agency have a commitment to involving children and young people actively in community life. This is achieved by the provision of a participation officer who organises a calendar of community events in consultation with young people. The officer works closely with foster carers to ensure that children and young people can actively engage in their hobbies and interests.

The statement of purpose and children's guides are regularly reviewed, and are clearly written and comprehensive in content. The guides are available in a range of age-appropriate formats and can be translated into other languages if required. The managers of the service conduct regular reviews of the service provision. There is evidence that there is active consultation with young people, foster carers and placing authorities in the construction of these reviews.

As previously stated, the agency employs a marketing and recruitment officer. This officer targets potential foster carers who are able to provide placements for children and young people who may have more challenging and complex needs. This is indicative of the agency's commitment to finding foster placements for children and young people who may be more difficult to place.

Supervising social workers are all professionally qualified and registered with the Health and Care Professions Council. The induction programme for new staff introduces them to all core areas of their role. They report that ongoing training is readily available. They feel that monthly supervision is of good quality and there are regular team meetings, in addition to monthly clinical supervision from a professional therapist. This ensures that children and young people receive a good quality service from people who are appropriately trained and supported.

The manager notifies the regulatory body and appropriate authorities of events required by regulation. The agency has implemented the recommendation of the previous inspection. Now, all staff and panel personnel files clearly indicate why there are any gaps in employees' service histories.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards, and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.