

Action for Children: Fostering Wessex

Action For Children

Round House, Newgate Lane, Fareham, Hampshire PO14 1JD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Action for Children: Fostering Wessex is operated by a large national charity. The organisation works in partnership with statutory bodies to deliver a wide range of services for vulnerable children, young people and their families across the United Kingdom.

This branch provides fostering placements for children and young people who have a variety of complex needs. The service provides therapeutic parenting and attachment-based foster care.

At the time of this inspection, the service was working with nine children and young people and had 20 approved fostering families.

There has been no registered manager in post since July 2018.

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 March 2019

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	requires improvement to be good

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 25 January 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Skilled staff and foster carers help the children and young people to make very good progress. As a result, a large majority of children and young people have good outcomes in every aspect of their lives.
- The quality of relationships between foster carers and children and young people is good. This has created bonds of trust that withstand challenges. This helps the children and young people weather difficulties and develop resilience.
- Foster carers praised the high-quality, dedicated support they receive from their supervising social workers and monthly therapeutic meetings. This helps them to continue with challenging situations and maintains placement stability.
- The agency ensures advanced training in contextual safeguarding is available to staff and foster carers. This research-based training helps them to keep the children and young people safe. The agency advocates strongly with other agencies to help protect children who are perceived to be at risk of harm.
- The agency has experienced and skilled senior leaders and managers. This provides continuity of purpose and a great depth of knowledge about the service and everyone in it. This has moderated the negative effect of recent management changes.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Lack of continuity in leadership has meant that there have been some management oversights.
- In one case, no unannounced visit to a foster carer had taken place prior to their review.
- One recommendation from the last inspection had not been actioned. Staff recruitment files did not contain all the information required by regulation. This was remedied during the inspection.
- There was no chronological information about some important safeguarding matters, such as whether return home interviews had been carried out and there were no detailed narratives when referrals had been made to the designated officer.
- The service's electronic recording system does not have a chronology feature. This means that managers must access children's records individually to monitor them. This affects good management oversight.

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
The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b)(c)) In particular, ensure that: ■ there is a management audit of staff recruitment files ■ recommendations from the last inspection are acted upon ■ there is provision on the electronic recording system for recording a chronology of any safeguarding concerns and referrals to the designated officer, and for monitoring matters such as return home interviews and unannounced visits to foster carers.	31/05/2019

Recommendations

- Ensure that the provider can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. This includes CRB checks. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 19.2)
- In particular, ensure that for each employee or panel member all the required information is on file to comply with Schedule 2 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

This service provides good-quality therapeutic care for children and young people in stable, loving foster homes. Exceptionally positive relationships between children, young people and foster carers help the children and young people to flourish and make good progress in every aspect of their lives.

In an Ofsted survey, one foster carer commented, 'The fostering agency have an excellent reputation for matching foster children to the right foster family. My current foster child... tells me they feel the most settled they have ever been with my family and that they "see a happy face when they look in the mirror rather than a sad face".'

The agency has effective systems in place to recruit and assess a diverse range of foster carers. Matching is managed extremely carefully and considers the needs of all the children and young people in the fostering family.

Foster carers said they feel welcomed by this agency. They praised the quality of their preparation training and assessments. Foster carers generally feel very well supported. One foster carer commented, 'Our supervising social worker, along with the whole team, are extremely supportive and someone is always available if needed.' Foster carers participate in regular support groups, led by an experienced member of staff. This enables them to share good practice and talk about any matters that concern them.

The agency has established foster carer ambassadors, who meet regularly with senior leaders. This means that the foster carer group has a representative voice.

Children and young people have regular contact with their foster carers' supervising social workers, who consult with them about their care. They are also invited to complete questionnaires. The service has a children's participation worker who supports children through direct work and constructive activities. Children and foster carers' families have access to fun days, barbecues and a Christmas party, to enable them to meet each other in an informal setting and have fun.

Children's and young people's emotional health and well-being are very well supported by a responsive, flexible, bespoke therapeutic service. An experienced child psychotherapist works with individual children. She holds monthly therapeutic meetings for foster carers, supervising social workers and other professionals involved with the child. This ensures that the team around each child works consistently in line with attachment-based therapeutic parenting principles.

Foster carers are comfortable in discussing personal relationships and young people's sexual health needs. They can, therefore, help young people to develop

healthy and loving relationships as they approach adulthood.

Children and young people are welcomed to their fostering families with good-quality pictorial profile information, so that they know what to expect when they arrive. They have careful introductions and are well supported during this period.

The agency has recently been granted charitable funding to finance a new digital children's guide, to supplement the existing paper guides. The guides are well designed and are tailored to children's differing needs.

Most children and young people have very positive educational outcomes. A small number of children have had difficulty in obtaining a place in a school. Some have struggled to maintain their education placements. In these instances, the agency works well with schools, virtual headteachers and placing authorities to help improve outcomes for the children.

Some young people are preparing to move on from their fostering families. They are helped to develop useful skills which will enable them to manage life independently. 'Staying put' arrangements are considered for young people who would benefit from additional support.

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

Risk assessments are detailed and kept up to date. This ensures that foster carers and staff have access to good-quality, current information to help them manage risk proportionately.

Strong relationships between foster carers and the children and young people in their care helps the fostering family members to work together to address any difficulties they may encounter. This high level of trust also enables children and young people to discuss any worries or concerns with their foster carers.

Well-trained staff and foster carers have a very good understanding of the risks faced by the children in their care, including risks from criminal and sexual exploitation and going missing. They take assertive action to protect children from harm. The manager ensures that any child protection concerns are discussed promptly with the local authority and other agencies.

Most children and young people do not go missing from care but one child has gone missing repeatedly over the past four months. The reasons for this are well understood and are not connected with the foster placement. The agency has responded very assertively to help this child, through therapeutic and practical support, and ensuring that relevant agencies are involved.

The staff and foster carers receive good-quality training on safeguarding, including the risks faced by children and young people on the internet. One member of staff is about to attend an external training course on this subject. The agency's designated safeguarding lead produces excellent video training material to help foster carers

and staff understand current issues in safeguarding.

The agency does not sanction foster carers' use of restraint. Hence, they do not train foster carers to restrain, but to de-escalate situations instead. Discussion took place during the inspection about the need to explain this position again to foster carers, some of whom expressed uncertainty about where they stand regarding restraint.

The agency has appropriately challenged a school's restraint practice. Managers acted correctly to help safeguard children who may be subject to restrictive measures to manage their behaviour.

The agency has rigorous processes to ensure that prospective foster carers are properly assessed as safe to look after children in their own homes. One foster carer who responded to an Ofsted survey said, 'I was reassured that they really do delve very deeply into the checks. As a society we expect nothing less for people who wish to be approved in a child caring role. [Our assessing social worker] was sensitive and diplomatic and also very approachable.'

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

There has not been a registered manager in post since July 2018. Prospective registered managers have been appointed, but, for reasons which were beyond the agency's control, they have not been able to proceed with registration.

The current fostering service manager has been acting up in this role since July 2018. He is a qualified, experienced social worker who has also been providing temporary team management cover since January 2019, when the post holder began maternity leave.

The fostering service manager applied for registration to Ofsted on 30 January 2019. This is a positive step forward after many months of uncertainty for the staff and foster carers.

Management monitoring is generally good, and there has been some continuity because those now in management roles have been with the agency for many years. However, changes in management over recent months have made it more difficult for the agency to keep track of all aspects of practice. There have been shortfalls in the recording of safeguarding concerns, because there is no readily accessible chronology. There is also no system in place to monitor return home interviews, so if missing-from-care incidents occur in quick succession, it is difficult to keep track of whether interviews have taken place in line with statutory guidance. The agency usually completes two unannounced visits to fostering households every year, one household in 2018 received no such visit.

Although the requirement and one recommendation from the last inspection have been met in full, one of the recommendations has not been actioned. Staff files did

not contain all the information required by Schedule 2 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011. The manager obtained and filed the missing information during the inspection, but this should have been actioned before.

Since the last inspection, financial constraints have meant that the service had to restructure and some redundancies had to be made. There is a strong financial management team in the wider organisation, which has implemented a range of measures to monitor finances and start to turn around the financial deficit.

The agency currently has enough staff to meet the needs of the children and their carers. Middle management has been stretched, with some managers carrying out more than one role. The recent appointment of a new head of fostering to oversee the agency's development is a promising indication that these problems are time-limited. The fostering services manager brings with her a wealth of experience in another similar agency, compassion and a clear vision for the future.

The agency's managers have responded well to complaints and concerns. They have ensured that these are investigated fairly and thoroughly, often with the benefit of an investigation by an independent social worker. This is good practice because it helps to achieve greater objectivity.

The manager ensures that the service maintains very positive relationships with commissioners and meets regularly with them to discuss developments. There is very good communication about children's needs. Commissioners confirmed that any issues are raised in an open way and responded to very promptly.

The agency has a practice development manager who helps to maintain high standards of care and documentation. For example, he has conducted targeted audits of unplanned endings to placements, and of notifications to Ofsted. Through targeted audits and knowledge of regulation, he has helped to guide service improvement.

Staff confirmed that professional supervision is extremely positive, timely, and that the manager is approachable. Additional psychotherapy hours have been introduced to support the staff and managers during a difficult year. The manager holds structured, regular team meetings interspersed with practice meetings. This helps to ensure that his team members are working to one model and that they are all aware of practice developments.

The service has a business plan which sets realistic targets for the coming year. The management team members work well together to promote good-quality practice. The outcomes for children and young people are well known and monitored.

The fostering panel is an efficient and effective element of this agency. The requirement in relation to the panel's functions and the recommendation about improving diversity are both met.

The fostering panel draws on a diverse central list of members. The meeting is efficiently and compassionately chaired by an experienced professional. Panel

members showed sensitivity and insight into the foster carers' situations. The minutes provide a clear and accurate record of the meeting.

Assessment reports are well written and rigorously quality assured before they reach the fostering panel. They contain enough detail and show good-quality evaluation of the impact of the prospective foster carers' histories on their capacity to care.

The agency has a very experienced agency decision maker, who is also the responsible individual. She is well able to exercise appropriate challenge when required.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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: SC039572

Registered provider: Action For Children

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

Responsible individual: Stacey Burnett

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 01329 666 930

Email address:

Inspector

Heather Chaplin, 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 looked after children, 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

<http://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://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>.

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: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

© Crown copyright 2019