

Action for Children: Fostering Wessex

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC039572
Inspection date	20/02/2012
Inspector	David Coulter
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

Setting address	Round House, Newgate Lane, FAREHAM, Hampshire, PO14 1JD
Telephone number	01329 666930
Email	maggie.ellis@actionforchildren.org.uk
Registered person	Action for Children
Registered manager	Margaret Woolcock
Responsible individual	Darren Johnson
Date of last inspection	22/08/2007

© Crown copyright 2012

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure 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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Action for Children Wessex Fostering provides fostering placements for a variety of young people, many of whom have been involved in anti-social or criminal activities. The aims of the service include a reduction in re-offending behaviour and improved family and social relationships. Placements include long-term welfare placements, remand placements, alternative-to-custody placements, post-custody placements and intensive-support placements for young people who have become involved in serious and persistent offending. The service works closely with placing authorities and youth offending teams in the Wessex area.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Outcomes for the extremely vulnerable young people accessing the service are outstanding and the majority make significant progress in many aspects of their lives. During their placements young people are kept safe while they are helped to change their anti-social and often self-destructive patterns of behaviour.

The health and well-being of young people are carefully monitored and any identified needs are appropriately addressed. Young people are provided with access to specialist advice and guidance to address difficulties associated with mental health, drugs and alcohol, eating disorders and sexual health.

A strong safeguarding ethos permeates every aspect of the service and a well-developed range of policies, procedures and working practices keep young people safe. Procedures relating to the recruitment of both foster carers and social work staff are thorough and minimise the risk of unsuitable individual's gaining entry into the service. Young people said they felt safe in their placements and were aware how and to whom they could convey any worries or concerns. Young people's views are regularly sought on all aspects of their lives. Foster carers are pro-active in advocating on behalf of the young people in their care, many of whom face discrimination due to their previous behaviours.

The service operates with a group of experienced and dedicated foster carers who provide placements with clear behavioural boundaries that are consistently applied. Young people respond positively to the stability, security and support they receive in their placements and make significant progress in many aspects of their lives. This is reflected in the significant decrease in re-offending rates while young people are in placement. Foster carers are well supported by an extremely motivated staff team who are committed to, and succeed in, ensuring that the service responds effectively

to changing circumstances. The expertise of staff in working with young offenders is clearly recognised and a number of staff offer advice to government agencies on intensive fostering programmes. Although there is one recommendation arising from this inspection it is aimed at further improving the quality of a service that is judged to be outstanding.

Improvements since the last inspection

The two recommendations arising from the last inspection have been fully addressed. Young peoples files record the referral process and make clear how matching is determined. Membership of the fostering panel has been extended and panel members now include those with experience in the areas of health and education.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Although a young person can enter the service at very short notice direct from court, staff have become extremely adept at seeking out key information on which to determine an appropriate match. Every effort is made to ensure that foster carers are aware of any significant health or behavioural difficulties relating to the young person entering their care. Many of the young people entering the service have been living unhealthy lifestyles characterised by poor diets, a lack of exercise and the regular use of alcohol and drugs. Through health education, eating wisely and providing opportunities for regular exercise they are made aware of the importance of assuming responsibility for their own health. Young people participating in the intensive fostering programme adhere to a prescribed healthy living programme that requires them to refrain from smoking, drinking or consuming fast foods. A number of young people confirmed that since entering the service they had, 'given up smoking' and were now 'eating properly'.

The health of each young person is assessed during their placement and any issues identified are appropriately addressed. Young people are supported by their foster carers in accessing health services and a record is kept of all medical appointments and interventions. Foster carers are extremely effective in monitoring the health and well-being of the young people in their care on an on-going basis. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities regarding the administration of medication. They are pro-active in advocating on the part of young people and frequently question medical staff on the use of prescribed medication if they believe it no longer appears necessary. Referrals are frequently made to specialist mental health services to help young people address their emotional and psychological difficulties. An effective matching process ensures young people with disabilities are appropriately placed with foster carers with the knowledge and skills to meet their needs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Although foster carers are recruited from all sections of the local community, there are rigorous assessment processes which ensure inappropriate individuals, who may present a risk to young people, do not enter the service. The service sets high standards and there is an expectation that those embarking on a fostering career will be capable of providing high quality care to a diverse group of vulnerable young people. Social work staff clearly recognise the demands that can be made on foster carers and ensure that only those with the necessary attributes are invited to proceed to training and approval at panel. Action for Children's well established recruitment process ensures all prospective staff are subject to Criminal Record Bureau checks and have to supply suitable references and proof of qualifications, and undertake an interview.

The service's well-established safeguarding ethos permeates all its policies, procedures and working practices. Foster carers undertake safe care training that helps them understand and recognise the different forms abuse can take. Both foster carers and social workers are aware of their respective roles and responsibilities in reporting any protection concerns. Safeguarding is a standing agenda item on staff and carer supervisions and team managers' agendas. The service's child-centred approach ensures that staff remain focused on the specific needs of each young person. Staff regularly see young people on their own and unannounced visits are undertaken to all placements.

Risk assessments are extensively used to identify any known risks associated with each young person's behaviour. Individual safe care plans are drawn up for each placement and take into account the vulnerability of all members of the household. All those living in the home aged 16 and over have enhanced Criminal Record Bureau Checks. Safe care plans provide clear guidance for carers on the maintenance of appropriate behavioural boundaries. Many of the young people referred by the courts have restrictions that limit their ability to move freely in the community. Such restrictions help break established patterns of behaviour and greatly reduce young people's opportunities to re-offend. The service is extremely successful in identifying young people's vulnerabilities and in providing care and support that will keep them safe. The re-offending rates of young people in placement are extremely low.

During their placements, young people are helped to examine the risks associated with their own behaviours and develop self-caring practices relating to such things as peer pressure, use of the internet and substance misuse. Young people reported that bullying was not a significant problem and that they would report any issues of concerns to their carers. Appropriate action is taken if it is known that a young person is being bullied. Young people indicated they would convey any worries or concerns to their foster carers, social workers or teachers. Any disclosures are dealt with sensitively and the privacy and confidentiality of young people is respected.

Effective monitoring of placements ensure that any difficulties can be identified at

any early stage and support provided quickly. Good lines of communication have been established between foster carers, social workers, educationalists and therapists. Carers feel well supported and can access support and guidance at any time. The service has a well-established complaints process and foster carers and young people are made aware of how to raise any concerns. Any concerns about the conduct of foster carers are presented to the fostering panel for consideration.

There are well-established procedures to ensure that young people who go missing from care are reported. Foster carers try to determine the movements of young people who put themselves at risk and develop strategies that ensure they do not mix with those that could exploit them. When required foster carers liaise with local police to keep the young people in their care safe. Foster carers are successful in breaking patterns of behaviour that put young people at risk.

Regular monitoring visits and health and safety checks ensure carers' homes offer safe and welcoming environments for young people. The assessment determines if a property provides good quality accommodation and conforms with accepted health and safety guidance. All outstanding safety issues have to be addressed prior to any placement being made. Young people spoke in positive terms about their placements and felt they were being treated well and being kept safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The diverse nature of the service means that carers offer either short-term, long-term or fixed term intensive fostering placements. The service recruits foster carers for each of the specific groups. While every effort is made to ensure that all young people are appropriately matched with carers, the referral process for each of the groups is quite different. For example, all those entering the intensive fostering programme are subject to a detailed assessment and must sign an agreement to adhere to the strictures of the programme. This is in contrast to young people who are referred by the courts at short notice, who may be placed within hours. In each case the staff aim to ensure foster carers are provided with key information about the young person in their care so they can contextualise their behaviours and respond appropriately.

In an effort to minimise anxiety levels, young people are provided with profiles of their carers and the nature of their accommodation before entering their placement. Many of the young people experience social and emotional difficulties that inhibit their ability to establish and maintain relationships; foster carers help young people to begin to establish meaningful relationships. Young people said they were welcomed into carers' homes and encouraged to participate into all aspects of family life.

Carers have high expectations of young people and aim to ensure that they will make significant progress in all aspects of their development. The personal development goals of individuals are reflected in their placement plans. Positive

behaviour is reinforced with praise and rewards from foster carers and life skills coaches. Young people are encouraged to assume responsibility for their behaviour in a way that is appropriate to their age and understanding. Service staff provide foster carers with guidance on how to manage young people who present with challenging behaviour.

Young people are encouraged to participate in a range of social and recreational activities and currently participate in sea cadets, scouts, drama, art, horse riding, cooking, cycling and other outdoor activities. Participation in such activities raises self-esteem, resilience and confidence. Young people on the intensive fostering programme earn privileges to participate in leisure activities such as the gym, sports and cinema. In some instances a young person's leisure activities have developed into employment opportunities. For example, one young person's interest in horses has led to employment in the equine industry.

Many of the young people who enter the service have experienced disruption in their educational lives. The service tries to ensure that young people have access to appropriate educational opportunities during their placements. Although many young people have personal education plans, staff do not always find it easy to meet each individual's specific needs. The uncertainty surrounding the duration of remand placements in particular make it difficult to secure school and college places. The service addresses this problem by engaging young people in educational activities and by providing access to a tutoring service. Foster carers support young people in their educational placements by attending staff meetings and helping with homework. While the service clearly raises the educational horizons of many young people the current provision is not comprehensive and educational opportunities can remain limited.

Each young person's religious and cultural needs are identified as part of the initial assessment process and every effort is made to ensure they can be met during their placements. Life-story work is often carried out with young people to provide them with an understanding of their personal history and cultural background. Carers are forceful advocates for the young people in their care and ensure they have access to appropriate resources and opportunities.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The views of young people are regularly sought about all aspects of their care. Their views are obtained formally through looked after children reviews and questionnaires, and informally through discussions with foster carers, their social workers and service staff. Young people said they feel listened to and can exercise choice over such things as food, clothing and leisure activities. Young people are involved in the development of the service and for example, a group of young people recently came together with service staff to make the young persons guide more 'user friendly'. While the views and suggestions made by young people are taken seriously, in the case of intensive fostering and remand placements, the response by

foster carers and service staff is often restricted by the demands of the programme and directions from the courts. Foster carers and service staff are sensitive when explaining to young people why their wishes cannot always be met. On admission to the service all young people are made aware of how to raise concerns and make a complaint.

The primary purpose of the intensive fostering and prevention placements is to reduce anti-social behaviour and offending. Many of the young people engaged in such activities have low self-esteem and foster carers and service staff help them understand their past and the circumstances that led to them entering care. The service is extremely successful in keeping young people out of trouble and over the last twelve months no young people on the intensive fostering programme have reoffended whilst in placement. Although over 40% of young people on the preventative programme have reoffended, for most their offending has reduced in both severity and frequency.

During their placements young people are able to maintain appropriate contact with their parents and relatives. The views of young people, the courts, social workers and birth parents are taken into consideration in determining the frequency and duration of contact visits. Arrangements are clear, constructive and safeguard young people. Any restrictions regarding contact are made clear to all parties and plans are developed to ensure young people are not put at risk through meeting inappropriate adults. Contact visits are managed sensitively by foster carers and appropriate working relationships are established with birth parents. The intensive fostering programme aims for to return young people to their family homes when they graduate from the programme, and dedicated family workers meet with family members on a regular basis to this aim. The progress on the intensive fostering programme determines the frequency and duration of young peoples contact. Outcomes and young people's experiences of contact visits are monitored, recorded and discussed with relevant parties.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

A well-developed placement planning system ensures each young person receives the appropriate care and support necessary to prepare them for their adult lives. Pathway plans are developed in respect of all young people over the age of 15 years. Preparing for independence plays an important role within all the service's fostering programmes. During their placements young people are helped to develop a range of social and life skills and foster carers and staff use specially designed training materials to increase their knowledge and skills in managing money, holding a tenancy, preparing for employment and accessing education and training courses. An employability programme, supported by a number of large national companies, also provides opportunities for young people to access work-taster experiences. Young people confirmed that their independence training is good and a number felt it contributed to an increase in their self-confidence.

The service still supports a small number of young people who are in stable long term welfare placements. In most instances young people have been living with their foster families for more than 5 years. In a number of cases foster carers have either taken out special guardianship orders or converted to supported lodgings providers to enable young people to 'stay put' on reaching 18 years.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

A clearly written Statement of Purpose accurately describes the overall aims and objectives of the service and details the different types of fostering placements on offer. The statement is subject to regular review. On admission young people are provided with their own guide that outlines what they can expect from the service. A group of young people recently updated the guide.

The service operates with a settled team of enthusiastic staff all of whom subscribe to Action for Children's child centred focus. Robust recruitment procedures ensure that staff are appropriately vetted and suitable to work with young people. All staff are provided with job descriptions that detail their specific roles and responsibilities. The service operates within a culture of training and professional development that makes it, as one member of staff remarked, 'a very stimulating place to work.' The nature and scope of the service provides opportunities for staff to increase their knowledge and skills in many different areas. Regular supervision and staff meetings allow staff to engage in reflective practice.

The service offers care to many young people who have committed offences or who have been identified as being at risk of doing so. The service has successfully recruited a group of foster carers who are non-judgemental and accept young people for who they are, rather than what they have done. Foster carers and service staff are pro-active in advocating on behalf of the young people in their care and regularly challenge the prejudice directed toward young offenders.

Each foster carer has an allocated social worker who provides regular support and oversees their development as effective carers. Social workers and therapeutic staff help foster carers contextualise the behaviour of young people. Foster carers describe the support they receive as outstanding. Support includes regular supervisory meetings, support groups, respite care, social activities and extensive professional support. There is a strong management commitment to the continuous development of foster carers and they are expected to access the many regular training opportunities on offer, including the Children's Workforce Development Council's training programme. Foster carers feel that the service provides high quality training and this contributes significantly to their understanding of the many issues associated with young people in care.

The service has been subject to a structural re-organisation since the last inspection and it is now managed by one, (previously two), manager. Under the new arrangements the manager is supported by two experienced team leaders who

provide additional leadership and support. The new management team ensure that the service's comprehensive policies and procedures are translated into effective working practices that address the needs of young people. The management team closely monitor all aspects of the service and are continuously briefed by staff on how foster carers are coping and the progress the young people in their care are making. An inclusive culture, based on respect and empowerment, means all interested parties are involved in the development of the service. There is a holistic approach to meeting young people's needs. Policies, procedures and working practices explicitly promote diversity and equality.

Although the service, like many others in the current economic climate, is facing financial restraints, savings have been carefully identified to ensure they do not adversely effect the quality of care provision. Staff and foster carers feel the service is being efficiently managed and resources appropriately utilised. The service has an effective foster carers' payment system that deposits funds directly into foster carers' accounts. Prompt payment and additional allowances contribute toward placement stability and good outcomes for young people.

The service offers both planned and emergency placements. Staff aim to ensure that young people are matched with carers who can keep them safe and meet their specific care needs. A high level of placement stability indicates young people are appropriately matched. While the service has effective systems for allocating and managing placements, difficulties and challenges can be caused by external factors, such as court proceedings, over which they have little control.

The service operates with an effective fostering panel, that is appropriately constituted and exercises its functions in accordance with statutory guidance. The panel demonstrates robust quality assurance. There is a strong emphasis on safeguarding and ensuring positive outcomes for young people. Evidence indicates panel members effectively challenge proposals and will make decisions based on the best interests of young people. The panel provides regular feedback to social workers and their team leaders in relation to their presentations and analysis. The panel has complimented staff on the quality of their assessments. The fostering panel seeks feedback from foster carers and their social workers about their experience at panel. A number of carers indicated that they had been apprehensive about their appearance at panel, but had been put at their ease and treated with respect throughout the process.

There is a well-established and effective complaints system and all allegations are appropriately reported and investigated. An independent support and advocacy service is provided to carers who are the subject of an allegation. Any significant issues arising result in a review of existing practice within the service.

The premises and administrative arrangements meet the service's needs. Although the service currently records information on both paper and a computer based information system staff were clearly aware of how to both record and access key information. The service is moving toward a wholly computer-based information system that will eradicate unnecessary duplication. Records examined contained

recent and relevant information that is written in clear and concise language.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure young people have access to a range of educational resources to support their learning and have opportunities beyond the school day to engage in activities which promote learning. (NMS 8)