
The Adolescent and Children's Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Marina Tully, Mandy Williams and Sharon Lloyd
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Provision subtype

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Registered person The Adolescent And Children's Trust
Registered manager Post Vacant
Acting Manager Jonathan Broadhurst
Responsible individual Andrew Elvin
Date of last inspection 14/12/2012

Service information

Brief description of the service

The Adolescent & Children's Trust (TACT) is a charity and an independent fostering agency. The head office is in London and there are nine regional offices across England, Scotland and Wales. The Liverpool office covers the North West of England. The agency provides emergency, short-term and permanent placements for children and young people. At the time of inspection, there were approximately 33 approved fostering households caring for 53 children and young people.

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**

Children benefit from living in a safe nurturing family environment. Their needs are effectively addressed and they experience improved outcomes in all areas of their development. Many children benefit from permanent placements and enjoy a stable, secure, happy family life.

Foster carers feel well prepared and trained for their fostering role. What is more, they feel valued and part of a team. They benefit from a supportive professional relationship with agency staff. A newly approved foster carer commented 'they (the agency) have exceeded our expectations. We have visits from our social worker every three to four weeks. We can call them anytime.'

Foster carers' assessments are analytical and detailed; providing a comprehensive picture of their lives and backgrounds. Furthermore, the fostering panel provides effective quality assurance to ensure that only appropriate people are approved to foster.

The agency has established positive working relationships with partner organisations, such as placing social workers and commissioners. This has led to effective collaborative working where positive outcomes for children are achieved.

Children's safety is a priority. Serious safeguarding concerns, including missing from home and child sexual exploitation (CSE), are rare. When they do occur, effective partnership working with other safeguarding bodies, such as the police and specialist CSE teams, reduces harm.

Foster carers and staff report that leaders are visible, approachable and provide them with good advice and support. The newly appointed manager demonstrates commitment to the continued development of the service and has clear plans to drive the service forward. His priorities include foster carer recruitment; increased foster carer and child participation; and continued placement stability.

We found some administrative shortfalls relating to: notifying Ofsted of significant events; staff recruitment; the statement of purpose and children's guide; service monitoring; and the detailing of agency decisions.

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 with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Provide a copy of the statement of purpose to the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 3(2))	18/12/2015
Ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to persons employed by the fostering service in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. Specifically in relation to a full employment history and satisfactory written explanation of any gaps in employment. (Regulation 20(3) & schedule 1)	18/12/2015
Ensure that if any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the	18/12/2015

<p>registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. Specifically in relation to notifying Ofsted. (Regulation 36(1))</p>	
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Recommendations

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

- Ensure there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. Particularly in monitoring children's records to ensure they are accurate; and the monitoring and evaluation of children's progress. (NMS 25.1)
- Ensure that in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination that the agency decision maker lists the material taken into account in reaching their decision; identifies the key arguments; is satisfied that the panel has properly addressed the arguments; is clear if they have had sight of any additional information; and identifies their own reasons for their decision. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.40)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children's life chances significantly improve due to the care and support they receive from dedicated, nurturing foster carers. Children's safety and welfare is a priority; they confirm that they feel happy, settled and safe. Through effective care, nurture and affection they form strong attachments with their fostering families. All of this enhances children's self-esteem and emotional resilience and prepares them well for adulthood.

Keeping birth children together is a key strength of this agency. Many children benefit from living in a settled family environment with their brothers and sisters. This further supports their emotional security and sense of well-being. Siblings who live together were extremely positive about the care and support they receive, a little boy said: 'I really like it here. We do lots of nice things like going on our bikes. We all went on holiday to Thailand.'

Children's educational outcomes improve because foster carers and supervising social workers work effectively with schools and colleges. A head teacher commented: 'They (foster carers) very much work with us, just like any good parent would. They fight the children's corner and have forged a really good relationship with the school.'

All children are settled in education. Both the agency and children have high aspirations for their future, including going to university. A young person proudly explained: 'I did my GCSEs last year and did better than I expected. I was really pleased. I had extra tuition at school and I got a C in my maths and English.'

Children benefit from improved physical and emotional health. Foster carers ensure that children attend all routine health appointments and annual health assessments. When necessary, children are referred to specialist teams, such as child and mental health services (CAMHS). Waiting times for this service vary, depending on the individual health authority. However, the agency has funded private therapy for some children waiting to access this service. This is ensuring that they benefit from emotional support and guidance in a timely way. Which in turn, is helping to achieve placement stability as children learn safer coping strategies.

The agency promotes children's contact with their birth families. Children enjoy their contact, know the arrangements and understood the reasons for any restrictions. This positive contact is ensuring that children sustain important attachments with birth family members. Furthermore, it is helping them to develop a clear understanding of their backgrounds and identity.

Children enjoy a wide range of leisure activities. Their hobbies and interests are harnessed and supported by their foster carers. Activities, such as family holidays, scouts, cubs, dance groups and celebrations are encouraging children to engage with their peers and develop essential social skills. Foster carers demonstrate a proactive approach to promoting social opportunities and activities for children in their care.

This is helping children to grow in confidence, make new friends and develop new interests and skills.

Children feel that their foster carers listen to them and they confirm being involved in making decisions about their care. They are included in their foster carer reviews and complete a consultation form where they share their thoughts on the care they receive. One child commented: 'I am happy with my placement and I get on well with my foster carers. I have the opportunity to see my friends and go out at weekends.'

The region lost their children's resource worker three years ago. This led to a decline in the children's participation group as they had less opportunities to meet. However, the new manager has put children's participation back on the agenda and steps have been taken to resume this group. Two supervising social workers have been assigned to lead on this initiative and two meetings have been held. Despite this being a newly formed group, they already have plans to develop the service. For example, they are devising a foster family welcome pack, which all carers will keep in their homes. This will provide useful information to children moving into their new foster homes.

The agency takes steps to provide children with information about their foster families before they move in. Each fostering household prepare a written profile, including photographs, which should be given to all children prior to them moving in. When followed, this helps children to overcome the fears of living with 'strangers' and, thus, supports them to settle in quickly. These arrangements, however, are not yet fully effective because it solely depends on the placing authority passing the information on to the child. Some foster children reported that this did not happen. The manager and staff fully recognise the importance of achieving this for all children and the introduction of the foster carers welcome pack will support this once fully in place.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The recruitment and retention of foster carers is high on the agency's development agenda. Since the last inspection in December 2012, approved fostering households have decreased from 42 to 33, with a noticeable shortage in black and minority ethnic foster carers. Some carers have left through retirement and others have moved to larger agencies who offer financial transfer incentives. The new chief executive officer has taken this in hand and established a national recruitment team, whose remit is solely to recruit new foster carers. Furthermore, on a local level, the manager has pioneered a word of mouth campaign with experienced foster carers support. So far, this has proven to be effective. Three of the five new families, currently being assessed, have come from this campaign.

The preparation, assessment and approval of foster carers is thorough and timely. Assessments are detailed and evaluative; focusing on the core skills and

competencies essential to fostering. Foster carers speak positively about their preparation and approval experience and confirm a rigorous process.

The agency has an appropriate central list of fostering panel members. The panel chair and vice chair are independent of the agency and suitably experienced. Although panel provides effective quality assurance and vetting of foster carers. Panel minutes do not consistently reflect the complexity and depth of discussions held. Furthermore, the agency decision maker does not always make it clear what documents he has read to inform his decisions. Neither does he clearly document the reasons for his decisions. These are important factors to demonstrate robust scrutiny and transparency in decision-making about the suitability of carers.

Foster carers demonstrate commitment to the children in their care and work hard to make them feel part of their family. Respite is only used to support placement stability. Children enjoy all the benefits of family life, including family outings, celebrations and holidays.

Foster carers receive ongoing training and support. Each fostering household have completed the training support and development standards within the required timescale. Foster carers speak highly of the training provided by the agency, particularly the 12 week fostering changes programme that addresses a wide range of relevant areas, including, attachment, behaviour management strategies, and improving children's learning. Training is also bespoke to children's specific needs; for example, some carers have attended foetal alcohol syndrome training. This ensures that foster carers are fully equipped with relevant knowledge and skills to meet children's wide ranging needs.

Effective professional support is enabling foster carers to provide high quality care. Partnership working with placing social workers is ensuring that placements are well planned, appropriate and needs led. Foster carers are viewed as important team players in the care planning process; their views are valued by the agency and placing social workers. This is reflected in a placing social worker's and reviewing officer's comments: 'I am more than happy with the care provided. The carers have made dramatic changes in the children's lives.' 'I cannot fault the carers. All four children are doing really well. They have made sure the children are kept together; this is a huge strength of the agency.'

Foster carers speak highly of their support and professional supervision. Regular visits from the agency social workers, support groups and telephone contact ensures that they receive appropriate guidance and support. Not only does this help build foster carers confidence and resilience, it promotes a sense of belonging to the agency. Foster carers have 24-hour support, including the out of hour's duty service. Foster carers value this support at times of crisis, knowing there is always someone at hand. The region benefits from having two foster carer representatives who communicate their views to senior managers. Although the manager has only recently evaluated its effectiveness, it is a positive step towards improving how foster carers influence agency decisions.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children's welfare is effectively safeguarded by a skilled and competent team. The trusting relationships that children develop with their foster carers helps them to confide in them. Children's safety is further enhanced by the agency social workers, who know the children extremely well and build positive relationships with them. This is achieved through regular visits to the foster home at times when children are present. A little boy explained how the agency social worker brought him some tomato seeds, from which he grew his 'own plant'. This demonstrates the level of commitment that staff have to forging trusting relationships with children; providing them with an additional trusted person to talk to.

Foster carers are trained in safeguarding matters, including E-safety and child sexual exploitation (CSE). This enables them to recognise such risks and develop strategies for tackling them. For example, foster carers, when necessary, regularly monitor children's mobile phones as a means of preventing unsafe people from contacting them. Clearly, this training is providing foster carers with the knowledge, skills and confidence to appropriately intervene and safeguard children.

High risk taking behaviour, including CSE and missing from home are extremely rare. Effective collaborative working with partner safeguarding agencies, including the police, social workers and specialist CSE workers, is further enhancing children's safety and developing their own awareness of risk.

In the main, child protection matters are reported to the relevant professionals in line with the agency and local protocols. On two occasions, however, foster carers did not follow agencies procedures; for instance, there was a delay in notifying the agency social worker. Additionally, the quality of children's individual safer caring plans is variable. Some lacked detail, including identified risk, triggers to behaviour and clear child protection guidance. These shortfalls have had no direct impact on children's safety or welfare. However, it demonstrates inconsistencies in the quality of some agency records and gaps in record monitoring.

The agency responds appropriately to allegations made against foster carers. They liaise fully with the relevant local authority safeguarding officer and work in partnership with children's social workers. This ensures that a full and thorough investigation is undertaken in a timely manner. On occasion, however, the manager has not notified Ofsted of such incidents, which prevents its regulator from evaluating the agency's handling of serious allegations and complaints.

To further enhance children's safety, improvements can be made in the agency's recruitment of staff. Some staff's employment histories had not been appropriately recorded on their application forms which prevents a complete exploration of any employment gaps.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Within the last twelve months, there have been significant changes in leadership and management within the agency. Including, the recruitment of a new chief executive officer, director/responsible individual and manager. Both staff and foster carers spoke positively about these changes and reported a more 'proactive' approach to service development.

The manager joined the agency, initially as the deputy, in May 2014. He was promoted to manager in May 2015 and is in the process of registering with Ofsted. He has extensive experience of working in fostering services, including management, and is undertaking the level 5 management qualification. He recognises the strengths of the service and the areas for further development.

Despite being new in post, the manager has already taken measures to drive the service forward. For example, he has taken steps to recruit a more diverse range of foster carers, including those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Once embedded, this initiative will lead to an increase in placement availability, and choice, for these children.

The agency has developed positive relationships with social workers and commissioners, who speak highly of the service. They are particularly positive about the effective partnership working with birth families and adoptive parents. Which has led to children being successfully reunited with their families and introduced to permanent families.

Staff feel very well supported. They receive regular individual and group supervision, as well as attending team meetings and reflective practice sessions. Supervising social workers have manageable caseloads. This ensures that they have time to focus on developing the service, such as establishing a children's participation group and leading on foster carer training. Consequently, foster carers and children benefit from meaningful support from a settled and competent team.

The statement of purpose is up-to-date and provides a clear picture of the service's aims and objectives. It is available on the agency's website, which is currently being updated. However, a copy of the updated statement of purpose and children's guide has not been provided to Ofsted. This prevents the regulatory body from obtaining a clear and current overview of the service's ethos, facilities and team.

The manager and staff are able to demonstrate, on an individual basis, children's progress and positive outcomes. However, current monitoring systems do not enable easy access to a strategic overview of children's progress in all aspects of their development. Monitoring systems can improve to assist the manager identify gaps and further enhance children's outcomes and experiences.

While there are clear improvements in the manager's monitoring of service records, errors in some children's details, such as dates of birth and ethnicity, have not been

picked up. This means that some children's identity is not accurately reflected on their files.

A requirement raised at the last inspection has not been sufficiently addressed. Ofsted has not been notified of all significant safeguarding incidents, including allegations made against foster carers. This does not ensure the regulator can fulfil its regulatory functions in monitoring the effectiveness of the agency's response to safeguarding concerns. Furthermore, the recommendation in respect of how the agency records decisions when approving foster carers, has not been sufficiently met.

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 and 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. Inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.