

The Adolescent and Children's Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Sandra Jacobs-Walls
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Service information

Brief description of the service

The service is based in south London and operates as a fostering branch office of The Adolescent and Children's Trust. The service provides a range of placements for children and young people aged from birth to under 18 years.

The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers. The service works with the local authority to offer foster placements to children and young people on a planned or emergency basis, for short and long term duration, and for respite care. The service also offers mother and baby placements and foster care placements that allow siblings to remain together. Other services include outreach support to children and their families and input from other disciplines such as psychology and play therapy.

At the time of the inspection the fostering service had 53 approved foster care households, 107 approved places, with 56 children and young people in placement.

The service continues to develop and expand the very successful recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers and placements in Hampshire and surrounding areas.

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**.

This fostering service offers a good quality service to looked after children. The outcomes for children and young people are positive. The fostering service provides stable placements which are well supported. There are very few unplanned endings of placements. Children and young people are well matched with their carers and their individual needs are generally very well met. Children and young people are effectively supported in line with their local authority plans and are making good progress.

The fostering service facilitates effective consultation with children, young people, foster carers and other stakeholders. This ensures that a range of viewpoints, both internal and external help shape the development and improvement of the service.

Safeguarding practice and monitoring is a priority in this fostering agency. There are effective, proactive systems in place to ensure that children and young people are kept safe from harm or abuse. Thorough assessments of foster carers' skills are conducted and robust risk assessments are carried out. These ensure that children and young people's welfare is promoted and that they experience positive outcomes.

The support of foster carers is excellent. Equally, the staff team are well supported and supervised to ensure placements fully meet the identified needs of children and young people. Staff's partnership working with internal and external professionals is effective and this promotes the careful co-ordination of care. Staff and foster carers have access to quality training opportunities, which enhances their existing skills and knowledge. The fostering panel is highly organised and efficiently run.

Leaders and managers provide very strong leadership and have a clear vision for the service. The fostering service is well managed, and there are strong quality assurance systems in place. The Registered Manager is very experienced and the entire staff team know the children and young people very well. Leaders regularly and efficiently monitor the progress they are making. All staff are very committed to ensuring the very best outcomes for children and young people in their care. Managers are very accessible and approachable to foster carers, staff, and children and young people alike. All those involved in the agency have high ambitions for future service development and continued improvement.

Two requirements and two recommendations have been made as a result of this inspection. These are in relation to the recording of information, health care planning, staffing patterns and foster carer training.

Areas for 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.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
11 (2011)	ensure that the welfare of children placed with foster parents are promoted. In particular that fostering staff maintain comprehensive case records. (Regulation 11(a))	01/09/2014
17 (2011)	provide foster parents with such training and advice as appears necessary in the interest of children placed with them. In particular for foster parents to complete mandatory, core agency training (Regulation 17(1))	01/12/2014

Recommendations

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

- promote children's physical, emotional and social development needs. In particular by staff's consistent completion of health care plans (NMS 6.1)
- review the fostering service's staffing patterns to ensure the service is staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible child care (NMS 17.5)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The experiences, progress and outcomes for children and young people are positive. Children and young people are very well cared for by the service and receive care that meets their specific identified needs. The fostering service's referral and placement negotiation processes are robust, ensuring that only the very best possible placement is offered and is one that can adequately meet identified needs. Where placements cannot be well matched, the service readily declines to accept the referral. As a result negotiated placements are positive, stable and well sustained. Children and young people feel that they belong, feel part of the family and develop good attachments, usually for a significant length of time. One young person states, 'My first impression? I was happy. X helps me; she is supportive and really cares for me. I am comfortable here, I like my room. I have everything I need'.

Young people are well matched with their foster carers who understand their needs and what is required to ensure placement objectives are achieved. Children and young people receive very clear information about the fostering service and what they should expect while in placement. For example it is the role of the service's

children's resource workers to explain and explore with looked after children the contents of the fostering service's children's guide. The service produces two children's guides; one for the use of primary aged children and the other for older young people. These documents are clear with creatively designed, age appropriate information to support and settle children and young people into their new families.

Children and young people have access to a range of opportunities and support that promotes their positive development. For example, children and young people have access to the service's play therapist, psychologists and an educational specialist to help address placement and individual issues and difficulties. These typically include issues of attachment, risky and challenging behaviour, peer engagement and life story work. Additionally, children and young people benefit from the input of the fostering service's children's resource worker. The post holder works directly with young people to explore a very wide range of key issues. These include the development of young people's independent skills, to assist in motivating young people to take greater responsibility for their lives and to engage them in positive community activities.

Children and young people have good access to family members, friends and others when it is safe for them to do so. Arrangements for contact are carefully managed by the fostering agency with a consistent focus on the impact and the best interest of children and young people. Children and young people have access to information written about them by the fostering service. There are clear procedures in place to facilitate access to relevant information and children and young people are aware of the necessary processes.

Children and young people have excellent opportunities to express their wishes, feelings and views. This is a clear strength of the service. Children and young people understand that throughout the organisation, all involved are keen to involve them in shaping the agency and assist in influencing the care they receive. For example managers of the fostering service, senior managers and trustees of the organisation make themselves available to meet with children and young people to ascertain their views. The organisation facilitates pro-active participation groups, which recently have attended parliamentary forums to share their views and opinions about being in public care. Periodically the fostering service co-ordinates activity based consultation days for children and young people in their care. The fostering service facilitates written survey questionnaires and face-to-face interviews to obtain feedback this ensures that children and young people have an influence in the services they receive. Children and young people feel listened to by everyone within the organisation. They know they are important and feel important.

Children and young people also know whom to approach if they are unhappy or dissatisfied. They indicate that the literature staff share with them helps their understanding of how complaints are made. They feel confident any complaint will be taken seriously and managed justly. Young people do not experience bullying or other forms of discrimination while in placement.

Children and young people's identity needs are very well met by the service and at

all levels, issues of equality and diversity are well explored. For example, as required, children and young people have access to translation and interpreting services to ensure any language barrier is minimised. Children and young people are encouraged to explore and celebrate individual faith practices and placements are supportive in helping looked after children understand their backgrounds and the events that have happened to them. As a result children and young people have increased self-confidence and self-esteem.

Children and young people are prepared for, and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their potential and achieve economic well-being. Foster carers provide all children and young people with creative opportunities to take measured risks and to learn independence skills. These are appropriate to their age and ability. Early in the placement start, children and young people are encouraged to develop practical skills and emotional strategies to support them taking personal responsibility for their actions and behaviour. Input from the agency's play therapist and psychologists assist with children and young people in this aspect of their development. In relation to developing independence, older young people benefit from the service's 'Skills For Life' course which is a structured 5 day summer programme offering practical skills development such as CV writing, interviewing for employment, personal safety and managing money matters.

Children and young people live healthy lifestyles and their physical, emotional and social well-being is well managed. Children and young people living with complex disabilities receive excellent health care services. All children and young people have full access to the necessary health professionals and resources to ensure their health needs are met. These include for example, diabetic nurses, consultant paediatricians, sexual health clinics, drug and alcohol workers and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Children and young people have current health care assessments in place, however, staff do not consistently complete health care plans. This is important to better ensure that all health care needs are clearly identified and that required health care services are efficiently co-ordinated. Children and young people benefit from the hard efforts of their foster carers to ensure they remain healthy. Children and young people enjoy well-balanced, nutritious diets, that meet their cultural and religious needs, undertake healthy exercise if they wish, and have support to cease unhealthy habits such as drug and alcohol use.

All children and young people are engaged in learning activities. Most have good school attendance and are making good educational progress. Children and young people benefit from early development and learning through play and pre-school clubs, and receive support to attend appropriate or specialist school. Children and young people make good progress as a result of their foster carers keen interest and involvement in their education attainment. For example, foster carers attend parent evenings and other school activities, their facilitation of homework as well as their liaison with other professionals. Foster carers are confident in meeting the educational needs of children and young people and are supported in this task by supervising social workers. All foster carers have good local knowledge of their educational authorities and are involved in the personal education plan (PEP) process and attend planning meetings for individual children placed. Children and young

people enjoy celebrating their achievements and success with their foster carers and the organisation as a whole at periodical celebratory events. This acts as further motivation for children and young people to aim high in their ambitions.

Children and young people participate in a wide range of recreational activities that largely community based. They greatly enjoy the organisation's regular school break holiday and summer leisure activities such as 'the 'Big' and 'Little' weekends that provide creative activities for the entire family.

Children and young people have a great sense of belonging in their foster families. One adult son of a foster carer comments: I get on really well with all the young people. I try to involve them with local activities. We do lots of stuff like ice skating, bowling, football. It's really nice having them around and a part of the family'.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The quality of care offered by the fostering service is good, and this significantly contributes to the positive experiences and progress made by children and young people. Foster carers enjoy sound relationships with children and young people in their care and are committed to supporting them to meet their full potential. One foster care comments 'I love having them with me. Watching them grow from when they first arrived to happy children. As it should be'.

The agency ensures prospective foster carers are robustly recruited and assessed to ensure they can safely meet the needs of children. Assessments are comprehensive and analytical and identify the competencies and strengths foster carers have or need to develop. Preparation and assessments are thorough and conducted with appropriate depth and rigor. Most assessments and approvals have been completed within eight months of the foster carers application. Where this is not the case there are valid reasons.

Foster carers receive good quality support from staff through regular visits, telephone calls, supervision and support groups. Foster carers feel highly valued within the agency. They feel a key strength of the agency is the support they receive to achieve positive outcomes for children and young people. All feedback received from foster carers has been extremely positive. One foster carer states, 'The best thing about TACT? Everything! I've had three placements in 10 years and I get total respect from TACT. I feel valued - I feel like I belong with TACT'.

Another foster care comments, 'My experience with TACT has been very positive. I wouldn't change a thing. I feel like a part of a family. They know their carers; you can't fault the level of support we get'.

The fostering service recognises the importance of training and offers a very wide ranging programme of training. This ensures foster carers receive continuous professional development opportunities. Most foster carers are very experienced and

bring with them a wealth of knowledge and skills. A large number of foster carers have undertaken the Training, Support and Development (TDS) Standards. All new carers are also working towards completing the TDS standards in order to increase their professional practice. Foster carers are extremely complimentary about the training provided by the fostering service, but some acknowledge that they do not attend training as consistently as required. Managers of the service acknowledge this as an issue for the service, and continue to try to remedy it.

The service's fostering panel is effective, efficient and well managed with strong leadership via the chairperson. There are clear written procedures in place that support practice. The fostering panel has a clear and effective quality assurance role and has influence in a wider context within the fostering service, such as policy development.

Children and young people are carefully matched to their foster placements to ensure that individual needs are identified clearly and met. There is a formal process to ensure that appropriate matching is taking place. This process successfully identifies any gaps and provides additional support, resources and training that are needed to support the foster carers and the young person's placement. The agency requires comprehensive information to help them and the foster carers make the most appropriate placements. Foster carers are very much involved in this process. One foster care comments 'We read between the lines of the information the local authority sends. If we think there is more to it, we send our social workers back, to get the full picture'. In turn, the fostering team share clear, relevant information with placing authorities and young people. The specific needs of children and young people are consistently considered during the matching process and throughout the duration of the placement.

The fostering service's careful matching processes directly contributes to placement success and stability. A local authority commissioner comments 'TACT is one of our preferred providers. Staff are always helpful in getting back to us when we make a referral - even when there are no appropriate vacancies. Staff provide full answers when questions are asked, and in an emergency, they are quick to respond. Generally placements are stable and sustained. The care offered from foster carers is quality; there is rarely an issue during placement planning and negotiation'.

Foster carers are committed to including children and young people within their family life and long-term arrangements are in place to provide permanence to young people. Partnership working is effective and foster carers understand their roles and accountabilities. They work with local authority social workers and supervising social workers within the agreed delegated authority. This ensures that timely decisions are made in the best interest of children and young people.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering service staff team and foster carers ensure that the safety and well-

being of children and young people is paramount. Foster carers are wholly committed to developing positive relationships with children and young people and generate a culture of openness and trust. Staff ensure that consistently, throughout each placement, children and young people's safety and well-being is regularly reviewed and monitored. Comprehensive placement plans, risk assessments and individual safe-caring policies, ensure changing needs are identified and strategies are put in place to address them. In relation to keeping young people safe and addressing risk-taking behaviour, one foster carer comments 'It's all about boundaries and structure. Boundaries, boundaries, boundaries. You need to put them in place first and help the young ones understand they are there for their safety and then let them learn and live within the structure you have set up'.

The agency has clear, comprehensive and effective policies and procedures in place to ensure that young people are safe. Foster carers and the fostering staff team are familiar with these procedures and act in accordance with them when required. The fostering service works in close partnership with local authorities to ensure they comply with local missing from home and care protocols. Incidents of young people missing from placement are low. A local authority social worker says of his experience of a child in placement going missing, 'He is safe. If he goes missing, G (the foster carer) follows procedures and alerts the police and EDT. She's trying to get to know his friends, to help locate him. She's been successful at this and prevents the involvement of the police unnecessarily. Its good crisis intervention'.

The fostering service has safeguarding and children and young people's safety and welfare at the forefront of all its work. As a consequence, child protection forms a significant part of the work undertaken in the recruitment, preparation, assessment and supervision of carers. Foster carers receive a range of safeguarding training, which starts during their Skills to Foster preparation course and continues throughout their fostering career. The staff team routinely ensure that supervisory visits explore and scrutinize issues of child protection as do staff case supervision sessions, foster carers annual reviews and Looked After Children's (LAC) reviews. Staff regularly interview children and young people in private to obtain their views of placement progress and issues. Staff consistently complete, at a minimum, one unannounced home visits to each fostering household per year. This is to further monitor the appropriateness and safety of fostering placements.

The fostering service has strong and effective working partnership with other agencies such as the police, education and health professionals which protect those children and young people who engage in risk-taking behaviour. This acts to promote an effective co-ordinated approach to safeguarding children and young people.

Allegations against foster carers are infrequent. When these occur they are handled with vigour and appropriately, in accordance with established child protection procedures. The fostering service's monitoring of such incidents is thorough and robust; managers ensure that any learning from allegations or any serious incidents are fully explored and shared within the staff team. A senior team member comments, 'We deal with allegations head on; we're honest and transparent in our management of any allegation'.

The fostering service has good systems in place for staff vetting and recruitment. These processes are well-organised and comprehensive. The organisation ensures that appropriate checks are carried out which confirm that staff, members of the central list and students are suitable to work with children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering service's Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and up to date. It accurately describes the service's operation and its facilities and is provided to interested parties as well as being available on the agency's website. The fostering service provides clear, creative and age-appropriate information to children and young people about its services. The two children's guides include advice about how to keep safe as well as information about complaints.

The fostering service has very clear managerial arrangements in place and regular, effective communication takes place with social workers and placing authorities. This effective partnership working between the parties enable the fostering service to ensure appropriate families are available to meet the needs of children and young people in need of fostering placements. A social worker new to working with TACT comments, 'I find the team very thorough. X has had two previous difficult placements which have broken down badly. Here he is settled, stable, happy. I got on immediately with the TACT social worker. She helped stabilize the placement, X needed stability. I'm very happy, I wish all my placements were this successful'.

The fostering service has highly effective newly developed quality assurance systems in place, which continue to be improved. This ensures that the fostering service is appropriately monitored and controlled. There is vigorous review and reporting of all aspects of the functioning of the service. This assists to identify potential shortfalls and offer effective remedial action where required. Robust monitoring systems enhance the fostering service's ability to continually improve outcomes and experiences of children and young people. The fostering service consistently provides Ofsted and other stakeholders with quality and performance data as required.

The fostering service has a systematic approach to recruiting foster carers. This is reviewed regularly to ensure effective methods are being used to attract carers with the right skills and qualities to meet the needs of children and young people. In recruiting foster carers, the agency clearly values quality as opposed to the quantity of carers and is very eager to promote placement stability and positive outcomes for children and young people. Currently there are creative plans in place to improve the fostering service's marketing strategy. There is a greater emphasis on innovative use of internet systems and social media. By far the most effective recruitment strategy is recommendations of existing approved TACT foster carers and by 'word of mouth'. The retention of foster carers is good. This is attributed to the keen level of support and training the fostering service provides and value it places on its foster carers. In turn, foster carers are highly appreciative of the role they play in service

development and improvement.

The fostering service is well resourced and is financially viable. The continued impressive development of fostering services in the Hampshire area is good illustration of the service's capacity to further expand while continuing to offer a quality service. As the service continues to successfully grow, some staff report existing staffing levels require review as the management of current workloads is becoming increasingly challenging.

The fostering panel provides an effective quality assurance function to support safe and secure placements. Legal and medical expertise is available to the panel as required. The panel chair is experienced, knowledgeable and provides effective leadership in encouraging members to challenge and rigorously consider approvals, reviews and deregistration. The panel administration is very efficient and members receive the papers in good time so they can give them their full consideration. Decision making is similarly prompt and effective. The fostering panel currently does not include a representative from child health. Panel meetings therefore do not benefit from regular contribution from this area of child development.

The premises and administrative systems are suitable to enable the fostering service to run smoothly. Currently the fostering service is working towards implementing of an improved IT system to better meet the recording and data needs of the service. Managers anticipate that improvements to the IT system will assist in streamlining and improving staff's documentation of information. For some identified staff, this is cause for concern. Managers continue to offer support and guidance to address any performance shortfalls.

Staff are appropriately qualified and extremely committed to providing excellent support to children and families. The Registered Manager is expertly skilled and experienced in managing the fostering team; her effort and commitment are commended by all those who spoke of her work her. One team member said of the Registered Manager, 'She is a skilled supervisor. She is a keen reflector and builds the theorist and reflector in me'.

All members of the staff team interviewed, including administrative staff and very senior, executive post-holders, demonstrate keen passion and enthusiasm for the work that they do within the organisation. The charity status of the organisation holds great meaning for staff and they genuinely share, at all levels, a common objective; to promote the best possible outcomes for children and young people they care for. A long serving member of the team comments, 'There is great, great energy here. Everyone wants to do a good job for families. The team is child focused, supportive and when something needs to be done, everyone steps up'. Another, newer member of the team states, 'I'm impressed by everyone's attitude. Managers are supportive and attentive to everyone. Very approachable. The manager's door is always open'.

Staff are supported through access to good training, regular supervision and reflective practice. The service is committed to supporting, valuing and developing

staff, who are actively encouraged to take responsibility for, and securing personal and professional development opportunities. This assists in enhancing staff's skills and knowledge of the fostering task.

The fostering service has a good track record of successfully addressing shortfalls identified at previous inspections. The service has a clear vision for its developmental path and demonstrates a commitment to ensuring the outcomes for children and young people are positive. The service has realistic plans in place to support its efforts to continue to offer quality care and enhance improvements to service provision.

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 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.