

At a glance

**A year of working with
Action for Children fostering,
adoption and short breaks**

2009/10

www.actionforchildren.org.uk

as long as it takes

Welcome

Working with passion, equality and hope

At Action for Children, we have a real passion. It's simple: we want every child and young person to achieve their full potential.

This report highlights how we put children and young people at the centre, what we have achieved over the last year, our innovations, best practice and our future direction. It also shares our thoughts about a more efficient, integrated offer to meet individual needs, and how we see government policy changing to meet the needs of children in care.

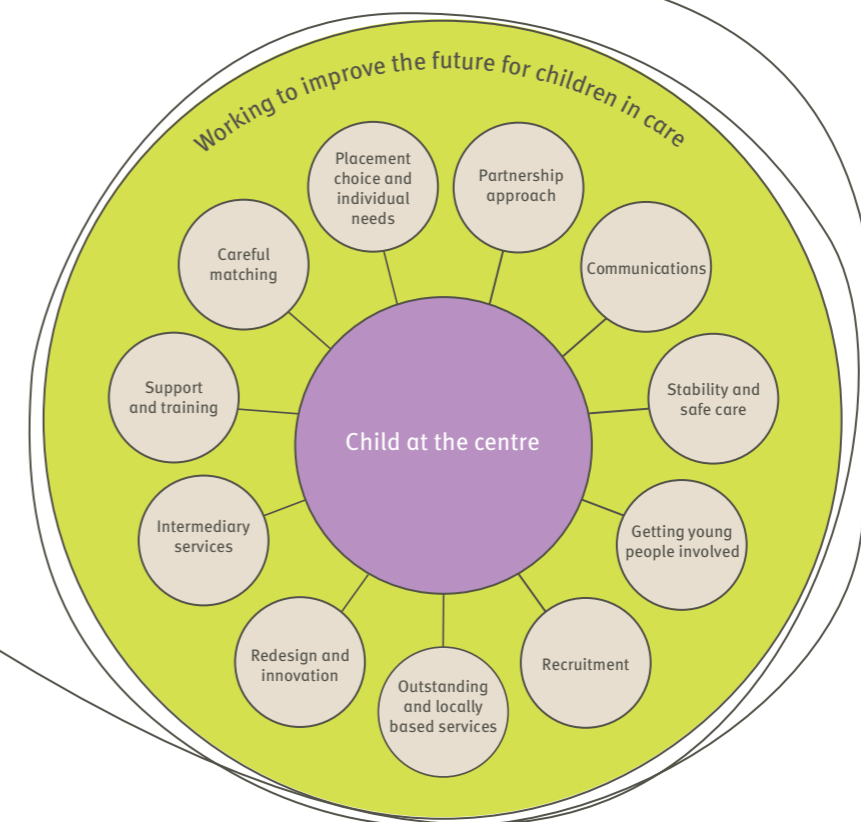
Our vision

We give hope to children who cannot live with their birth families, and are passionate about helping them to enjoy the same life chances as other children and young people, so they can achieve their full potential. Our vision for our services to children in care builds upon our aim that has stayed the same throughout our 140-year history: to meet the needs of the UK's most vulnerable and neglected children and young people.

Our values

Our organisation is guided by three values: passion, equality and hope.

Hugh Thornbery
Strategic Director of Children's Services



Putting the child at the centre

As a UK-wide children's charity, our goal is to always be there for the children and young people who need us. We are passionate about transforming young people's lives and are committed to a long-term approach rather than a quick fix. This is reflected in our work, shown throughout this report but also through the feedback we have received:

'The time dedicated to the child has significantly raised his self-esteem and self-confidence; an area that always was lacking. Since he left his foster placement I can see a dramatic improvement in his behaviour and his cognitive skills. He is thinking more about the consequences of his actions and has a strong determination to succeed in college on his course'

Placing social worker

Changes in placement choices for children in care

Fostering is the preferred option to meet the needs of children in care. In 2010, 73 per cent of looked after children in England were in foster placements and only four per cent in adoption. Across the UK, the number of fostering placements grew from 53 per cent in 2004 to 59 per cent in 2009. For disabled children and young people, the benefit of family-based short breaks to contribute towards meeting their needs is increasingly recognised.

Children in our foster care confirm this, telling us they would like us to recruit more foster carers, with one young person saying that fostering had been positive for him, and he wishes there were more carers so his brothers and sisters could have the same chance.

In 2009–10, we placed 229 children in foster families and 69 children in 53 adoptive families. Many of our children in fostering and adoption are older, may be challenging to others, are part of sibling groups or have disabilities or learning difficulties. Our family-based short breaks services had an average of 153 placements.

So what are we doing to support children and young people in care?

Focusing on stability and safe care

Many of the young people placed by Action for Children are statistically at high risk of placement breakdown, because of their experience and background. Many have had multiple moves in the care and education system. Working in partnership with the children and young people and their parents and carers means we achieve high levels of stability. We have robust systems in place to monitor the safety and quality of all our services.

'It makes me feel part of the family and is somewhere I feel safe and secure. And no matter what, we have ups and downs like a normal family'

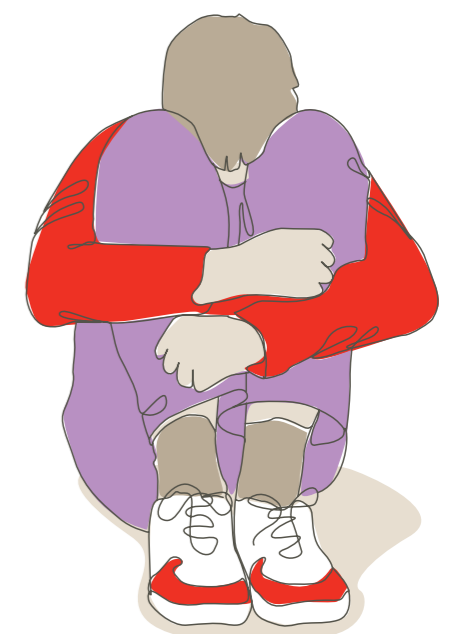
Child in our care

Responding to local needs with locally based services

We have strong local networks, which helps us to develop responsive services that are tailored to the specific needs of an area. Action for Children Fostering represents 15 separate fostering services and seven family-based short break services, across the four nations of the UK, varying in size and offering a range of placements.

We also have five registered adoption services based in England, providing recruitment, assessment and support services for local authorities. Our London service specifically finds placements for children from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, and we provide adoption support services in Kent, Gloucestershire and Somerset. In addition, we provide intermediary services to individuals who have been affected by adoption through Action for Children.

Disruption rates of only 6% for adoption and 14% for fostering demonstrate our exceptionally good record given the complexity of needs we meet



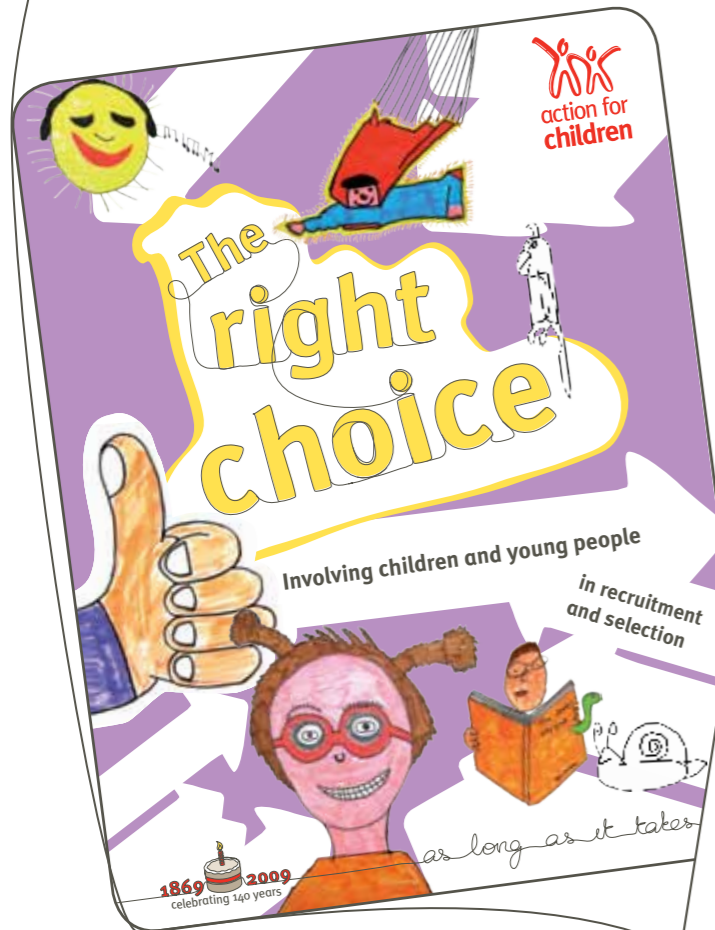
Getting young people involved

We have a long tradition of involving children and young people in making decisions that affect the services they receive.

Whether it's our ARTiculation programme giving young people a voice through performing arts, our Art Matters initiative to get children exploring their creativity, or working through locally based schemes, we provide a range of opportunities for children and young people to tell us what they think.

Our staff benefit from a national participation training programme. *The Right Choice* is Action for Children's guide to involving children and young people in staff recruitment.

Every year a satisfaction survey is sent to foster carers, placing social workers and children and young people. We use the results of this survey to take action and improve our service.



90% of our children and young people feel they can talk to their Action for Children social worker if they are unhappy



Case study

Artwork by Action for Children youngsters featured in the V&A Museum

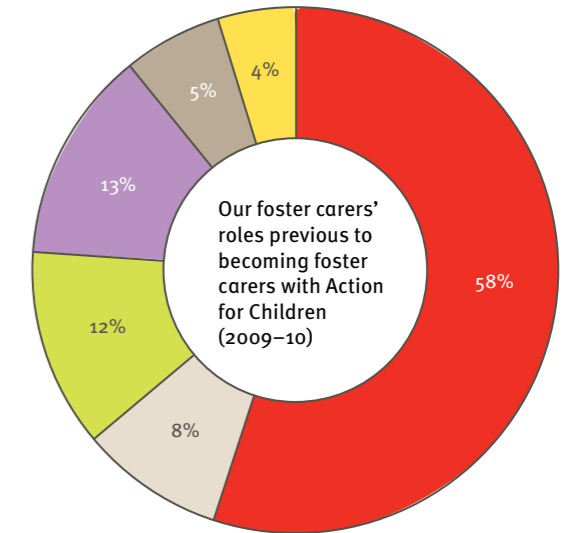
Youngsters from Action for Children projects across the UK have been having been making trips to London to see their own artwork displayed at the V&A, the world's greatest museum of art and design. The children and young people created artwork inspired by the V&A's major exhibition 'Maharaja: The Splendour of India's Royal Courts'.



This artwork was designed by the children of Action for Children Fostering, Wessex

Recruiting carers and adopters

We actively recruit carers and adopters from a variety of backgrounds, life experiences and skills, as shown in the graph below. Over the years, we have seen an increase in the number of people enquiring about and becoming foster carers.



- Foster carer
- Education
- Health
- Other public sector
- Social care
- Another

We have also been successful in encouraging diversity, by ensuring we recruit adopters that reflect the complex needs of the children and young people waiting for adoption:

- ▶ six same-sex couples approved
- ▶ fifty-five per cent increase in the number of adopters interested in sibling groups
- ▶ forty-four families from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background

Since 2007 we increased our pool of foster carers by 19%

We have 120 approved family-based short breaks households

Supporting and training carers and adopters

To ensure our children and young people achieve the best possible outcomes, we provide comprehensive support, training and supervision for carers.

This support helps to give carers the knowledge and expertise to be there for children and young people displaying behaviour that may be challenging, and it can help to prevent placement breakdown. It also helps to keep carers' levels of satisfaction with Action for Children high.

This support and training and the value we place on the carer role has a direct impact on the length of time foster carers are likely to stay with Action for Children:

- ▶ in England, 50 per cent of carers have worked with us for one to five years and 42 per cent for over five years
- ▶ in Scotland, 55 per cent have worked for one to five years and 28 per cent for over five years
- ▶ in Wales, 65 per cent have worked for one to five years and 22 per cent for over five years
- ▶ in Northern Ireland, even though the service has only been in action for a relatively short time, 65 per cent of carers have worked with us for one to five years

We provide comprehensive support services for all our approved adopters, as well as preparation and training for adopters both pre- and post-approval. In addition, we provide sessions for family and friends including individual work and counselling and advice on a wide range of external

services available to them. During the year, we provided:

- ▶ support for 74 adoption orders
- ▶ ongoing support for 69 children prior to making the adoption order
- ▶ 28 support groups and social events
- ▶ 143 post box arrangements

Careful and efficient matching of children to placements

Extensive research indicates robust matching processes are a key factor in placement success and positive outcomes. We always aim to place children in families that:

- ▶ reflect the young person's ethnicity where possible
- ▶ are close to their birth family (fostering only)
- ▶ can allow them to stay at the same school (fostering only)
- ▶ have the ability to manage their behaviour and will not suffer any potential trauma as a result of the child's background

'The foster carer has given 110% commitment. She is caring and nurturing; something the child has had little experience of. She understands the child and her way of working with him is excellent. It is very clear that the foster carer's main focus and motivation is his welfare and best interest. He knows that she genuinely cares for him. In my opinion, she is an exceptional carer'

'Very satisfied and then some! The foster carers have their own children and still managed to meet the child's needs in every way. They communicated effectively and worked as part of the core team to support her through a difficult period.'

Placing social worker

We have successfully met the National Adoption Standards targets by completing all our assessments within eight months. Our ability to meet these targets reduces the likelihood of delay.

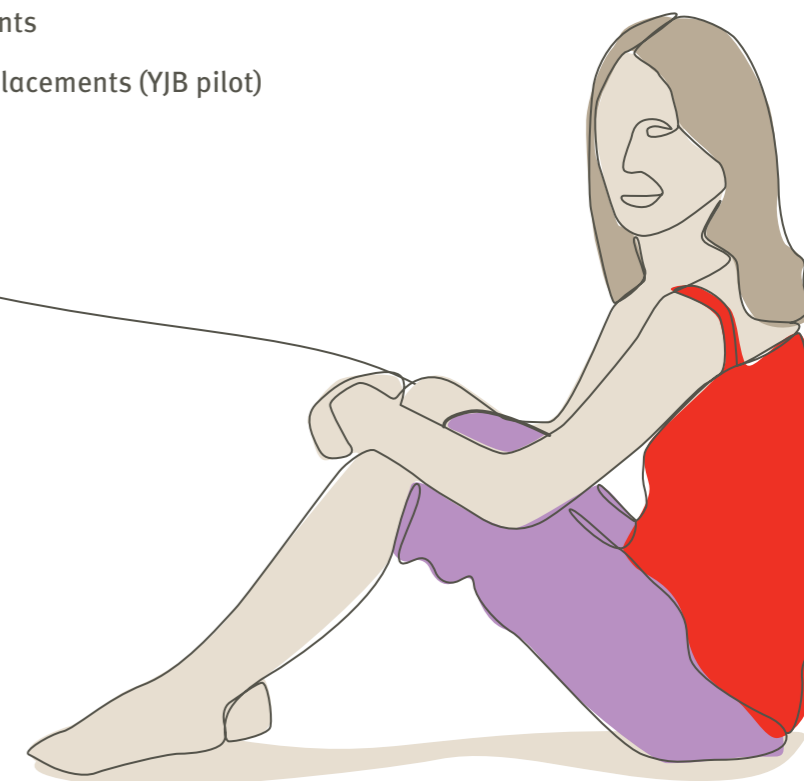
Offering placement choice and being responsive to individual need

We offer a range of high-quality placements that provide flexibility and choice for commissioners, so they can meet the complex and diverse needs of children and young people in care. This includes specialist models of care as required such as intensive fostering, such as Intensive Fostering (its captials though) and specialist adoption services for Black and minority ethnic groups.

We offer:

- ▶ short and long-term placements
- ▶ placements for non-disabled and disabled children and young people
- ▶ permanent placements
- ▶ time-limited placements
- ▶ family-based short breaks for disabled and non-disabled children and young people
- ▶ parent and child placements
- ▶ specialised placements
- ▶ Intensive Fostering placements (YJB pilot)
- ▶ remand placements

- ▶ youth justice placements
- ▶ placements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children
- ▶ adoption placements for a wide range of groups including siblings, older children, BME and children with disabilities
- ▶ family-based short breaks placements for children with a wide range of disabilities



Case study

Action for Children Wessex Community Project – intensive fostering

Action for Children Wessex Community Project had their first young person in an intensive fostering placement by March 2006. To date, 12 young people have graduated from the programme, fulfilling every requirement. All the young people have been in school, training or employment at the point of graduation, with the majority of young people moving on to suitable accommodation. The majority of young people who successfully graduated are now in full-time education, with many attending mainstream schools, training or full-time employment.

None of the young people who have successfully graduated have been found guilty of an offence committed while on the programme, with the majority of young people not committing offences after graduation either. Families have also given very positive feedback about the programme and how Action for Children works with them.

Providing outstanding services

We continuously strive to improve our services and achieve more for the children and young people in our care. A key indicator of this progress is our inspection results and positive feedback from placing social workers.

Scottish Care Commission results

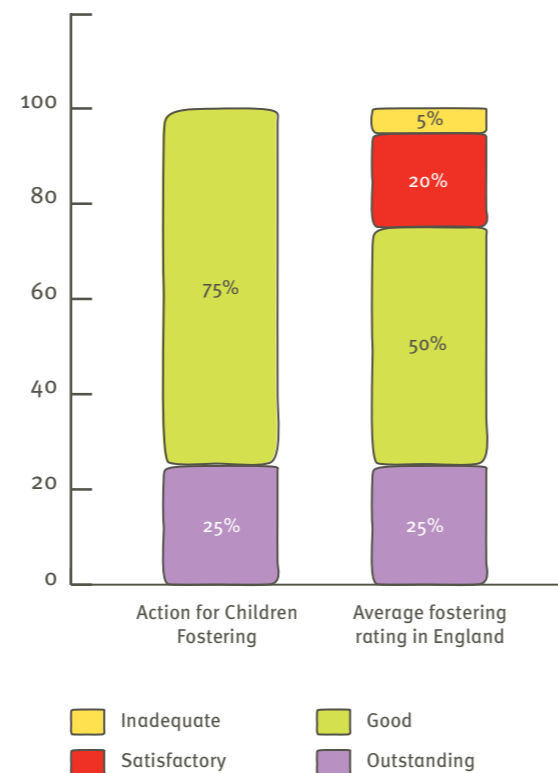
All our services gained a rating of ‘good’ or above. These findings were mirrored in a highly commendable report by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW). It stated:

‘The policy and procedure framework underpinning this agency is coherent and comprehensive. The management and staffing of the service is very experienced, committed and both progressive and child-centred in their approach to their work’

‘The agency had a highly experienced and qualified staffed team – all staff, including the support worker were qualified social workers. They worked well together as a team ... Support to carers was well developed and carers confirmed feeling well supported ... Very good opportunities for training and development for staff and carers’

England Ofsted results

Twenty-five per cent of our fostering services in England have achieved ‘outstanding’ Ofsted ratings and a further 75 per cent achieved ‘good’, exceeding the national average.



97% of placing social workers were happy with our service and almost 60% said they were ‘very satisfied’

‘There has been a real partnership between the two agencies. The support and communication has been good. I feel really positive about the way the placement has been managed for the young person. The teamwork and communication are key elements to this’

‘He has not offended since starting the programme and has a different belief system about criminal behaviour, and is even trying to deter his friends away from it’

Placing social workers

Comments on which part of Action for Children’s work placing social workers are most satisfied with include:

‘The communication and teamwork with all involved which lead to better outcomes for the young person’

‘Very insightful and responsive to the needs of the young person and difficulties. Anything we asked for as a placing authority you have produced as part of the service. The individuals involved have all been approachable and committed’

‘The young person is a very complex and damaged child who can be difficult and trying (and delightful). I am very impressed. I am very impressed by the way her behaviour is handled by the foster carers, ie in a therapeutic way as requested. I have never had reason to doubt that they are very focused on the young person’s needs and welfare at all times. Excellent support to the placement’

Placing social workers

Regular and straightforward communication

In addition to keeping commissioners fully informed about our placements and the progress children are making, we liaise closely with other professionals, foster carers and birth families to make sure we are all working collaboratively to meet the child’s needs.

This is achieved through:

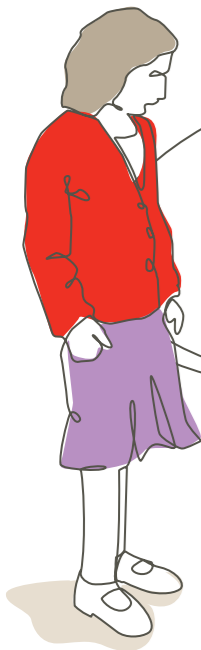
- ▶ contract meetings with commissioners
- ▶ care planning and reviews
- ▶ care supervision
- ▶ appropriate contract meetings
- ▶ foster carer newsletters
- ▶ information materials

‘Very clear and prompt communication’

‘Very tight exchange of information. There was teamwork between all adults involved in the care-giving. The child was aware that the adults were communicating and this gave her a sense of security. This ensures there was no drift and delay with decision making’

Placing social workers

94% of placing social workers were happy with the exchange of information between themselves, carers and Action for Children, with 64% stating they were ‘very satisfied’



90% of foster carers agreed they were happy with the way they were kept informed and 94% were happy with the telephone contact and correspondence from Action for Children

‘Good communication and working relationship and great support’

‘Can trust her and know she will always be there’

Action for Children foster carers

Redesigning and innovating our services

We are actively working to maintain our high-quality services, at the same time as achieving efficiency and looking at new ways to deliver cost-effective and integrated services. Some of the areas we are actively developing include:

- ▶ child and parent placements
- ▶ family recovery models and reunification
- ▶ supporting children and young people on the edge of care
- ▶ utilising volunteers through mentoring services
- ▶ integrated services for disabled children
- ▶ multi-disciplinary intensive services
- ▶ care and education packages

This view is shared by the children and young people in our foster care. They would like to see more foster families working with birth families to stop children and young people coming into care, and would also would like to see foster placements for children who have been in trouble with the police.

Case study

Looked after children and young people can have significant challenging and risk-taking behaviour, threatening the stability of their placement.

Action for Children helps support local authorities through managing services like Multi-disciplinary Intervention Service Torfaen (MIST), which offers a ‘wraparound’ therapeutic service. This service supports young people with complex needs who require considerable resources to help them. We provide intensive support to foster carers and intensive ongoing work with the young people themselves.

MIST supports carers in a variety of ways, including a 24-hour on-call service, ongoing advice and supervision, training and education. The service works therapeutically with the young people, using a variety of individual psychological therapies and activity-based inputs such as drama, music, art, as well as practical support, befriending and learning support. It works closely with all other professionals involved in each young person’s care, through consultation, liaison and joint direct work. The service has been externally evaluated and a report – *Moving into Maturity* – has been published. It is perceived as providing a highly valued resource that is producing positive outcomes for children and young people.

Case study

Parent and child placements

We understand that sometimes parents need somewhere to live where they can be supported. Our parent and child fostering placements can help these parents learn and develop better parenting skills. We keep focused on ensuring the right outcome for the child is achieved. These family-based placements involve placing a baby or child and one or both parents in a family home. There they will receive the support and guidance they need from a specialist foster carer. This kind of placement is usually a result of court proceedings.

Parents can be all ages and typically have chaotic and stressful lifestyles, which can have a negative impact upon their ability to parent their children well. Mental health, drug and alcohol misuse problems or learning disabilities are some of the issues they may face.

Comments from families that have benefited from the parent and child service include:

‘They are just a really nice and welcoming family. We have never felt so welcome. They did not make us feel across a boundary of ‘you there and us here’; instead they said that they wanted to help and support us. And the roasts were really special!’

‘Even if we had had a difficult day, and we were under pressure, she made us feel more confident and more comfortable. She said “how do you think you could have done it differently?” then we’d say what we thought we could have done, and she would say “yes, you could do that, or I would think you could possibly do this...” and so we would be thinking for ourselves instead of her telling us what to do’

Helping young people to transform their lives and achieve positive results

Through Action for Children’s outcomes framework, we identify with individual children and young people, carers and professional partners the outcome we are working towards and the steps we need to take on the way.

Where reported, some of the improved outcomes for children and young people in our care include:

- ▶ 71% have seen an improvement in physical health
- ▶ 70% have seen a reduction in the use of harmful substances
- ▶ 71% maintain a supportive relationship with significant other(s)
- ▶ 71% have their ethnicity or heritage needs met
- ▶ 70% have seen their communication skills improve
- ▶ 72% have seen an improvement in their practical life skills

Almost 94% of children and young people stated that living with their Action for Children foster carer had helped them, with 80% stating that it had helped them a lot



Almost 96% of children and young people stated that they were able to do things they enjoyed whilst living with an Action for Children foster carer

Activities children and young people said they enjoyed doing while living with our foster carers included:

‘Going out with friends, playing with carers’ children, seeing Dad, drawing, playing football, texting, guitar, TV, computer and shopping’

‘Everything!’

‘Swimming, ice-skating, pictures and many more – there is too many. Nearly everything and that’s why I love them, and not just because of that, it is also because they are caring and loving and that’s another reason why I love them so much’

Children and young people in our care



‘I feel safe and secure and like part of the family. They help if there is anything wrong’

‘The programme has changed me. It has helped me keep out of trouble’

‘I took the wrong road for a while but with all the help and support of everyone, especially my family, I have now got back on the straight and narrow and that’s the way I am staying as I hated seeing my mum upset. I could not put her through all that worry again’

‘My foster carer is caring and loving. Where I live is wonderful. She is cuddly like a soft teddy bear’

Children and young people in our care

Counselling and intermediary services

We provide counselling and intermediary services for the following groups of people:

- ▶ people who have been adopted through Action for Children
- ▶ birth relatives of adopted people
- ▶ people who have been adopted who are living overseas
- ▶ child migrants and their descendants
- ▶ people who were looked after by Action for Children and their descendants

We have provided:

- ▶ adoption counselling to 64 individuals
- ▶ counselling to 18 birth relatives and 55 birth relatives receiving intermediary services
- ▶ support to 213 people asking for access to records, an increase from 156 in 2008–09

We provide a synopsis of information as many individuals have no knowledge of their family history or the reasons they were brought into care. We work to support each individual through the many issues they may face.

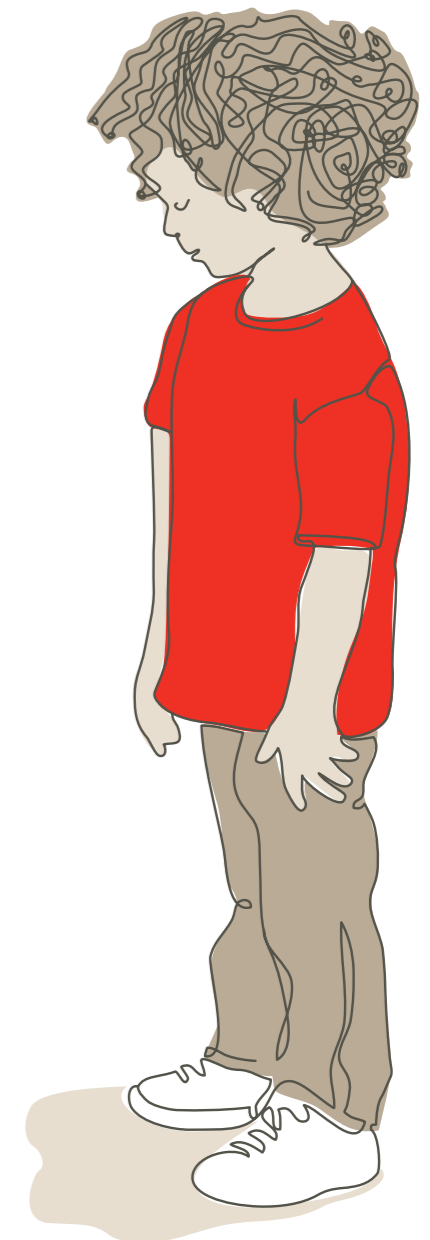
Influencing and campaigning to improve the future of children in care

Through our influencing work, Action for Children is asking the government to promote a care system that ensures all decisions around placement are focused on the individual child, to avoid disruption and increase placement stability. We need a care system where the child’s voice is heard, that ensures every child has a consistent adult in their lives.

We are calling for a care system that reinforces the message that the care option is not seen as a failure by the child, their family, the local authority or any other agency, and which measures a broader range of outcomes such as the ability to live independently and an improvement in emotional wellbeing. We support investment in therapeutic interventions for children and young people who need it and believe that intensive fostering should be rolled out as an alternative to custody, as it is more likely to result in positive outcomes.

We are also calling on the government to:

- ▶ support foster carers with flexible training and qualifications systems that are underpinned by excellent standards and create transferable skills
- ▶ allow young people to remain with their foster families until the age of 25
- ▶ introduce a professional fee for all foster carers as the intensity of demands placed on certain foster carers warrant a higher fee being paid



Contact us

Our fostering, family-based short breaks and adoption projects are located throughout the UK. You can find a current list of our projects on our website at www.actionforchildren.org.uk/childrenincare

Action for Children Fostering

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