

Foster Care Associates South

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	David Coulter
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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 outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

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

Foster Care Associates (South) is a registered independent fostering agency providing foster placements for young people placed by local authorities. Foster Care Associates is a limited company with over 50 offices across the United Kingdom. At the time of the inspection the southern area had 105 approved fostering households offering 188 places to young people in care. The region operates from three offices that are situated in Southampton, Worthing and the Isle of Wight. Foster Care Associates' mission statement states: 'Foster Care Associates is a national organisation providing high quality family placements to children and young people at a local level. We want to provide the opportunity for those children 'looked after' to achieve their full potential'.

Summary

The inspection was undertaken by two inspectors, Dr David Coulter and Lynda Mosling, over a three day period 9 to 11 July 2007. The aim of the inspection was to measure the performance of the agency against the National Minimum Standards and Regulations for Fostering Services. During the course of the inspection evidence was obtained from staff within Foster Care Associates including: managers, social workers, administrative staff and education staff. Detailed discussions were also held with a number of foster carers in their own homes. Information was also received from those using the service, such as placing social workers within local authorities. A range of records and documents were also examined including the placement plans of a number of young people currently placed with the agency. Evidence indicates that the service is operating effectively and carers are being supported by an experienced and well motivated staff team. Carers and agency staff retain a 'child focused' approach that ensures that the needs of the children and young people being cared for remain paramount.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection there have been a number of changes in the structure of the organisation. While these changes have impacted on the roles and responsibilities of senior managers, there has been minimal disruption to the day-to-day operation of the agency. The service remains committed to the training and development of both its staff and carers and a large number have completed a range of training courses. 35 carers have now achieved National Vocational Qualifications at level 3. The agency has strengthened its relationship with local authorities and has achieved, in a number of instances, preferred provider status.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The health and well being of children and young people is closely monitored within the service. On entering the service all children and young people are subject to a comprehensive health assessment that aims to identify any health problems. Each child and young person is provided with a health passport that is used to record any treatment received. Records demonstrate that children and young people receive an annual health check. Every effort is made, through the matching process, to ensure that children and young people are placed with carers who will meet their specific, physical, social and emotional needs. Records indicate that help is sought

from specialised health professionals when required. The health and well-being of each child and young person is discussed during reviews. There is an expectation within the service that carers will promote the concept of 'healthy living'. The agency provides both carers and young people with information on the importance of diet and regular exercise. Carers can also access training courses and material on specific health related topics such as alcohol and drug misuse. Foster Care Associates regularly organise activities that promote healthy activities such as football tournaments and fun days. It was noted that a number of young people were being given the opportunity to participate in adventure activities during the summer holidays. Both carers and Foster Care Associate staff receive first aid training. A number of staff were of the opinion that, as lone workers, they would benefit from a more comprehensive training course than the one day course they currently undertake.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service's director has the appropriate qualifications and experience to manage the service. His qualifications include: BA (Honours) in Sociology/Public Media, Certificate of Qualification in Social Work, Diploma in Practice Teaching and a Diploma in Management Studies. Over the last year a new senior management team has been established. The director is now supported by two assistant directors, one responsible for social work practice and the other for business development. Both have relevant qualifications and experience in their respective fields. Staff reported that the new team are operating effectively and provide clear guidance and support. All three are deemed to be accessible. All prospective carers undertake a thorough assessment process that includes checks on both themselves and family members. Health and safety assessments are also carried out in respect of their properties and pets. The assessment and training programme has a high attrition rate and many who embark on the process drop out. Only those that are likely to be approved are presented to the fostering panel. The director is of the opinion that the process needs to be demanding to ensure that those putting themselves forward are aware of the responsibilities they are taking on and the likely social and emotional demands that will be made upon them. Foster Care Associates recruit carers from a wide section of the community and records indicate that the present group bring with them a range of skills and experience. During the inspection four foster carers were visited in their own homes. All the young people being cared for were being accommodated in their own rooms. All the properties visited provide warm and comfortable environments that are in good decorative order and appropriately furnished. The foster carers confirmed they receive regular support and supervision. Evidence indicates that carers provide suitable and safe placements for the young people fostered. Social work staff spoken with were of the opinion that the matching process has, in recent times, been more successful and as a consequence, the number of placement breakdowns has decreased. The specific care needs of young people are now more clearly identified prior to placement. Agreements with foster carers aim to ensure that identified needs are appropriately addressed during the placement. The matching process takes into consideration, amongst other things, each individual's physical, social, emotional, cultural, educational and religious needs. Each placement is considered on an individual basis and carers have the right to refuse if they do not feel a placement is suitable. Over the last year, the service has been asked to find suitable foster placements for a number of unaccompanied young people who have arrived in Britain from areas of conflict in other parts of the world. It is to the services credit that the numerous difficulties associated with caring for such young people have been successfully addressed and they are now settled and prospering in the safety and security of their new homes. All carers receive training in child protection and are made aware of their

personal responsibilities in regard to the reporting of any child protection concerns. Out of hours support is available to all carers. There are well established policies and procedures in the event of a child or young person going missing. The views of children and young people are regularly sought by support workers and social workers. Foster Care Associates organise Young Persons' Forums three times a year. These meetings provide opportunities for children and young people to discuss issues of common interest. All young people are provided with information on how to make a complaint and given freepost complaints cards and an emergency phone number. All complaints are subject to an investigative process. Staff are recruited to the service via a well established process that requires them to complete a detailed application form, undertake a Criminal Record Bureau Check and provide the names of referees who can comment on their knowledge and skills. All new staff have to undertake a full induction before assuming their full responsibilities. Once in post staff can access a range of training courses. The service has its own fostering panel that meets at regular intervals. Over 30 new carers have been approved since March 2006. A number of carers were spoken with about the recruitment and assessment process. There was a general consensus that the whole process was necessarily thorough. A number felt the process could have been completed within a shorter time frame. For most, appearing in front of panel had been a positive, if somewhat daunting experience. All appreciated the efforts of panel members to put them at their ease.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency values diversity and promotes equality. Carers are drawn from a wide section of the community and reflect differences in age, gender, social and ethnic background. Carers are often recruited to meet the specialist needs of children with disabilities. The Children's Services Team aims to ensure that the diverse needs of young people are appropriately met within their placements. The arrival, in recent years, of unaccompanied young people from countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq has presented the agency with new challenges and required carers to meet new demands in regard to, among other things, specialist food and religious observance. Training, for both carers and staff provide opportunities to examine issues associated with social and cultural diversity. The importance of education in the care of children and young people is clearly recognised within Foster Care Associates and there is an expectation that all will access an appropriate educational placement. Foster Care Associates have been awarded the Leading Aspect Award for securing and maintaining education for looked after children. A recent survey within the agency indicated that over 90% of children and young people had an educational placement. At the point of admission education liaison officers assess the educational needs of each individual and determine the best way of meeting them. If a child or young person is already settled in a school or college, every effort is made to support their continued attendance. However, if a new placement is required an educational liaison officer will enter into negotiations with the local education authority to secure a place at an appropriate school or college. The educational progress of each child and young person is closely monitored and discussed during their reviews. The progress of young people in post-16 educational, training and employment placements is monitored by a National Leaving Care Services co-ordinator. Educational support for carers is provided through training, carer support groups, home visits and telephone contact. Carers are encouraged to be pro-active in supporting the education of the young people in their care and can access a variety of resource material. A special resource pack has been developed for carers to support young people who have been excluded from school. Additional tutorial support has been made available, this academic year, for those young people undertaking national exams. The personal and social development of young people is

actively promoted and young people are encouraged to participate in a range of activities including adventure holidays, art exhibitions and organised visits to places of interest such as the Houses of Parliament. The agency celebrates the achievements of all the children and young people in its care and holds a presentation evening to do this publicly. The achievements of individuals are recognised through the issuing of certificates. A number of carers provide short-term respite placements for other Foster Care Associate carers. In such instances carers normally liaise between themselves to ensure that important information is shared. Each young person is encouraged to visit their respite placements prior to their stay. Respite stays are not offered to parents who remain the main carers for their child.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people are, when appropriate, encouraged to maintain contact with their family and friends. Contact arrangements are made explicit in placement plans and the role of carers established. If there are any restrictions regarding contact, they are made clear to all parties concerned. Records demonstrate that carers often provide transport to contact visits. Contact visit arrangements are regularly monitored and any difficulties arising discussed. The views of children and young people are taken into consideration in determining the frequency and duration of contact visits. Staff and carers indicate that many children and young people maintain regular contact with their family and friends via their mobile phones and in some cases computers. Carers are encouraged to be pro-active in seeking out the views of children and young people about their care. By so doing, issues or concerns can be addressed before they develop into major difficulties. Agency staff also ascertain the views of children and young people on all aspects of their care. This is achieved on both an individual and group basis. Agency staff regularly meet with children and young people outside of their placements and discuss various aspects of their lives. The review process also provides a mechanism for individual children and young people to express their views on their particular circumstances. Young People's Forum meetings that are held, on a regional basis, three times a year provide the opportunities for children and young people to meet together and discuss issues of common interest. Issues raised through the forum meetings can be taken forward for discussion at Foster Care Associates National Children and Young People's Annual Conference. The File of Facts and Toby Bear Book provides children and young people with information about being fostered, including contact details for organisations that represent young people's views. A Young Person's Charter has been produced by young people with experience of being looked after and is provided to those entering the service. All children and young people are made aware of how to raise issues of concern and register a complaint.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The agency has a Leaving Care Service that has developed a 'Steps to Independence Assessments' programme to help young people plan for life beyond foster care. Carers are provided with support and guidance on how to assist young people prepare for adulthood by developing a range of social and life skills. The agency runs an Independence Skills for Young People course for carers and the Education Liaison Service offers advice on post-16 education and training opportunities. In order to make transitions successful, agency staff plan Leaving Care Review Meetings, with placing authorities, well in advance of any proposed departure dates. If a young person wishes someone to represent them in negotiating their future with their placing authority

they can gain access to an independent advocate. There was a general consensus, amongst both agency staff and carers spoken with, that recent government proposals to extend the provision of foster care beyond 16 years will enable young people to better prepare for independence. Carers spoken with confirmed their allowances were paid on time. No negative comments were received about the amount of the present allowances. Individual placement agreements make clear the allowances to be paid.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Foster Care Associates has developed a Statement of Purpose that sets out the aims and objectives of the organisation. Each region has also developed a specific statement that reflects the service offered in their area. These statements are subject to review and are changed to reflect changes and developments within the organisation. A number of information leaflets have also been developed on specific elements of the service such as; education, therapy, life story work and support services. A new senior management team has been introduced during the last year. There are now two assistant directors, each with their own separate areas of responsibility. One is responsible for the day to day operation of the fostering service and the other for the management of the business. Both are suitably qualified and experienced in their respective areas. Agency staff spoken with felt that the new management team is working well and that the new structure provides clear lines of accountability. Foster Care Associates has developed a quality assurance system that operates on a national basis. A Central Services Team aims to ensure that policies and procedures that develop within each region, in response to local circumstances, comply with the organisations aims and objectives, national minimum standards and guidance arising out of recent government reports such as Every Child Matters. Performance indicators are used to monitor development within specific areas of the service. Evidence collected indicate that the agency is managed effectively and efficiently. The offices are pleasant, well equipped and fit for purpose. However, the new management team believe that more efficiencies can be gained by relocating to an out-of-city office and providing workers with opportunities to work from home. Plans are being developed to allow this to happen. All staff have job descriptions that outline their roles and responsibilities. There are clear lines of accountability and managers operate an 'open door policy' that provides staff with ready access to advice and guidance. All staff receive regular supervision. Arrangements are put in place to provide management cover in the manager's absence. Staff spoken with all felt supported by their colleagues. Social work staff felt there was an appropriate level of administrative support, however, mention was made about the quality and reliability of some of the information technology equipment and systems. While workloads were deemed manageable, it was evident that absences, resulting from a number of staff all being on maternity leave at the same time, was creating some additional pressure. At the time of the inspection a team managers post was also vacant. In spite of this, assessment and review schedules are still being met. Staff spoken with assessed morale within the agency as being good. Regular staff meetings provide the opportunity for workers, many of whom operate alone in the community, to get together and discuss issues of common interest. All the agency staff spoken with, regardless of role, feel valued by the organisation. There is culture of training and professional development within the agency. Social Work staff are expected to meet the requirements of their professional registration and access regular training. All training courses are evaluated. Social work staff are involved in the delivery of training to carers and often undertake joint training with them. The agency offers a comprehensive training programme. Agency staff and carers can also seek financial assistance to undertake training with outside bodies. There is a well established

procedure for the recruitment of both carers and agency staff, that requires the production of references and completion of a number of checks, including Criminal Record Bureau checks. The present recruitment strategy has developed as a consequence of the demands currently being made on the service. The service has made the assessment and training of carers a key priority. All carers have to undertake a comprehensive assessment process and obtain panel approval before being offered placements. Once approved, carers are expected to further develop their knowledge and skills, to meet the often complex needs of the young people they are caring for. Carers undertake National Vocational Qualifications in Child Care at level 3. As carers become more skilled and experienced, more responsibilities are being delegated to them. While many carers appreciate the increase in decision making powers afforded to them, a small number expressed unease about the decreasing level of support from agency staff. It is felt that the rationale for these changes could be better explained to carers. As a response to this increase in independence a number of carers have set up their own support networks that operate, very successfully, on an informal basis. Staff spoken with feel that Foster Care Services is a fair and competent employer that supports its staff and carers. There is a good support system for carers that includes regular supervision, appraisal and out of hours assistance. All carers are offered regular periods of respite. The agency recognises the contribution played by members of carers families and organises social events, to show their appreciation. Risk assessments are used extensively by staff and carers to identify potential hazards associated with activities. During the course of the inspection a range of documents and records were examined. All the records requested were readily available. Administrative records are kept separately from those relating to staff, carers and young people. All the records examined contain recent and relevant information that is presented in clear, accessible language. Confidential records are stored in appropriately locked facilities. The manager confirmed that the agency is financially viable and continues to grow. One of the assistant directors is responsible for financial management and business development. Over the last year the agency has gained preferred provider status with a number of key authorities and established contract agreements with others. The agency accounts are subject to an annual audit.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

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

- undertake an audit of staff qualifications in First Aid. Those working alone in the community should be considered for more extensive training.
- provide carers with the rationale behind recent organisational changes and explain the likely impact on existing systems of support.

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.