

# Foster Care Associates Thames Valley

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	27 November 2006

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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 (FCA), Thames Valley region, is a local branch of a well-established national organisation offering a comprehensive range of fostering placements to placing local authorities. The Thames Valley branch has its operational headquarters in Wendover, Buckinghamshire and two smaller, additional offices in Bletchley and Reading. The branch offers emergency, short and longer placements for children of all ages, with a particular focus on more difficult to place young people. The agency provides a range of additional support for such placements, including education support, child psychotherapy, and sessional staff input. At the time of this inspection the agency supported 74 carer households, offering approximately 86 placements.

### **Summary**

This was an announced proportionate key inspection which, due to the excellent quality of the service as assessed at the last full inspection in November 2006, relied on a reduced methodology, in line with Ofsted guidance on inspection of fostering services. The agency continues to offer fostering placements of a high standard that are well matched to children's identified needs. Excellent attention is paid to keeping placed children safe, ensuring their individual needs are met and supporting their educational achievement. Assessment and monitoring of carers is thorough and consistent and support systems for carers are of a high standard. The agency is well managed and the staff team is appropriately experienced and qualified and well supported in the exercise of its duties.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

A number of minor recommendations were made at the last inspection. The agency was recommended to clarify responsibility for final approval of staffing appointments. This has been done with responsibility now clearly resting with the local Director to ensure all required checks have been carried out prior to commencement of employment. The agency was recommended to review arrangements for respite care. This has been undertaken and a more child centred approach to consideration of respite requests from carers is being adopted and use made of a peripatetic respite carer resource to avoid children having to leave their usual household. The agency was recommended to ensure more consistent record keeping was maintained on carer and child files. This has been addressed and records are being well maintained to provide accurate and up to date information on carers and children in placement. The agency was recommended to consider ways of receiving consistent feedback on service quality from placing authorities. The agency is still exploring options in this area. Other improvements made by the agency since the last inspection include the inclusion of fostering panel representation from someone with an educational background and the development of a more local children's forum to hear the views of placed children about the running of the service. The agency is now also including questions raised by children themselves as part of panel assessment processes for new carers. The organisation is facilitating more flexible and shared use of resources and expertise across its different regions to provide more co-ordinated support to its carers and placed children.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The service provides good support for foster carers to help ensure placed children's immediate health care needs are met consistently and that their health is promoted. The various systems and resources seen at the last inspection, when this outcome area was judged as good, remain largely unchanged. The service pays good attention to getting as much clear information as possible on health issues to help ensure that appropriate matching between carers and children takes place, and that carers are fully informed of health concerns. Carers ensure children are registered with relevant local primary health services and receive the usual range of regular health checks. Where more complex health care needs arise the service supports carers well in ensuring these are met and carers liaise well with other health professionals involved. Where additional guidance or training is needed to support more complex needs the agency ensures this is provided to carers. The agency has its own resources to help advise and support carers working with children with mental health concerns. Supervising social workers from the agency monitor attention to children's health needs as part of supervision and carer household review processes. Individual running records on children's health care history are maintained. The agency provides regular training opportunities on first aid and health care matters for carers. The agency is in the process of introducing stricter guidelines on carer smoking habits to ensure children's health is suitably safeguarded.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency continues to provide safe and appropriately matched placements for children and ensure all reasonable steps to safeguard their welfare are taken. The persons carrying on the agency are unchanged since the last inspection and continue to be judged as fit to carry out this role. Recruitment procedures for staff are rigorous and minor shortfalls noted at the last inspection have now been addressed. The agency has very good and consistent procedures in place to confirm the initial and ongoing safety of carer households and carers take appropriate steps when adaptations to households are required. Detailed matching considerations are applied to all placement requests to ensure as good a match between carers and children as possible. Carers are confident that the agency respects their views on placement suitability. Carer approval terms are generally well respected but decisions to temporarily vary carer approval terms are not being consistently and formally signed off by the local Director on carer files when this happens. Where placements have identified shortfalls in matching with children's identified needs appropriate plans are put in place by the agency and carers to address these shortfalls. The agency's policies and procedures on child protection are largely unchanged since the last inspection and provide a clear framework designed to safeguard the welfare of children and carers. Appropriate notifications are made to regulators and placing authorities when child welfare concerns arise in placements and appropriate action is taken to minimise any risks to children and to cooperate with subsequent investigations. Carers are familiar with their responsibilities for ensuring children are safe and take appropriate action when required, for example in relation to any major incidents or situations where children are absent without permission. A new risk assessment procedure is being introduced to manage the assessment of the safety of temporary alternative care situations where Criminal Records Bureau checks are not applicable. The agency's local fostering panel continues to work fully in line with the expectations of regulations and standards and is effective in its role of challenging and monitoring the quality of foster carer household assessments and annual reviews. Panel

membership is largely unchanged since the last inspection with the exception of the recent inclusion of a panel member with specific education experience and expertise. The panel is well supported by the agency and receives regular training opportunities to keep abreast of practice issues.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency pays good attention to the diverse needs of placed children as part of initial matching and placement processes and offers relevant support and guidance for carers where particular needs have to be met. The agency has recruited a satisfactory number of carers from minority ethnic backgrounds to offer a reasonable range of matching choices when children are placed. When such matches cannot be made due consideration is paid to making up the shortfalls in other appropriate ways. Where the agency place children with special disability needs excellent attention is paid to supporting carers in meeting those needs by provision of targeted training and support, and specialist equipment when needed. Although this inspection took place during school holidays, carers were nonetheless clear and positive about the level of support that the agency consistently offers around educational support for placed children. Specialist education liaison officers help carers to ensure children obtain, and maintain, suitable school or college placements and also keep up an excellent level of monitoring of educational concerns and achievements. Carers are active in their support and championing of children's educational needs in their liaison with schools.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency continues to make suitable arrangements to support placed children in sustaining family and community contacts where this is judged to be in their best interests. Contact arrangements are well planned and supported directly by agency staff, where needed, to avoid undue pressure on carer households. Carers have access to relevant guidance and training on the importance of contact and maintenance of good relationships with birth families. The agency has extensive national consultation mechanisms in place to obtain the views and input of children into the running of the service and this has recently been supplemented by the development of a more local children's forum shared with another FCA region. The views of children had recently been taken on board with the development of additional children's questions for prospective carers attending fostering panel. Children are also able to make their views known through their own care reviews and can contribute to carers' household reviews. Appropriate children's complaints processes are in place and children can also make use of their own placing authority complaints and advocacy services. The agency provides placed children with a good range of information about the agency and fostering in general.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is outstanding.

The agency has appropriate written guidance in place about its organisation, ethos and functions that fully meets the expectations of the regulations and standards. Since the last inspection some internal managerial reorganisation has taken place but the agency remains very well

organised and managed. A more integrated and co-operative national structure for the agency also allows more flexible and shared use of resources and expertise across different regions. Staff are well supported and are offered good training and development opportunities. The agency has good levels of administrative support for its front line staff and also for more central functions such as the fostering panel. Staffing levels remain good, enabling staff to sufficient time to undertake their various tasks satisfactorily and consistently. Arrangements for completion of annual carer household reviews are not as consistent as noted at previous inspections in part due to changes of responsibilities for this task. As a result, although reviews have taken place, the completion of all relevant recording and issuing of formal notices after reviews is being delayed. Overall carer numbers are largely unchanged since the last inspection, due to the retirement of a number of carer households for a variety of reasons. The agency however continues to actively recruit and is seeking to specifically develop more carers in the north of its current region to meet continuing demand from placing authorities. Carer assessments are robust and thorough and are overseen by specific senior management staff in the agency, as well as being subject to thorough scrutiny at fostering panel. The agency continues to provide an excellent range of support to its carers, as noted at the last inspection. This includes regular support and formal supervision, access to a wide range of training opportunities, input and guidance from specialist agency staff in areas such as education and child psychology, and practical direct support from agency staff for more demanding and challenging placements. The agency continues to offer respite breaks to carers, but on a more restricted and better considered basis that focuses equally on the needs of placed children for continuity and consistency. Good use is also being made of a peripatetic respite carer who can offer care in children's existing placements when their carers need a break. Despite the wide range of training on offer the consistency of training take-up by carers is variable, an issue the agency is seeking to address appropriately. The agency maintains required records to a generally high standard covering carers, placed young people and central administrative records. A minor shortfall exists in relation to file confirmation by the Director of temporary approval changes for carers. The agency experiences continuing problems in obtaining all necessary documentation from placing authorities at the right time but does take appropriate steps to try to obtain this as quickly as possible. Consistent and effective monitoring of key records and areas of practice is undertaken both locally and centrally within the agency.

## 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):

- ensure that any temporary variations to carer approval terms are subject to formal recorded assessment and approval that is held on carer files (NMS 25)
- ensure carer household reviews are fully completed and recorded promptly (NMS 21)

## 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.**