

Foster Care Associates (North West)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Sharon Lloyd
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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) North West is part of a national independent organisation providing family placement to children and young people who are looked after by local authorities. The agency's key activities are carried out from the regional branch office located in Sharston, South Manchester. Area offices are based in Manchester, Ashton, Liverpool, Chorley, Penrith, Carnforth and Cockermouth. Area offices do not operate independently and only carry out ancillary activities. A range of fostering services is provided throughout the north west of England. All the children have complex needs and each has an individual care package agreed by the placing authority. Additional support is provided by the education liaison staff, therapists and support workers. All foster carers are entitled to 21 days respite per year and this is provided within the service by respite foster carers. The service continues to grow rapidly and more staff have been employed since the last inspection in line with an increasing number of approved foster carers. At 31 August 2007 the service was looking after 231 children.

Summary

Children receive good quality care from well trained foster carers who are supported by competent staff. The agency is well managed and continually strives to refine its service so that outcomes for children continue to improve. Shortfalls in the service are recognised and addressed.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has continued to grow and develop and recruitment of additional carers throughout the north west has resulted in more children being placed within 20 miles of their own homes. Liaison with education and health services has continued to improve and good relationships have been established with all placing authorities. Most of the recommendations of the last report have been implemented. However, the children's guide is still only available in English. Good team parenting continues to be a strength of the agency. It ensures that each child's individual needs are identified and action is taken to address them. Progress is regularly reviewed by the whole team.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

All children are registered with a doctor and receive dental and optical health checks regularly. An example was seen of a foster carer invoking the support of the local authority to ensure that a child received the dental treatment required. Liaison with the Looked After Children (LAC) nurses is good and children receive advice about drugs, alcohol and sexual health from the nurses or specialist local teams. Foster carers receive training in first aid and guidance in the safe administration of medication and food hygiene. However, only basic information is provided in the skills to foster training and not all carers have completed the additional courses offered during their first year of fostering with FCA. Foster placement agreements do not routinely contain details of children's health plans. The agency's health passports are not always completed and supervising social workers are not routinely checking these although they do report on children's health at supervisory visits. FCA has written to placing authorities for health

plans where information is missing. A child said, 'FCA are excellent at taking care of me and other people, they look after all the kids in FCA'.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Foster carers provide comfortable, warm homes and children are encouraged to personalise their own bedrooms. All foster carers have safe caring policies although these are not routinely updated at the start of each new placement to address any identified needs of that child. Comprehensive health and safety checks are carried out prior to approval and annually before the foster carer review. Up to date checks are not available on every foster carer file. All foster carers receive training in child protection and safe caring. Training is also available in non-violent crisis intervention and in managing allegations although neither course is mandatory. Some carers have restrained children as a last resort. A record of significant events, including accidents, allegations and complaints is maintained on each child's file and is monitored by the team leader. A copy of any incident is forwarded to the manager for review. Individual registers of accidents, restraints, allegations, complaints and children missing from home are not kept. These incidents are instead recorded as significant incidents and the information is collated and monitored by the manager and used to inform developments in the service. It is not always evident from the records what follow up action has been taken. For example, the records do not always show that a child reported missing has returned. Despite this, team leaders have a thorough knowledge of concerns about individual children in their area. FCA have employed an independent person to review their monitoring procedures and advise on improvements needed. Child protection matters are referred to the local safeguarding unit. Allegations against carers are investigated fully and followed by a foster carer review. There has, however, been one instance where a child protection matter was referred to the placing authority and not to the local safeguarding unit. Ofsted have issued a notice to improve in relation to this matter. Children are carefully matched with carers by well trained staff who follow effective matching processes. A foster carer commented: 'FCA know their carers, they know people's strengths and weaknesses and show good practice by carefully matching young people with carers'. Introductory visits are routinely planned wherever possible. The agency has introduced photographic profiles of foster families and their homes that can be emailed to placing authorities to show to children prior to placement. This has proved effective in allaying the anxieties of children placed in emergencies. Placements are reviewed regularly and additional support is provided to ensure that foster carers meet the assessed needs of the child. Less than 5% of children have had three or more placement moves since being looked after by FCA North West. However, tough decisions are taken regarding the suitability of the placement where it becomes obvious that a child's needs are not being promoted. One child said, 'I'm glad I've finally found foster parents I can get on with and I am most alike'. Although there are robust systems for the recruitment and checking of new staff, these are not always followed fully and not all of the required information was available on some files. Robust checks are carried out on foster carers. A competent, experienced and well trained fostering panel meets at the head office in Manchester once a fortnight. The manager acknowledges that it is sometimes difficult for carers from the north of Cumbria to attend and on at least one occasion the panel has travelled to Cumbria instead. Good systems ensure that assessments are thorough and the panel manager supervises the work of independent assessors. Panel minutes show that careful consideration is given to each new applicant and review prior to approval. Many foster carers are approved for children across the full age range: birth to 18.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

FCA considers the diverse needs of each child at the point of matching. Children of dual heritage placed in a predominantly white area receive regular support from a black resource worker from a distant location because this is the best person to help them with identity issues. Both FCA and the individual worker are committed to the child. FCA approves foster carers with disabilities as long as they are able to demonstrate their suitability through the assessment process and can meet the needs of any child placed. Qualified teachers act as education liaison officers to support foster carers in liaising with schools. This is an effective service. Children who are temporarily or permanently excluded continue to receive education in most instances and the education liaison officers work with schools and foster carers to establish alternative, effective education packages quickly. Foster carers find it frustrating that the education liaison officers do not work during school holidays so that arrangements and negotiations with schools cannot proceed during this time. Education support workers and resource staff support children in school on a temporary basis where necessary and until the school can make its own arrangements. They also work with children in the foster family supporting them with work set by school. Arrangements in one area of the north west are less good than in the other areas so that not all children get the same high standard of service from the education team. The system for accessing the resource workers is slow and can be cumbersome, causing minor delay in meeting a child's needs. FCA monitors children's attainment levels and consideration is given to how best to improve educational outcomes for children and young people. A summer school has been piloted this year. It gave information to those children at the point of transition, those entering reception, year seven and year ten, to help prepare them for their new schools. FCA has received good verbal feedback following the event, but plans to send questionnaires to those who took part to monitor its effectiveness and value for future use. Each child has an education file detailing the child's school, school reports and assessed needs. Statements of special educational needs are included where these are in place. FCA continues to request copies of Personal Education Plans from the placing authorities but with varying degrees of success. Foster carers are encouraged to attend the two day training event focusing on educating children in foster care. This event takes place at each of the area offices at least once a year. FCA provides all its foster children with short breaks for up to three weeks a year. Children are matched carefully to respite families, taking into account the needs and personalities of the children already in placement as well as the child needing respite. The system works effectively to sustain difficult placements by giving both the child and carers a break. Respite carers go through the same robust assessment process as all other carers. A social worker commented, 'FCA are excellent at providing a range of leisure activities for children'. Foster carers and children confirmed this.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers appreciate the importance of contact for children and facilitate it. Children are included in decisions about contact and say they are satisfied with the arrangements in place. Foster placement agreements contain details about contact. Arrangements are regularly reviewed with the placing authority. Children are included in decisions about their day to day lives and their future plans. They report that they are listened to and most say they can talk to their foster carers about any problems. They know the FCA supervising social workers and resource workers well and would approach them with a problem where the foster carer could not help.

A foster carer commented, 'we all work together to steer the young people into making the right decisions about their day to day lives and their future'. Good systems are in place to elicit the views of children about their placements, wishes and feelings. Young people's groups are set up to focus on specific issues and have proved effective in helping a number of children and young people. Children receive a copy of the children's guide, giving them information about living with FCA carers and being part of the organisation. They are encouraged to participate in a range of activities where they get to know other staff and children within FCA. Quarterly newsletters keep everyone informed of what has been happening across the region. Children's achievements are valued and children and carers appreciate the annual award ceremony where each child receives recognition. Children and young people participate in a national children's forum where representatives from each area comment upon and contribute to the future development of the service provided by FCA. Children's work is framed and displayed on the office walls of FCA premises. Photographs of them participating in FCA events are also displayed, in rooms used by FCA members but not the public.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

An information and assessment pack on 'steps to independence' is sent out to all children when they reach 15. Pathway planning training is provided to help those carers of children aged 15 and over to support children effectively through transition to work, sixth form or college. Some supervising social workers have expertise and experience in working with children who are leaving care. Systems are being set up to use their skills throughout the area to provide children and carers with a high level of support and guidance. Young people who wish to remain with their foster carers post-18 are put in touch with an independent advocate to negotiate with the placing authority on the young person's behalf. Through good team parenting, foster carers are encouraged and supported to meet the developmental needs of each child. Additional therapeutic or other support helps children to achieve developmental milestones and form relationships. Children develop self esteem and new skills because their interests are encouraged and they are supported to try new experiences and to develop their potential. The amount of pocket money children receive is left to the discretion of the foster carers and this varies widely. Supervising social workers do not routinely discuss this with children or foster carers. Satisfactory arrangements are in place for foster carers to receive payments and allowances on time. The amount is sufficient to meet the needs of the children, including an annual holiday. One foster carer was pleased to receive a large lump sum immediately when a child was placed a few days before Christmas. All foster carers currently receive the same amount irrespective of their experience, skill level, training attended, qualifications or competencies.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

A child commented: 'FCA have done a perfect job because they've found me a perfect family'. The Statement of Purpose accurately reflects the service provided. A children's guide is available as an interactive CD Rom, or in written form for both young children and teenagers. It is attractive and child focused in each format. It is currently available only in English. The service is well organised with a good management structure. Lines of accountability are clear and known to both staff and carers. There is regular and effective supervision of staff and carers. A staff member described FCA as 'a very child-focused agency' where 'they see you as a person, not just a worker'. Regular team meetings are held where there is a case discussion about the

progress of every child looked after in the area. The need for additional support or resources is identified and this ensures that children receive the services they need. Children are looked after by carers who are well supported. The following are typical quotes from carers: 'We get outstanding support from FCA', 'we are properly looked after', 'you're not on your own with FCA'. Home visits usually take place fortnightly with telephone calls in between. Carers receive advice and guidance about behaviour management and any issues of concern. The service has grown rapidly following effective recent recruitment campaigns and more foster carers are now available in the Cumbria and North Lancashire areas. Additional staff have been recruited to support these carers but in the interim, staff are working hard to maintain a high level of service to all carers. Not all carers have received an unannounced visit during the past 12 months. The workloads of the therapeutic social worker, education liaison officer and support workers in these areas have grown substantially and are compounded by the large geographical area they cover. FCA is now considering how best to resource these services to ensure children continue to receive the support they need. Staff are well trained at all levels of the service and training takes place at area offices each month. Individual training records for staff and carers show good attendance at training events. Staff and foster carers commented on the high quality of the training and how it helps them to meet children's needs. Carers said the three day attachment workshop was particularly valuable and helped them to understand children better. National Vocational Qualification training is available to both staff and carers. Experienced foster carers are actively involved in delivering training. Foster carer support groups run each month and allow carers to speak honestly and openly in a confidential environment. Carers find this opportunity invaluable. One foster carer said: 'the support groups are brilliant'; 'you don't have to worry about confidentiality'; 'you can speak your mind' and 'people are very supportive and talk openly'. Foster Care Agreements do not cover all the matters listed in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002. Foster care assessments are undertaken by contract social workers who are supervised by the panel manager. Comprehensive reports that identify competencies, experience and skills are presented to panel. Foster carers are encouraged to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to consider the impact that fostering will have on their lives. They said that the assessment process is very thorough and the pre-approval training provides them with the skills and knowledge to foster. The foster care review system works effectively to ensure a high standard of care is maintained for children. Systems are in place to monitor the quality and effectiveness of the service. However, FCA do not routinely produce a report to show that all the matters identified in Schedule 7 are monitored. Separate registers are not kept for complaints and allegations although these are recorded on individual files and are monitored as notifiable incidents. Good administrative support is available and staff and carers appreciate the friendly, helpful approach of the administrative and management teams. A new worker commented 'I'm not afraid to say I'm struggling with something' and carers said they feel they can contact senior managers at any time about any issue. The standard of office premises is variable. Although some are well adapted for wheelchair users, others are not. Meeting rooms and therapy rooms are available. However, in one office, these are on the first floor which makes it difficult for those with mobility problems to access them. FCA have begun to address this and alterations to the premises are underway. However, FCA recognise that even with the planned alterations, the building will have limitations for carers and staff with disabilities and they are actively seeking alternative premises. A loose television aerial and a glass lampshade were within children's reach in one of the meeting rooms used by children. Records are stored confidentially in locked cabinets. Staff have mobile telephones to aid communication. Staff do not have laptops and in the rural areas such as Cumbria, this impedes their ability to record information quickly and to communicate with carers by email.

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
9	improve systems for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations (Regulation 42(1))	30 December 2007
6	ensure that a health and safety assessment is carried out and a record held on the foster carer's file prior to every review of approval (Regulation 29(3)(a))	30 December 2007
15	ensure that FCA's comprehensive vetting procedures are fully implemented whenever a new member of staff is appointed and review current staff files to ensure compliance with Schedule 1 (Regulation 20)	30 December 2007
26	make sure hazards are identified and removed from FCA rooms used by children (Regulation 23(1)).	31 October 2007
22	review the Foster Care Agreements to ensure they contain all the details listed in Schedule 5 (Regulation 28(5)(b)).	30 December 2007

Recommendations

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

- ensure all foster carers attend training in first aid, medicine administration and health and hygiene (NMS 12.5)
- hold information regarding the child's state of health and identified health needs in the placement agreement and make sure that foster carers receive it and keep it up to date (NMS 12.3, 12.4)
- review and improve the arrangements for promoting children's health (NMS 12.1)
- collate and evaluate information on the circumstances, number and outcome of all allegations against carers (NMS 9.5)
- update the safer caring policy with the arrival of each new child, taking account of the needs of all children in the foster family (NMS 9.3)
- consider using individual risk assessments and safer caring policies to determine whether children should be left alone with male carers (NMS 9.7)
- maintain separate registers of complaints and allegations (NMS 25.2)
- consider the competency, skills and experience of foster carers when deciding on and reviewing their terms of approval (NMS 8.1)

- discuss arrangements for pocket money with each child and foster carer and periodically review these arrangements to ensure that children are receiving a personal allowance and learning how to save, to use money and to budget (NMS 14.4)
- improve communication systems in rural areas (NMS 26.3)
- ensure that all foster carers receive visits in accordance with the FCA policy and that a record of these visits is maintained on the foster carer's file (NMS 22.6)
- review the system for the allocation of resource workers (NMS 21.2)
- ensure there are sufficient staff to maintain a high level of service to foster carers and children, especially in rural areas where staff spend many hours travelling (NMS 22.6)
- make sure that unannounced visits are carried out at least once a year (NMS 22.6)
- ensure that all premises are fit for purpose (Regulation 23(1))

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.