

Foster Care Associates (North East)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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 (North East), (FCA (NE)) is a fostering service which is part of the national organisation Foster Care Associates. FCA (NE) provides family placements to children and young people in the North East of England. The main office is situated in Newcastle upon Tyne and there are sub-offices in Alnwick, Seaton Burn, Darlington and Middlesbrough. The agency offers a range of services to meet the needs of placing authorities, for example emergency, parent and child, short-term, bridging, assessment and long term placements. They also specialise in offering placements to children who may challenge the service. At the time of the inspection visit the staff team at the service were supporting 155 fostering households currently providing placements to 184 children across these various areas of work. FCA (NE) provides a multi-disciplinary approach to working with children and young people. This allows better opportunities for foster carers and social work staff to access therapy and educational support services. The agency also provide children and young people with access to group work and activities organised by a team of resource workers. The agency has achieved the Investors In Children award.

Summary

This was an announced key inspection for the fostering service which was undertaken to assess how the service is complying with the key National Minimum Standards and regulations relating to fostering services. Arrangements to help children achieve economic wellbeing are not key standards and were not inspected on this occasion. Throughout the course of this visit the inspectors noted the commitment both from managers, staff and foster carers to maintain good standards, whilst working to further improve the range and quality of service provided. The service is good at promoting children's health and children themselves raised no concerns regarding their health needs being well met by their carers. The service uses children's 'health passports' and these are a very good way of ensuring that carers have detailed information about children's health needs. However, as these are held at home by foster carers, the recorded evidence of medical appointments within the care files of children is currently limited. This can make it difficult for the service to monitor health appointments. For example, by using their central records the service was only able to confirm that just over half of the children placed through it had attended their annual health assessment in the last 12 months. The service is good at keeping children safe. It ensures that foster carers' homes are safe and that children are well matched with their carers. However, safe care documents are not always signed and dated and some do need more detailed information in them. Children are well matched with their carers and feel well cared for where they are living. Staff who work at the service are very experienced and suitable, however the previous employment history in one staff file examined could have been more clearly presented. Any allegations of abuse against children are closely monitored and recorded, however the manager does not currently sign the central record to give evidence of their monitoring. There is detailed recording of any incidents within care files, but summary sheets held at the front of each file are not always completed. The fostering panel have robust effective procedures which work to ensure that children are looked after by carers who have been assessed thoroughly and approved properly. The service works to ensure that children and young people are provided with foster care that values diversity and promotes equality. It works closely with the other services to promote and recognise both the educational and non-academic achievements of children and provides very good help and support in this. There are very good arrangements in place to ensure that children are consulted about their

care. Support for children's contact with their families is also good. The service is well organised with an effective management structure in place. Management processes are generally well organised and are used effectively by the experienced administrative staff team. The assessments of new foster carers are thorough, however the record of the visits to the applicants' referees do not include the original notes from these meetings. The current foster carer agreements are compliant with Schedule 5 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002, but an amendment is necessary to highlight the change of responsibility for regulation from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted. Although some examples of Looked After Children (LAC) documentation being only partially completed or being in need of update were noted, the case files for children are generally well presented and comprehensive. Carer's records are also maintained to a good standard, although their training records are not always completed in sufficient detail.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Children, their carers and their placing social workers were unable to highlight any major common areas in need of further improvement. Most carers when asked felt that the service had not changed in the last 12 months, with all others describing it as 'better'. One told us that 'I don't think that anything could change for the better as I am more than happy with the level of support I receive from FCA'. Another wrote 'It is an outstanding organisation, very well staffed, who will always do what they say they will. I feel very well supported and proud to work for them'. Children's comments included 'I love being with FCA. The activities are cool - I have a great time at the activities! The staff are friendly'. Also 'I am very happy and like it where I am living'. One social worker commented that 'This agency offers a comprehensive programme of care for the children I have on my caseload, all five (outcome) areas receive appropriate attention'. Another told us 'I believe FCA to be an excellent organisation, who in my view provide an excellent service'. The service continues to introduce improvements. As recommended at the previous inspection the fostering panel now have access to all of their previous minutes, fostering standards and regulations for reference throughout the course of each of their meetings. A formal declaration of interest has been introduced to allow panel members to stand down from an item of business where this is appropriate. Additional panel meetings have taken place to allow the service to catch up on the previous backlog of foster carer annual reviews. A central training monitor sheet for foster carers has been introduced to allow the service to better monitor and plan their training needs. The service has improved the documentation from foster carer annual reviews to better demonstrate that safety checks, Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and health checks are being updated as necessary and that training needs for each carer are being monitored. Recording within foster carers files has been improved to ensure that an accurate record is kept of every child placed with them. Foster carers safe caring policies are being updated for each child in placement and are being agreed by the fostering service and, where possible, the child's social worker. To further ensure that children are cared for safely, procedures for recruitment have been improved so that staff records contain full histories of their previous employment. The service has reviewed and improved their foster carer agreements to make them compliant with the requirements of Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. Previous recommendations made regarding how the fostering panel was constituted and their business recorded have been fully implemented. A central recording

system has been developed to enable better monitoring of the training undertaken by foster carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people benefit from health care services that meet their overall physical, social and emotional developmental needs. Foster carers see the support they receive from the service in achieving this as either 'good' or 'outstanding'. One described how 'all children have a health passport and their health is reported by carers every week'. Another commented positively on the 'training provided'. A third described how they received support 'through my supervising social worker e.g. discussion on exercise/healthy eating etc'. Placing social workers also responded positively when asked what the service did to help children stay healthy. One described how 'The carer appears to promote healthy eating and encourages the child to try new things' and continued, 'they are very good at monitoring the child's emotional health and offers time to discuss issues appropriately and offers reassurance'. Another told us that 'the carers provide all that is necessary and more in respect of the child's health'. Although carers and children themselves raised no concerns regarding health needs being well met, the service was only able to confirm from their central records that just over half of the children placed through it had attended their annual health assessment in the last 12 months. Children's 'health passports', are held at home by their foster carers, consequently the recorded evidence of medical appointments within their care files is currently limited. The health information within individual children's 'health passports' is well presented, and indicated that carers receive descriptions of children's health needs in advance with medical consents recorded. To help carers meet the health needs of children, additional training is regularly provided to them with their attendance monitored and recorded. However, in one example although the carer themselves was able to confirm that they had completed first aid training prior to their approval by the agency, this was not recorded on their file. When children were asked if they got support and advice about being healthy they all responded positively. One young person wrote that 'my foster carers encourage me to exercise'. Another described how 'my foster carer lets me eat a lot of fruit instead of sweets'.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Since the previous inspection the service has successfully appointed a new manager and obtained the required approval of the Commission for Social Care Inspection. The manager confirmed that every staff member, foster carer and adult members of their households have had all required checks satisfactorily completed. An examination of a selection of staffing files supported this. However, in one example it was noted that the less recent parts of an employment history had not been completed in sufficient detail to ensure that any possible gaps could be identified and explained. The service monitors the safety of each home environment through initial health and safety checks which are updated through regular subsequent inspections. Family safe care agreements and individual risk assessment documents are also used to help keep children safe. Documents examined had been reviewed and updated but did not always include confirming signatures or dates. One family pet safety assessment did not contain sufficient detail. The agency has recently produced additional guidance to improve overall understanding of how risk assessments and safe care agreements should be completed and used. Placing social workers gave a number of examples of how children and young people were kept safe. One told us that

'The child concerned is a high risk and the carer has been excellent in establishing safe care and providing a high level of supervision'. The service has clear procedures in place to ensure that children are appropriately matched with their carers. The effectiveness of these were reflected by the relatively low number of un-planned endings to placements. The use of emergency placements for children is also infrequent. Carers provided very positive evidence of the work undertaken by the service to ensure that children are appropriately matched with them. When asked how they rated the information provided when children were first placed with them nearly all described this as either 'good' or 'outstanding' or at least 'satisfactory'. One described how 'all placements I have had, I have received plenty of information, also have got to meet the child before coming into my care'. Foster placement agreements examined were generally well presented and completed in good detail. Carers were also asked 'How good is the service at ensuring that you can meet the needs of the children and young people placed with you?' and in response described this as either 'good' or 'outstanding'. One carer described how 'our social worker advises us on the issues surrounding a placement before they come. So we are clear of all known facts before making up our mind for example distance to school, any contact arrangements and medical issues'. Again, when carers were asked 'How good is the service at maintaining placements, so that children only move in a planned way?', the overall response was that this was either 'good' or 'outstanding'. Further evidence of good matching was provided by children themselves, with all those responding by questionnaire able to confirm that they 'always' or 'usually' feel well cared for where they are living now. One described how this was true 'because we are always cared for and listened to'. Another highlighted how 'my carers always make sure I have what I need'. Carers are provided with the training necessary to ensure that children are protected from abuse and neglect. Robust systems are in place to ensure that the manager can collect and monitor any allegations of abuse toward children and young people, it was agreed that the manager should routinely sign the documentation in use. Detailed record sheets of any critical incidents are maintained within each carers file, however the summary sheets also used were not always fully completed. With only one exception, none of the young people who wrote to us had any current concerns regarding bullying. Some gave examples of previous incidents that had occurred and highlighted the support they had received from their carers to overcome these problems. One young person did report some current problems at school and this was shared with the manager for their review with the young person themselves and their carers. Previous recommendations made regarding the support available to the fostering panel and how aspects of it's business were conducted have been fully implemented. Examination of panel minutes and discussion with the chair provided evidence of robust effective procedures which work to ensure that children are looked after by carers who have been assessed thoroughly and approved properly.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service works to ensure that children and young people are provided with foster care that values diversity and promotes equality. Carers themselves were asked for their opinion as to how well the fostering service addresses these issues and almost all responded very positively, describing this as either 'good' or 'outstanding'. One carer commented that 'Placement matching is very good which helps cover the above. Also brochures and support training helps a lot to'. Another carer described how 'All carers are trained in good practice concerning cultural diversity and equality, issues in this subject are also discussed in supervision'. They were also very positive regarding the support received from the service to help the children cared for undertake activities in the community, again, mainly describing this as either 'outstanding' or 'good'. One carer

described how through the agency they 'regularly have days out and support children during these, more like a family'. The service provides a variety of training courses to support the further development of carers skills in these areas, recent examples included 'caring for a child with a disability' and 'equality, diversity and rights'. A high priority is given by the service to ensure that the educational needs of each child and young person are met. Young people confirmed that they receive the right help from their carers in meeting these needs, and are helped to think about their future. Overall carers see the support they receive from the service in meeting the educational needs of children as either 'good' or 'outstanding'. One gave their view that the 'FCA education department is second to none, they have had help on several occasions with moving schools, reviews, peps etc'. One placing social worker described how 'Regular school meetings are held to ensure educational needs are addressed; foster carers always attend and liaise regularly with school'. The service has a system in place to monitor attendance and achievement. Each of the children undertaking GCSE's in the last 12 months have been successful with 40% achieving five passes. Education files examined contained good evidence of the detailed planning and multi-agency working undertaken to ensure that children's educational needs continue to be properly identified and met. The service is equally committed to promoting non-academic achievements and care files contained very good examples of these being recognised and celebrated.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There are agreed policies and procedures in place to ensure that contact is promoted and monitored. Contact arrangements are agreed and recorded at the outset of placements. Carers mainly described children's networks with their own family and friends as either 'outstanding', 'good', or at least 'satisfactory'. The service ensures that children are regularly consulted and are able to raise and discuss any concerns they may have regarding the care they receive. All of the children who responded to our questions were able to confirm that they could speak to someone if they were unhappy, and knew how to make a complaint if necessary. They also responded positively when asked 'Do your carers listen to you and take notice of your opinions?'. One simply stated 'they listen to my problems, they try to help me always'. Another described how 'When we have a conversation my carer always lets me have my say and I think she understands me'. Carers mainly rated the service as either 'outstanding' or 'good' at involving children in decisions about their day to day lives, and about how the service overall is run. One carer described how 'children are always involved in meetings and decisions that they disagree with are always discussed and reasons given'. Another carer said that 'FCA have a Children's Forum where the children get to have their say. Also on my fortnightly support visits by my social worker, she tries to make a time where the children will be around so she can have a chat with them'. The service continues to successfully encourage children and young people to get involved with the user groups facilitated for their benefit. One placing social worker described how 'regular consultation and meetings take place'. Another described how they are supported to consult with children as 'social workers and others involved with the child are always made welcome and space provided to see the child on their own'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose has been subject to recent annual review, it continues to provide a clear description of the aims and objectives of the fostering service. A children's guide is also provided and young people spoken with confirmed they had received this. There is an effective management structure in place at the service with agreed areas of responsibility and delegation. There are well organised management processes which are used effectively by the experienced administrative staff team working to the benefit of children and their carers. The service has continued to recruit new carers steadily from their well organised advertising campaigns and word of mouth recommendations. Carers responded very positively when they were asked why they chose to foster for this service. One carer said that 'The help you get from any member of staff is outstanding and I have never felt let down'. Others highlighted the 'good reputation' of the agency, the '24 hour support' and the 'outstanding training and support received'. Another gave the view that 'FCA's philosophy does believe "every child matters"'. The foster care assessments examined were generally comprehensive and thorough with good panel processes evident, however original notes from visits to applicants referees are not currently retained. Clear notices of initial approval and any subsequent changes to them are maintained within the foster carers files. To effectively manage and support carers, the service ensures that that they are visited regularly and supervised thoroughly by their own social worker. Records of this supervision are maintained on file for reference. Carers were asked how well they felt the service supported them in caring for the children they look after and nearly all described this support as 'good' or 'outstanding'. One described how they 'have had the same link worker for 5 years - very professional, sound logical advice, very supportive in a caring professional manner'. Other examples such as the 24 hour support, thinking space forums and training days were also given. Carers were equally positive when asked 'What does the fostering service do to help you look after the children and young people in your care?', those responding typically highlighted regular contact, 24 hour support, guidance and plenty of training and backup. The arrangements by which foster carer annual review reports are provided to the fostering panel have been improved. Some reports were not available as they were with the independent review team for processing, however those that were available were seen to be generally comprehensive and well presented. The current foster carer agreements in use require amendment to highlight the change of responsibility for regulation from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted. Social workers placing children through the fostering service were happy to confirm the good communication existing between the fostering service and themselves. One described how 'I have regular contact with the foster carers who keep me very up to date with events/circumstances of the young person'. Another described how 'Communication is regular, relevant and always child centred'. As previously recommended the service has introduced a central recording system to enable better monitoring of the training undertaken by carers. Training is also recorded within foster carers own files. Currently, nearly one third of foster carers either hold or are working toward a National Vocational Qualification to Level 3, however, in some examples training records within the carers files had not been updated to reflect this. Those case files for children examined were well presented and generally comprehensive, and the manager was able to confirm that placement agreements are in place for each young person. However, not all care plans had been received from their placing social workers. Files contained good evidence of the efforts being made by staff at the service to obtain any outstanding documentation. The overall administrative systems are well organised, records are in place containing all significant information relevant to the running of the service. These are all regularly monitored by the manager.

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):

- make sure that children's care files contain written confirmation of their annual LAC medical (NMS 12)
- ensure that when family safe care agreements and individual risk assessment documents are reviewed they are signed and dated on each occasion.(NMS 9)
- ensure that family pet safety assessments contain sufficient detail (NMS 6)
- the documentation used to collect and monitor any allegations of abuse toward children and young people should be routinely signed by the manager (NMS 9)
- ensure that the critical incident summary record sheets maintained within each carers file are fully completed.(NMS 9)
- ensure that staff files include a full record of their previous employment history (NMS 15)
- maintain records of visits to the referees of applicants to foster within the carers' file (NMS 17)
- amend Foster Carer agreements to highlight the change of responsibility for inspection and regulation from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted (NMS 21)
- record in detail the individual training undertaken by foster carers within their file (NMS 23)

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.