

Foster Care Associates - Yorkshire and Lincolnshire

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 (FCA) is a nationwide fostering agency. FCA Yorkshire and Lincolnshire region consists of a regional office in Barlborough, Chesterfield and seven area offices in Sheffield, Doncaster, Mansfield, Leeds (2), Lincoln and Hull. Within each of the area teams is a team manager, a team of qualified social workers and administrative staff. Children and young people's support services (CHYPSS) workers, educational liaison officers (ELO) and therapists provide services across the region and have attachment to specific office bases. The registered manager for the service, Fred Lillie, is an operational director and is based at the regional office in Chesterfield, together with a deputy director, two assistant directors (each with designated managerial responsibilities for the various fostering offices) and the recruitment and placement teams and administrators. FCA Yorkshire and Lincolnshire region offers a range of family placements including emergency, short term, assessment, bridging, long term and parent and child. The statement of purpose, dated January 2008 details that the agency is currently supporting 228 fostering households to provide placements to 264 young people. The agency provides recruitment, assessment and approval of foster carers and all related training and support. Supervising social workers and resource workers support placements, and work closely with both foster children and carers own children. This inspection has focused on the Sheffield office, which supports 38 foster carer households to provide placements to 44 young people.

Summary

This is a good fostering service with some outstanding practices. The Sheffield team is led by an experienced and dedicated team manager and constitutes a stable and dedicated child-centred team with a demonstrated focus on promoting positive outcomes for young people. There is a commendable focus on promoting and rewarding young people's personal and educational achievements. Generally carers feel well supported and valued. Excellent training opportunities ensure that both carers and staff progressively develop their individual skills and talents. The agency has been recommended to clarify its policy on restraint as a tool for managing behaviour, since the current policy reflects a very restrictive understanding of the term, and to review training for carers in this area. The agency has additionally been recommended to ensure that risk assessments are in place to support young people's contact arrangements and that carers are clear about their role in relation to young people's contact arrangements, particularly with regard to these taking place in the carer's home. Currently fostered young people are not directly consulted at the time of the foster carer's annual review, to ascertain their views, although their placing social workers are requested to seek and reflect their opinions. Young people are not actively encouraged to challenge inappropriate care planning and support provided by their placing authorities although the fostering service is making challenges, in respect of these practices, at a management level.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

During the previous inspection the agency was recommended to clearly record how identified shortfalls in the matching process and potential risks in relation to individual young people's behaviours would be addressed within placement. The completion of individual risk assessments identifying potential behavioural issues, their known triggers and useful management strategies

has largely addressed this, although the matching pro-forma utilised by the agency remains a poor reflection of the demonstrated care taken in ensuring that young people are placed with carers who are equipped to fully meet their needs. The agency was additionally recommended to implement individualised safe care policies, which it has now done.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Carers are diligent in ensuring that young people are appropriately registered with doctors and dentists and that they access routine health appointments regularly to ensure that their physical wellbeing is promoted. Although the agency is able to demonstrate rigorous systems for chasing health information from placing authorities, carers say that historical health information, received in relation to young people placed, has often been poor. Many of the young people, who are placed with carers supervised by the Sheffield office, are placed by one local authority. The team manager has now made contact with the looked after children (LAC) health team for that authority and secured agreement for health care plans, arising from annual health checks, to be supplied to foster carers and for support to be provided in obtaining historical health information. A member of the LAC health team is also going to attend a carer support group meeting to discuss LAC health needs. The establishment of a working relationship with the LAC health team is commended as it will support carers well to better understand and better meet young people's health needs. The agency provides a separate health passport booklet for carers to complete for each child placed and this is transferred with the child when they move placement or go for respite with other carers. Foster carers sign to confirm receipt of these. Carers are very aware of their responsibility to ensure that these booklets are comprehensively completed in respect of all health appointments and medication administered and these booklets will, in the future, provide young people with a full record of their health issues. Good, health related training is routinely provided to carers and this enables them to have a good awareness of their healthcare responsibilities to children placed. Therapists are actively involved in the provision of carer training as well as in providing individualised support to both carers and young people. Recent training provided has related to the power of play, attachment issues and the agency's team parenting approach. Foster carers particularly value the ADAPT (attachment difficulties and parenting therapeutically) training, which focuses on supporting the stability of long term placements for young people with significant attachment difficulties. All carers are required to complete first aid training. The in-house therapy service supports carers well to meet young people's emotional and psychological needs and the training provided by this team promotes reflective thinking, on the part of carers, and the development of empathy with looked after children. Team parenting placements offer a particularly robust, multi-agency, wrap around service. The agency has reviewed and updated its smoking policy and carers who smoke may no longer provide placements to children under five years of age. Fostering panel minutes demonstrate that this policy is being sensibly implemented in that current, stable placements, which do not fit this policy change, are not being disrupted but those carers are being strongly encouraged and supported to cease smoking.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Previous inspections have demonstrated robust recruitment policies and procedures in relation to both staff and foster carers and this was confirmed by an Ofsted audit of the Foster Care Associates head office in January 2008. No personnel files have been examined during this

inspection. Both the team manager and staff, in the Sheffield office, have considerable knowledge, experience and skills in the field of social care and fostering, and carer supervision records demonstrate that they provide sound support and advise carers in their provision of positive and safe placements for young people. The Agency completes a very thorough health and safety risk assessment of each carer's home at the point of initial approval and this is reviewed annually at the time of the carer's review. The files tracked provided evidence that additional requirements were sometimes identified within this review process and were appropriately followed up. Each carer prepares a household safe care policy at the point of approval and there is consistently good evidence that safe care is prioritised through carer supervision, contact records, reviews and carer records of young people's placements. Carer's safe care policies are regularly reviewed and addendums are completed as young people are placed to make them specifically pertinent to the individual needs of the young people in placement. Robust individual risk assessments, in relation to young people placed, support these safe care policies and detail potential complex behaviours and proposed strategies for managing these safely. Carers and staff have access to good training opportunities in relation to child protection and keeping young people safe, including negotiated access to training by the local safeguarding children board and the introduction of a very good FCA course entitled 'Protecting children, supporting carers'. Young people feel safe in their foster placements: 'They make me feel safe and comfortable'. The agency's policy on restraint reflects a very limited view of restraint, only as a measure of discipline and control, detailing that it should not be used by carers or staff, in any circumstances. Some carers, however, are utilising physical intervention as a means of protecting young people. Discussions with the team manager and staff demonstrate sound awareness of the occasional necessity for carers to restrain young people to prevent them harming themselves or others and, where this need is recognised, appropriate consultation is undertaken with placing authorities to agree strategies. All carers have access to training on non-violent crisis intervention but no specific training is provided to cover the use of restraint. Discussions with foster carers and staff demonstrate that considerable work goes into ensuring that young people are appropriately placed with fosters carers capable of meeting their needs. Foster carers said that they have a say as to who is placed with them, and whether they feel they have the skills to meet the young person's needs. The regional placements team handles referrals for placement centrally and discussion of matching considerations is then undertaken with the relevant area office and the proposed carer's supervising social worker prior to contacting a carer. Although the matching pro-forma, currently used by the agency, is extremely basic and poorly reflective of the matching process, it is well supported by clear and comprehensive recording and monitoring of foster carer competencies and comprehensive individual profiles and risk assessments of young people detailing their individual needs, triggers for inappropriate behaviours and management strategies. The agency's fostering panel meets monthly at the head office at Barlborough and was not observed during this inspection. Panel minutes are good and provide a comprehensive record of panel discussion and clarity of reasons for recommendations to the agency's decision maker. The panel receives regular updates about agency practice and exercises its quality assurance role well. Agency managers demonstrate a sound awareness of the regulatory requirements in relation to panel constitution, however, the recent long term absence of the panel chair has been recorded in a manner indicating illegal panel constitution of 11 members. 11 members are also listed in the panel handbook, which has been prepared for foster carers, since the absent panel chair features in the listing. No action has been identified since panel minutes demonstrate that 11 members have never sat as a fostering panel and that the error is in the failure to appropriately record the standing down of the panel chair.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Many positive initiatives are operated by the agency to promote equality and to meet the diverse needs of children and young people. Staff and carers are recruited from diverse backgrounds and the agency provides a local and national Black workers forum. The matching process takes full account of young people's needs in relation to culture, race, religion and disability. The magazine produced for young people regularly features articles from fostered young people sharing their particular experiences of various cultural heritages. Carers and staff have access to good training opportunities for example 'identity and belonging' and 'working with disabilities'. The agency provides young people with a memory box and carers encourage them to collect photographs and memorabilia. This agency demonstrates a commendable level of commitment and pro-actively devotes resources to achieving positive educational outcomes for children. The FCA education service is well staffed and is an integral component of the FCA support service to its carers and young people. Education liaison officers attend a range of meetings in order to advocate for and support both carers and young people in relation to school placements and are pro-active in negotiating school placements, in obtaining additional support needed and, where appropriate, in supporting the statementing process. These services are highly valued by carers: 'FCA has been an excellent source of help and advice in relation to education and has even funded additional classroom support'. The education team meets monthly to review the young people they are involved with and to monitor support plans for year 11 students. Excellent support, in the form of individual tutoring, is provided for young people studying for GCSE exams and, during 2007, 71% achieved five plus A-G grades, which is commendable. At the time of this inspection 98% of young people placed with FCA Yorkshire and Lincolnshire have a school placement. The agency supplies all its carers with an excellent education handbook, developed by the education team. The individual achievements, educational and personal, of both fostered and birth children, are positively recognised and celebrated by the agency with certificates, articles in 'Kids Unlimited' and annual award ceremonies. Letters received by the agency reflect young people's appreciation of this. Additional support is provided to young people, to develop self-confidence and to promote personal and educational achievement, by the children and young people's support service (CHYPSS). CHYPSS workers often provide one to one support sessions to support particular individual needs and these sessions are well recorded and have a demonstrated positive impact on young people's progress and placement stability. FCA therapists have also visited some young people's schools to raise awareness of school staff of the implications of attachment disorders for educational achievement. The agency is sometimes struggling to obtain current copies of young people's personal education plans (PEP), with only 54% in place in November 2007, but has instituted robust systems for chasing these. The agency provides training to carers in preparing young people for independence and has a national coordinator for leaving care services. Currently this region has above the national average of young people going into further education and encourages placing authorities to support the continuation of foster placements for young people continuing in education. The agency taps into the assessment and qualifications (AQA) scheme and has an education liaison officer and several CHYPSS workers trained to deliver accredited training to young people, which recognises and rewards the development of independence skills. The agency invests in the provision of a very good range of activities, sports events and holiday breaks for all children, carers and their families. Carers and children said how much these were enjoyed. Information about forthcoming events is detailed in colourful newsletters and literature circulated to both carers and young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Although carers demonstrate a good awareness of the importance for young people of maintaining family contacts and friendships, there is some confusion about the circumstances under which this should be facilitated in their homes and, where this is happening, no risk assessments have been completed. The increased number of younger children, accommodated by the agency, has resulted in the increased involvement of many carers in contact arrangements and no specific training has recently been provided to Sheffield carers. Foster Care Associates has a commendable range of processes and systems for consultation with young people at local, regional and national levels. Each area has nominated young people's representatives who represent their area at the regional children's forum and a national conference is held for children and young people from all areas. Regular social events are organised and carers, birth children and fostered children are encouraged to attend. CHYPSS workers facilitate the young people's forums and have developed an excellent folder to guide discussions, which includes coverage of topics such as bullying and fire safety. The agency produces quarterly magazines for both carers (Yorks and Lincs news) and young people (Kids unlimited), which contain news from each area office and information about future events and provide opportunities for carers and young people to have their say about any topic. Excellent booklets are produced for young people, by the education team, the therapy team and CHYPSS, to introduce staff members and to detail the services they are able to offer. The impact of fostering, on carers' own children, is given good consideration. Their views are sought at each carer annual review and are read and commented on by the fostering panel. Currently, in relation to carer annual reviews, the agency only seeks to obtain the views of fostered children through their placing social workers and often does not receive them. Young people's views about their foster placements are however, sought and recorded by supervising social workers, particularly at the time of an unannounced visit.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Foster Care Associates produces an overall statement of purpose, which provides the national framework within which all branches operate and includes a regional insert providing information specific to the seven offices that comprise FCA Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. A separate, commendable booklet entitled 'welcome to the Sheffield team' is provided to carers supervised from this office and this provides an excellent introduction to the staff team clarifying their qualifications and experience. FCA has an excellent range of literature for young people entering placement, with 'Toby Bear' books for young children and a 'file of facts' for the older group. The latter contains excellent information about health, personal safety, education and the law as well as details of young people's rights and responsibilities and contact details for several advocacy services. The Agency has additionally developed a CD Rom, with young people, containing all this information for those who need to access the information in other than written form. FCA Yorkshire and Lincolnshire region is efficiently and professionally managed, providing clear lines of accountability and strong leadership and a good level of support to staff and foster carers. Clear arrangements are in place for monitoring all aspects of the fostering service to ensure that a sound professional service is operated. The Sheffield team is a very

child-focused, stable team with a demonstrated dedication to promoting positive outcomes for young people. Staff feel well supported and valued. Robust local leadership is provided by a dedicated and knowledgeable team manager who strives to promote positive outcomes for young people. Feedback from foster carers and records examined show that carers receive a very good level of support from the fostering service, particularly from their designated supervising social worker. Virtually all questionnaires received from carers indicated that they felt valued and extremely well supported by the Agency. In response to market demand the agency has begun to offer placements to local authorities, at a reduced rate, for young people with less complex needs. These placements are termed foundation placements and theoretically provide lower levels of support to both carers and young people and no input from the education team, the therapy team or CHYPSS. Many carers are unhappy about these placements and many staff have serious reservations, particularly as they are often provided by newly approved carers. Often complexities become evident, in these young people's behaviours, subsequent to placement and local authorities are then reluctant to renegotiate terms to facilitate appropriate placement support. In these situations agency staff are providing the necessary increased support to the carers, and often requesting that a therapist or education liaison officer provide some consultation, but carers still feel insecure with these placements. Foster carer assessments are completed to a high standard and are well scrutinised by the fostering panel. Carer's annual reviews are commendably robust and are completed by two independent reviewing officers. Reviews are completed in a timely manner and are extremely thorough in their consideration of carer's growth and development and their provision of positive placements. The agency rarely requests exemptions for carers to accommodate more than three young people, but, when these are in place, carer approval status is being recorded in a misleading way. Training opportunities for carers and staff are excellent. A comprehensive internal training programme is available and both staff and carers are encouraged and financially supported to access external training. The agency has also developed opportunities for carers to undertake some training courses as home study courses. There is a demonstrated commitment to encouraging carers to undertake training, which has specific relevance to the identified needs of young people in placement. Records relating to staff and young people are retained in good order. An excellent folder has been developed to provide all relevant information to carers providing respite placements for young people. Some young people's records do not contain full looked after children (LAC) documentation but the agency is able to demonstrate that this information is chased through approaches to both the operational teams supporting the young people and through independent LAC reviewing officers. Care planning for some young people is particularly poor and many young people are without allocated qualified social workers. The team manager is able to demonstrate robust endeavours to address this with placing authorities. Currently, however, young people are not being well supported to challenge the inappropriate support and care planning of their placing authorities, in their own right. During the recent audit, carried out at the agency's head office, some minor shortfalls were identified in the agency's foster care agreement and foster placement agreement. These shortfalls are in the process of being addressed and recommendations have not been re-iterated.

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):

- clarify the agency policy on restraint as a tool for managing behaviour and review training provision to reflect any policy changes (NMS 9.2)
- provide training to foster carers to cover the skills required to encourage and facilitate contact and ensure that, except where an overriding requirement exists, that contact does not take place until the child's social worker has carried out a risk assessment and arrangements are made for any supervision that is needed (NMS 10.5, NMS 10.6)
- obtain children's opinions of their foster placements, directly rather than through a third party, at the time of the foster carer's annual review, since this concerns issues central to their daily life (NMS 11.1)
- support young people better to challenge inappropriate care planning and support on the part of their placing authorities (NMS 11.4).

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.