

Foster Care Associates - Eastern Region

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 an independent fostering agency. It is a national organisation and has been operating since 1994. FCA Eastern Region consists of a regional office in Claydon, Suffolk and four additional offices situated in north and south Essex, Cambridge and Norfolk. In May 2007, following changes to the organisation's management structure, FCA made an application to Ofsted to cancel the registration of FCA South East, which was then a separately registered branch, and to change the name of FCA East Anglia to FCA Eastern Region. These changes were agreed and FCA Eastern Region now incorporates the functions of the former FCA South East branch. The Operational Director of FCA Eastern Region holds the position of Registered Manager and is based at the regional office, together with an assistant director, team manager, supervising social workers, therapists and administrative staff. Other team managers, supervising social workers and ancillary staff are based in the local offices. FCA Eastern Region offers a range of placements, including emergency, short-term, long-term, bridging and respite placements. Therapists, education and support services staff provide a range of support to these placements, including activities, direct work with children and additional support for foster carers. At the time of this inspection, FCA Eastern Region was supporting 120 approved foster carer households, in which carers were looking after a total of 113 children and young people.

Summary

This was an announced proportionate key inspection. All of the key National Minimum Standards have been covered. As a result of the good quality rating given to the agency at the last inspection in December 2006, this inspection followed a reduced methodology in line with Ofsted guidance on the inspection of fostering services. FCA Eastern Region incorporates the former FCA South East branch, which was inspected in October 2007 while it was still separately registered. FCA South East was also judged to be a good quality service. This inspection found that FCA Eastern Region continues to provide good overall outcomes for children placed with its foster carers. The outcome groups of Being healthy, Staying safe and Organisation are judged as good. The Enjoying and achieving, Making a positive contribution outcome groups are judged as outstanding. Economic wellbeing was not assessed during this inspection. Actions have been made in relation to the content of foster placement agreements and foster carer agreements, and the need to include Ofsted's contact details in the children's guide. One recommendation has been made regarding safer caring policies.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The Registered Provider was asked to ensure that, if a proposed placement would be outside of the foster carer's existing conditions of approval, it is referred to the fostering panel and a record is kept of the decision made. The agency has taken steps to address this requirement, helping to ensure that children are appropriately matched with suitable carers. The Registered Provider was asked to ensure that the foster care agreement contains all of the information specified in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations. This requirement is not met and a new action has been made. A recommendation was made in relation to ensuring that, when carers miss planned training, they are given other opportunities to acquire relevant skills and

knowledge before any child with specific needs is placed with them. This recommendation has been met.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The health needs of children placed with FCA Eastern Region's foster carers are well met. The service makes good efforts to obtain as much information as possible about children's health, so that appropriate matching can take place between foster carers and children. The agency also seeks to ensure that carers are fully informed about any health concerns and treatment. The necessary written parental consent for medical treatment, administration of medicines and use of first aid is also held on young people's files. Children are registered with local GPs and dentists and carers keep records of routine health care appointments. The agency provides a 'health passport' for each child placed, with the expectation that carers will update it with relevant information, as appropriate. This document encourages consistent recording of health-related information and can move with the child to any future placement. The agency provides regular training opportunities for carers, covering first aid and other relevant matters, such as attachment, self-harm and drug awareness. Carers are provided with guidance and information that makes clear the responsibility of carers to meet children's immediate health care needs and promote their health. Relevant information is included in the foster carer handbook. Supervising social workers provide support to foster carers in relation to children's health needs and monitor the completion of records. Children said that they were receiving support and guidance from their carers about health issues, including how to lead a healthy lifestyle. The agency provides a range of activities to encourage children to be physically active. FCA Eastern Region recently ran a time-limited group for teenage girls placed with foster carers, focussing on healthy eating, hygiene, sexual health and self-esteem, and is considering plans for a similar group for boys. The agency provides a therapeutic assessment and support service for children and for any foster carers who are looking after children with particular emotional health needs. This is an integral part of the agency's holistic 'team parenting' approach to meeting children's needs. An art therapy anger management workshop has been developed to train carers and staff, and anger management work has been undertaken with individual children. Children are also supported in receiving external services to meet their emotional health needs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

FCA Eastern Region has robust recruitment processes in place to ensure that staff employed by the agency are suitable to work with children and have the necessary qualifications and skills for their roles. New staff undertake a probationary period. The persons carrying on the agency are unchanged since the last inspection and continue to be judged as fit to carry out this role. The agency provides foster carers who offer a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. The agency's carers have been subject to a comprehensive assessment, including robust vetting checks, before they are approved. The assessment process involves ensuring that the environment provided for the children is safe and secure. Health and safety assessments are updated at annual household reviews, in order to check that the accommodation continues to be appropriate. Foster carers' homes visited during this inspection were welcoming, clean and comfortable. Children were happy with their rooms and had personalised them. The agency recruits an appropriate range of carers to meet the needs of the children for whom it aims to provide a service. A thorough matching process is followed, which includes completion of a

detailed matching form for each prospective placement. This process helps to ensure that children are carefully matched to foster carers who have the skills and experience to meet their assessed needs. The terms of foster carers' approval are generally well respected and decisions to temporarily vary terms of approval, for example in the case of a child who had reached the upper age limit while in placement, are recorded on case files and signed off by the Operational Director. Staff take appropriate steps to obtain full details from placing authorities about children's needs and backgrounds before and, at the point of, placement, so that foster carers have the information that they need to meet their needs on a daily basis. Carers are confident that, if some of this information is not immediately available, staff make every effort to obtain it as soon as possible after the start of the placement. A foster placement agreement (FPA), setting out the arrangements for the child's care, is completed for each child placed with carers. In cases where comprehensive, up to date care planning documentation is not provided by the placing authority, the agency completes a second part to this form with the intention of covering all of the areas that have to be included in the FPA. However, some FPAs contain limited detail about certain aspects of children's needs and the arrangements for meeting them. This reduces the effectiveness of the FPA in setting out the role and responsibilities of foster carers in relation to individual placements. The agency has a child protection policy and a procedure to be followed in the event of an allegation or suspicion of abuse. Relevant training is provided for foster carers. In addition to their pre-approval training, carers receive further safeguarding training as part of the mandatory post-approval programme. The foster carer handbook includes policies on child protection, internet and mobile phone safety, and children who go missing from the foster home. Staff and carers are conversant with the procedures for reporting abuse. Child protection incidents are dealt with appropriately and all relevant authorities are informed promptly. The agency has a system for monitoring other incidents relating to safeguarding children and ensures that appropriate action is taken. The agency provides foster carers with written guidelines on safer caring. Each carer produces their own family policy on safer caring to help protect everyone living in the household. The agency has introduced a new format to promote the inclusion in these policies of information that is specific to the needs of each child placed in the household. Safer caring policies are being reviewed when second and subsequent placements are made, but an example was seen of a policy, developed during the carers' assessment, which had not been updated to take into account the specific needs of the first child placed with the carers. Safer caring guidelines are likely to be less effective if they are not reviewed for each new placement. The agency ensures that children have access to advice about bullying to help keep them safe and there is also a written policy on bullying. Anti-bullying information cards are now included in the welcome pack which is given to each child who joins the agency's carers. A group of children have recently participated in an anti-bullying workshop event, arranged jointly with another branch of FCA, following a request made through the children's forum. A training package for foster carers has been developed by the Education Liaison Officer and the agency has indicated its intention to start delivering this training later this year. The agency's fostering panel is well organised and is effective in ensuring that good quality decisions are made. The panel chair and other members have appropriate experience and expertise relevant to their role on the panel. The panel is well supported by the agency, including the provision of regular training opportunities. The agency has introduced regular meetings between the panel chair, vice chair, agency decision maker and social work team managers to look at quality issues, such as agency policies and timescales for assessments.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency ensures that children are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promote equality. For example, issues relating to diversity and equality are covered during the assessment period. Carers are provided with further training in relation to equality and diversity on an ongoing basis. Foster carers are given training and guidance to help them meet the cultural and religious needs of children. Staff have recently received specialist training to raise awareness of trafficked children and how their needs can be met in foster placements. Links have been established with a local specialist social care team in order to develop awareness of the particular needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. FCA Eastern Region is committed to continuing to recruit foster carers from all sections of the community in order to offer a reasonable range of placement choices to meet the diverse needs of children. The agency's matching process takes account of any racial or cultural needs that children may have and ensures that an appropriate match is made, whenever possible. Foster carers are well supported to help them to recognise and address the individual needs of children placed. Carers who provide placements for children with disabilities commented very positively on the support provided by the agency, including additional training and specialist equipment. Children's cultural needs and differences are recognised and celebrated by the agency and its foster carers. Each year, the agency organises a Black History Month, which is a special event that enables fostered children, birth children, foster carers and staff to participate in a range of activities celebrating black culture. FCA Eastern Region places a high priority on meeting children's education needs and helping them to achieve their full potential. The agency supports carers in ensuring that children have appropriate school or college places and also monitors children's educational progress and any concerns. At the time of the inspection, a very high proportion of children placed with the agency had suitable education placements. Structured learning opportunities are provided for children who are unable to attend school, enabling them to work towards nationally recognised awards. A specialist education liaison officer (ELO) provides a wide range of support for carers and children. The ELO has particular knowledge and expertise in relation to school and college admissions processes, exclusions and the provision of additional support for children in school. When a placement is identified as needing therapeutic support, the ELO attends the 'team parenting' meeting as part of the plan to ensure that a consistent approach is taken to meeting the child's needs. The ELO works directly with schools, when necessary, in order to support and stabilise children's school placements. Training, written guidance and support materials are available to help carers understand the education system and how best to support children in their care. Foster carers are active in liaising with schools and express very positive views about the support that the agency provides for children's education. Children receive recognition and awards for their individual achievements in education. Additional support, such as extra tuition, is offered to young people who are preparing for their GCSEs. The agency is also pro-active in supporting young people in Year 11 and their carers through the process of considering post-16 options and, where appropriate, applying for places in further education colleges. Reports detailing children's education history, needs and progress are kept in their files. The agency is pro-active in contacting schools to request copies of children's school reports and personal education plans (PEPs) as part of the process of monitoring children's progress. The agency's arrangements for supporting children's education are excellent.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency ensures that children are encouraged to maintain contact with family members and others, in accordance with the plans made by their placing authorities. Children's contact needs

are identified at the time of placement and clearly recorded on their files. Foster carers are fully aware of the contact arrangements for children in their care, including any restrictions. Supervising social workers offer valuable support to carers in relation to children's contact by, for example, liaising regularly with placing authorities and clarifying any changes that are proposed. Contact arrangements are generally well planned and, where necessary, the agency's support services staff provide direct assistance in order to avoid undue pressure being placed on carers. The agency has safe and comfortable facilities to enable contact meetings to take place at its offices. Foster carers are provided with written guidance on promoting contact. This subject is also covered during pre-approval training and in the ongoing training programme for foster carers. Children confirmed that they were satisfied with the contact arrangements in place. The agency ensures that children's views are sought over issues which are likely to affect their daily life. Training for foster carers includes the importance of listening to the views of children in their care and understanding other ways in which children express their wishes and feelings. Supervising social workers and other agency staff see the children regularly and they are also clear about the need to listen to their views. As part of each foster carer's household review, children placed with the carer are encouraged to complete a questionnaire about their own experience of the placement. Children also have the opportunity to express their views and opinions during their statutory reviews. Children placed with the agency's carers are offered excellent opportunities to take an active role in the development of the service. There are national consultation arrangements in place to obtain children's views and FCA Eastern Region has its own active children's forum. The agency is currently carrying out an extensive audit of the extent and effectiveness of children's participation in the service. Children have recently been actively involved in the process of interviewing applicants for support worker posts. Children have also contributed to the design of new 'welcome' literature. Children are aware of the agency's complaints procedure. They are provided with an interactive guide and written information about their rights, including how to complain.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose covering the aims and objectives of the fostering agency. This document includes information on how to make a complaint as well as information about complaints received by the agency. In addition, the agency has a children's guide which is presented in a child-friendly format for different age groups. The guide includes information about what children can expect when living with foster carers as well as who to contact if they are not happy. The agency also provides children with an interactive guide to FCA's fostering service on CD Rom. The children's guide contains the details of the previous regulatory body, but it has not yet been updated with the name and address of Ofsted. Consequently, children do not have information to enable them to contact Ofsted should they wish to do so. There are clear procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering agency. For example, the Registered Manager undertakes monitoring of the matters set out in Schedule 7 of the regulations, with the support of senior regional office staff and FCA's national quality assurance. Audits are carried out on the files of children and foster carers to assess the practice of the staff within the agency. Staff within the agency are committed to ensuring that their practice is effective in promoting the interests of children. Management information and quality assurance systems have been reviewed to take into account the recent restructuring of the

region. The fostering agency has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff. Supervising social workers hold a social work qualification and have previous relevant experience of working with children. Staff within the agency are clear about their roles and responsibilities. The administrative team is pro-active in organising the daily running of the agency and provides a good level of support for the supervising social workers and other staff. Staff are organised and managed in a way which enables the agency to deliver an efficient and effective service. For example, there is a clear staffing structure in place and lines of accountability are well defined. Staff say that they feel supported and receive regular supervision. Regular team meetings are held. A new staff appraisal system has recently been introduced and this is linked to identifying and meeting staff training needs. The fostering agency recruits foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the children. Independent social workers employed by the agency have relevant experience to ensure that they are able to carry out good quality assessments of prospective foster carers. The process for assessing foster carers is thorough and is overseen by senior managers within the agency. The fostering agency has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers. For example, supervising social workers carry out regular visits to complete supervision with foster carers. Clear records are made of these visits and any issues are followed up. Regular support group meetings are arranged where foster carers can meet together informally. Foster carers are provided with a good range of written policies and guidance in the foster carer handbook. Foster carers are aware of the agency's out of hours service and are confident that they can contact the agency at any time for advice and support. The agency provides support groups for the sons and daughters of foster carers. A number of events organised by FCA Eastern Region, such as the children's achievement awards day and the talent contest are open to both fostered children and carers' birth children. Overall, foster carers are very complimentary about the support that they receive from their supervising social workers and from the agency as a whole. The agency has worked well to minimise any disruption caused to carers by the recent restructuring of the region. Reviews of foster carers' approval are completed within the relevant timescales, demonstrating a consistent approach to evaluating the continued suitability of foster carers. Foster carer households are visited annually on an unannounced basis. Foster carers sign a detailed foster care agreement, but this does not include the procedure for carers to make complaints. This omission could compromise the effectiveness of this document, which is intended to make clear the responsibilities of foster carers and the extent of the agency's duties to them. Case records for children are well maintained. Each child has their own file, which is well organised and up to date, ensuring that information can be easily retrieved. Systems are in place to ensure that all relevant information is kept on the child's file. There is evidence in children's files to show that the agency takes appropriate steps to obtain all of the necessary background and care planning documentation from placing authorities in a timely manner. The fostering agency's administrative records contain all significant information relevant to the running of the service. For example, separate records are maintained for children, foster carers and staff. Complaints, allegations and other significant events are recorded separately. Confidential records are stored securely in lockable facilities.

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
8	ensure that the written foster placement agreements made between the responsible authority and the foster carers cover all of the matters in Schedule 6. (Regulation 34) This refers, in particular, to ensuring that foster placement agreements contain an adequate level of detail about children's needs and how they are to be met.	31 May 2008
22	ensure that, when the fostering service provider approves a person as a foster parent, it enters into a written agreement with the foster parent covering the matters specified in Schedule 5. (Regulation 28)	31 May 2008
1	ensure that the children's guide contains the address and telephone number of Ofsted. (Regulation 3)	31 May 2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the safer caring guidelines produced for each foster home are reviewed and, as necessary, developed to take into account the needs of each child placed. (NMS 9.3).

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.