

Foster Care Associates (North West)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC040408
Inspection date	12 July 2010
Inspector	Sharon Lloyd / Sarah Oldham
Type of Inspection	Key

Address	Sharston Road Sharston Court Sharston Manchester M22 4BB
Telephone number	0161 998 1127
Email	
Registered person	Foster Care Associates Ltd
Registered manager	Colette Abbiss
Responsible individual	David John Oldham
Date of last inspection	14 September 2007

© Crown copyright 2010

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Cripins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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 West is part of a national independent organisation providing family placements 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. There are eight area offices based in the north west of England. A further office in Blackburn hosts the panel and is a base for the recruitment, assessment and training functions of the service. Area offices do not operate independently.

A range of fostering services is provided throughout the north west of England. Many of the children have complex and challenging needs. Each has an individual care package agreed by the placing authority. Additional support is provided by education liaison staff, therapists and support workers. Foster carers have up 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 March 2010 the service was looking after 343 children and young people in 237 approved fostering households.

Summary

This was a key announced inspection. This fostering agency provides competent and dedicated carers who are very well trained, supervised and supported. This means that the children and young people they look after make excellent progress and achieve good and outstanding outcomes in all areas of their development. Placing social workers say: 'Foster Care Associates' carers are of a high standard and always put the needs of the children first.' All foster carers rate the service as good or outstanding in every way. They comment on the positive 'family feel', the outstanding levels of support and the focus on review and development so that the service to children is constantly improving. A typical comment from a child is: 'I am very happy here. I get looked after very well.'

Three recommendations for good practice are made. One relates to the clarity of information to carers about claiming expenses for baby equipment. The second relates to the recording of allegations and complaints. The final recommendation is made because photographs held on staff members' files are not always recent at the time of recruitment. None impact on the care of the children and young people.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Five breaches in regulations were identified at the last inspection and all have been addressed in full. Two related to the organisation and management of the service. The agency has introduced effective systems for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations so the Registered Manager has good management information to demonstrate that the service is operating effectively to meet the needs of children and young people. Foster care agreements have been updated and contain all the information required

by Schedule 5 of the Fostering Services Regulations. This means that foster carers enter into a contract with the agency to provide care and accommodation in line with legal requirements.

Two actions were raised in relation to the outcome area staying safe. The agency has improved its procedures for vetting new staff members so that robust recruitment procedures promote the safety of children and young people. Facilities at venues used by children are risk assessed so that hazards to safety are identified and removed. Health and safety risk assessments are carried out before every review of approval so the agency is assured that foster homes continue to provide suitable, safe accommodation. Office premises are fit for purpose and have been adapted to meet the use of wheelchair users.

Fifteen recommendations for good practice were issued. Three related to the outcome area, being healthy, and have been addressed so that the service has good systems that effectively promote the health of children and young people through training its foster carers, ensuring they have information about children's health needs and maintain up-to-date health records.

Four recommendations were made in relation to the outcome area staying safe. Three have been addressed in full and one has been partially addressed. The service collates information relating to allegations and complaints so that managers can effectively monitor how they are addressed. Although it has separate records for both, the difference between an allegation and a complaint is not always apparent so that some allegations are recorded as complaints. This does not impact upon the outcomes for children and young people but does not provide wholly accurate management information. Safe care policies are in place in relation to each child in a foster family and these identify the best ways to safeguard the child, taking into account each child's own particular needs. This includes whether the child can be safely left alone with male carers without the risk of allegations. Safe care policies are completed whenever a new child joins a foster family.

A recommendation to consider the competency, skills and experience of foster carers when deciding on and reviewing their terms of approval has been partially met. Most foster carers are approved to care for children aged from 0-18 years. In some cases, the approval is for children aged 0-18, with a preference for children of a certain age group. The agency is increasingly introducing preference to aid placement officers when they are looking to match children to available carers. However, foster carers confirmed that they are never put under pressure to take children they do not feel able to manage and most are happy to be approved for a wide age range.

A recommendation to review the allocation of resource workers has been met so they are available to work with those children who need additional support irrespective of their location. The agency monitors the distribution of pocket money to children to make sure they all receive the pocket money they are entitled to, learn to budget and are encouraged to save.

Five recommendations relating to the organisation and management of the service have been met. Foster carers are visited fortnightly in accordance with the agency's policy and this provides them with a very high level of support. Unannounced visits to carers take place at least once a year so the agency is assured that carers provide a good standard of care at all times. Communication problems in rural areas have been addressed and the agency recruits new staff to vacant posts quickly to reduce the strain on the service especially in rural areas. Additional

telephone support is provided where staff shortages impact for short periods on the frequency of visits to carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has outstanding practices that support children to lead healthy lives. It provides foster carers with excellent training in a range of health matters including first aid, autism, healthy eating and promoting good health. Children report they have healthy diets and recognise this is important for their development. One child commented: 'I eat all my vegetables and eat fruit. I run around doing my exercise to stay fit. I go to bed on time, I get loads of sleep.'

Foster carers keep very good health records that move with children to their next placements. They ensure children attend appointments with specialist health advisors and doctors, and monitor children's health to ensure they get the treatment they need. Carers work closely with health visitors and nurses to ensure children's health needs are identified and met. Records kept provide evidence of excellent development and improvements in health and are available to courts where children are involved in care proceedings.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are effectively safeguarded by the agency's robust policies, procedures and systems. All who work for the agency have a clear understanding of their role and responsibility to keep children safe. A placing social worker commented: 'Foster Care Associates take safeguarding very seriously. They work with foster carers around risk assessments for young people in their care.'

Children and young people live in foster homes that are safe, secure, homely and well appointed. Good standards are maintained through regular health and safety checks that identify and address any hazards. Annual unannounced visits focus on ensuring the foster home is safe, clean and suitable. Safer caring policies identify the safe care needed for each individual child, taking into account their particular behaviours and needs. They are personalised and are updated when a new child joins a family. This means that children live in safe environments. A young person said: 'My carers are very fair. I can speak to them about anything. There are rules and boundaries, but none of us complain about them because they are very good and keep us in line.'

The agency enables effective matching of children to foster families. This promotes stability for children and ensures that carers have the skills to meet their needs. Children report they are well looked after, happy and safe. They know how to complain and are confident that any complaints made are addressed. One young person said: 'Foster Care Associates (FCA) has given me the best, most reliable parents any one could wish for. They (both FCA and my parents) are warm, welcoming, caring people that only want the best for us kids... I could not possibly ask for anything else.'

Foster carers have a very good understanding of safeguarding and know exactly what to do in the event of an allegation or disclosure of abuse. The excellent support and communication systems within the agency ensure that information is quickly processed and children and carers receive all the support they need to promote their safety and well-being following a disclosure.

The agency works very well with local authority designated officers, the police and other professionals to promote and safeguard children's welfare.

The agency ensures that staff and foster carers appointed are suitable to work with children and have the necessary skills to carry out their duties to a high standard. Robust recruitment checks are carried out and promote children's safety by ensuring as far as possible that children are protected from coming into contact with potential abusers. Checks on panel members and support staff are equally robust. A minor shortfall is that not all photographs of staff that are held on their files are up to date at the time they are recruited.

The fostering panel provides excellent scrutiny of applications and is a highly effective safeguarding mechanism. It ensures that only suitable applicants are recommended for approval as carers.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

An ethos of non-discriminatory practice permeates the agency. One foster carer said: 'The staff are friendly and you don't get the "them and us" feeling. We all work as part of a team and are treated as equals.' Managers, staff and carers value diversity and promote understanding and acceptance of difference. Foster carers report excellent and detailed training is provided in caring for children with disabilities and sanctuary-seeking children. They demonstrate a good awareness of the challenges involved in this work and meeting the particular needs of every child. Each child's individual needs are identified and clear plans are put in place to address them. This includes ensuring children's religious, cultural, racial and language needs are met. Where children are in transracial placements, carers pay particular attention to meeting their racial and cultural needs, as well as their physical, dietary and identity needs.

An outstanding level of support assists children to achieve their educational potential. A placing social worker commented: 'Foster Care Associates provide excellent educational support.' Education liaison officers work with children, carers and schools to ensure that children are in suitable school placements or alternative education placements. Children and young people maintain good attendance at school and foster carers know the value of education and work hard to ensure they make the best possible progress. A young person said: 'When I needed help in school, my (foster) mum got the education liaison to come in and have a word with the teachers.'

The agency provides additional education support where necessary. It provides a 'transition' summer school to help those moving from junior to senior school to make that transition smoothly. It focuses on helping children to develop self-esteem, confidence and social skills so that they are less likely to truant from school and more likely to feel comfortable at school with peers and to make good progress. GCSE attainment levels significantly exceed the national average for children in care with 18% obtaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C and 73% obtaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to G. Children and young people who are in alternative forms of education have the opportunity to take alternative awards where this is appropriate. One carer said: 'We are working on the additional AQA awards with the child in our care as we feel this will enhance educational achievement and self-confidence.'

Outstanding support to respite carers ensures they provide a very good service to the children with whom they are linked. Children and young people enjoy their time in respite care and

mainstream carers benefit from the rest. This is a much valued component to maintaining stability for complex and challenging children and young people. The agency is developing its respite service to children with disabilities by providing extensive training to foster carers so that more respite carers will be available with the appropriate level of skill to look after children with complex health needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are very well supported to maintain and develop contact with family and friends. Arrangements for contact are clearly stipulated and foster carers work closely with local authority workers to ensure children have a positive experience of contact wherever possible. Carers monitor children's behaviour before, during and after contact and provide valuable information to social workers and courts to aid care planning. Foster carers ensure that children and young people who are separated from their siblings have the opportunity to meet up regularly and to enjoy their time together. For example, foster families who look after siblings visit each other frequently and some go on holiday together to the company's holiday home. This ensures that siblings have good quality contact time.

Children and young people have ample opportunity to contribute to their own plans and to comment on the level of care they receive. A young person commented: 'I feel very cared for because they listen to anything you have to say and look after us proper good.' They also have the opportunity to influence the development of the service by contributing their views through children's forums, youth groups and newsletters. A foster carer commented: 'Both looked after children and birth children have the opportunity to input on how Foster Care Associates is run through support groups and social activities and events.' They report that their views are taken seriously and considered. Their achievements are celebrated and publicised within the organisation and this helps to build self-esteem.

The organisation contributes to its local community and has offered counselling to children who are suffering as a result of a recent tragedy in the north west of England. A carer said: 'Foster Care Associates organises and pays for lots of additional activities during school holidays which is helpful.' It organises outings for foster families to get together during every school holiday. This provides children in care and birth children with opportunities to meet others in the same situation as themselves.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The agency trains carers very well so they have the skills and knowledge to support children and young people who are approaching adulthood. One young person said: 'Mum and dad provide me with the skills I will need later in life.' Where local authorities are slow to produce pathway plans for young people's future, this does not impair the agency from supporting young people effectively. A foster carer commented: 'Transition planning does not start at 15, it starts much earlier, which allows young people more time for preparation.' The 'steps to adulthood' policy encourages the completion of a comprehensive assessment tool that identifies young people's stage of development and focuses on what they need to learn to promote their independence. This effectively focuses carers and young people on the small steps needed to develop self-care and independence skills. Young people confirm they learn how to budget and to save, how to use public transport and how to look after themselves. Many young people

remain with their carers until they are 18 or more and carers support young people through university.

Levels of payment are made in accordance with the age and the degree of complexity of the children in placement. Foster carers confirm that payments are made on time. This means that children and young people live in households that are financially sound, where their individual needs are met. Not all foster carers know the agency's arrangements for financial support with the provision of baby equipment and some feel they have been left out of pocket when they have bought a range of equipment and have not been reimbursed. However, most foster carers are satisfied that the agency reimburses them fairly for expenses incurred and pays them at a good rate.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose accurately reflects the service provided to children and to foster carers. The level of information available to carers, children, social workers and others who use the service is outstanding. A comprehensive and interactive website provides children and young people with all the information they need about the agency. It is available for translation into a range of 22 different languages. Children and young people who are new to the agency receive a DVD that tells them all about what they can expect from the agency. Interpreters are available to sanctuary-seeking children and others with little English so that they have as much information as possible about the agency and the service they can expect.

The organisation and management of the service are outstanding. There is a clear organisational structure that is well known to staff and delivers outstanding levels of supervision and support to staff across the agency. Opportunities to work together to promote good outcomes for children are continually reviewed and improved. The systems for the provision of management information are excellent so that there is constant monitoring and review of the service. Changes are implemented to take account of changing needs, changing legislation and guidance, and feedback from customers, including children and carers. Statistical information relating to the number, location and type of referrals received is used to determine the recruitment policy so that the agency responds well to the needs of the local communities it serves. Effective contracts are maintained with a number of local authorities and this means that the agency provides children and young people with the services they need, while providing good value for money.

All staff are suitably qualified and trained to fulfil their role effectively. They each appreciate the importance of their own role in supporting foster carers to provide high quality care. The approval, assessment and review processes are extremely good so that the service provides foster carers who are suitable and competent. A carer described the pre-approval training and assessment as 'rigorous'. An excellent training programme for carers provides high quality, effective training so carers develop the skills they need to look after children and young people with complex and challenging needs. As one carer said: 'They invest in their carers by providing an excellent training package.' Foster carers know they are expected to attend a minimum level of training and many attend far more because they appreciate its value. This means that children and young people live with families who know how to meet their needs and who are supported to do so. A foster carer commented: 'We are extremely positive about every element of the service. From our initial enquiry to the present day we have found Foster Care Associates to be professional, caring and respectful of its children and families.'

Foster carers attend support groups where they share their experiences and learn from each other. They are kept up to date with changes and developments within the service and are encouraged to participate in a range of activities that take place for all foster families during school holidays. This promotes a sense of belonging within the agency, and children in care, birth children and foster carers all appreciate the opportunity to socialise with each other.

An out-of-hours team is available to foster carers so that support is available 24 hours a day and foster carers appreciate the guidance provided when dealing with critical incidents. They are confident that in the absence of their allocated supervising social worker, they get good advice from the team manager or other staff who are familiar with their situation. Dedicated support workers and education liaison workers provide a service to those children who need additional support. This helps to sustain placements and develop social skills, self-esteem and improved educational outcomes for those children and young people.

Case files are well kept and recording by foster carers is excellent. This means that good quality information is held about children and a history of the placement is maintained. Carers record the positive aspects of the placement and the child's day-to-day achievements as well as the challenges presented. Children and young people are encouraged to record their own comments. This means that children and young people have a well-documented and balanced history they can take with them in the future.

Staff and carers appreciate the need for the safe storage of confidential information and emphasis is placed on the careful and appropriate use of computers and lockable storage facilities for this purpose. The agency is developing its systems so that more use can be made of electronic files in the future. Separate records are maintained for the storage of information about complaints and allegations. However, there is a lack of clarity to distinguish between a complaint against a carer and an allegation so that some allegations are recorded as complaints. All are effectively addressed so that children and young people's safety is promoted, but there is sometimes a delay between completing the investigation and providing the outcome information to the manager.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Staff and foster carers are recruited from a range of diverse backgrounds. The assessment process focuses on ensuring that foster carers understand the importance of meeting children and young people's diverse needs. Children with disabilities and communication difficulties live with foster carers who address their particular needs and promote their development, working with specialists and other professionals to do so. Monitoring of transracial placements ensures that foster carers are proactive in promoting children's cultural, racial and identity needs. Foster carers report they receive an outstanding level of training in caring for children with disabilities and sanctuary-seeking children. Training events include a Black History day that promotes learning about the slave trade and increasing the self-esteem of Black children.

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
----------	--------	----------

Recommendations

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

- ensure that separate records are kept for complaints and allegations (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that carers receive clear information about the allowances and expenses payable and how to access them, before a child is placed (NMS 29.2)
- ensure that you obtain a recent photograph of persons seeking to work for the service. (NMS 15.1)