

Foster Care Associates South

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC039271
Inspection date	20 October 2008
Inspector	David Coulter / Lynda Mosling
Type of Inspection	Key

Address	21 Cumberland Place Southampton Hants SO15 2BB
Telephone number	02380 638020
Email	frank.ward@thefca.co.uk
Registered person	Foster Care Associates Ltd
Registered manager	Frank Ward
Responsible individual	
Date of last inspection	9 July 2007

© Crown copyright 2008

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 (South) is a registered independent fostering agency providing foster placements for young people placed by local authorities. Foster Care Associates is a limited company with over 50 offices across the United Kingdom. In recent times Foster Care Associates has expanded its service overseas and is now operating in Canada, Australia, Finland and Sweden. At the time of the inspection the southern area had 117 approved fostering households offering 229 places to young people in care. The region operates from three offices that are situated in the New Forest, Worthing and the Isle of Wight. Foster Care Associates' mission statement states 'Foster Care Associates is a national organisation providing high quality family placements to children and young people at a local level. We want to provide the opportunity for those children 'looked after' to achieve their full potential'.

Summary

Since the last inspection Foster Care Associates (South) has implemented some radical changes in respect to the way it operates. The changes are aimed at making the service more efficient and responsive to changing needs of placing authorities and have resulted in the regional office moving out of Southampton City Centre to a more rural location on the edge of the New Forest and new premises being acquired for the Worthing office. Other significant changes include the introduction of a more flexible working regime for social work staff who can now opt to spend at least part of their time working from home. From discussions with staff and carers it is apparent that the full implications of the changes are still being realised and that new systems and working practices are in the process of bedding down. As part of the inspection staff from each of the area offices were met and spoken with and a total of nine foster homes visited. Information was also received via questionnaires from both carers and young people in placement. From the information received it is clear that Foster Care Associates (South) offers a good quality service. It is evident that the type of young people being referred to the service has changed in recent times and that the service has had to respond to meet the new demands. Many of the young people now referred to the service are teenagers who have complex social and emotional needs and can present with challenging behaviour. The service has actively sought to recruit carers who can meet the needs of such young people. While the service has been successful in recruiting new carers its overall numbers have not changed as some carers have left and been deregistered. New carers confirmed the recruitment and training programme was thorough and prepared them well for their initial placements. Staff within the service have worked hard to ensure that young people are appropriately placed and that carers are aware of their physical social and cultural needs prior to placement. There has been a significant drop in the number of placement breakdowns, a factor which would indicate that more appropriate matching is taking place. Carers indicated they were well supported by Foster Care Associate staff and that out of hours advice was always available. While there is a small number of recommendations arising from this inspection no shortfalls in the operation of the service were identified. While it is evident that recent changes have created a certain amount of stress amongst employees and some carers, all displayed considerable loyalty to Foster Care Associates and felt they were good employers who were intent in providing a good quality service.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The new regional office has opened and is now fully operational. A new flexible working system has been introduced and staff are adjusting to new patterns of working. Recent recruitment campaigns have been successful in identifying new prospective carers. Carers continue to develop their knowledge and skills and have completed training in a variety of areas. Improvements relating to the outcomes for young people have included: * an increase in discussion around health related issues within foster care supervision and healthy living topics have been discussed at young people's forums. * the introduction of risk assessments for carers babysitters * a review of foster carers safer caring policy to bring it in line with recent guidance * an increase in learning resources for carers through 'Fostertalk' and the Learn Premium website * carers and staff have all now been issued with Foster Care Associate Education handbooks * the educational attainment of young people in Foster Care Associate placements continues to grow. * a new Unit Award Scheme has been introduced for when young people are either out of school or on a limited school programme. * a children's charter has been produced as a corporate document. * introduction of a 'Steps to Independence Assessment' to identify independent living skills

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Foster Care Associates aims to ensure that the health and well-being of young people placed in their care is closely monitored and that any identified needs are appropriately addressed. The health needs of each individual are identified as part of the admissions process and a health plan developed. Every effort is made, through the matching process, to ensure that children and young people are placed with carers who will meet their specific, physical, social and emotional needs. Support workers assist carers in accessing the services of dentists, opticians, general practitioners and therapists. Any treatment received is recorded in a 'health passport' that provides an effective monitoring tool. There is an expectation that placing authorities will arrange annual health checks for all looked after children in their care. During the last 12 months over 70% of young people in Foster Care Associate placements received a health check. Carers and support workers report that there is a reluctance on the part of some of the older teenagers to undertake such checks. However, this has been recognised by many local authorities who are now offering drop-in facilities within community based facilities such as leisure centres. Many of the carers were aware of such facilities. Carers can access a range of training on health related subjects that are offered within the annual training programme. Foster Care Associates employs, on a part-time basis, a psychotherapist who is used to help carers work with young people with social and emotional difficulties. The health and well-being of each young person is discussed during reviews. Foster Care Associate carers promote the concept of 'healthy living' by raising awareness amongst young people about the importance of eating a healthy diet and taking regular exercise. The service provides training courses and information on specific health related topics such as alcohol and drug misuse. All carers undertake first aid training. There is an established policy on the administration of medication that is made available to all new carers. There is a system in place to report all accidents and incidents that affect the well being of young people. Annual health and safety checks of carers' homes aim to minimise the risks associated with their particular domestic setting. For example, all carers' pets are assessed prior to any placement and any potential hazards such as swimming pools examined to ensure that access arrangements are suitable to ensure the safety of young people.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service is managed by a well qualified and experienced manager who possesses amongst his qualifications a professional Qualification in Social Work and a Diploma in Management Studies. The registered manager is supported by two assistant directors, one responsible for social work practice and the other responsible for business and finance. Both have relevant qualifications and experience in their respective fields. The senior management team is supported by a number of area managers who assume responsibility for the placement of young people and support to carers in their geographic area. The new management structure is still bedding in and roles and responsibilities are evolving in line with changing needs. Staff confirmed that they always had access to managers and that out of hours support was always available. One of the consequences of the changes is the fact that contact between carers and the registered manager has diminished. A number of long established carers regretted this change but accepted that it was a product of the organisation's growth. Senior managers' contact with carers is now more often made by e-mail and phone. Foster Care Associates invests a lot of resources in both recruiting and training carers. Recruitment campaigns are targeted in specific parts of the region to address identified areas of need. Due to the often complex care needs of young people requiring placements, the service is increasingly looking for carers capable of dealing with challenging behaviours. It was observed that staff and carers have enhanced criminal record bureau checks that are regularly updated. The service recruits carers from a wide section of the community. The recruitment policy is thorough and all potential carers have to undertake a detailed assessment and complete a 'skills to foster' programme. Health and safety assessments are also carried out in respect of their properties. All aspects of the recruitment and training programme have to be completed before carers are presented for approval at the fostering panel. A Safe Care Policy is drawn up in respect of each new placement. Placements are monitored on an on-going basis and carers receive regular supervision from a Foster Care Associates support worker. Discussions with social work staff indicate that every effort is made to ensure that young people are matched with carers capable of meeting their needs. Carers confirmed they were not put under pressure to accept placements if they did not deem them appropriate. The matching process takes into consideration, amongst other things, each individual's physical, social, emotional, cultural, educational and religious needs. More appropriate matching has continued to decrease placement breakdowns. The service has, in recent times, offered placements to young people who have arrived unaccompanied in the country from areas of conflict. Carers have been extremely successful in providing care that meets their specific needs. Foster Care Associates employs a team parenting approach that provides a support network for carers including a 24 hour help line. Risk assessments are used to provide a framework for carers to work safely with young people and contribute to the development of 'safe care plans' in respect of each placement. Support staff undertake both announced and unannounced monitoring visits to carers' homes. All carers receive training in child protection as part of their induction and those spoken with were aware of their personal responsibilities in keeping young people safe. Foster Care Associates organises Young Person's Forums three times a year that provide opportunities to discuss issues of common interest. All young people are provided with information on how to make a complaint and given freepost complaints cards and an emergency phone number. All complaints are subject to an investigative process. As part of the inspection nine foster carers' homes were visited. All the young people placed were being accommodated in their own rooms. Carers spoken with were clearly aware of the specific care needs of the young people they were caring for and all talked positively of

the support they received from their support workers. All the properties visited were well appointed and provide comfortable domestic environments that are well maintained. Evidence indicates that carers provide suitable and safe placements for the young people fostered. The service has its own fostering panel that meets at regular intervals. Since the last inspection the panel has approved a number of new carers while deregistering a number of others. The number of carers available has remained quite constant. The panel system appears to be working effectively and new carers spoken with talked in positive terms about their experience at panel and appreciated the efforts of panel members to put them at their ease.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Foster Care Associates values diversity and promotes equality and attempts to recruit carers from a range of social and religious backgrounds. The present group of carers includes single people and married couples from different ethnic/religious backgrounds. Every effort is made to ensure that young people are matched with carers who can meet their religious and cultural needs. Carers are often recruited to meet the specialist needs of children with disabilities. A number of carers currently provide placements for a number of unaccompanied young people who have arrived in the country from war and strife ridden regions such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Carers have been extremely successful in addressing the particular challenges associated with such placements and reported that they were supported by agency staff in determining the religious and cultural needs of the young people being placed. Foster Care Associates places high importance on the education of young people in its care and there is an expectation that all will access an appropriate educational placement. The agency has two dedicated education liaison officers who monitor the educational progress of each young person and provide additional tutorial help when required. Foster Care Associates' approach to educational support has been recognised nationally and has been awarded the Leading Aspect Award for securing and maintaining education for looked after children. The educational needs of each young person are determined as part of the admission process. If a young person is already settled within a school or college every effort is made to maintain their placement by providing transport when required. However, if a new placement is required an educational liaison officer will with carers enter into negotiations with the local education authority to secure a place at an appropriate school or college. All carers receive specific training on educational issues and have access to a range of educational resources. Many are pro-active in assisting young people in areas such as literacy. The educational progress of each child and young person is closely monitored and discussed during their reviews. The achievements of each young person, including their educational progress, are recognised and celebrated during an annual award ceremony. Foster Care Associates actively promotes the personal and social development of each young person. Traditionally staff within the organisation would arrange a programme of social and recreational activities that could be accessed by all young people in their care. As attendance on many of the organised activities was falling, due in part to the changing needs of young people now being placed, a management decision was made to abandon this corporate approach. While this has clearly been regretted by a number of carers and staff evidence indicates that young people are still participating in a wide range of social and recreational activities within their local communities. The majority of carers provide full-time placements that can vary from short-term to permanency. All carers with long term placements are entitled to periods of respite. However, not all carers take up their entitlement. Many carers will take the young people in their care on holidays with them. If respite is provided it will normally be provided by other Foster Care Associate carers. In such instances carers normally liaise between themselves

to ensure that important information is shared. Each young person is encouraged to visit their respite placements prior to their stay. Short-term breaks, where parents remain the main carers, are not provided by the service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

At the outset of any placement contact arrangements with parents are made explicit. Young people are, when appropriate, encouraged to maintain contact with their family and friends. If there are any restrictions regarding contact, they are made clear to all parties concerned. Carers are made aware of the importance of promoting regular cultural experiences for young people from backgrounds different from their own. Young people maintain contact via visits, telephone, e-mail and post. Carers often provide transport to contact visits. Contact visit arrangements are regularly monitored and any difficulties arising discussed with placing authority social workers. All young people are, on admission, provided with information about being fostered, including contact details for organisations that represent young people's views. If a young person experiences language difficulties, every effort is made to ensure that key information is conveyed to them in an appropriate format. A young person's charter has been produced by young people with experience of being looked after and is provided to those entering the service. All children and young people are made aware of how to raise issues of concern and register a complaint. The views of young people are regularly sought by carers and agency staff about all aspects of their lives within their placements. This pro-active approach is aimed at addressing any issues before they develop into major concerns. It is evident that the degree of support young people receive from their own social workers varies. This often leads to a situation in which Foster Care Associate staff and carers act as the main advocates for the young people in their care. Young people confirm that they are asked to contribute to their placement reviews. The outcomes/recommendations arising out of reviews are incorporated into the placement planning process. Foster Care Associates organise regional forums for young people through which common issues and concerns can be discussed. Issues raised through the forum meetings can be taken forward for discussion at Foster Care Associates National Children and Young People's Annual Conference. One of the consequences of the relocation of the agencies regional office has meant the drop-in facility offered by a city centre location no longer exists. This does not appear to be a major concern to young people. One of the carer's birth children felt that while the support group for birth children were extremely useful they were not held frequently enough.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster Care Services has a Leaving Care Service that has developed a 'Steps to Independence Assessments' programme to help young people plan for life beyond foster care. While staff try to ensure that young people are well prepared for adulthood there is a realisation that the final decision about after care provision rests with the after care teams of the placing authorities. In order to make transitions successful, agency staff plan leaving care review meetings, with placing authorities, well in advance of any proposed departure dates. If a young person wishes someone to represent them in negotiating their future with their placing authority they can gain access to an independent advocate. Education liaison officers provide young people with advice on post-16 education. Carers are provided with support and guidance on how to assist young people prepare for adulthood by developing a range of social and life skills. In order to

provide young people with care beyond 18 years, a number of carers have moved across to supported accommodation schemes. While this has proved extremely beneficial for the young people concerned it has had an impact on the availability of placements. Carers indicate that expenses and allowances are always paid on time. No negative comments were received regarding the size of allowances. All carers are provided with a placement contract that indicates the allowances available and their financial responsibilities. Travelling expenses are paid on a per-mile basis. Discussions with carers indicated that they were not motivated by money and participated in the scheme because they wished to help young people with care needs.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Foster Care Associates has developed a statement of purpose that sets out the aims and objectives of the organisation. While the current statement provides a good overview of the service, a number of staff felt that recent operational changes were as yet not accurately reflected. The registered manager confirmed that recent changes will be incorporated at the next review. The agency has produced a number of information leaflets that detail specific elements of the service such as; education, therapy, life story work and support services. The current senior management team contains individuals with qualifications and experience in the management of a fostering service. The agency operates with a small group of three directors, supported by a group of senior managers who operate each of the fostering offices. All senior staff, apart from the finance director, have professional qualifications in social work. Administrative support, though limited, is available in all offices. Arrangements are in place to provide cover in the registered manager's absence. Foster Care Associates has a quality assurance system that operates on a national basis. A Central Services Team aims to ensure that policies and procedures that develop within each region, in response to local circumstances, comply with the organisations aims and objectives, national minimum standards and guidance arising out of recent government reports such as Every Child Matters. Performance indicators are used to monitor development within specific areas of the service. Placement stability and the turnover of both carers and staff are regularly examined. The agency has a comprehensive recording system and all financial accounts are subject to an annual audit. Foster Care Associates offers tailor made services that can include additional packages such as therapy. All costs are transparent and agreed with placing authorities prior to placement. Since the last inspection the regional office has moved out of central Southampton to its present rural location on the edge of the New Forest. The new office is well appointed and includes a dedicated training room and separate offices. While a small number of staff and carers expressed reservations about the accessibility of the new location and limited desk space, the majority felt the setting provides an extremely pleasant environment in which to work. The offices appeared appropriately organised and equipped. Staff indicated that communication and efficiency could be greatly improved by the introduction of a more modern computer system. During the course of the inspection a range of documents and records were examined. All the records examined contain recent and relevant information that is presented in clear, unambiguous language. Confidential records are stored in appropriately locked facilities. The reorganisation has also resulted in a relocation of the West Sussex office and the introduction of a new flexible working system that provides social work staff an option of undertaking some of their work at home. Some staff feel that the reorganisation has coincided with an increase in their workloads and is a consequence of staff not being replaced, a decrease in administrative support and an increase in travelling time to support carers in Surrey. While the senior management team acknowledged that the service had gone through some radical change, they were of the opinion that the

service is now operating more effectively and is more responsive to the changing demands of placing authorities. They also pointed out that staff no longer have to make unnecessary journey's into the office and that a number of part-time staff have increased their hours to provide additional cover. Evidence indicates that while the agency is being managed effectively new systems and working practices are still bedding down. While the service has both lost and gained carers since the last inspection the number of carers has remained constant. The recruitment process reflects the changing demands of the service and many new carers have a range of life experiences that can be harnessed in their roles as foster carers. The recruitment and training of carers is very thorough requiring a comprehensive assessment and range of checks. Once approved by panel carers are expected to further develop their knowledge and skills, to meet the often complex needs of the young people they are caring for. Carers are supported in undertaking National Vocational Qualifications in Child Care at level 3. There is a system of practical support for carers including an out of hours service. Carers confirmed that they can meet together on a regular basis and many have also established informal networks amongst themselves. The agency recognises the contribution played by members of carers' families and organises social events, to show their appreciation. Risk assessments are used extensively by staff and carers to identify potential hazards associated with activities. All new Foster Care Services staff have job descriptions that outline their roles and responsibilities. There is a well established procedure for the recruitment of both carers and agency staff, that requires the production of references and completion of a number of checks, including Criminal Record Bureau checks. There are clear lines of accountability and managers operate an 'open door policy' that provides staff with ready access to advice and guidance. All staff receive regular supervision. Evidence indicates that staff are supportive of each other and that morale is good. Regular staff meetings provide an opportunity for workers, many of whom operate alone in the community, to get together and discuss issues of common interest. All staff spoken with, regardless of role, feel valued by Foster Care Associates. The promotion of equality and diversity within the service is good. Foster Care Associates recruits both staff and carers from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. The service provides training that incorporates equality and diversity in its aim and objectives. Each year the service organises a 'Black History Month' that raises awareness of cultural issues. Foster Care Associates offers a life story work service that helps young explore their past and cultural heritage. There is culture of training and professional development within the agency. Social work staff are expected to meet the requirements of their professional registration and access regular training. Staff can access training both within the organisation and through specialised external bodies. All training courses are evaluated. Social work staff are involved in the delivery of training to carers and often undertake joint training with them. An annual training programme is developed annually by the training arm of Foster Care Associates and provides a wide range of courses that includes issues relating to equality and diversity that can be accessed by both carers and staff. The management team indicated that the service is, after recent efficiency changes, financially viable. The service has gained preferred provider status with a number of key authorities and established contract agreements with others. All the agency accounts are subject to an annual audit.

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):

- ascertain the views of birth children on their lives within a fostering setting on a more regular basis (NMS 11).
- monitor the new flexible working practices at regular intervals to ensure that information is shared and accessible (NMS 16).
- ensure that carers are kept abreast of organisational changes and informed of their likely impact (NMS 21).