

# Foster Care Associates Thames Valley

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), Thames Valley region, is a local branch of a well-established national organisation offering a comprehensive range of fostering placements to placing local authorities. The Thames Valley branch has its operational headquarters in Wendover, Buckinghamshire and a smaller, additional office in Reading. The branch offers emergency, short and longer placements for children of all ages, with a particular focus on more difficult to place young people. The agency provides a range of additional support for such placements, including education support, child psychotherapy, and sessional staff input.

### **Summary**

This was an announced key inspection undertaken by one inspector over the course of three days. The inspection concentrated on the National Minimum Standards identified by Ofsted as being most important to safeguarding and promoting children's welfare. The judgements in this report have been made using new Ofsted benchmarking guidance that was implemented on 1 April 2008. Information about this guidance can be found on the Ofsted website. The new basis for making judgements is not directly comparable with that used previously. The agency continues to offer fostering placements of a high standard that are well matched to children's identified needs. All the National Minimum Standards are met and in some cases exceeded. Good attention is paid to keeping placed children safe and to ensuring their individual needs are met. The agency is excellent at supporting young people's educational achievement and at promoting a positive approach to issues of equality and diversity. Assessment and monitoring of carers is thorough and consistent and support systems for carers are excellent. The agency is well managed and the staff team is appropriately experienced and qualified. Staff team members are well supported and supervised in the exercise of their duties. A small number of recommendations have been made around improvement of monitoring and recording systems relating to completion of annual medicals for young people, health and safety checks of carer households, the outcome of complaints and investigations and follow-up of recommendations made at carer reviews.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Two minor recommendations were made at the last inspection concerning the need for formal managerial verification of any temporary changes to carers' approval and for improvement to management of the process of carer annual reviews. Both these recommendations have been satisfactorily addressed.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The service provides good support for foster carers to help ensure placed children's immediate health care needs are met consistently and that their health is promoted. The service tries to get as much clear information as possible on health issues when children are first referred to help ensure that good matching between carers and children takes place, and that carers are fully informed of health concerns. Carers ensure children are registered with local health services and receive regular health checks. Information provided by the agency does, however, indicate

that figures for completion of annual Looked After Children (LAC) medicals appear low. Running records on children's health care history are held on individual health 'passports' supplied by the agency to carers so that accurate records of treatments are kept and passed on to future carers. Where more complex health care needs arise the service supports carers in ensuring these are met and carers work well with other health professionals involved. Where additional guidance or training is needed to support more complex needs the agency ensures this is provided to carers. The agency has its own resources to help advise and support carers working with children with mental health concerns and makes appropriate referrals on to local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Surveys from young people confirm they get good support from carers on developing healthy diets and taking suitable levels of exercise. Supervising social workers from the agency monitor attention to children's health needs as part of supervision and carer household review processes. The agency provides regular training opportunities on first aid, health care and healthy lifestyle matters for carers.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The agency continues to provide safe and appropriately matched placements for children and takes all reasonable steps to safeguard their welfare. The persons carrying on the agency at a central level are unchanged since the last inspection and continue to be judged as fit to carry out this role. Local managers are suitably qualified and experienced. Staff recruitment systems are rigorous and help ensure only suitable people are appointed to work with carers and young people. The agency regularly updates Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for staff and carer household members, although carer files are sometimes not clear about changes in household membership and therefore who needs checking. The agency has good procedures in place to assess the initial and ongoing safety of carer households, however, systems for ensuring recommendations arising from those assessments have been met are not working consistently. Detailed matching considerations are applied to all placement requests to ensure as good a match between carers and children as possible. Carers are confident that the agency respects their views on placement suitability. Where placements have shortfalls in matching with children's identified needs appropriate plans are put in place by the agency and carers to address these. Wherever possible placements are pre-planned to allow introductions and choice on the part of young people. Matches for permanent fostering placements are subject to additional specific matching by the agency and placing authorities. The agency's policies and procedures on child protection provide a clear framework that safeguards the welfare of children and carers. Appropriate notifications are made to regulators and placing authorities when child welfare concerns arise in placements and appropriate action is taken to minimise any risks to children and to cooperate with subsequent investigations. Carers are familiar with their responsibilities for ensuring children are safe and take appropriate action when any concerning incidents arise. Good attention is paid to supporting the safe management of all placements through individual safe caring plans and carers are provided with a good range of training on how to safeguard young people. Clear complaints and investigation processes are in place and followed consistently, although files lack a concise summary of outcomes following investigations. The agency's local fostering panel continues to work fully in line with the expectations of regulations and standards and is effective in its role of challenging and monitoring the quality of foster carer household assessments and annual reviews. Panel membership is largely unchanged since the last inspection and has a good range of expertise and independent input to support its consideration of carer approvals. The panel is well supported by the agency and receives regular training opportunities to keep abreast of practice issues.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency pays very good attention to the diverse needs of placed children as part of initial matching and placement processes and offers relevant support and guidance for carers where particular needs have to be met. The agency has recruited an increasing number of carers from minority ethnic backgrounds to offer an improved range of matching choices when children are placed. When such matches cannot be made due consideration is paid to making up the shortfalls in other appropriate ways. Where the agency places children with special disability needs excellent attention is paid to supporting carers in meeting those needs by provision of targeted training and support, and specialist equipment when needed. The agency provides training and input for carers on diversity issues both before and after approval and holds events that celebrate positive aspects of cultural diversity and achievements. The agency offers excellent support for young people's education and this is reflected in the universally positive comments in carers' surveys received by Ofsted. Specialist education liaison officers help carers to ensure children obtain, and maintain, suitable school or college placements and they also keep up an excellent level of monitoring of educational concerns and achievements. Carers themselves are active in their support and championing of children's educational needs in their contact with schools. Additional targeted teaching support is offered to young people preparing for exams and the agency as a whole has gained a Leading Aspect Award for its work in this area. The agency also arranges a good range of stimulating and diverse activities for young people during holiday periods and recognises and celebrates their achievements outside of the educational arena.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The agency works well with carers to support placed children in keeping up family and community contacts where this is judged to be in their best interests. Contact arrangements are well planned and supported directly by the agency's staff, where needed, to avoid undue pressure on carer households. Carers have access to relevant guidance and training on the importance of contact and maintenance of good relationships with birth families. The agency has extensive national consultation mechanisms in place to obtain the views and input of children into the running of the service and this is supplemented by a more local children's forum shared with another FCA region. The agency also makes use of more informal fun activities to gain the views of young people about the quality of the fostering service. A recent survey of young people's views has also been completed. Children are also able to make their views known through their own care reviews and can contribute to carers' household reviews. Appropriate children's complaints processes are in place and children can also make use of their own placing authority complaints and advocacy services. The agency provides placed children with a good range of information about the agency and fostering in general.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The agency provides good support and guidance for carers on making sure they prepare young people for leaving care. The agency works hard to ensure Pathway Plans are put in place by placing authorities for older young people to plan their routes to independence properly. The agency also makes use of its own Steps to Independence programme that helps carers equip

young people with the necessary independent living skills. Carers are strong advocates on behalf of the young people they look after when it comes to assessing the suitability of any independent living setting they might be moving on to. The agency provides a good level of financial support to carers through regular allowances and also specific one-off payments where required to meet placed children's needs. Carers confirm that payments systems work smoothly and promptly.

## Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has appropriate central and local written guidance in place about its organisation, ethos and functions that provides a clear picture to carers, placing authorities and to young people in its care about how it is run. Since the last inspection the agency has experienced a considerable level of change with a number of staff departures and moves and the closure of a sub office. Feedback from carers confirms, however, that the quality of support and guidance to them was unaffected during this period indicating these changes were well managed. Local management structures have changed with the appointment of a new but experienced local manager, currently in the process of registration by Ofsted, and the further development of a senior local business manager role. This helps ensure that, alongside support of good care practice, business development in liaison with potential placing authorities is more focused and targeted to their needs. The agency has effective local monitoring systems in place covering all key areas of practice that enable areas of strength, and those needing further development, to be identified. Local monitoring is backed up by central FCA monitoring and quality assurance oversight. Recent staffing and organisational changes, and unavoidable delays in appointments, have placed increased pressure on staffing levels and deployment. Interim additional staffing support and future appointments should ensure staffing levels remain adequate to meet current needs, pending any future increase in carer numbers. Staff are well deployed within the agency to ensure all key functions are carried out consistently and there are clear lines of management responsibility and accountability. Staff are well supported in their day to day work and there is good administrative and business systems support in place. The agency continues to successfully attract and recruit new foster families across the area it covers, including families from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Carer assessments, which are still largely carried out by independent assessors, are thorough and cover all key areas of practice. They are subject to effective quality checks within the agency and then to appropriate challenge by the agency's fostering panel. The agency has improved its systems for undertaking carer reviews through the appointment of an internal reviewing officer. This is helping to ensure they are now completed and signed off more promptly. Where annual carer reviews make recommendations for particular action by the agency, systems for ensuring these have been addressed within expected timescales are not sufficiently robust. The agency continues to provide an excellent range of support to its carers that is enthusiastically recognised in carer surveys received by Ofsted. The support includes regular supervision and telephone contact, access to a wide range of training opportunities, carer mentors, input and guidance from specialist agency staff in areas such as education and child psychology, and practical direct support from agency staff for more demanding and challenging placements. Carers particularly appreciate the good support offered by the agency's emergency duty team and also the gestures of support and consideration when placements pose particular difficulties. There is also a range of forums and coffee mornings for carers to attend. The agency continues to offer respite breaks to carers on a considered basis that focuses equally on the needs of placed children for continuity and consistency. The agency provides an extensive range of training for carers, both before and after approval,

covering mandatory core areas of good practice and additional specialist training. Take up of training is monitored through carer supervision and annual reviews to help ensure any significant shortfalls are promptly identified and addressed. The agency is reviewing the structure for carer supervision to ensure that it complements the imminent training and development expectations of the Children's Workforce Development Council. The agency maintains high standards of record keeping in its files for carers and for placed young people so that the management of placements and the progress of children can be monitored effectively. All other required records are well kept.

## **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):

- review systems for monitoring the completion of annual Looked After Children medical check-ups. (NMS 12)
- review systems for monitoring the satisfactory meeting of any health and safety recommendations made about carer households. (NMS 6)
- put in place more comprehensive summaries of the outcomes of any complaints or investigations relating to carers. (NMS 9)
- put in place systems to monitor the satisfactory meeting of any recommendations made as a result of carers' annual reviews. (NMS 21)



## 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.**