



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Foster Care Associates South

**21 Cumberland Place
Southampton
Hants
SO15 2BB**

Lead Inspector
Lynda Mosling

Announced Inspection
10th October 2006 10:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
- Be an expert voice on social care
- Practise what we preach in our own organisation

Reader Information	
Document Purpose	Inspection Report
Author	CSCI
Audience	General Public
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Internet address	www.csci.org.uk

This is a report of an inspection to assess whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them. The legal basis for conducting inspections is the Care Standards Act 2000 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for this establishment are those for *Fostering Services*. They can be found at www.dh.gov.uk or obtained from The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

Every Child Matters, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life. Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	Foster Care Associates South
Address	21 Cumberland Place Southampton Hants SO15 2BB
Telephone number	01527 556480
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Email address	frank.ward@thefca.co.uk
Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Foster Care Associates Limited
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Frank Ward
Type of registration	Fostering Agencies

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 14th November 2005

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 U.K. The south has approximately 150 approved foster placements in the region. The region includes area offices in Southampton, Isle of Wight and Worthing, West Sussex. 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'.

The cost of the service ranges from £650 per week, for a foundation placement, to £1815 per week for a parent and child placement. Foster carers receive fees of £300 - £728 per week.

SUMMARY

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

This report covers the key standards for the inspection of fostering services. Evidence was gained from a range of sources including: discussion with the manager/director, discussion with social work and administration staff, visits to foster homes, where carers and young people were spoken with, questionnaire returns from carers, young people and placing social workers and reading of records.

In addition the agency provided comprehensive information prior to the inspection visits. A fostering panel was also observed.

All evidence showed that the service provided by the agency is highly regarded and promotes the welfare of the young people it looks after.

The service has recovered from a period of instability, in terms of staffing, and is now fully staffed with people who expressed their commitment to the agency.

The most used phrase to describe the service was 'very child focused'.

All of the feedback received was positive, with carers particularly appreciating the 24 hour support available to them.

There were no requirements made as a result of this inspection. The service, in their pre-inspection information, had identified a number of improvements they are planning to make to the service. These cover the majority of the issues raised in the 'could do better' section and therefore only one additional recommendation was identified.

What the service does well:

- Good assessments of young people's health needs, with clear plans on how these will be met.
- Involvement of appropriate professionals to promote health
- Access to in house therapy services
- Appropriate, safe recruitment processes
- A range of committed carers providing safe and caring placements
- Only referrals where there is a possible good match of carer are accepted
- Young people said 'I feel safe and like my home'
- Individual safe-caring plans are recorded on the young person's file

- Training for carers and staff regarding child protection is on-going
- Diversity is promoted within training, supervision and support groups
- Good education support with improving outcomes for young people
- Celebration of young people's achievements
- Contact with family and friends actively promoted
- Young people are helped to understand the reasons they are not with their parents
- Consultation with young people includes a range of groups and events
- Young people said they 'felt listened to'
- Leaving care service offered
- Young people said they are actively planning for their independence
- Realistic fees paid to carers
- Flexible charging arrangements for purchasers
- Clear lines of accountability
- Regular and good quality supervision provided to staff and carers
- Good induction process
- Carers supported in a range of ways including, respite, training, one to one sessions, therapy, social events and support groups
- Records easy to read and comprehensive

What has improved since the last inspection?

- Stability of staff and management group
- Recruitment of additional carers
- Clearer objectives for leaving care services
- More 'child friendly' information available
- Designated worker to promote diversity and equality needs of young people
- Development of risk assessment format for young people sharing bedrooms
- Broadened the achievement award categories
- Recruitment of a new Senior Management team

What they could do better:

- Appoint additional therapist
- Consider the involvement of therapist where assessments of foster carers indicate there are issues to be addressed
- Improve access to on-going therapy services i.e. CAHMS

- Target recruitment of carers in urban areas
- Train staff and carers in independence issues
- Ensure all carers take responsibility for promoting education

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office.

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Being Healthy

The intended outcome for this Standard is:

- The fostering service promotes the health and development of children.(NMS 12)

The Commission considers Standard 12 the key standard to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12

The health and development of the young people placed is promoted by the agency.

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

Health needs are well recorded on the young people's files and are used to help make appropriate matches with carers. The placement plan sets out how the health needs will be met within the placement. Each young person has a health 'passport' which records treatment received, health professionals involved and ongoing needs. Reviews of the placements includes reviewing the health of the young person and identifies any additional action required.

One of the young people visited had a long list of medical needs. These were met with the support of medical specialists, hospital visits and the carer undertaking the physical interventions. The carer had received training and support in this from the local medical professionals. There was written evidence on the files and a daily diary of how the young person's needs were being met. The young person explained that he was due to go into hospital for an operation soon and was confident about this because his carers would be 'there for him'.

In completed questionnaires young people said they have access to dentists, GP's etc and that they are 'encouraged to eat healthily'. This was evidenced at the visits to carers and young people. In one placement, where there were 2 siblings with very different dietary needs, the carer was observed encouraging the young people to eat their agreed diet and explaining the need for this. Many of the carers had experience of caring for young people where food was a particular issue for them. They appeared to understand the link between

emotional and physical needs and were helping the young people to take control of their diet.

The agency employs a therapist who provides support to young people and their carers. Initially six sessions are offered and focuses on helping the young people and the carer work together on identified issues. Part of the role is to offer advice to social work staff who are working with troubled young people and their carers. If ongoing therapeutic needs are identified a referral will be made to other services, including CAHMS, although there is a long waiting list for this service. The therapist role is greatly appreciated by carers and staff and there are plans to recruit another in order to provide additional support.

Foster carers receive training in first aid, drug and alcohol misuse and said they can access training in how to manage individual health needs of the young people they care for.

The foster care handbook gives clear advice on a number of health issues.

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)

The Commission considers Standards 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following Standard(s):

3,6,8,9,15 and 30.

The director/manager has the appropriate qualifications and experience to manage the service. The carers provide suitable and safe placements for the young people fostered. The matching processes ensure placements are well considered and suitable. Young people are protected from abuse and neglect. The people working in the service are recruited using appropriate, safe procedures. The fostering panel is organised efficiently and appropriately considers the suitability of carers.

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The manager has the relevant experience and qualifications to manage the service. His qualifications include: BA Honours in Sociology/Public Media, Certificate of Qualification in Social Work, Diploma in Practice Teaching , Approved Social Worker under the 1983 Mental Health Act and a Diploma in Management Studies .

The manager is seen by staff and carers as 'accessible', 'knowledgable' and 'understanding'. One carer said, 'I trust him completely and have the greatest respect for him'. This view was echoed throughout the contact with carers.

Carers are recruited through a well-tested process which includes a full assessment and presentation to the fostering panel. Foster carers files were seen and showed references are taken up, the whole family are involved in the assessment and health and safety checks are completed. There is particularly full information about the pets of the household and assessment of any possible risks to young people.

The visits to carers, and the files seen, demonstrated that there is a large range of carers with different experiences and backgrounds. Some carers were seen to have had troubled experiences in the past. Whilst the assessments covered these in some detail and made a judgement as to how these experiences might affect the young people cared for it is recommended that consultation with the agency's therapist during assessment is considered, in order to obtain an additional professional view.

All homes visited were comfortable and safe. Young people had their own rooms and said they are able to have their own possessions around them. The carer's household review includes issues regarding accommodation. In addition there are annual health and safety up-dates of the household.

The process to de-register carers who prove to be unsuitable is well known by the staff and has been used appropriately to ensure the standards of care remain high.

Carers and staff said the agency does not put pressure on them to agree to placements that are inappropriate. Sometimes the information available at the time of referral makes a good match difficult. On the occasions where the young person and foster home has not worked out there has been good support from the agency. One carer said, 'they really learn from poor matches' and explained how the information is used to clarify what the carer can and can't cope with.

Young people spoken to during the visits explained that they had often had numerous placements prior to being placed through FCA. One young person said 'I was able to meet these carers before I was placed and was open about what I was like'.

The agency is clear that they will not accept a placement if they do not have a good match. Supervising social workers said they are involved in discussion about the possible placement before it is made with one of their carers.

In the completed questionnaires returned by the young people the comments include: 'I feel safe and I like my home', 'they are always there to help me' and 'it is really good here'.

Training regarding child protection forms part of the preparation course for carers. All those spoken to had a good understanding of child protection issues and had been involved in safe caring agreements.

Carers spoke knowledgeably about the vulnerability of young people in their care and were able to discuss how they minimized risks for children.

The incidents notified to the Commission also show a good understanding of the agency's responsibility for the protection of young people. The paperwork evidenced appropriate action taken following incidents, including use of the local child protection procedures.

The agency has recently reviewed its policy regarding young people sharing bedrooms. This acknowledges the need to be aware of the risks that can be posed by other young people. There were lots of examples where the agency, in discussion with the placing agency, had decided to make some placements 'lone placements' in order to protect the young person placed. This sometimes causes conflict with carers who would like more placements but it demonstrates the agencies desire to keep the interests of the young people central to its decision-making.

The agency has a recruitment policy that ensures the safety of the young people cared for. A sample of personnel files were seen and appropriate references and procedures were evidenced. Discussion with managers and staff showed that the agency have robust procedures to challenge inappropriate behaviour. Evidence that disciplinary action is used where necessary was available.

All staff have job descriptions and are clear about their role. The staff have the appropriate qualifications to undertake their tasks and all of the staff spoken to appeared committed to providing the best possible care for young people.

One of the positives mentioned by placing social workers, carers, young people and staff is the child-focused nature of the agency.

The fostering panel was observed and was seen to work efficiently and effectively. The panel has been set up according to the legislation and the members have a good range of experiences that they bring to the panel discussion.

The assessments of carers are thorough with health and safety information, assessments of any potential risks, including the pets in the household. The assessments are written by staff of the agency, and some fee-attracting practitioners. The team leaders have a responsibility to quality assure the reports prior to them going to panel. In addition to the reports, the prospective carers prepare a portfolio with information, including photographs, about their family and local resources. This is helpful for the panel and for the young people subsequently placed.

Applicants attend panel and are dealt with sensitively by the panel members, who carefully consider the questions to ask the applicants. The discussion about the suitability of the applicants was observed to be thorough and took account of the views of all members of the panel. The decisions made took account of matching considerations and raised issues to be considered when prospective placements are planned.

The minutes of previous panels were seen. The notes regarding the decisions made were clear and easy to follow. Issues considered during the discussion were recorded and included the views of the applicants.

One very useful addition to the minutes is a report that highlights any follow up action required from the last panel, such as responses to references, additional information required etc. This enables panel members to have an up-date on the issues they raise and to hear about the outcome of their decisions. It also ensures that no important issues are lost. This demonstrates the agency's desire to ensure accountability for the decisions taken.

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)

The Commission considers Standards 7, 13, and 31 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

7, 13 and 31.

The agency values diversity and promotes this through training and support systems. The agency actively promotes educational achievement and has made improvements to the outcomes for the young people fostered through the agency. Short-term breaks, where parents remain the main carers, are not provided by this service.

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The agency values diversity and promotes equality. This is done by providing training for carers and staff in valuing differences and meeting individual needs.

Carers are helped to understand the important background and cultural issues for young people by being encouraged to become involved in Life Story work with young people. There were examples of good matching where ethnic background was an important issue.

The agency promotes Black History Month with events and publicity and provides a Black Workers forum and internet site.

Age, disability and gender issues are also considered when recruiting carers and staff and the agency has established a Children's Services Team with the aim to ensure they meet the diverse needs of the young people placed.

All training offered to carers incorporate equality and diversity in its aims and objectives. The social workers are encouraged by the agency to challenge views where prejudice is being expressed. Carers said this is making a positive difference to their understanding of their responsibilities.

Whilst appropriate action is being taken there are still areas for improvement i.e finding more carers in city/urban areas.

FCA has an Education Liaison Service that aims to find appropriate education provision for each young person placed through the agency. Education Liaison Officers are involved at the point of placement in order to ensure efforts are made to assess young people's educational needs and meet them.

Figures provided by the agency show that no young people were excluded either on a fixed term or permanent basis on the day of the survey. Three young people of school age were awaiting a school placement, but all other young people were attending education provision.

Although the attainment of GCSE's and GNVQ's is low, in common with other young people in the Looked After system, other outcomes were very positive.

Three of the young people visited had been out of school for many months prior to the placement but were now regularly attending. One of the young people explained that she had not been to school for 7 months but that since being placed with a FCA foster carer had been introduced to a school and had been attending 'almost every day'. This is a huge achievement for her and she felt it was due to the support of the education liaison officer, the efforts of her carer to find the school and transport her daily, and the fact that she has made new friends at the school.

Another younger child was undergoing a period of introduction to a local school following months of not attending. He said he was 'pleased and a bit scared' about returning to school. When seen again, following a morning at the school, he was obviously feeling very pleased with himself and the way it went.

The agency celebrates the achievements of all young people and holds a presentation evening to do this publicly. The carers, social workers and education liaison officers work closely together to recognise the successes of the young people. Whilst the achievements may appear small to some, the effort that they represent should not be underestimated.

Education liaison officers are involved in team parenting meetings and are seen as a vital part of the team. They also contribute to the young people's reviews.

Placing social workers spoken to mentioned education as a key reason for contracting with the agency and felt the educational outcomes for the young people were good.

Carers obviously play a vital role in the education of the young people and many provide support, transport and help at school for the young people. Where this happens the outcomes are particularly good. The agency is to provide training to carers regarding the part they can play in the young persons education to further this success.

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)

The Commission considers Standards 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

10 and 11

The agency actively promotes contact with family and friends. There are a range of consultation processes to ensure young people, and carers, feel listened to.

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The agency promotes contact with parents and the arrangements form part of the foster placement agreement.

Carers are made aware of the importance of contact with family and friends in the preparation training and there is an expectation that carers will help with the setting up of contact.

All of the young people spoken to had some form of contact with their family and were clear about the contact agreement. In one case there was some anxiety about the messages given by parents who had frequent contact to young people who are in permanent placements. Discussion with the link social worker confirmed this is an issue being dealt with by the placing agency.

Young people said they had been helped to understand their parents views and behaviour and one young person said about her mother 'I used to get upset when she kicked off, but now I know it is her problem, not mine so I can walk away'.

Carers appeared understanding and sympathetic when talking about family contact and were observed to help young people understand their current situation.

Carers help with transport for contact and often support it happening in their home. Some carers find this more difficult than others and need a lot of support from their supervising social workers to carry this through.

Discussion with placing social workers evidenced their satisfaction with the way parents and contact are supported by the agency.

The agency have well developed consultation systems. For young people these include a children and young people's forum with meetings held quarterly. A representative from the forum attends the National children and young people's annual conference.

The File of Facts and Toby Bear Book provides children and young people with information about being fostered, including contact details for organisations that represent young people's views.

The Foster Carer annual review includes consultation with young people, as does the Looked After Children review system.

The agency has a Young Person's Charter that has been written by children and young people with experience of being looked after.

Young people, in the completed questionnaires said, 'my carers have said that I can always talk to them about anything ..they listen', 'I am listened to by my carers ..not so sure about my social worker' and 'I would go to my carer with problems because she can sit there for hours and talk about things'.

During the visits to young people they said they felt that they were involved in all decisions about their placements and their future. They said they get regular communication from the agency and one said 'it feels like they really care'.

There are sometimes tensions when local authorities decide to end placements where the young person has settled well. At such times the supervising social workers advocate on behalf of the young person to ensure the authority consider their views and their best interests. One social worker said that they feel they are getting better at this as any challenge is based on outcomes, young people's views and the benefits of the placement rather than an emotional response. This has led to more success in local authorities reviewing their decisions. Independent advocacy services are also accessed by young people and carers when necessary.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

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)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

14 and 29

The agency has a 'leaving care service' and has developed a comprehensive assessment process to help young people plan for independence. Realistic allowances are paid to carers on a regular, agreed basis.

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The agency has developed a Leaving Care Service that offers supported lodgings, outreach care and supported accommodation. Initially it was set up as an additional service on offer to purchasing authorities. However, it is now used mainly by those young people that have been fostered through the agency.

Discussion with the responsible social worker demonstrated that the agency has learnt a lot from the experiences, and needs, of the young people fostered through the agency as they approach 16 years. Gaps in planning for those young people, and an expectation (by local authorities and the young people themselves) that care would end at 16 years has allowed some young people to move into independent living without the support or preparation.

In response to this the agency has developed a 'steps to independence' assessment for young people at 14 years. The dedicated social worker assists the young person to understand their rights and their needs and work towards a realistic plan post 16 years. The plan will be made in consultation with the young person, carers, parents and all the professionals involved.

The agency recognise the need to highlight to carers and social workers the need to carefully plan a young persons route to independence. The hope is that this is achieved without making young people even more vulnerable on leaving care.

Discussion with carers and young people said they felt confident that they would be supported through to adulthood. This was particularly true where placements had been agreed as permanent. One young person visited was able to talk about her plans to move from the foster carer 'around 18' and had plans to take up a college place and get a weekend job in preparation for this. She also spoke about learning to cook and budget with the help of the carer.

One returned questionnaire had the comment, 'driving is set up so I can be more independent ...doing a cooking course too'. The young person had the support of a leaving care worker and planned to leave the foster home post 18 years due to her needs.

An area identified by the agency as still needing some work is with regard to tracking the young person's needs throughout the care experience. It appears that those who have been in the care system for many years have often had different needs identified at the Looked After Children reviews, but these needs have not been addressed, or issues picked up. The agency plans to look at these needs and highlight any gaps to be filled prior to the young person leaving the care system.

The cost of the service to purchasers start at £650 per week for foundation placements (whilst assessment of need is being made), £908 per week for a standard placement, £1708 for a solo placement and £1815 for a parent and child placement.

Carers are paid between £300 and £728 per week with the average being £364.

Carers said they were paid regularly and the majority of carers had no complaints about money. Two carers felt they should be able to access more finances to follow up young people's particular interests i.e. horse riding, gymnastics etc, but others felt they were given enough money to budget for the needs of the young person.

Staff felt the recent move to be more flexible with purchasers regarding the charges was both fair and realistic.

The separation of the social work and the business management appears to have been seen as positive by most of the staff. Some said that it was time to 'get real' about the business side of the care profession and felt everyone

should know that there is not 'a bottomless pit' of money. Others found this harder to accept. All appeared to have a clearer understanding of the need to make the agency succeed in business as well as providing the best possible service.

The agency provides annual accounts and are an expanding business. The managers confirmed there were no concerns about financial viability.

Management

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)
- 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)

The Commission considers Standards 17, 21, 24 and 32 the key standards to be inspected at least once during a 12 month period.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32.

There is clear information, including a statement of purpose, that sets out the service delivered by the agency. Staff are well organised and managed effectively. There are sufficient committed and appropriately qualified staff to provide the service. Carers say that support from the agency is consistently good. Administrative and case records are clear, thorough and securely kept. As the agency is independent it does not place young people with family and friends.

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The agency had a corporate statement of purpose that sets out the aims and objectives of the service provided. It includes all the necessary information to enable purchasers, parents and young people to understand what is on offer.

In addition to the statement of purpose there are leaflets on the individual services i.e education, therapy etc that set out what to expect from the services.

Young people have a range of information available to them including the file of facts, young person's charter and the FCA welcome CD. All are attractively presented and appropriate for a range of ages.

Young people said they felt they received good information from the agency. They particularly appreciated the information they were able to see about the carers prior to planned placements.

The agency provided all requested information, including the data set, prior to the inspection. This was thorough and helpful.

The FCA South magazine is particularly informative and provides information about forthcoming events. It includes photographs of some of the activities enjoyed. It has a section to welcome new carers, up-dates from all of the area offices and details of awards given to young people, carers and staff.

There is a clear line of accountability and all of the staff spoken to said they were clear about their role and responsibilities.

The agency has seen a number of changes of staff over the past 12 months following a period of instability. Now the agency is almost fully staffed and there was a noticeable improvement in staff morale since the last inspection.

The changes made have included the recruitment of permanent staff and managers. This decision was made following a number of short-term arrangements and secondments in the senior management team which left staff feeling unsure of the future and continually adapting to 'new' managers. Staff spoken to were unanimous in their positive views about these changes and there was a greater feeling of energy and commitment expressed.

Staff said they have regular supervision and value the sessions. They were clear that they were able to access support and advice from all of their colleagues and managers and talked of 'an open door policy'.

One member of staff said they particularly appreciated the fact that all employees are valued 'regardless of role'. There is a strong area and regional identity and the acceptance of everyone being an important part of the team appears to apply to carers as well as staff.

A recent recruit to the staff team said that the welcome and the induction was the best he had ever experienced.

The staff spoken to felt that there are enough staff to provide a high quality service and are pleased that vacant posts are being filled. Some additional work has been required whilst covering unavoidable absences, but this was felt to be acceptable on a short-term basis.

The agency has had to look realistically at the cost effectiveness of the service and made some changes last year to the delivery of service i.e closing of the Poole office. There is a suggestion that some of the face to face contact with the carers is undertaken by resource workers rather than social workers. This was seen as a realistic and cost effective way of working by some, whereas others had concerns about the boundaries of the role. It is recommended that the agency give careful consideration to the implications of this change before implementing the plan.

Recruitment of carers is going particularly well with a large number of responses to recent advertisement. Preparation groups and assessments have increased to meet the demand. The only major gap is in some city areas where recruitment of carers is a national problem. However, the agency are working on new recruitment ideas for these areas.

At the time of the last inspection another independent agency had recruited some of FCA's staff and carers. This, understandably, caused anxiety at a time when the agency was already lacking in stability. This situation has now ceased and the staff spoken to said that they had actively chosen to continue to work with FCA and that this choice had strengthened their commitment.

The staff working in the agency have a range of experiences and backgrounds but all are qualified and experienced for the roles they have. Their knowledge of young people's, and carer's needs is impressive.

All of the carers seen, and those who responded to the questionnaires, said that they are well supported by the agency. The support includes support groups organised by the area offices, supervising social workers for each foster

carer and the involvement of education liaison officers, resource workers and therapist.

Some carers get together informally to support each other and this was said to 'help considerably' with their ability to manage challenging behaviour. Sharing activities during school holidays was mentioned as a particular help.

Additionally, the agency encourages respite for carers and has recently provided carers with the use of a holiday cottage in Wales. The carers who have used this really enjoyed the experience, as did the young people, who said 'it was brilliant'.

One of the major feelings of support comes from being seen as valued members of the team and being 'listened to' by social workers and managers. Carers said that the agency ensures that all family members feel considered and appreciate small gestures such as birthday cards for birth children, recognition of special family occasions etc.

The support available was mentioned by a number of carers as the reason for choosing to work with this agency. One said 'I can always talk to someone when I need to - whatever the time'.

The foster care agreement sets out what the carer can expect in the way of support from the agency. This includes regular supervision with a qualified social worker.

A sample of young people's case records were seen. These were comprehensive and set out the information gathered from the point of referral.

A full assessment of each young person was seen, including regular up-dates. Contact with carers and young people was recorded and there were reports from schools, medical professionals, and other specialists.

Decisions taken at reviews and/or planning meetings were clearly recorded. Views of young people and parents were recorded where they conflicted with the plans made.

Foster carers said that they felt confident that they are given all the information about the young people that is available to the agency. There are still occasions when it is difficult to gain relevant information from the local authority but this has improved as the agency has made their expectations clearer.

Foster carers understood the need to keep this information safe and confidential.

Discussion with placing agencies demonstrated that there are good systems to share information. Communication regarding the needs of young people from the agency was said to be 'really good'.

The administrative records kept by the agency meet the standards and requirements. A range of records were examined and all were clear and well recorded. These included: complaints records, carers, staff and young people's files, panel minutes, team meeting minutes, notified incidents and business plans. All requested records were made available without delay.

There are separate records for staff, carers and young people and these are all securely kept. The personnel files are stored at the head office but were made available at the regional office for inspection.

The policies and procedure manual is available to all staff and carers have a copy of the carer's handbook which is comprehensive and detailed. It was felt to be particularly helpful to new carers who use it to check out new situations and how they should respond i.e young person going absent without permission.

The amount of paperwork required was seen as a chore by some social workers and carers, but they generally understood the need to keep the records as evidence of actions, decisions etc.

The agency is planning to continue IT training for social workers and team managers in order to make the best use of time and resources.

As an independent fostering agency FCA do not generally place young people with friends and family, unless they are the friends and family of the permanent foster carers. They would then be subject of a complete fostering assessment.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services have been met and uses the following scale.

4 Standard Exceeded (Commendable) **3** Standard Met (No Shortfalls)
2 Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls) **1** Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion

"N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

BEING HEALTHY	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
12	3

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
3	3
6	3
8	3
9	3
15	4
30	3

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	3
13	4
31	N/A

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
10	3
11	3

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
14	3
29	3

MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
1	4
2	X
4	X
5	X
16	3
17	3
18	X
19	X
20	X
21	4
22	X
23	X
24	3
25	3
26	X
27	X
28	X
32	N/A

No

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Registered Provider/s to consider carrying out.

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1.	FS6	Recommend that the agency consider involving a therapist in the assessment process of carers when another professional view would be useful.

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