

Foster Care Associates (North East)

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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Inspector	David Martin / Fiona Parker
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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Foster Care Associates (North East) is a fostering service which is part of a national organisation providing a range of family placements for children and young people.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This fostering agency is successfully providing good quality family placements for young people. The staff and carers are achieving stability for young people in a caring and nurturing environment. The staff are making prompt and effective use of the agency's resources to assist carers looking after young people in crisis. The agency's therapeutic and educational support services play a key role in this process. Young people's health care needs are well met. Educationally, young people have excellent school attendance and many are achieving well above expectations given their low starting points. The agency is committed to listening to young people who are in placement and participation activities are well established. The fostering panel is fulfilling its responsibilities for rigorous scrutiny of assessments and carrying out its quality assurance role. Overall, the agency is well managed and continues to meet the needs of a diverse range of young people. No actions or recommendations are made as a result of this inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has responded positively to recommendations made as a result of the last inspection. The recommendations focused on minor improvements to the way in which information was being recorded and maintained and all have been fully actioned.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The agency is committed to ensuring that young people's physical, emotional and psychological health care needs are met. Foster carers successfully promote healthy lifestyles and are actively involved in making sure that young people have access to primary health care services. The agency has its own therapeutic service which plays a key role in helping carers to understand the individual needs of young people. It makes a significant contribution to placement stability and is able to respond quickly and effectively to young people in crisis. Supervising social workers are actively engaged with external partners, such as the child and adolescent mental health

service, to ensure young people receive individual support and help when required.

Foster carers have a sound understanding of health care and have clearly benefitted from in-house training on topics such as attachment theory, drug and alcohol misuse, brain development in infancy and therapeutic parenting. They maintain a health passport for each young person in which they can record all significant health care issues. The passport is transferred with the young person when a placement ends, ensuring that health information about a young person is readily accessible to future carers. While this is an excellent development, the agency acknowledges that it needs to ensure that the information is kept up-to-date. The health care needs of young people are addressed during each supervisory visit ensuring that any unmet need can be picked up quickly.

Young people benefit from living with foster carers whose households have been risk assessed and provide safe and suitable accommodation. Young people are actively engaged in a wide range of organised sporting and outdoor activities and the agency has responded well to meet young people's requests for specific regular events such as football coaching and dance. Young people participate in their own training events which have included courses on hygiene, drug misuse and basic first aid. Overall, the agency provides young people with a solid foundation in understanding their own health care needs and participating in activities which promote good health. One young person said, 'I get healthy meals and go ice skating and swimming every week.'

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

All staff within the agency understand and take seriously their collective responsibility to ensure that young people are looked after safely and protected from harm. The agency has taken appropriate action in response to safeguarding concerns and where necessary has instigated child protection enquiries. Carers are confident about reporting any concerns and managing disclosures of abuse. The agency's approach makes a significant contribution to the safety and well-being of young people.

Carers manage incidents of unauthorised absence well. They are familiar with the procedures and respond promptly in contacting the out-of-hours service and reporting incidents to the police. The number of incidents is relatively low in view of the numbers of children in placement and absences are, in the main, of short duration. Carers are confident about managing anti-social or challenging behaviour but have, on occasions, called the police when a young person's behaviour is particularly threatening and intimidating. All carers recognise that this is only undertaken as a last resort and are keen not criminalise young people.

Young people understand the need to keep themselves safe. A group of young people said that, 'They all get on well and their carers talk to them about their safety and keeping out of trouble.' Young people have participated in health and safety training and more recently have completed a course about keeping themselves safe

when using the internet. Young people said they feel safe and enjoy living with their carers and their families. One young person commented that, 'It's like being in a normal family but better.' Young people have a positive attitude to their own personal safety and express a strong sense of well-being.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Young people enjoy strong relationships with their carers and interact very positively with them and their families. This was best exemplified at a large ice skating and swimming event that took place during the inspection. It involved young people, their carers, birth children and staff. The event was a relaxed, good humoured occasion and provided everyone with a chance to network informally and renew friendships. Carers have strong supportive relationships with each other.

Young people have excellent opportunities to develop their skills and confidence and are well supported to pursue their leisure interests. One local authority social worker rated the agency's input highly and said of one particular placement that, 'The biggest success are the positive friendships they have made.' Young people talked enthusiastically about visiting local attractions and leisure venues with each other and their foster carers' families. The agency regularly holds events to celebrate achievement and has encouraged young people to develop their skills and experience through participation in national sporting events, survival skills training and leaving care forums. The agency's proactive approach ensures that all young people have opportunities for personal growth.

The agency strongly promotes the value of education. It has its own education officer who has a clear overview of the educational needs of all young people in placement. The post holder is universally held in high regard by foster carers. There are individual packages of support for young people which are very effective in promoting school attendance and high levels of achievement given the low starting point of many young people.

Carers have an excellent understanding of their responsibilities to support young people in school and demonstrate a commitment to liaising with schools to resolve any difficult issues. One young person who had a long history of non-school attendance prior to placement has achieved 100% attendance at school and is hoping to be the best achieving pupil ever. There are impressive and improving figures relating to the achievements of Year 11 pupils over the last four years. The agency stresses the importance of education in improving life chances of young people and young people are making excellent progress as a result of the positive attitude of staff and carers.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are strongly supported to express their views and wishes in a variety of forums. They are able to contribute their ideas and personal aspirations in written or verbal form for reviews and have excellent access to social workers and independent reviewing officers to assist with this process. Young people understand the reasons why they are placed with foster carers and are aware of plans for their future. They are familiar with the complaints procedures and are confident that any complaint would be dealt with due seriousness. One young person wrote to their placing social worker to suggest that the number of statutory visits should be reduced and received a positive response. Young people understand that they can actively influence the outcome of decision making processes.

The agency has a well established participation strategy which encourages young people to contribute their ideas to the development of the agency both regionally and nationally. They are actively involved in the training of prospective foster carers and have made a number of short, informative films as part of the training materials. They have also made a significant contribution to the panel process in recommending the approval of new carers through the formulation of a series of questions which the panel asks on their behalf. Their regional forum meets regularly and has undertaken a variety of projects and provides the agency with young people's feedback on how well the agency is doing. The agency is fully committed to hearing young people's views and opinions and has implemented many of their suggestions.

The agency has an excellent track record in promoting positive and constructive contact with birth parents where appropriate. There is clear guidance for carers explaining their responsibilities for assisting young people to maintain positive relationships with significant people in their lives. In some cases this has been particularly helpful to carers in understanding young people's backgrounds and individual needs associated with culture, ethnicity and disability.

Young people said they feel valued as part of the carers' families and typically commented that, 'When I need my carers, they are always there for me.' It is clear that carers have a very good understanding of young people's emotional needs. Young people are welcomed into foster carers' families and fully participate in family life. The views of birth children are explored well at both the assessment stage and as part of the ongoing supervision of carers. All young people associated with the agency are encouraged to express their views and make a positive contribution.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The agency is very successful in ensuring that young people make a positive transition to adult life. The majority of young people of post statutory school age are actively engaged in work and college placements. Through the young people's forum

they have many opportunities to acquire the skills they will require to support themselves independently. This includes learning to cook, budgeting and household management. There is an established 'staying put' scheme which enables young people to stay with foster carers until they feel ready to move on to leaving care services. One of the supervising social workers has developed a highly regarded 'steps to independence' steering group which enables foster carers easy access to advice and guidance on the preparation of young people for leaving care. The agency is strongly committed to ensuring that young people are given the best possible start to adulthood and can maximise their life chances.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Foster carers have a sound understanding of the need to promote the individual needs of young people. They are very clear that they would challenge discrimination and bullying. The agency has undertaken excellent work with partner agencies, particularly schools, in ensuring that they are not inadvertently disadvantaging young people because they are looked after.

The fostering panel undertakes its functions very effectively. It robustly scrutinises all matters that come before it and makes appropriate decisions to recommend approval or seek a deferral in the absence of sufficient information. It is efficient in providing the agency with constructive feedback and fulfils its quality assurance role in relation to Form F assessments. Panel members are vetted prior to appointment to the central list to ensure that they are suitable.

In general, the agency has access to all necessary information to make appropriate matches between carers and young people. The placement team initially handles all referrals and in the majority of cases matches are only made in consultation with the supervising social worker and foster carers. The agency is achieving a high level of placement stability and where possible is ensuring placements and endings are planned. Emergency placements are well managed. Young people benefit from being placed with carers who can meet their needs.

Staff and carers have a good understanding of the aims and value base of the agency. The agency's underpinning ethos and guiding principles are clearly set out in its Statement of Purpose and the foster carers' handbook. Carers are formally supervised on a monthly basis and the sessions address outcomes identified under Every Child Matters. Foster carers are strongly challenged to reflect on their practice.

The fostering service is well managed. The manager and all social work staff are appropriately qualified and experienced and are registered with the General Social Care Council. They are robustly and comprehensively vetted prior to commencing employment. The foster carers are also suitably qualified to provide care, having undertaken skills to fostering training and all mandatory training post approval. They are thoroughly assessed and vetted prior to approval and are subject to periodic

review thereafter to ensure they remain suitable carers. All foster carers have access to good training and are well motivated to attend. The agency acknowledges that the training available for its social workers has been limited in the past year but it has taken steps to rectify this issue and is implementing a well thought out training strategy.

Records are well maintained and are set to improve further following the implementation of a new electronic record system. Case files are comprehensive and it is clear that young people are cared for in line with their placement plans. Carers are required to maintain day-to-day records and take their responsibilities to do so seriously. The agency is aware of the difficulty that some carers have in completing the record in its current format and is reviewing its use.

The agency is financially sound and makes payments to foster carers in a timely way.