

# Foster Care Associates (FCA) South

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Foster Care Associates (FCA) South is a regional branch of a large privately owned independent fostering agency, which is registered as a limited company. The head office is based in Worcestershire. The agency has 11 regional offices in England with separately registered offices throughout Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The agency provides emergency, short and long-term foster placements for children and young people of all ages and with a range of care needs. The registered branch of the agency which is located in the New Forest near Southampton, with sub offices in Lancing and on the Isle of Wight, is the subject of this inspection.

At the time of the inspection, FCA South had 111 approved fostering households offering 133 places to young people in care.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

This independent fostering agency provides a good level of foster care for the children and young people who it looks after. This is achieved by an excellent quality of service provided by well trained, enthusiastic and experienced staff and carers, who are managed and supervised with a high level of competence. There is a strong culture of participation in this service, and this emphasis on children and young people's well-being helps them make good progress. There are robust and up-to-date safeguarding procedures in place. The agency has several service development plans which are reviewed by a strong staff and management team who are committed and motivated to improving the lives of looked after children.

There are two recommendations made as a result of this inspection. These involve ensuring the reasons for recommending foster carers are included in panel minutes and taking action to respond to emerging patterns and trends in foster placements. The managers of the service are aware of these areas and committed to further improve outcomes for the children and young people.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that the written minutes of panel meetings clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and in particular to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (NMS 25.2)

### Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

A significant strength of this service is the strong culture of participation. This means that children and young people's views are respected and sought across all areas, from designing agency football shirts to recruiting staff. Young people are given the tools to make their voices heard, right from the start of their placements. They receive an excellent welcome pack containing a wide range of helpful contacts. On personal matters foster carers are also sensitive to young people's views for example, supporting their preferred career aspirations but also guiding them in thinking about the implications of their choices.

Children and young people demonstrate, by their relaxed demeanour and confident manner, that they feel safe and comfortable with their carers. Foster carers talk warmly of, 'my girls' and others proudly list their foster children's achievements. Young people simply say, 'this is my home now.'

Children and young people's individual needs are well-met especially those relating to disability and/or culture and ethnicity. For example, some children people have learnt communication skills through their carer's efforts and so can now communicate their needs. Others have become more mobile, and have learnt crucial social skills like sitting at a table and eating from a plate using cutlery. Some sanctuary seeking young people maintain their religion and culture, but in addition have learnt new skills such as driving and speaking English. This means that some are now able to pursue desired trades which would have previously not been open to them.

Children and young people are placed with their siblings, and there are good examples of stable, long-term placements with two or more sibling groups. Local authority commissioners use the service for mainly unplanned placements. In spite of this, most placements are well-sustained, but a very small minority of placements do disrupt. The service has developed its practice accordingly and now routinely holds

disruption meetings and where possible pre-disruption meetings. However, a management overview analysis of disrupting factors and possible service level mitigation is not routinely in place. This means that learning points from unplanned endings are not fully integrated into the service.

Young people are generally healthy and their health care needs are well-met. Some children and young people make substantial progress in improving their health outcomes for example, by being supported through life-changing treatment or minimising the impact of their hearing loss. Young people are strongly encouraged to be physically active, for example taking part in the service's football team and tournament, and some exceed expectations by completing charity events involving climbing mountains. Foster carers are well-supported by therapeutic resources, both through routine training and bespoke packages. This means that young people's emotional health is also strongly nurtured.

Almost all children and young people attend school, and there are some good examples of young people achieving very good examination results. Other young people also exceed expectations, achieving unexpectedly good levels of literacy and numeracy with strong encouragement and support from their carers. Some young people's future prospects are so well-promoted by their carers that they are equipped to start attending a mainstream school and gain qualifications. Young people also enjoy everyday family life and look forward to meals, holidays and special treats. Some young people have regular contact with their birth families as well, and older siblings in particular offer them positive adult role-models.

The service has been successful in negotiating post-18 placements, which has meant that young people have valuable further opportunities to practise necessary skills for independent adulthood. For example, some young people have developed a basic repertoire of meals that they can cook and others can now confidently use savings accounts and cheque books. Others have used the opportunity to develop personal skills, such as speaking in public and some young people have successfully grown their abilities to form closer relationships.

## Quality of service

The quality of the service is **outstanding**.

The quality of service provision is a key strength of this service. Children and young people benefit from being looked after by child-centred foster carers, who are carefully recruited, thoroughly assessed, regularly trained and supervised. As a consequence, carers are well equipped to provide a very high level of care, enabling them to meet the challenging needs of a wide range children and young people. Children and young people are actively consulted and involved in interviewing staff and their views are given a great deal of consideration in this process.

This service recruits a broad range of carers, many with transferable professional child care skills, who are able to effectively meet the diverse needs and abilities of the children and young people placed with them. Carers engage well in the agency's

therapeutic approach to care and come from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences. They include single carers, same sex couples and several carer couples who are dedicated to the fostering task on a full-time basis.

Assessment of prospective foster carers is rigorous and both the preparation and post approval training is of a very high standard and well attended. The assessment and preparation process for carers is described by carers as thorough and informative. Several carers also commented that this helped them with many different aspects of fostering. In depth and analytical assessments of carers are completed to a high standard within recommended timescales, this minimises delays to ensure well prepared carers are available to meet the needs of children. Foster carers undertake the Children's Workforce Development Council qualification immediately after approval, to further enhance their skills.

On-going support is available to carers through a range of support meetings together with regular supervision of a high standard. Carers are provided with free membership of an organisation that gives them personal advice and guidance about fostering and this enhances their knowledge and understanding of the fostering task. The service recruits carers from minority ethnic communities. This ensures that children will be placed in homes which reflect their racial identity and birth culture.

The fostering panel has a very experienced chair and decisions made by the panel adhere to clear policies and procedures. The Panel's composition is appropriate with a central list of members in accordance with regulations. Panel members are well trained and regularly supervised with an annual performance appraisal being carried out, although there are no panel members from minority ethnic groups. Minutes of panel meetings clearly record the rigorous detail of the discussions of issues raised by panel members and provide evidence that extensive consideration is given to approvals of carers. However, the panel chair highlighted that the reasons for recommending specific carers and their strengths are not routinely reflected in the panel minutes. Recommendations made to the agency decision maker are responded to in a prompt manner, which reduces the time that children have to wait for appropriate placements.

Foster carers have access to a range of health, education and therapeutic services. Carers are kept well informed and actively involved in therapeutic approaches provided by the agency. This collective approach is nurturing and helps to further meet looked after children's and young people's overall needs. Young people's physical and psychological health is promoted by a range of medical support services and the peer support carers receive is very strong.

There is an out-of-hours support service run by fostering social workers which carers say provides them with an excellent level of support. Additional support when children have contact with their birth families further enhances the help provided to carers and to children in maintaining these important links.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people comment that if they are unhappy about any aspect of their care they know how to make a complaint and would talk to a range of people to express any concerns. Any complaints made are investigated and responded to within determined timescales, which ensures that concerns are considered and attended to without delay. Policies are in place to address incidents of bullying and children and young people are supplied with information to advise them where they can go to get help in this matter. Children felt confident that any incidents reported to the agency would be dealt with very effectively. Young people can also access an independent advocacy service provided by their placing authorities which provides them with further support.

Foster carers training, as part of their recruitment, is focused on safeguarding, safe caring, attachment and loss. This training is very thorough and regularly updated to make sure that carers gain a good understanding of current child care practice and an awareness about the impact abuse and neglect can have on a child's behaviour and development.

There are robust systems in place to check that the care of young people is safe. Unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place at least annually. Children are always seen alone by placing social workers and often asked if they feel safe in their carer's home. Any concerns identified about a foster carer are shared with management and this can result in an exceptional review meeting and the reconsideration of the carer's approval. Staff report that they receive regular supervision which a senior social worker stated is 'challenging but very safe.'

There is an up-to-date, thorough and centrally organised recruitment and vetting process, this ensures that staff and carers who are appointed or approved are checked correctly as well as being aware of their duties and responsibilities to keep children safe. Young people are involved in the process of interviewing new members of staff. Staff and carers' files are subject to a regular audit process to ensure that all statutory checks are kept up to date.

There are a few incidences of children going missing. Whenever this happens foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to report children missing from their care and the procedures to be followed. The manager of the service states there is a good collaborative relationship with the police in local areas and carers take seriously the safety of looked after children who go missing and will actively search for them to ensure a swift return to a place of safety.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **good**.

The performance and delivery of the fostering service is well monitored and reported upon to leaders of the organisation in various forms at least monthly. This ensures that the level of care that fostered children receive, within this part of a national

agency, is scrutinised regularly by senior management. There are several action plans in place that identify areas the service wants to develop and respond to. However, there have been some delays in addressing issues which may impact on the delivery of the fostering service. Children and young people are actively involved in the service development through their attendance and feedback from support groups. This ensures that their voices are heard in developing the service.

The social work and administrative staff appointed are competent, trained, supervised and well supported. Several social workers have a post-qualifying award in childcare work. There is an extensive induction process for new staff which equips them with necessary skills to supervise and train foster carers and make sure that fostered children's needs are properly considered. Appraisals of social workers and the manager's competency takes place at least annually. The manager of the service is a professionally qualified, registered social worker who has several years of experience in childcare management and an appropriate management qualification. These high levels of support and management ensure that children receive good quality care from carers whose work is supervised by skilled professionals.

Foster carers' support group meetings, on-going training and information events are well attended and this further ensures that children are cared for by informed and professional carers who contribute to the development of the service. Managers of the service have developed a working relationship with other agencies, including placing authorities, education and health services, to ensure that there is a joint approach when assessing and meeting looked after children's needs.

There is a national and specific agency Statement of Purpose which is clearly written, regularly reviewed and describes in detail the service's aims and objectives. The children's guide is available in different formats and is accessible and inclusive for children of differing abilities. There are numerous social events for young people, carers and carers children which are enjoyed by all who regularly attend.

There were three recommendations made at the last inspection which have all been addressed. This has resulted in a positive improvement in the service for young people who are fostered. Two recommendations have been made as a result of this inspection. The Registered Manager is aware of these areas and is committed to improve outcomes for children and young people.



## **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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for independent fostering agencies.