

Foster Care Associates Midlands

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Foster Care Associates Midlands is part of a national, privately-owned organisation. The Midlands office, located in Worcestershire, consists of four sub-offices in Dudley, Oldbury, Shrewsbury and Stafford.

Foster Care Associates Midlands recruits, assesses and approves foster carers in the Midlands and provides short breaks, emergency, short term and long term placements for looked after children referred by local authorities.

At the time of this inspection the Midlands region has 205 fostering households providing 258 placements for children and young people. The service also has 10 fostering households which exclusively provide short breaks for children and young people with disabilities for Birmingham local Authority. 46 children and young people have received short breaks between April 2014 and September 2014.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The majority of young people are safe, happy and settled in well-matched, stable placements which are meeting their individual needs well. They receive a good standard of individualised care that meets their social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. They build positive relationships with foster carers and are treated as

part of the family. This enables them to make and sustain strong attachments and develop a positive self-view. Their progress is monitored and regularly reviewed. Staff and foster carers listen to the views of children and young people and work in partnership with parents and other agencies to ensure their needs continue to be met. However, not all children and young people are aware of the role of the independent reviewing officer. Their role is also not described in the children's and young people's guides. This individual's role in reviewing their care is significant and young people have a right to have direct contact with them. This is not possible when their role and details are not known.

The recruitment and preparation of foster carers is thorough. All foster carer assessments and approvals are undertaken within eight months of application. The agency recruits foster carers who have good insight into the needs of children and young people who need foster care. Foster carers feel they have clear delegated authority, are actively involved in the life and development of the agency. They feel valued, well informed and excellently supported by the supervising social workers and support workers. Matching children and young people with foster carers is robust but the systems for recording this process are inconsistent and do not provide an easily accessible paper trail for managers to monitor.

Safeguarding practice is a priority in this fostering agency. There are effective, proactive systems in place to ensure that children and young people are kept safe. Thorough assessments of foster carers' skills are conducted and robust risk assessments are carried out. These ensure that children and young people's welfare is promoted and that they experience positive outcomes.

The systems in place for the management team to collate an organisational overview of quality of care are manual and therefore not as efficient as they might be. However, the new management team have made significant process in driving up standards and continue to be proactive. They have identified where development is still required. There are clear aims and objectives and processes for monitoring these areas and that outcomes are positive. As a result there are clear records that evidence consistent on-going improvement. Annual unannounced visits to foster carers and annual reviews of foster carers are not yet consistently achieved but are being monitored through these processes.

Since the last inspection there has been a change to regional structures and regional offices within the organisation. This resulted in the closure of the Derby office, staff redundancies, relocation of foster carers and the centralisation of a number of the agencies services. This period of change was challenging for staff and foster carers and as a result some foster carers stopped fostering for the agency.

Since August 2013 the new regional structure has stabilised. There is a new Registered Manager and operational manager in post who are held in high regard by staff, foster carers and children and young people. The foster carers and staff team feel the new management team have worked hard to ensure structure and systems are in place in the new region that ensure good standards of care. They also feel the inclusive atmosphere and philosophy they initially valued has been re-established.

There is good focus given to the recruitment, approval, support and personal development of foster carers. This aids the aim of achieving good outcomes for children and young people. There are no breaches in regulations and the six recommendations made in this report do not compromise the safety and wellbeing of 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 children have access to independent advice and support from adults who they can contact directly and in private about problems or concerns, which is appropriate to their age and understanding. This specifically relates to information about the independent reviewing officer (NMS 1.5)
- ensure the fostering service only suggests foster carers to Local Authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resources and support required (NMS 15.1)
- ensure the children's guide includes a summary of what the fostering service sets out to do for children, how they can find out their rights, how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer and Ofsted if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how secure access to an independent advocate (NMS 16.4)
- ensure approval of all foster carers must be reviewed within a year of approval, and thereafter when ever felt necessary, but at least annually (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.60)
- ensure each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year (NMS 21.8)
- ensure the management team have the capability to ensure the independent fostering service's provider/trustees, board members or management committee members monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order the satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children. (NMS 25.7 b)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Each child and young person is supported by a team of people who are significant to

them and specific to their individual needs. As a result their personal aims and objectives are effectively met and they make positive progress.

Children and young people enjoy excellent relationships with their foster families because they are matched and placed appropriately with foster carers capable of meeting their needs. A social worker stated: 'The carer has supported the young person throughout the placement to develop his sense of identity and his self-confidence. He has formed a positive attachment to the carer and, although he is looking forward to no longer being in care, he speaks about his foster placement in a very positive light.'

Children and young people develop resilience and have good insight into their backgrounds. They have appropriate contact with their family and friends. They develop new relationships and friendships through education and leisure interests. Targeted support groups run by the agency cover specific topics, for example, about the female image in the media and male role models. A foster carer stated: 'One of the bonuses of the activities is developing the capacity of young people who have really struggled to make friends to mix happily with their peers'. Another foster carer stated: 'Our young person has just attended the 'girl's group'. She is making real friends. When she came she couldn't make friends and could not function in a group with peers.'

Children and young people lead healthy lifestyles and are in good health. Their well-being is actively promoted by foster carers and supervising social workers who ensure they grow up in healthy environments. Children and young people with historically poor or unstable health receive appropriate health interventions which improve their health improving or meet their needs. Children and young people gain valuable information through their foster carers and the agency that helps them know about available services and how to stay fit and healthy. This is reinforced and consolidated by on-going educational discussions and activities that encourage a greater awareness of how to prevent illness and poor health.

Children and young people are well informed and know their rights. They have access to independent advice and support from adults who they can contact directly and in private about problems or concerns. They know their rights to advocacy. However, not all children and young people understand the role of, and how to contact, their independent reviewing officer and this information is not in the agency's children's guides.

Children and young people are actively supported and enabled to share their views, wishes and feelings. They are fully involved in decisions about their care and participate in their reviews. They are also encouraged to contribute to the running of the fostering agency. They attend participation events where their views are gained and changes are made to the service as a result. For example, following suggestions, young people designed posters promoting the agency's complaints process.

Children and young people have good school attendance and make good educational progress. Foster carers, supervising social workers, support workers and educational

specialists support children's development and learning through play and appropriate educational facilities. All foster carers have good local knowledge of educational authorities and are involved in the personal education plan (PEP) process and attend planning meetings for individual children. Children and young people's achievements and successes are celebrated. A social worker stated: 'This has been a very positive experience for him. He has settled into the carer's home and feels like a member of the family. She has encouraged his education and encouraged him to express his opinions.' A foster carer stated: 'When the young person came to us at six she could not read or write. Now, at sixteen, through additional educational support negotiated through the foster agency, she has just achieved two B grades and an A+ in GCSE, plays the clarinet and is in an orchestra. For her this is real achievement.' A young person stated: 'I have been supported to get my grades. I've achieved what I wanted. I'm going to university and no-one can stop me now.'

Children and young people learn the skills they require to successfully move on from foster care and become confident adults. They have appropriate opportunities to take measured risks and learn independence skills depending on age and ability. For example, the agency runs overnight workshop sessions that develop independence and team building skills. All children and young people learn practical skills in cleaning, cooking, budgeting and taking personal responsibility. As a result, children and young people develop positive self-esteem and become confident individuals who sustain relationships with the foster families. One young person stated: 'They were great foster carers to me. They were always there to support me in choices I had made. They are like my own family now and ever since I've moved out I see them once a week. They have also been great to my brother (still placed) too. They have given us both opportunities to see new things and become more open minded. They have the best interests of the child in hand always in mind.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency robustly recruits and assesses prospective foster carers to ensure they meet the needs of children and young people. There are systems in place to ensure independent assessments are thorough and identify the competencies and strengths foster carers have or need to develop. Preparation and assessment is conducted with appropriate depth and rigor and all assessments and approvals have been completed within eight months of the application. Foster carers stated: 'I investigated several providers and this agency stood out as an organization that supported its carers.' 'The person who came to do the assessment was very professional and thorough, and inspired confidence that we were entering an organization that was on top of the business.' All prospective foster carers are allocated a supervising social worker as well as a peer mentor. This successfully supports them through the assessment and approval process and ensures they feel part of the region.

In the national restructure of regions and regional offices, forty-one foster carers moved out of the Midlands region into other regions. As a result of the restructure a number of foster carers also decided to leave the agency, either to stop fostering or

to work for another independent fostering agency. The agency has not rushed to recruit to increase numbers of approved foster carers. Instead they have focused on stabilising the service and consolidating good practice. They are on target for recruiting and approving the agreed number of foster carers identified in their business plan.

The panel has experienced a lot of change due to the agency's re-organisation. However, systems were put in place to ensure those changes did not compromise the safety of children and the robustness of processes. The panel are appropriately vigilant about the quality of assessments presented to them. Panel meetings are well-chaired by experienced practitioners. Panel minutes ensure any outstanding issues are effectively followed up. The panel makes timely and appropriate recommendations. Decisions are in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children and young people in foster care. Decision making is prompt and effective.

Panel members are recruited from a range of diverse backgrounds and have the experience and expertise to ask insightful, relevant questions to ensure robust recommendations are made. The panel is currently waiting for a newly recruited panel Chair to start in post. Vice Chairs have undertaken this role competently in the interim. Good quality assurance systems monitor the effectiveness of the panel and the standard of assessments to ensure good quality foster care placements.

The management team has a good focus on quality of care and monitors specific indicators and targets. When shortfalls are identified they are quickly addressed. For example, there has been a significant improvement after the agency focused on ensuring the timeliness of foster carers' annual reviews. At the time of the inspection there were two reviews just out of timescale. These outstanding reviews are being monitored by managers and managed as a priority.

Foster carers are provided with good levels of information to help them care effectively for the children and young people placed with them. Good matching of children's and young people's needs to carers' skills is taking place. However, the paper trail for evidencing this good practice is not consistent and this makes it difficult to monitor the robustness and quality of practice.

Foster carers are well informed because the agency provides them with good advice, support, guidance and training. There is a running programme of mandatory training and more additional focused training linked to each placement. Access to, and quality of, the training programme has significantly improved this year in response to foster carers' feedback. There are also a number of foster carers who have completed or are in the process of completing training at a higher professional level. Some foster carers are also completing professional mentoring qualifications to enable them to be part of the regions new peer mentoring scheme.

The agency further supports foster carers by signposting them to professionals and literature that enhances the care of individual children and young people. As a result, children and young people are making good progress, leading full lifestyles and

making informed decisions about their future and well-being. Where children and young people have specific needs or conditions, foster carers manage these professionally and sensitively. They access additional input through support workers, attend relevant training and specific conferences. This is well supported by the agency.

Foster carers receive good quality support from staff through regular visits, telephone calls, and supervision and support groups. Some carers have experienced several changes in their allocated supervised social workers but they have not seen a reduction in the quality and quantity of the supervision and support they receive. Some carers have found these changes more challenging than others. However, most foster carers feel highly valued within the agency. Feedback received from foster carers has been positive with comments such as: 'My supervising social worker has helped and supported the children to access extra education and therapeutic services. She will pull out all the stops to support our young people and badger the services until we get what we need.'

This agency successfully supports children and young people who have very complex needs and have often experienced previous placement breakdowns. Foster carers and young people receive considerable support to prevent further placement breakdown. Support workers work on an individual basis with children and young people who request their support. The agency also uses psychological services to provide direct emotional and therapeutic support to young people and to foster carers on a one-to-one, group or training basis. There is also a specific short-break service which provides specialist support to children and young people with disabilities. This aspect is a key strength of the agency and effectively supports children and young people to live in safe, stable families.

Another key strength of this agency is their positive inclusion of adults who have experienced being in care. Their involvement is promoted in a range of ways that enables them to share their experience and knowledge and be positive role models. For example, they run a range of training courses for foster carers and supervising social workers. They also undertake direct work with children and young people, either on a one-to-one basis, or with groups.

Foster carers are active and valued members of the team around the child. They communicate regularly and effectively with children and young people's social workers and other professionals. They are actively involved in planning for the child or young person and ensure they work towards the aims of the placing authority plan and the wishes of the child. Foster carers work well with local authority colleagues and attend and contribute to all essential meetings.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency, staff and foster carers place the highest importance on safeguarding and the safety and well-being of children and young people is paramount. Their

welfare and protection is promoted and effectively monitored. There are clear operational policies and procedures that ensure the safety and welfare of all staff, foster carers, children and young people.

Foster carers have positive relationships with children and young people. Prior to, and throughout a placement, a young person's safety and well-being is regularly reviewed and monitored. All children and young people have thorough and detailed risk assessments completed prior to placement. These identify the impact of any abuse or neglect and the actions needed to support them and their foster families to minimise future risk.

There are complaints procedures in place which ensure concerns raised by foster carers are investigated and acted upon by the agency. There is also an effective children's complaints procedure that the young people's forum have recently reviewed. They defined the difference between a complaint and an allegation and then designed a series of posters promoting children's rights to complain.

The management team has a good focus on safeguarding matters. There are effective systems that identify strengths and areas for development. For example, the agency has focused on ensuring unannounced visits to foster carers take place annually. As a result there has been a significant improvement. At the time of the inspection there were eleven unavoidable visits outstanding. These outstanding visits are being monitored by managers and managed as a priority. Depending on the level of risk the agency visits some foster carers unannounced several times a year.

The agency is not risk-averse. They effectively identify and develop strategies to manage risk. As a result, children and young people feel safe and learn how to protect themselves and make sensible, safe decisions. The agency successfully supports young people with disabilities. They are sensitive to each individual's complex needs and effectively balance the need to safeguard with the need to promote independence. The agency ensures on-going support and guidance for foster carers who support children and young people who go missing or who start to exhibit risk taking behaviours. This input significantly reduces risk and promotes safety and well-being.

When children or young people go missing supervising social workers, support workers and foster carers work closely with other agencies to ensure young people are protected and responded to positively on their return. Staff and foster carers are trained and confident in using practice and procedures to safeguard children and young people and secure good outcomes. All panel members, staff and foster carers attend safeguarding and whistle-blowing training and respond in a very professional and knowledgeable way to any concerns about children's and young people's safety.

Allegations against foster carers are referred appropriately and promptly. Children and young people are kept safe and good support is given to foster carers while actions are taken by the local authority. Foster carers stated: 'We have been fostering for seventeen years so we are quite experienced. We had an allegation made against us. At that time we felt like retiring. The support we received from the

agency was amazing, especially from our manager. If we hadn't been with this agency we would have resigned from our vocation.'

Foster carers promote e-safety and address any instances of bullying or cyber-bullying, in consultation with their supervising social workers and young people's social workers. They have a good understanding of the particular vulnerabilities of looked after children and current issues and practice.

Clear, robust safeguarding policies, procedures and guidance underpin recruitment and staff vetting. The agency has positive working relationships with local authorities and other agencies. This proactive partnership work, in line with multi agency protocols, meets the specific needs of each child and young person and ensures they are kept safe and supported to reduce any high-risk behaviour.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency is effectively managed by a Registered Manager who is appropriately experienced and qualified for the role. Since starting in post in August 2013, he has successfully supported staff and foster carers by embedding good practice. His style of management ensures that staff and foster carers are clear about their roles and responsibilities and enabled to promote welfare, safety and achieve good outcomes for the children and young people in their care. There is demonstrated and clearly expressed confidence in the Registered Manager to lead improvement of the service. All of the previous requirements and recommendations from the last inspection have been met.

The regional management structure has been strengthened through the appointment of an operations manager to the Midlands service. The management team have an effective strategy for the future development of the agency. They have significantly developed the participation of foster carers, their birth children and children and young people. They are committed and proactive in wanting to continue develop the service in line with research and practice developments within the sector. A foster carer stated: 'I feel the company are transitioning to a more effective and inclusive place to work. They have listened to our concerns on policies and training and are improving them'.

The Statement of Purpose describes the organisation's range of policies and procedures. These documents, as well as the agency's website and the Foster Carers Charter, ensure that staff and foster carers understand the aims and objectives of the service. Records are clear and child centred. The premises and administrative systems assist the fostering service to run smoothly. For example, payments to foster carers are fair and paid in a timely way and foster carers are clear about the fostering service's payment structures and the payments due to them.

The Registered Manager and management team have a range of quality assurance systems in place, which include tracking the progress and outcomes of each child

and young person. They continue to develop these systems. For example, the agency is currently working on the implementation of a foster carers' recording system to enable young people to contribute. They plan to collate indications of their progress through placement to gather an accumulative picture of each young person's childhood experiences. The systems in place to collate an organisational overview of quality of care are at times cumbersome and time-consuming for the management team. The Registered Manager is working to improve these systems and is part of a working group developing the agency's electronic recording systems. Their aim is to ensure access to precise statistical information in order to demonstrate that the service is effective and achieving good outcomes. Complaints are seen in a positive light and as a way of improving practice and children and young people have good opportunities to express their views.

The Registered Manager and staff team are all qualified and highly experienced. Staff are well trained, dynamic and effectively supported. Since moving to the new regional office, a stable workforce has been recruited and developed. They are enthusiastic and dedicated to the young people and foster carers they work with. All hold additional responsibilities for improvement and development and they have played an essential role in recent service improvements. The engagement of staff and foster carers is integral to care planning and service delivery. Staff and foster carers feel highly valued and all feel as though they are working together as part of a team. Young people and carers' birth children also influence and contribute to the development of the agency. Supervising social workers constantly gather feedback to ensure all young people have the opportunity to give their views regarding service development.

All significant events relating to the health and protection of children and young people are notified by the Registered Manager to the appropriate authorities. Incidents are low and reflect that placements are planned and well matched. The agency has established strong and effective partnerships with other organisations and professionals. An external professional stated: 'We have a very good relationship with the placements team. They are very quick to respond to placement requests and supply good information to support effective matching. They are very thorough.' 'Placement disruption is low. If a placement is going to end they work with us in a pro-active way and prioritise young people's needs. They will often extend the placement to provide us with time to identify an appropriate alternative to save unnecessary extra moves.'

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.