

# Foster Care Associates North East

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC037579
<b>Inspection date</b>	08/02/2016
<b>Inspector</b>	Mr Bill Drumm and Mr Steve Smith
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full
<b>Provision subtype</b>	

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	13/02/2012

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## 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. The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children and young people. The agency provides long and short-term foster carers for children with a range of needs.

### 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**

This is a good fostering service. It is very well managed by the registered manager who provides clear, consistent leadership and direction to the staff team. She is a qualified social worker and has an appropriate management qualification. She is also undertaking a Level 5 Diploma in Leadership for Health and Social Care and Children and Young People's Services. She is qualified to undertake her role with the agency and continues to improve her knowledge and skills. The staff, registered manager and senior managers within the organisation are committed to fostering and have a very good understanding of their strengths and areas for development. One member of staff said, 'The culture in the North East is one of improving practice.' Monitoring systems are thorough and well organised. This helps to ensure that the quality of the service delivered to young people and their foster carers is consistently of a very high standard.

The agency has a well-trained, committed and effective staff team. They work very well with partner agencies to provide safe stable foster placements to children and

young people. This helps children and young people to develop a sense of safety and security, which in turn helps to increase their self-confidence, self-esteem and sense of belonging. The matching process of foster carers and children and young people is well thought out. Documentation used to support this process is detailed and completed fully. Aspects of the young person's life, behaviour and family background are understood and considered fully before matching takes place and a placement is made.

Assessments of foster carers are rigorous and thorough. They provide a clear evaluation of the applicant's strengths, value base, competency and suitability to foster children. Initial applications forms, assessments and approval systems are robust. They take place in a timely well-ordered manner. This helps to ensure that prospective foster carers remain positive about fostering and are not discouraged by the overall process of becoming approved because of unnecessary delays. One foster carer said, 'The whole process went smoothly. It was a little daunting at first but we were helped along the way at our pace.'

Foster carers receive good training and very high levels of support. Their suitability to continue being foster carers, as well as the overall quality of the service offered by the agency is regularly reviewed. The agency seeks the views of placing social workers as part of this process. However, their views are not always consistently received back. This lack of regular feedback means that the agencies capacity to develop and improve is not as robustly measured as it should be.

Children and young people make their needs known, they have a say in their own care and how the agency is run. Staff and foster carers listen to what they have to say and take appropriate action to advocate on their behalf. One young person said, 'My social worker from the agency is very good and I like her. She listens to what I have to say. I want to stay with my foster carers until I'm in my twenties.' Young people are also involved in planning social events, participating in group activities and, where possible, helping to recruit new staff.

From their starting points children and young people make excellent progress. They receive first-rate support with their health, education, personal relationships and social skills. Foster carers have consistently high aspirations for the young people they look after which means their overall health, well-being and educational attainment improves in addition to their self-confidence and self-esteem. One foster carer said, 'These are our children and we want them to be successful and happy. We're like a family. If one of us is having a problem or difficulty we know we can turn to each other and ask for advice or help.'

## **Areas of improvement**

### **Recommendations**

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

- Ensure that written records are clear, up to date, stored securely and contribute to an effective understanding of the child's life. Specifically, recording allows for robust monitoring of the day to day progress of each child (NMS 26)
  
- Ensure the reviews of each carers approval include an appraisal of performance against clear and consistent standards set by the agency. Specifically, seek the opinions of placing social workers regularly and in a robust manner. (NMS 20.6)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Care planning is of an exceptionally high quality. Children and young people receive a superior level of individualised care that meets their social, emotional and physical needs. They thrive, make significant progress and have positive life experiences during their time in foster care. They benefit fully from living in stable well supported placements. This helps them to develop positive, meaningful and lasting relationships. The carer of one young person said, 'I can't fault this agency. I did think about moving to another but then realised it doesn't get any better than this. The support I get is absolutely first class.'

The agency works effectively and in partnership with local authorities to ensure they receive accurate, detailed information about each child. This helps to ensure that children and young people are placed with appropriate foster carers who are as well matched to their individual needs as possible. The matching documentation for foster carers and children is organised, thorough and completed to a consistently high standard. Placement decisions are methodical and well thought out. Where achievable, children and young people move to their foster carers in an organised and planned manner. They receive information about their prospective foster carers before they are placed, even at short notice. The agency's social workers are empathetic and fully support them through this difficult time. One young person said, 'I like living with my foster carers. I'm part of the family.' The progress children make is very closely scrutinised and all their achievements, no matter how small, are celebrated within their homes. One foster carer said, 'Our young person has been with us for years. We're just so happy to see him make progress every day. Everything he achieves is great and we make a fuss every time he does something positive.' Additionally, the agency keeps written records and scrap books of young people's achievements. For example, getting an apprenticeship, participating in a choir competition or playing in a football tournament. Recognising and celebrating individual achievements helps young people to develop self-confidence, improves their self-esteem and promotes their feelings of worth.

Staff listen to what young people have to say and they are encouraged to contribute toward the development of the service. For instance, one young person has assisted in the recruitment of agency staff and others have developed questions for the fostering panel that every applicant can be asked. In addition, the agency is actively looking at ways in which young people can take an active part in the fostering panel and receive payment for their contributions and expertise.

Young people thrive in their placements and they enjoy good health. They have access to all primary and specialist healthcare provision they require. Clear, detailed risk assessments identify any health needs that a young person may have which are considered at the time of their placement and in the matching process. Additionally, young people are regularly involved in physical exercise. For instance, raft building, kayaking, football tournaments and building a den. Children and young people have a very good understanding of how they can keep themselves fit and well. One young

person said, 'I enjoy dance class and I want to join a running club.'

Agency staff and foster carers work in close partnership to ensure each young person thrives at school. One foster carer said, 'I've never known them to write a kid off. They go above and beyond what you'd expect. Our young person has 100% attendance at school and their last school report shows they have an excellent attitude and they are academically above average for their year.' Where young people are not in education the agency dedicates time and effort in liaising with the appropriate agencies to ensure this time is kept to an absolute minimum. School moves and exclusions are therefore minimised and young people are supported to realise their maximum potential and achieve success.

Where appropriate, agency staff and foster carers support young people to maintain contact with their friends, families and relatives. For example, by providing transport or by supervising visits. One foster carer said, 'I have a very good relationship with my young person's mother. She's very ill at the moment and we take her child to see her every week. This is very positive and helps the child to realise and understand that her mother loves her very much.' This helps young people to retain important family ties and to appreciate that the foster families are there to help and not replace birth parents.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency has an efficient, detailed and effective programme in place for the recruitment of foster carers. It is based on the needs of young people who are currently being referred for placement as well those who may be referred in the future. For instance, young people with disabilities, young people moving out of residential care and children seeking asylum. Potential foster carers are thoroughly screened as to their suitability and understanding of the fostering lifestyle and how it will impact upon them, their friends and their families. Those that go on to apply are given detailed information about being a foster parent and the agency has already commenced the assessment process. Once a formal application is accepted thorough, meticulous and rigorous assessments are undertaken. The assessments establish the applicant's suitability, competence, attitude and experience. The full process is carried out in a timely and efficient manner. This ensures that detailed analysis takes place without unnecessary delay.

The agency fostering panel has a robust system in place for proficiently scrutinising applications presented to it. Detailed deliberation of the application takes place in an objective manner and decision making is based on a clear analysis and evaluation of all the information received. Where there are shortcomings in the assessment process and further information is required, fostering panel will defer their decision appropriately. Additionally, all applications are extensively reviewed by the agency's decision maker. This ensures that the agency only recruits suitable people to become foster carers, the agency's practice is quality assured and that maintaining very high standards is given a top priority.

Foster carers said that they feel fully supported and valued by the agency. One carer said, 'They are always there when you need them. If my worker doesn't know the answer to a particular question then I know they will go and find it. I also know that they all value the foster carers from the administrators to the manager.' Another carer said, 'I don't know how the manager does it. I don't see her that often but when I do she always remembers my name and the child I'm looking after. That in itself is impressive.' Foster carers know all the staff at the agency very well. They work in partnership together to achieve and maintain the best possible outcomes for the young people in placement. Fostering social workers provide foster carers with both formal supervision and informal guidance and support. Positive working relationships flourish and essential information relating to individual foster placements is readily shared.

Foster carers benefit from excellent and wide ranging training opportunities offered by the agency. For instance, child sexual exploitation and radicalisation, e-safety and safe use of the internet. One foster carer said, 'I can't remember the amount of training I've had. There seems to be something on every month.' Foster carers recently recruited to the agency quickly undertake training in first aid and safeguarding. One newly appointed foster carer said, 'I can't fault the agency. They've been very good at getting me the training I need and I already feel as though I'm part of a big family.'

The agency regards foster carers as professionals doing a professional job and an integral part of the team. They work alongside the fostering agency and other statutory organisations in a highly effective way to consistently promote excellent outcomes for children and young people. They embrace the fact that this relationship requires them to have regular supervision and an annual review. Review processes are exceptionally well organised, well managed and challenging. Reviews take place on time and provide both foster carers and the agency with a mechanism for analysing practice and in ensuring high standards are maintained.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency works exceptionally well with placing authorities to help keep young people safe. It works hard to identify suitable foster carers for young people it receives referrals for. Placements are only made in families who are well matched to the specific needs of young people. Collaborative working with placing social workers promotes open and honest dialogue about the needs of individual young people. Essential information is disclosed and barriers to progress are shared. This helps to ensure young people continue to make progress and their wellbeing is safeguarded.

The agency has developed detailed, individual safe care policies and risk assessments for each young person placed. Regular review of these documents takes place and any necessary action is quickly taken should any issues arise. For example, a social worker from the agency challenged the local authority about a service shortfall for their young person. The social worker did this by liaising with the



authority's independent reviewing officer. As a result, the service shortfall was addressed and the necessary support was quickly provided. The training foster carers receive in safeguarding is very good and it is updated regularly. This means that they not only have the skills and competencies needed to help keep young people safe from harm but these skills are regularly maintained in line with changing issues or concerns. For instance, radicalisation. One foster carer said, 'When our child first came to live with us they were like a whirlwind. They've settled down a lot since then. Regular routines, clear boundaries and firm handling has paid dividends and they are nowhere near as bad as they used to be.' Good training of foster carers coupled with the excellent support provided by the agency means that young people are helped to stay safe.

Some young people occasionally go missing from their foster placements. The agency monitors the number of times this occurs and endeavours to determine the reasons for their behaviour. However, the analysis of this information could be more robust and detailed particularly in relation to the antecedents leading up to them going missing. Nevertheless, there has been a gradual decrease in the number of instances over the last two years when young people have gone missing. As far as possible, young people's safety is maintained.

Young people are encouraged to express their views, opinions and concerns about all aspects of the care they receive as well as their placements. They are given good information by the agency about who they can contact if they want to speak with an independent person about any concerns they might have. They are listened to and their concerns are treated seriously. When child protection concerns occur, the agency responds swiftly and appropriately to these concerns, in line with the local authority's procedures to ensure young people are kept safe. A local authority social worker said, 'I can't fault the agency. They take swift, decisive action when a child protection concern has been raised or an allegation against a foster carer is made. They take their responsibilities very seriously indeed.'

The agency has excellent recruitment and selection procedures in place for foster carers, staff and members of the fostering panel. Detailed checks are made of the applicant's background, work history and suitability.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome:

**Good**

This is a very well-managed agency. The registered manager provides strong, clear leadership and direction whilst maintaining an approachable demeanour and sense of humour. She is supported on a daily basis by an excellent team of support staff. Senior managers within the organisation share her commitment to improving outcomes for the children and young people fostered. Foster carers describe her as being open and honest, caring and, above all else, approachable. The leadership team at the agency demonstrates a clear focus on improving the quality of the service offered. As part of this process the agency attempts to gather the comments

and opinions of placing social workers, contracts officers and other professionals about the quality of the service they provide. However, the response they receive is limited and the agency is not good at following up these requests or looking at other ways they can capture their views. This means that the review process is not as robust as it should be.

The agency has a detailed development plan in place for the future. One member of staff said, 'It's partly about improving our practice and partly about how we remain competitive for the future. We have to balance the volume of carers we recruit and the need to appeal to the niche market. For instance, step down care, parent and child placements or children with disabilities. We're committed to providing a high quality service to all the children and young people as well as our carers.' The activities of the agency are regularly monitored by the manager and senior staff within the organisation. The monitoring process helps to identify areas of good practice as well as any shortcomings. Areas of concern are addressed quickly and appropriate action is taken. This further enhances the agency's ability to make continued progress.

The agency has excellent working relationships with placing authorities. Effective communication between the agency and placing authorities encourages and supports the free flow of essential information between all relevant parties. When essential information is not provided in a timely fashion by placing authorities the agency challenges these failings in an appropriate manner. These challenges are necessary to ensure young people receive the help, support and services they need to continue making progress.

The agency's staff team is self-motivated, well-trained, experienced and committed. It provides excellent support to foster carers and young people. One foster carer said, 'The agency social worker is always there when I need her and when I ring someone always gets back to me.' The team have manageable caseloads and support each other when dealing with difficult issues. Supervision and appraisal systems are very good. One member of staff said, 'The registered manager and the senior managers all appreciate what we do. The manager is contactable and approachable. I know I can talk to her any time I have a problem or a concern. We all pull together to support the carers and the young people. It's good to know they are there when I need them.' The supervision and appraisal systems are effective in recognising when staff have completed good work or when they need support or training to maintain and develop their skills.

The agency makes appropriate notifications to Ofsted and ensures that appropriate action is taken in response to any significant events that take place.

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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 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.