

Foster Care Associates Eastern

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Foster Care Associates (FCA) is an independent fostering agency. It is a national organisation and has been operating since 1994. FCA Eastern Region consists of a regional office in Suffolk and additional offices situated in Essex, Peterborough and Norfolk. FCA Eastern Region offers a range of placements, including emergency, short-term, long-term, bridging, parent and child and respite placements. Therapists, education and support services staff provide a range of support to these placements. This includes activities, direct work with children and additional support for foster carers. At the time of this inspection, FCA Eastern Region was supporting 121 approved foster carer households, in which carers were looking after a total of 146 children and young people.

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 fostering service recruits and trains a range of foster carers to meet the diverse needs of children and young people. It offers a range of services to meet the complexities and individual needs of these children and young people and additional resources to both children and foster carers which helps to maintain stable and successful placements.

The agency's placement stability figures for children and young people are higher than the national average. Placement stability offers children and young people the opportunity to form safe and secure relationships where they are able to settle within the home and community. One young person commenting: 'Before I came here I

moved around a lot.'

The agency demonstrates a significantly high commitment to the education of children and young people. They are supported by their foster carers and the agency's has a dedicated education officer who's priority is to work with children out of school and supporting year 11 students with exam revision. The agency's NEET figures are lower than the national average.

Children and young people are positive about their experience of care. They recognise how their foster carers support and care about them. Regular recording capture the child or young person's overall progress and outcomes are good.

Foster carers speak highly of the agency. They can rely on staff to provide timely, professional supervision. They describe a dependable organisation that is proactive and very supportive in assisting them to execute their role and responsibility as foster carers and in meeting the needs of children placed in their care. Foster carers feel included and valued members of the team.

The experienced and committed staff team deliver effective supervision to foster carers. The agency also provides a therapeutic service to support foster carers to help them understand behaviours and offer strategies to manage these. These effective inputs and support assist in attaining improved outcomes for the children and young people in care.

The agency offers placements across the Eastern region which local authorities utilise to place children and young people appropriately. Commissioners within local authorities have high regard for the agency and the outcomes they secure for children and young people.

There has been some recent changes in the management of the service, however, leaders and managers have a clear plan for continued service improvement where the welfare and outcomes of children and young people placed at the centre.

This inspection has identified a number of shortfalls. These include the agency not consistently implementing their own policies in the areas of completing safer caring plans and in the frequency of supervision to foster carers subject to an allegation. Foster carers do not receive training in the management and administration of medicine. The document used for matching children and young people to potential foster carers does not consider the impact the placement may have on existing members of the household. Whilst the agency does undertake monthly compliance monitoring it does not provide a report to senior management which evaluates this information to consider how the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children. The agency does not have a robust pet policy in place. The fostering panel should only consider the approval of an applicant to become a foster carer when satisfactory checks and references are completed for the household.

In considering meeting the shortfalls identified, one statutory requirement and six recommendations are set to assist the service with continued improvement.

Areas of improvement

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 (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
The fostering service provider must not approve X as a foster parent unless they have completed their assessment of X's suitability. Regulation 27 (2) (a)	20/01/2015

Recommendations

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

ensure the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment, specifically in the timeliness and robustness of foster carer and individual young people's safer caring policies/plans (NMS 4.5)

ensure the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment, specifically by providing foster carers with a robust pet policy and guidance (NMS 4.5)

ensure that foster carers are trained in the management and administration of medicine (NMS 6.10)

ensure that the fostering service only suggest foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered (NMS 15.1)

ensure that investigations into allegations or suspicion of harm are handled fairly, quickly and consistently in a way that provides effective support to the person who is the subject of the allegation (NMS 22.9)

ensure that the independent foster service's provider/trustees, board members or management committee:

b. monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children. (NMS 25.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people experience stable home environments where they feel safe and are cared about. They say good things about the care they receive including such things as enjoying great holidays and really good food. One young person reports: 'I wanted to stay where I was, but actually I like it here very much, I like living with my carer and hope it continues as she helps me to think about the future.'

Information about the foster family is available to children and young person prior to or at the point of placement. It offers them a visual insight into the family they will be living with. In addition, each child and young person receives a welcome box filled with various practical and fun items. It also includes a memory folder where children and young people to keep various mementos of their time in placement. This helps children and young people to feel valued and welcomed into their foster family.

The agency ensures that each child or young person in care has the required information in an appealing format. It has produced a comprehensive and engaging children's guide for the children and young people in care. This is available in two versions, one for children under 12 years and one for older young people. This handy pocket sized version can also be used as a reference guide as it holds valuable information for young people.

A real strength of this agency is the commitment to educational outcomes for children and young people. Foster carers support children and young people to achieve and attendance figures are particularly high. The agency has a dedicated education officer who works creatively with children or young people out of school, working towards reintegration into an appropriate education facility. The education officer continues to support children and young people through this process until they can attend and work independently. The agency has supported particular success. One example being, a child having been out of education for 2 years prior to placement is now attending mainstream school full time. The agency promote the 'reading adventure scheme' where children and young people are encouraged to read 10 books, receiving a voucher and certificate on completion. The education officer also works with year 11 pupils to support exam revision. Educational progress and outcomes are good, children and young people are advantaged and their future opportunities extended by the collective input of the agency.

Children and young people accessing the service will have undoubtedly experienced some early life trauma, which will often present itself in particularly challenging behaviours. The agency offers a programme of therapeutic parenting where foster carers work with the in house therapists looking at the meaning of behaviour and how to achieve positive change. Evidence of how this programme has been successful is summed up by a young person: 'I used to have quite bad outbursts of anger and she's (foster carer) helped me to know what to do with that; to let it out before I boil.' A foster carer comments: 'I think this is what FCA do the best, if it wasn't for this, I couldn't do the job'. This intervention is a valuable resource that

assists the well-being of children and young people, particularly by enabling self-regulation of harmful behaviours. Foster carers acquire a greater understanding of the effects of trauma and are empowered to care therapeutically and create positive change for the children and young people in their care.

Children and young people have their health needs met. Each are registered with the appropriate medical bodies and maintain good health through routine medicals, regular health checks and a healthy lifestyle.

Children and young people are engaged in a range of activities and leisure pursuits to aid their development and social skills. Foster carers support individual children and young people to access these activities and the agency offer a number of annual events whereby all children come together to play and/or celebrate successes.

Children and young people's forums offer opportunity for participation. These forums run for both children in care and the children of foster carers. Feedback from these groups have contributed to some service development, such as fostering panel asking applicants questions that children and young people want asked. From the outset of a foster carer's approval the voice of the child remains a central consideration. An ex care leaver employed by the agency brings a unique voice to foster carer training and the participation of children and young people. The development plan in place will ensure that this area of practice will continue to grow.

Children and young people generally make good progress. A strength based recording system provides weekly and monthly monitoring which captures development and progress. Following feedback from foster carers, plans are in place to improve the process.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency offer a range of services as they work together to meet the placement demands of the local authorities. They recruit foster carers from a variety of backgrounds to meet the diverse needs of children and young people who are looked after. They offer a range of both short term and permanent placements and a specialist provision of parent and child placements. Sensitive consideration of placing of children and young people mean they remain close to their family home, school and community.

Applicants going through the fostering assessment process receive specially designed pre-approval training. This introduces the applicant to the role and responsibilities of a foster carer and offers knowledge and understanding as to the needs of children and young people in care. Following approval foster carers undertake a programme of core mandatory training. Whilst foster carers receive first aid training there is a shortfall as foster carers are not trained in the management and administration of medicine. The service continues to offer a range of further learning and development opportunities and have invested in quality training packages which offer foster carers significant opportunity to expand their knowledge and skills set.

Foster carers speak very highly of the training they receive: 'Training is just excellent!'

Foster carers receive regular supervision, whilst some have experienced changes in their allocated fostering social worker this has not impacted in the quality or frequency of the supervision they receive. They report good relationships between the staff and themselves and trust the service to respond to their needs, particularly if faced with challenges. Foster carers are also able to access an out of hours support service, which is experienced as: 'Effective, it provides reliable guidance and direction.' Foster carers also access peer support by their attendance at the regular support groups offered by the agency. Therapeutic support and guidance is a constant availability to support foster carers in understanding and meeting the needs of children and young people in their care. It is also available as a supervision opportunity within the therapeutic parenting groups. This high level of support creates a trusting relationship between the agency and its carers and is a key factor in retaining skilled and experienced carers to meet the needs of children and young people. The placement stability figures reflect how these high levels of effective support impact positively on the consistency experienced and delivered to children and young people. Children and young people placed with the agency experience higher than average levels of placement stability and about 40% of them are in a permanent/long term arrangement.

Individuals from a range of disciplines and experience make up the membership of the fostering panel. Regular fostering panel training enhances the knowledge base of its members. Members are diligent in their review of panel paperwork which they receive in a timely fashion. Their deliberations consider the strengths and vulnerabilities of applicants or foster carers to ensure that children and young people receive care from competent and caring foster carers.

The placements team manage all requests for the placements of children and young people. Placements are then made in collaboration with the fostering social worker. The document used for matching children and young people to potential foster carers does not consider the impact the child or young person may have on existing members of the household. This is particularly importance as the approval of foster carers spans a wide range of ages and categories. By not considering the needs of all children and young people some may be disadvantaged and their welfare not maintained.

Prior to the placement of a child or young person, foster carers receive the information available. Placement plans include the areas of care in which the foster carer can make decisions under the delegated authority umbrella. Foster carers are part of the team around the child and work collaboratively with all the agencies to execute the plan, to attain good outcomes for children and young people.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Safeguarding children and young people is integral to practice within the organisation. It forms part of the preparation to foster training for applicants going through the assessment process and is fundamental to the training that continues throughout the foster carer's career. The training and safeguarding ethos prepares foster carers with a conscious awareness of the likely or actual effects of abuse and neglect. Foster carers have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities to safeguarding and how to refer any concerns to the agency.

Foster carers and staff are aware of safer caring practices and both family and individual children and young people's safety plans are completed. However, the inspection found a variable degree of robustness and timeliness of the completion of these documents. Attention is required to ensure all children and young people receive the same levels of safeguarding.

All staff have recently undertaken training on the subject of child sexual exploitation. This training is also available to foster carers some of which have complete it. The agency are aware of young people placed who are at risk of this. They complete a specific child sexual exploitation risk assessment to reduce risk and further safeguard these children and young people.

The manager works with social care and safeguarding authorities. The policy and procedure for managing allegations is robust. The manager demonstrates good practice as all suspicions of harm or potentially poor practice are referred to the Local Authority Designated Officer for an independent review prior to setting a course of action. Taking this line of advice and enquiry demonstrates robust safeguarding measures.

The agency operate a critical incident reporting system. This system offers the manager an oversight into other areas of concern. For example, it will bring incidents of bullying to her attention. The manager will then review the management strategies and where appropriate add further actions to be undertaken. This level of scrutiny ensures the maintenance of children and young people's welfare.

Unannounced visits to foster homes are undertaken at least annually, more recently the agency has increased this practice to twice yearly. This practice offer a snap shot of family life at any given time and ensures children are safe and environments suitable. An annual health and safety check of the carer's property assesses its continued suitability.

The recruitment and vetting of staff is very good with safer recruitment practices adhered to. As a result of this robust practice as agency only employ suitable people to work with children and young people. As part of the foster carer's assessment process, completed checks and references are required to be in place prior to presentation to fostering panel for approval. Whilst no foster carers have been approved without all checks and references in place, of the records sampled, on one occasion household checks were not completed prior to panel. The decision maker,

however, does not agree approvals until satisfactory checks are returned. The agency should ensure that only fully completed assessments are presented to fostering panel for consideration.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The agency has experienced a number of staff changes in recent times. The registered manager has resumed her post following changes to the management structure. She is a qualified social worker and brings a wealth of experience to the post having worked with children and families across a range services. She is suitably qualified and working towards completion of a Level 5 Diploma in Leadership and Management. The manager is aware of the strengths of the service and has a clear plan of action for the continued improvement and development of both the practice and the delivery of the service.

The relatively new staff team share the same drive and passion to deliver the best of services to children and their foster carers. They have extensive experience of working with children and families and some are experienced trainers who deliver new learning to the foster carer cohort. Staff receive regular supervision which is child focussed and annual appraisals where performance and professional development are monitored.

Leaders and managers have developed effective working relationships with placing authorities. They maintain placements and develop services to meet the needs of the looked after children. The agency has a high number of teenage placements; they provide specific resources to their carers to ensure that these arrangements remain stable and deliver good outcomes to children and young people. Parent and child placements have also been a local authority requirement this agency has met. The agency has a number of skilled carers that offer this resource and supplement their skill base with specifically tailored training. Commissioners speak highly about their working relationship with the agency and recognise placement stability, good educational outcomes and well supported, skilled foster carers amongst their strengths.

Systems are in place for the manager to monitor specific areas of the service and monthly reporting delivers feedback to senior management. However, little analysis of the monitoring data takes place to inform its effectiveness of the service and the outcomes for children and young people.

This agency is part of a much bigger organisation as such policies and procedures are centrally located. The agency, however, does not consistently adhere to some of the policies in place. This is highlighted by a lack of supervision to a carer subject to an allegation. Safer caring plans not completed in a robust or timely fashion and a poor guidance for the keeping of pets, particularly dogs in foster homes. This shortfall in practice does not ensure the wellbeing of children or adults.

The agency has strong links with centres for learning and research and have commissioned specific projects as part of the continued development of the agency. Continued learning is a feature of practice, the manager has considered learning opportunities from events such as complaints received to look at how practice can improve.

Since the last inspection, significant events are recorded appropriately and appropriate bodies notified. The agency has implemented a missing from care policy and procedure and the fostering panel minutes record the reasons for its recommendations. As such the agency has met all requirements and recommendations set at the last inspection.

The agency has an up to date statement of purpose that sets out the ethos, the aims and the objectives of the service. The service operates in line with the statement of purpose.

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.