

Foster Care Associates Thames Valley

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC047677
Inspection date	30/11/2015
Inspectors	Mrs Dancer and Ms McMillian
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

Setting address	Foster Care Associates, Hale Court, Hale Road, Wendover, AYLESBURY, Buckinghamshire, HP22 6NJ
Telephone number	01296 628300
Email	Ian.langley@thefca.co.uk
Registered person	Foster Care Associates Limited
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Mr David Oldham
Date of last inspection	18/03/2013

© Crown copyright 2015

Website: www.gov.uk/ofsted

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

Foster Care Associates, Thames Valley region, is a local branch of a well-established national organisation offering a comprehensive range of fostering placements to placing local authorities. The Thames Valley branch has its operational headquarters in Wendover, Buckinghamshire and smaller offices in Reading and Stanmore. The branch offers emergency, short and longer placements for children of all ages, with a particular focus on more difficult to place young people for whom an enhanced package of care based on a team parenting model is available. The agency currently supports 92 carers who between them have 148 children and young people placed.

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: **Requires improvement**

Since the last inspection the numbers of carers have increased from 109 to 131. Thirty nine of the 131 carers were without placements at this inspection.

There are some good committed foster carers that work as a team with the agency and other professionals to ensure that the children they foster progress well. In a minority of cases there is a lack of understanding of children's needs and an inadequate level of commitment towards the children they care for, which has not been challenged by the agency. This means that not all children are thriving in secure and stable placements or developing strong and lasting relationships with their carers.

There is good attention paid to children's education and this means that children's attendance and attainment is good and in some cases has exceeded expectations.

Not all children's safety and well-being is adequately promoted because in a small number of cases

risk management is weak and carers have not always followed safe caring plans. There is no formal agreement with the police about the arrangements when a young person goes missing that underpins the safe caring plans. In a small number of cases it was found that ineffective challenge has been made to local authorities when it is felt care plan reviews are needed because children are unsafe. The arrangement for behaviour management are not always in line with the agency's policy because untrained carers have carried out physical interventions. The approach to dealing with complaints is not sufficiently robust and children did not identify the agency as a route through which they can make a complaint.

Overall the agency is able to offer sufficient diversity in placement choice to meet the needs of children local authorities are looking to place and there has been a move to extend the diversity among the carer base.

There are formal assessment, preparation and approval processes but the quality of some of the assessments of carers has slipped and this means that the suitability of applicants to foster has not been robustly tested. Gaps in some foster carers knowledge or skills have not been identified or for some when, they have been identified, actions have not been followed through. Likewise the supervision process for carers is not always robust in identifying areas for development and where it has been actions have not always been successfully followed through. Unannounced visits to foster homes are not always occurring in a timely way.

The quality and timing of the induction process for panel members is unclear and there are no arrangements for the supervision of unqualified workers in relation to them carrying out initial visits to interested parties. The support to carers when there has been an allegation made about them is weak and leaves them feeling unsupported.

Records of complaints, safeguarding matters and notifications are of a poor quality and do not always contain details of the actions taken by the agency or the outcomes of the matters. Some records relating to children are of a poor quality.

There is a very recently appointed manager in post following the registered manager leaving. He has identified many of the shortfalls found during the inspection and has made some good progress. However, he has not yet had sufficient time to address all the issues that he has inherited although early signs suggest he has the skill and capacity to ensure that this agency improves and develops. A requirement has been made in relation to monitoring because although it is more robust than it was a few months ago the systems have not had time to have sufficient impact. The manager needs time to identify all the actions needed and to ensure these are embedded before they can make a real difference.

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
18.—(1) Subject to paragraph (7), the registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must establish a written procedure for	8/1/2016

<p>considering complaints made by or on behalf of children placed by the agency, and by foster parents approved by the agency.</p> <p>(2) The procedure must, in particular, provide— for the procedure to be made known to—</p> <p>(i) children placed by the agency (subject to their age and understanding),</p> <p>(ii) the parents of those children,</p> <p>(iii) persons working for the purposes of the independent fostering agency, and for a copy of the procedure to be supplied to any of those persons on request.</p> <p>(4) The registered person must ensure that a written record is made of any complaint or representation, the action taken in response to it, and the outcome of the investigation.</p> <p>This is with specific reference to: ensuring that children are confident about making a complaint; the complaints policy is implemented in every case; records are made of all actions taken following a complaint having been made and of the outcomes.</p>	
<p>The fostering panel must (b) oversee the conduct of assessments carried out by the fostering service provider. (Regulation 25 (4))</p> <p>This is with specific reference to making sure there is robust exploration of any gaps or potential areas for development that are apparent in assessments before making recommendations about an applicant's suitability to foster.</p>	8/1/2016
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))</p> <p>This is with specific reference to ensuring that any gaps identified in the matching considerations are set out in the placement plan or supervision with carers and actions are implemented and ensuring that unannounced visits to foster carers and children take place at the expected frequency.</p>	8/1/2016
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>This is with specific reference to: ensuring all risk assessments and safe caring policies are of an adequate quality and are implemented on every occasion; all children's emotional needs are identified and addressed; effective challenge is made to local authorities when children's needs are not being met.</p>	8/1/2016
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a policy, which is agreed with the local police, setting out the measures to be followed to prevent children placed with foster parents from going missing from their placement, and the procedure to be followed when a child is missing from a foster parent's home without permission. (Regulation 13 (3))</p>	22/1/2016
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents. (regulation 13 (1))</p> <p>This is with specific reference to ensuring that the agency's policy of no restraint is implemented or amended and if amended ensuring that carers are</p>	8/1/2016

trained in safe physical intervention techniques.	
The fostering service provider must prepare and, in particular, implement a written policy which is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect. The procedure under paragraph (1) (b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider, to the Chief Inspector, written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response. (Regulation 12 (1) (a) and (b) 3 (c) and (d))	8/1/2016
The fostering service provider must not allow a person to whom paragraph (2) applies, to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so. This paragraph applies to any person who is employed, other than by the fostering service provider, in a position in which that person may in the course of their duties have regular contact with children placed by the fostering service. For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform, and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20 1 (b) 2 (c))	8/1/2016
	DATE?

Recommendations

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

ensure prospective foster carers are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way that meets the child's development needs. (National Minimum Standard 13.6)

ensure each person on the central list is given induction training which is completed within 10 weeks of joining the central list. (National Minimum Standard 23.9)

ensure during an investigation the fostering service makes support, which is independent of the fostering service, available to the person subject to the allegation and, where this is a foster carer, to their household, in order to provide: information and advice about the process; emotional support; and, if needed, mediation between the foster carer and the fostering service and/or advocacy (including attendance at meetings and panel hearings). (National Minimum Standard 22.12)

ensure staff have access to support and advice, and are provided with regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff. This is with specific reference to unqualified workers being provided with supervision for their role of carrying out initial visits. (National Minimum Standard 24.4)

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

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Children settle well into their placements because, where possible, children are provided with information about the carers they are moving to live with and are invited to spend time with them before they move in. There are examples of children being provided with good quality care that is in line with their local authority care plans. These children are settled and well integrated into family life and are making good progress. One foster child said life with their carer had been 'amazing.' Another child, who was described as having been under stimulated and mute on admission was now full of energy, always asking questions and laughing and smiling. Some children have settled in very quickly due to the care and understanding they have received from their foster family.

In one case nurturing relationships between a carer and a child had not developed and this led to the young person's disengagement in family life and him spending time out of the home often in an unplanned way.

Children's physical health is catered for. All the usual routine needs such as dentist and optical appointments are met and GP services are available to them on a needs basis so they remain fit and well. Foster carers support children well in this area. Some children are provided with a wide range of opportunities and support that helps them to grow and develop in terms of their physical and emotional well-being. They develop a positive sense of identity and experience an increase in their self-esteem and confidence.

These positive experiences are not enjoyed by all children. This is because their emotional health needs are not recognised or are not addressed effectively in a prompt way. For example, there was a lack of understanding about the emotional needs of a young asylum seeker in relation to the loss and likely despair they are experiencing.

Most foster carers support children to express their views, advocate for them and work hard to make sure that issues they raise are addressed. For example, when young people have been the victim of bullying in school carers have worked very closely with schools, and other professionals, to make sure that the bullying ceased. Carers have then helped them overcome the emotional impact bullying has had on them so their self-esteem and confidence have not been affected in the long term. This helps these children to feel that their views are valued and that they have some influence over their lives.

The children spoken to during the inspection identified people they felt they could talk to but none of them named a person from within the agency.

Conversely children's participation forums enable children, collectively, to have an input into service development. There has recently been a children's forum established. These sessions are facilitated by an adult who has personal experience of the care system and support workers from the branch. Six children, who are fostered by the agency, are members of the forum and they discuss areas of the agency's work they feel are important to them. This is a very new group who have met on two occasions. The children attending were positive about this exciting new opportunity and were enthusiastic about the potential for them to affect change.

There is a variable picture in relation to how children are learning about taking responsibility for their behaviour. Some good examples were seen of positive and effective work having been carried out with some children. These children have increased

their understanding of and ability to behave in a socially acceptable way. They know they are accountable for their actions and are taking responsibility for their behaviour. Likewise some children have been well supported to develop their independence skills such as using public transport, learning to budget, doing the daily tasks needed to move successfully into independent living, and they are developing the emotional resilience they will need.

For a minority of children a lack of planned support has led to an escalation in dangerous behaviours, for example, being missing, becoming involved in substance misuse and other criminal activities and general disengagement in family life, adversely affecting their life chances.

Overall children's educational needs are well met. There has been some good improvements in children's attendance and attainment and positive successes in GCSE examinations. Carers and the agency are proactive in ensuring that when issues arise within school or other educational facilities prompt attention is taken to address these. This has meant that when educational placements are breaking, or have broken down, they have either stabilised or alternative provision has been quickly made available. Foster carers are good advocates for the children in ensuring their educational needs are met well and maintain good working relationships with education providers.

Some very good support is given to children to maintain and develop relationships with their birth families, where this is appropriate. Foster carers have successfully supported some positive moves back into the family and some children have been able to improve their relationship with their birth family. These relationships will be important to them as they move into independence.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The agency has a national and regional recruitment programme. Currently there are high numbers of carers who are white British. However, this has not had an impact on the ability of the agency to offer placements for children to the local authorities they serve. There are plans to do some targeted recruitment to expand the diversity of the pool of carers.

The arrangements for the preparation and assessment of carers are of a mixed quality. All applicants attend a three day pre-approval training that provides them with an understanding about the complex role they will be taking on as a foster parent. There is further training, once they are approved, that provides them with opportunities to grow and develop in the foster parenting role. Foster carers felt that the training opportunities were good and supported them in their care of children and young people.

The required statutory checks are undertaken on applicants and a formal assessment process is undertaken. The preparation and assessments processes have resulted in there being some good, experienced and dedicated carers who are totally child focused and are supporting children effectively to achieve well and succeed in their lives.

The robustness of the social workers' assessments are variable. For example, in one case information that suggested the applicants' had not sought professional input for

difficulties their child was experiencing was not explored and this could mean they may not seek and use support in their care of a foster child. In other case the dynamics between applicants' birth children had not been considered in terms of the impact on a foster child and in a third case the carers' past approach to dealing with the difficult behaviour of their own children had not been explored or challenged. Some recent assessments have little evidence that applicants' life histories and experiences have been fully explored and these shortfalls could have a significant impact on the quality of care that children experience.

Overall applicants are presented to panel in a timely way for a recommendation about their suitability to foster. While members consider and challenge some of the information presented to them there are gaps in their challenge. For example, shortfalls, as found in the assessments commented on above, were not explored in respect to the implications of these for a foster child, recommendations and advice made by the panel lack rigour. Panel members receive training on an ongoing basis, sometimes with the social workers for the agency. There is an induction process but for one panel member it was not clear if they had carried out the full induction programme before they were accepted as a member. The administration of the panel is effective and ensures that the members have the paperwork in time to read it and formulate questions about the cases presented. There is a formal decision making process and the new manager is now the decision maker. He has challenged gaps in the paperwork presented and delayed making his decision pending further information.

The agency has a dedicated person to co-ordinate referrals. Initial visits are conducted by unqualified staff who have had training to do this, they do not receive supervision in respect to this role. Decisions on matching are made by qualified social worker

There are some good effective services that support children and their carers well. One carer, when asked if the support was good said 'absolutely they are approachable and supportive; all are, from day one from the admin team to the social workers and other carers, they do a good job.' Services include: therapeutic input from a team that offers packages of support and training for complex cases and is based on relationship forming and attachment; an out of hours' service, which a foster carer said is 'really supportive'; support workers who work directly with children; various groups and activities. A foster carer said 'support groups have been brilliant', another highlighted that the activities football weekend was 'amazing' and all had enjoyed a singing competition, the summer barbeque and a pantomime. Overall carers commented positively about the good range of support they had received. However, the quality of support to children and foster families across the agency is not consistent.

Support to carers and children in the form of respite is provided and generally conducive to supporting placements in a child-centred way. Often the child's respite carer is well known to them, sometimes a family member of the carer. Respite care often takes place in the carers' home so the child remains in familiar surroundings. Respite care is also offered to carers and children when placements are strained so that time can be taken to reflect and develop the will and energy to repair relationships.

Some supervision for carers is of a good quality and the sessions provide a good arena for discussion about the children and the carer's needs. Other supervision is of a poor quality there is a lack of focus on the child placed and in one case a child was present but the records stated there was no child in placement. When in a subsequent visit it was identified the child was living in the home there was no discussion about how the carers could support the child to develop positive relationship with them and how they could help them decrease their periods of absence from the home. In another case actions agreed in a supervision

sessions as being required to support a child have never been followed through. Additionally, unannounced visits are not all carried out at the required frequency, this was the case even in placements that were experiencing difficulties where this support and additional safeguard is imperative.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

Some children are enabled to take age-appropriate risks because risk management for them is effective, safe caring plans are well thought through and carers implement the strategies identified. These children grow and develop their skills they need to make positive choices and are kept safe. For a small number of children a lack of understanding about risks posed to them or a failure to plan and implement effective strategies to manage risk has meant they have not been kept safe. In these cases while risk assessments have been undertaken in relation to the level of some risks, they do not include strategies to minimise, prevent or deal with dangerous and anti-social behaviour such as offending or being missing, and their safety and the safety of others is not assured.

In relation to children going missing there is no protocol with the police about dealing with missing episodes and where there is guidance for carers about the reporting processes not all carers have followed this on every occasion. When needs change and behaviours escalate safe caring plans and risk assessments are not always updated in a timely way. The agency has contacted local authorities in cases there has been concern about the continued viability of the placement due to a child's safety but these challenges have been ineffective and situations have been left to drift. These shortfalls have left some children vulnerable to all kinds of risk including being sexually exploited, enticed into gang crime or being radicalised.

Some carers have a clear understanding about how past experiences have impacted on children's behaviour and overall well-being and support them well in modifying their behaviour and making improvements in their emotional well-being. For some children clear and consistent boundaries coupled with attentive and nurturing care has had a positive impact on children and they develop effective coping strategies. However, not all children's emotional needs are fully understood and this means their behaviour is not always seen in the context of their past adverse experiences.

Behaviour management strategies are not always in line with the agency's policy. A child's plan allowed for a carer, who had not received training from the agency in carrying out restraint, to use physical intervention. Other untrained people were also involved in carrying out these holds. This is not only contrary to the agency's policy of no restraint and the regulations but puts the child, carer and others at risk of physical harm, the child at risk of emotional harm and the carer and their family at risk of allegations being made about them in the future.

Carers had a good knowledge of the reporting procedures and were confident to report

safeguarding and other concerns about a child. The agency has taken action when carers had not reported safeguarding and other matters in a timely way and their training has been refreshed. Foster carers who had been the subject of investigations did not feel that they had been adequately supported, they had been provided with a phone number and reported they had not had any other contact or support from the agency.

The local authority designated officer is satisfied that the agency refers matters to them in a timely way, and stated that they are professional and remain fully involved in any investigation. The records of safeguarding matters are of a poor quality and do not provide detail about the actions the agency has taken or the outcome of the investigation. This makes monitoring how matters have been dealt with difficult.

While the agency refers safeguarding matters to the relevant agencies it does not inform Ofsted about all significant events and does not provide the regulator with outcomes of situations. This means that the regulator is not provided with a clear overview of how issues are dealt with and does not have the opportunity to follow up or clarify any issues to ensure the agency is meeting regulations.

Recruitment of social work staff is robust and ensures that applicants are suitable people to be working with children. The arrangements for the recruitment of panel members is not robust and a requirement from the last inspection had not been met; there was a long gap in an applicant's employment history that had not been explored.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The registered manager left the service in July 2015. A new manager has been in post for two months and is making an application to register with Ofsted.

A number of shortfalls, some having a direct impact on the well-being of children have been found during this inspection. There has been a decline since the last inspection in the overall quality of this agency.

A number of monitoring systems have been introduced and the new manager is using these to ensure support structures are adequate to meet all children's needs; carers who need further support or training; why the quality of care has declined. Systems he has introduced include a placement panel at which social workers come and present cases, from this he is getting a good oversight of each child. He has shown that where he has identified shortfalls in the care of children or where there has been drift action is now being taken. He has also identified that there had been a decline in placement stability from less than two per cent in 2014-2015 to a reported 10.8 percent since January this year and he is investigating the reasons for this. The manager had identified many of the shortfalls through these systems before this inspection and had begun to address the issues relating to young people not being safe. As the manager and monitoring systems are very new it will take time to improve the quality of service; however, he has made an impressive start.

The management and staff team have been strengthened, some staff have left and the management arrangements have been adjusted accordingly while there is a recruitment process for a new manager to manage the assessment processes. There is a sense of a shared commitment among the management and staff team to drive improvement. The

staff team reported that they had been through 'bad times' but that they can see a 'way forward' due to the new manager who they describe as 'supportive', 'open and approachable' and 'proactive in getting things done.' One social worker said 'he is amazing he has done so much.' The staff of the agency are committed professionals and are child centred but say they had felt restricted in the influence they were able to have on their work. They said they now feel there is 'shared responsibility' and that they are feeling energised and positive about the future. They reported that their opportunities in relation to training are very good and that training informs their practice. They also reported that supervision is now of a good quality and this also is ensuring that they are developing professionally.

Carers met with were clearly dedicated to the children they care for and want to help them to grow and develop into useful members of society who achieve well and enjoy their lives. Commissioners, social workers and foster carers feedback about the agency was positive overall.

The previous requirement made to ensure that all checks required under regulations are carried out on prospective panel members has not been met. Previous recommendations in relation to the central list of panel members have been met and further plans have been developed to achieve a more diverse panel membership. Incidents of physical interventions are now recorded clearly but the policy in relation to the use of physical interventions is not being followed. Recommendations made relating to the quality of supervision and identifying the training, resources or support carers require to meet the needs of specific children have not been met or where actions have been identified they have not been implemented.

The quality of the case recording is variable. For example some records tend to focus on the carers and their needs and have little focus on the child's needs There was no evidence of management oversight of the records.

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.