

Foster Care Associates South

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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| Inspectors | Lucy Chapman and Teri Peck |
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| Registered manager | Mrs Hilary Vass |
| Responsible individual | Mr David Oldham |
| Date of last inspection | 12/09/2012 |

Service information

Brief description of the service

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

At the time of the inspection, FCA South had 143 approved fostering households offering 136 placements to 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: **Requires improvement**

The inspection follows a period of instability in the agency, resulting in significant staff change. The recent appointment of a new Registered Manager has brought about improvement. She has successfully identified areas for development and is implementing an effective improvement plan. However, change is recent and much progress is yet to embed into practice. During her short time in post the Registered Manager has done much to facilitate positive change in the agency and future plans

indicate a continued journey of improvement.

Organisational change has had minimal impact upon young people. They are happy in their foster families and their safety and welfare is promoted. Young people have excellent opportunities for participation. Their views are valued and influence organisational development; young people's participation is a strength of this agency.

Effective partnership working with placing authorities promotes positive placement matching and means that young people receive the services that they require. However, educational support is inconsistent geographically and a lack of monitoring of young people's educational progress means that it is unclear whether young people are maximising their educational outcomes.

The Registered Manager has improved management oversight with the introduction of weekly monitoring meetings. She fully recognises the previous shortfalls in respect of monitoring missing incidents and placement breakdowns to identify patterns and trends. Targeted remedial action is now underway.

Some foster carers lack mandatory training; planned improvement includes increased and more flexible training provision. However, these plans have yet to impact practice. Supervising social workers, although well trained, lack online-safety training. Their ability to support carers relies upon their personal knowledge and research rather than a clear organisational understanding.

Panel processes require improvement; a new panel action plan identifies and guides development. Current panel minutes do not effectively record discussion or the reasons for panel recommendations. Some panel members lack training to equip them to undertake their roles effectively. A confident and skilled agency decision maker rectifies ineffective panel decision making and ensures effective safeguarding.

The agency promptly reports safeguarding issues to relevant authorities. Notifications to HMCI evidence improvement, however updated notifications on the outcome of child protection enquiries remain inconsistent.

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 |
|---|------------|
| Ensure that foster carers are provided with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. | 30/04/2016 |

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| (Regulation 17 (1)) | |
| Ensure that the fostering panel has sufficient numbers and that individual members have between them the experience and expertise necessary to discharge the functions of panel.(Regulation 23 (7)) | 30/04/2016 |
| Ensure notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider, to the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 12 (3)(c)) | 30/04/2016 |
| Implement a procedure for monitoring the educational achievement, progress and school attendance of children placed with their carers. (Regulation 16 (2)(a)) | 30/04/2016 |

Recommendations

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

Ensure the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and in particular to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring, particularly in respect of missing incidents and placement disruptions. (NMS 25.2)

Ensure written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. (NMS 14.7)

Ensure entries in records, decisions and reasons for them are clear, guide practice and are signed and dated, in particular care plans and risk assessments. (NMS 26.5)

Ensure training equips staff with the skills required to meet the needs of children, particularly that supervising social workers complete online safety training. (NMS 23.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Young people say they are happy in their placements and can identify the progress they have made since living there. They describe caring and valued relationships between themselves and their carers. One young person said 'my carers are the best; there's no one better than them'. Young people speak to their carers about their concerns and receive the advice and support that they require.

Young people have excellent opportunities for participation. They value agency events, including 'the big sing', a national football tournament and numerous local activities. Young people contribute to the interviewing of all staff and the recruitment of foster carers. Their voice has been further enhanced with the introduction of young people's forums. Young people's participation is a strength of the agency.

All young people have individual care plans. Care plans contain adequate information for the carer to look after the young person; however, they do not identify specific work targets and strategies for change. This misses opportunities to promote and monitor young people's progress.

A lifeskills training programme guides the preparation of young people towards independence. Its use is not consistent or effectively monitored. The commitment of foster carers, rather than proactive agency response, ensures that young people have the skills that they need for their future.

Placement staff who know carers and their families well are responsible for the matching of new placements. A carer said 'the agency safeguard my whole family in matching'. A local authority commissioner said 'they don't put forward unsuitable carers; they give a considered view of whether carers can meet a child's needs.' Staff demonstrate a commitment to obtaining full information to facilitate good matching.

Despite positive matching, there are a substantial number of unplanned placement endings. Inconsistent use of stability and disruption meetings means that there are missed opportunities to promote placement stability, possibly preventing unplanned placement moves for young people. A lack of detailed monitoring of placement endings means that it is difficult to identify trends and take learning from failed placements.

Inconsistent educational support provision across the region means that some young people and their carers receive good educational advice and support from a qualified teacher. An external advisory service, 'FosterTalk' is promoted by the agency but not all carers showed awareness of this service. These disparities disadvantage some young people's education. While there are plans to address this issue in future recruitment, this remains a current shortfall in stated provision.

There is no specific training programme to support carers or supervising social workers in the education of looked after children. The agency does not monitor the

educational progress of all young people, it is therefore difficult to know if young people's educational opportunities are being maximised.

Young people receive the health services that they need, including specialist health provision. Therapeutic support is available via in-house, qualified and registered therapists to those young people where this is an identified need. Therapy progress undergoes regular review and informs the team around the child; this supports the holistic care of young people with complex needs.

Young people feel part of the agency and develop good relationships with staff, especially support workers who provide one-to one and group support. For some young people the recent supervising social worker change means that they have lacked a consistent named worker in the agency who they know well and trust.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The agency recruits a diverse range of carers who can meet the diverse needs of young people. Carers speak highly of their Journey to foster training, and describe the process of fostering assessment as being both rigorous and informative.

Good quality training equips carers with the skills to meet the complex needs of the young people in their care. However, a significant number of carers have yet to complete mandatory training, including safeguarding, first aid, safer care and de-escalation skills. Carers report that the location and timing of training does not always meet their needs and course cancellation occurs where there is poor carer enrolment. A newly introduced training action plan outlines planned improvement to foster carer training, including increased training provision and improved flexibility to meet carer's needs; improvements are recent and have yet to evidence positive change.

Majority of carers complete their training, support and development standards (TSD) to timescale, where there are delays an individual TSD action plan supports completion. Newly introduced TSD workshops provide additional support for carers and receives positive carer feedback.

A foster carer mentor system provides peer support and learning for newer carers. Newly approved carers appreciate this additional peer support, one carer said, 'I got given a mentor; this was really useful as I was able to talk about finances and get to know another carer.' The mentor scheme provides a mutually beneficial relationship where new carers gain support and experienced carers enhance and refresh their learning.

Foster carers, in general, feel well supervised. One foster carer said, 'my supervising social worker phones me every week and visits monthly. If I have an issue we talk it

over and she makes sure I'm doing the right thing.' However, significant staff changes in recent months result in many foster carers receiving inconsistent support. One foster carer said, 'it's been difficult with all the chopping and changing of staff,' and another said, 'support was inconsistent due to different styles of working and I had to develop new relationships.' Written records accompany carer supervision, although recording does not always reflect the quality of support provided.

Managers recognise panel as an area of agency functioning that requires development. Recent panel recruitment increases the range of panel knowledge and expertise with the appointment of panel members with health and educational expertise.

Panel provide feedback to the agency regarding the quality of assessment reports; this is not analysed or collated to provide effective quality assurance feedback to support agency improvement.

Panel decision making lacks a robust response and does not always ensure that foster carer terms of approval lie within their skills and experience. Panel minutes lack good quality recording of discussions or clear reasons for panel decision making.

A meticulous agency decision maker demonstrates excellent safeguarding awareness and demonstrates the ability to rectify any ineffective panel decision making. A panel improvement plan identifies shortfalls and guides improvement; however, robust panel procedures remain a significant shortfall in the agency.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

All young people have an individual safer caring plan, which records known and identified risks. Safe care plans enable young people to take age-appropriate risks and to develop an understanding of how to protect themselves. Where appropriate, specific risk assessments include missing, child sexual exploitation and self-harm. Risk assessments are not always updated following significant incidents and do not contain sufficient strategies to minimise risk; this diminishes the effectiveness of plans to safeguard young people.

A significant number of young people go missing. An effective missing person's policy guides the responses of carers and the agency. Previous monitoring shortfalls resulted in a loss of opportunity to identify potential patterns and trends in the missing behaviours of some young people. Opportunities for the agency to understand this and effect positive change were compromised. Newly introduced 'Missing Solutions' training enhances carers' understanding. Carers speak highly of this training. One foster carer said, 'I learnt a lot about children missing, how it should be done rather than how we were doing it previously. I didn't know about safe and well checks and return home interviews before the training.' Carers are now more effectively equipped to respond to missing young people and to keep them

safe.

Not all carers demonstrate an effective understanding of child sexual exploitation and radicalisation. Where there are known risks specialist training and support, provided by the agency and placing authority equips and guides carers to safeguard young people. The lack of consistent training provision means that some foster carers may lack the understanding to identify young people's involvement in child sexual exploitation and radicalisation at an early stage.

Online safety training is not mandatory for all carers, despite the significant risk online use poses to young people. This is compounded by agency supervising social workers lacking online safety training. In many cases, young people's online safety depends on the proactive approach taken by carers and supervising social workers, rather than by organisational guidance or training.

Effective links with the Local Safeguarding Children Board provide organisational leaders with up-to-date safeguarding advice and training. Established relationships with local area designated officers (LADOs) provide guidance in the safe management of allegations. Safeguarding concerns are reported without delay to the appropriate authorities. Feedback from LADOs is that the reporting and management of safeguarding incidents by the agency is effective. However, the submission of update notifications to Ofsted on the outcome of allegations and child protection enquiries is not consistent.

Staff and panel member recruitment is thorough and complies with regulatory requirements; a meticulous commitment to safeguarding in recruitment protects young people.

Unannounced visits are undertaken at least annually and wherever possible include discussion with young people. Unannounced visits improve agency safeguarding however, the quality of these visits and their recording is variable and does not always maximise quality assurance.

Staff and foster carers know how to report concerns and have a clear understanding of whistleblowing procedures. They know how to make complaints and any complaints made receive thorough investigation and effective response. There are many opportunities provided for young people to know about complaints and advocacy. Young people demonstrate a good knowledge of the complaints procedure; there have been no complaints made by young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

A newly registered manager leads the agency with energy and enthusiasm, demonstrating a commitment to high standards of care. She is a qualified social worker with a Level 4 Diploma in Leadership and management and has extensive management experience. Staff value her appointment, one staff member said, 'she is a very good manager; I have a great deal of respect for her.'

The Registered Manager has good oversight and awareness of areas for development. An effective development plan addresses areas for improvement with clear action and timeframe for completion. There is evidence of organisational improvement since the Registered Manager's appointment, with building blocks in place for ongoing improvement.

A clear statement of purpose effectively outlines the ethos of the organisation, the range of placements and the individualised structure of support. An excellent children's guide equips young people with information about the agency; they keep and refer to this guide and are well informed.

Placing authorities describe the positive working relationships with the agency. One local authority commissioner said, 'I've been impressed with the agency, the quality of carers has been good and placements are well matched to young people's needs'. Young people benefit from constructive working relationships between agency staff and local authority social workers and commissioners.

Improved monitoring of the agency now includes Quality of Care monitoring reports, which were previously lacking. The introduction of weekly monitoring meetings provides improved management oversight where young people have high-risk behaviour and where there is placement instability. However, there remains a lack of holistic oversight of significant incidents and placement breakdowns, meaning that it is difficult to identify patterns and trends and to take action to address issues. Newly introduced senior management support of monitoring aids progress via their more active role in quality assurance and auditing.

The Registered Manager demonstrates an active commitment to listening to foster carers' and young people's views. One foster carer said, 'Carers feel more listened to; the new manager attends the carer support group; she is trying to listen to carers and communication is better.' Enhanced communication with foster carers and young people results in an improved ability to respond to their views and ideas. Carers and young people feel increasingly listened to and valued.

Significant recent staff change has led to the recent recruitment of a number of supervising social workers; staff recruitment is ongoing to achieve full permanent staffing. Regular supervision of staff, previously lacking, is now established. Staff report more effective support in their roles through supervision as well as day-to-day management support. The establishment of a reflective practice group provides additional opportunities for staff to discuss issues and provides additional guidance and group learning opportunities.

Staff appraisal is annual; it effectively reviews current practice and guides future training and development. Appraisal demonstrates good practice with the inclusion of

feedback from children, foster carers and professionals, providing additional quality assurance.

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.