

Foster Care Associates South East

Foster Care Associates

9 Tollgate, Chandler's Ford, Eastleigh, Southampton, Hampshire SO53 3TG

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Care Associates (FCA) South East is a regional branch of a large, privately owned independent fostering agency. It is operated by the limited company Foster Care Associates Ltd. The agency provides emergency, short-term, long-term and parent-and-child placements for children of all ages. This inspection covers the agency located in Chandler's Ford near Southampton, with sub offices in Faversham, Sutton, Worthing and on the Isle of Wight.

At the time of inspection, FCA South East had 102 approved fostering households offering 128 placements to children.

Inspection dates: 26 to 29 June 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account

requires improvement to be good

How well children and young people are helped and protected

requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

inadequate

The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 25 January 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because:

- There are shortfalls in the monitoring of the service by managers. The lack of oversight of the quality of direct work by foster carers means that ineffective practice is not always recognised and rectified.
- The quality of staff supervision is variable and, in many instances, does not focus effectively upon young people's needs.
- Some staff lack sufficient training; moreover, training is not effectively documented, monitored and verified. Not all panel members have completed safeguarding training, and supervising social workers have not received training in the needs and risks associated with asylum-seeking and trafficked young people.
- Staff make placement-matching decisions based upon foster carers' previous experience and do not always consider their training history. Gaps in foster carers' knowledge and skills are not always recognised and addressed. This means that some carers have insufficient training and understanding of the needs of the young people in their care.
- When young people are out of education, stated agency education provision is not always in place. One young person was not in education, and the absence of good monitoring, clear guidance to carers and any challenge to secure a suitable provision resulted in this being far more prolonged than it needed to be.
- Documentation provided to the agency's fostering panel does not always provide full information to facilitate panel recommendations, and is not always provided within appropriate timescales.
- The quality of record keeping is poor. There is a new recording system in place. However, the impact of this is yet to be felt.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- Placement stability has improved since the last inspection. The majority of young people are in settled placements that meet their needs and in which they are making progress.
- The agency's response to young people going missing is proactive. Young people with missing behaviour benefit from regular management oversight. The agency works hard to ensure that young people's missing episodes decrease in number.

- New fostering applicants feel well trained and supported. The agency has improved Journey to Foster training by introducing a 'day 4' with a specific focus upon the needs of children looked after.
- Young people feel listened to: they confidently share their ideas with the agency. Young people have widespread involvement in the agency, including training foster carers, presenting questions to fostering applicants, and they enjoy a comprehensive range of activities.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))	29/08/2017
Ensure that the fostering service provider promotes the educational achievement of children placed with fostering families. (Regulation 16 (1))	29/08/2017
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. (Regulation 17 (1))	29/08/2017
Ensure that any person working for the fostering service has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary 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 (3) (b and c))	29/08/2017
Ensure that all persons employed by the fostering agency receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4) (a))	29/08/2017
Ensure that the registered person maintains a system for improving the quality of care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1) (b))	29/08/2017

Recommendations

- Ensure that all necessary information is provided to panel members at least five working days in advance of the panel meeting to enable full and proper

consideration. (National Minimum Standards 14.3)

- Ensure the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision. (National Minimum Standards 13.7)
- 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, and that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (National Minimum Standards 25.2)
- Ensure there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (National Minimum Standards 26.2)
- Ensure information about the child is recorded clearly. (National Minimum Standards 26.6)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

The majority of young people are settled and doing well in their placements. There is a marked improvement in their physical and emotional well-being, a reduction in their risk-taking behaviour and an improvement in their engagement with education and activities outside of school. Young people informed inspectors that they like their carers and feel part of the family.

However, the agency fails to promote the experiences and progress of all young people. For a young person out of education, ineffective management oversight failed to pick up the situation despite accurate reporting by foster carers. Therefore, there was no cohesive plan to facilitate his learning or appropriate guidance for the carers. The agency's failure to monitor whether stated educational provision was in place resulted in a prolonged period without a suitable educational provision. Managers were unaware of these educational shortfalls until highlighted by inspectors during the inspection.

The professional challenge of external organisations by agency staff is inconsistent. While some young people have benefited from purposeful agency challenge to secure an exceptional service provision, other young people have remained without suitable services. The provision that young people receive varies according to the skill, experience and proactivity of their agency social worker. Monitoring by senior managers failed to recognise, address and rectify this disparity.

New foster carers speak highly of their 'journey to foster training'. The agency has improved the training provided to fostering applicants by introducing a journey to foster 'day 4', which focuses specifically upon the needs of looked after young people. Foster carers said that this has helped them to understand the needs of the young people who may be referred to their care.

Placement matching does not always consider fully foster carers' training history; not all carers have completed the training they need in order to meet the identified needs of the young people placed with them. In some instances where mandatory training had not been completed there was a lack of challenge to the foster carers about this. In some cases, gaps in placement matching remain unidentified and unaddressed. For example, the carers of a young person who has post-traumatic stress disorder lacked training in this condition; further, there was no specialist provision sought by the agency to meet this need. Some foster carers informed inspectors that they are providing care by instinct rather than care informed by specialist training and support.

While foster carers said that they are increasingly satisfied with the agency, they highlighted high levels of staff change. Foster carer feedback confirmed that the support they receive is of variable quality and purpose. Inspectors observed inconsistent quality in the supervision and support provided to foster carers. Some

young people, too, said that they lack a consistent agency social worker whom they know and trust.

The agency is proactive in its work with young people. Young people informed inspectors that they feel listened to, they are confident to share their ideas with the agency and they spoke to inspectors about the positive response that they have received. Young people's involvement in the agency is wide ranging; they undertake training of fostering applicants, they have created a 'speaking book' to present their questions to prospective foster carers at panel, and they work collaboratively with staff and foster carers to develop agency training. The agency also provides opportunities for young people, foster carers and staff to have fun and celebrate together, including the recent 'big-sing' competition, which was enjoyed by everybody involved.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

In the majority of cases, there is an improvement in the safety and welfare of young people placed with the agency. Young people's risk-taking behaviour improves as they settle in their placement. There is improvement in the stability of young people's placements since the previous inspection.

There is an enhanced response to young people's missing behaviour, improved by mandatory training for carers and staff, and increased management oversight of young people who may go missing. Child sexual exploitation awareness training is also now mandatory for agency social workers and foster carers, resulting in an improved response to young people for whom this is a known risk.

Investigations into allegations and safeguarding concerns are well reported; a local authority designated officer confirmed that safeguarding concerns are reported in an appropriate and timely manner; this promotes the safety and welfare of young people.

However, there are shortfalls noted. Managers, staff and foster carers do not demonstrate a thorough understanding of all risks to young people; in particular, they lack awareness particularly of the needs of asylum-seeking young people. There is no current training provision for staff and carers looking after asylum-seeking and trafficked young people. Supervising social workers and foster carers have failed to promptly identify and act upon known signs of risk that may have prevented one trafficked young person from going missing.

Supervising social workers have recently completed radicalisation training; however, foster carers have yet to undertake this training. When the radicalisation of young people is a possible concern, there is a lack of evidence of work to equip foster carers with the knowledge and understanding that they require to keep young people safe.

Young people's safe care plans are insufficient. They do not clearly document known risks for young people and do not provide clear guidance to foster carers in how to address risks. For one young person, stranger danger was a known risk. However, this was not in her safer care plan and there was no guidance to her carer to address this risk. For another young person who has a history of sexualised behaviour, the young person's sexually inappropriate touching was not recognised as a risk, and his safe care plan did not provide guidance to his carers in how to manage this behaviour.

Where young people exhibit complex and challenging behaviour, agency plans provide insufficient guidance to carers. One carer informed inspectors that she managed a young person's physical aggression using her own skill rather than from clear agency guidance. A failure to put into place identified specialist training and support for this carer may have compromised the safety of both the foster carer and the young person in their care.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

The registered manager has been in post for 17 months. She has high ambitions for the agency and high expectations for children. However, these have not yet been realised across all areas of practice.

In some instances, managers have failed to effectively oversee and monitor organisational practice and the quality of care provided to children; this fails to identify and rectify shortfalls in practice. Managers are ineffective in their oversight of young people's plans; there is insufficient oversight to ensure that these plans are effective. Concerns raised by inspectors were unknown to leaders and managers until highlighted by inspection.

Poor recording hinders managers' ability to ensure that issues of concern, including safeguarding issues, are dealt with effectively. In some cases, records of safeguarding concerns and the action taken in response could not be located within agency recording systems; inspectors needed to contact local authorities to establish that safeguarding concerns had been reported. A new recording system has been introduced; however, the impact of this is yet to be fully realised because this is so recent a change.

Staff supervision does not always focus upon young people's needs; the quality and content of supervision varies according to supervisor. Staff supervision does not consistently provide an effective oversight of staff practice and this allows unsatisfactory practice to persist unchallenged.

Not all staff members have the skills that they need to fulfil their role effectively; training for panel members varies too much. The panel chair and vice chair are well trained, having recently undertaken specific specialised training for their roles. However, other panel members lack key training, including in safeguarding. Training completed by panel members is not clearly documented, verified and monitored.

Quality assurance of documentation presented to panel is poor. Panel members do not always receive full documentation within the prescribed timescales (as set out in the national minimum standards); this inhibits full and proper consideration of information prior to going to panel. In addition, some fostering assessments are of insufficient quality, they lack detail and do not provide panel with full information to make its recommendation. For example, one assessment failed to explore the cultural and religious practice of the applicants and the impact of this upon children; agency quality assurance processes failed to note and address this shortfall. Recent joint training for panel members and assessing social workers is designed to improve the quality of the assessments. However, at the point of inspection, assessment shortfalls remained.

Panel generally provides safe and effective recommendations to the agency. It places emphasis upon the safety and well-being of children, asks relevant questions and demonstrates a commitment to high standards. Panel provides effective feedback to the agency. However, managers do not sufficiently make use of panel as a critical friend, and some matters raised by panel were not effectively addressed in a timely manner.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC039271

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Inspectors

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