

Foster Care Associates Midlands

Foster Care Associates Limited

Foster Care Associates Midlands, Abberley View, Saxon Business Park, Hanbury Road, Stoke Prior, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B60 4AD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency was registered in 2004. It is part of a large, privately owned national organisation. It offers a wide range of placements: emergency, respite, bridging, and 'step-down' from residential, long and short term, parent and child, unaccompanied children and for young adults 'staying put'. At the time of the inspection, there were 243 children living in 182 fostering households across 14 local authority regions.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 March 2018

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

requires improvement to be good

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: 3 October 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because:

- This agency has established good outcomes for children over several years. However, shortfalls in some aspects of how the service helps and protects children and how the organisation reviews significant events across the service have had an impact on previous positive judgements.
- Regulatory improvement is required in how assessments about people who join fostering households are completed and how essential information about children to inform safe care is obtained.
- Improvement is required to ensure that an agency-wide review is completed to learn lessons after serious incidents and to ensure that there is a consistent implementation of safeguarding procedures.
- Recommendations are made to improve matching documentation, recruitment processes and evidence of decision-making about foster carer suitability.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- A stable, secure management team, including an experienced, competent manager, has the capacity and commitment to make improvements promptly.
- Stable and supported agency staff support foster carers well.
- Creative resourcing of the agency, including of therapeutic support of foster carers, benefits children.
- There is imaginative consultation with children and a wide range of opportunities for participation and inclusion through meaningful, child-centred activities.
- Foster carers feel extremely valued.

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 |
|---|------------|
| Provide foster parents with such training as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them, and ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17(1)(3)) | 01/09/2018 |
| Ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11(a)) This relates to identifying patterns and trends, in particular around safeguarding and placement endings to help to learn lessons and to improve children's experience of care and social work practice. | 01/09/2018 |
| Implement a written (protection of children) policy which sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect, in particular for the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider. (Regulation 12(1)(3)(b)) | 01/09/2018 |
| Ensure that where a person ("X") applies to become a foster parent and the fostering service provider decide to assess X's suitability to become a foster parent, any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation. (Regulation 26(1)) This relates to having effective assessment processes for adults who become part of a fostering household. | 01/09/2018 |

Recommendations

- Demonstrate that children are carefully matched to a foster placement and foster carers have full information about the child. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 11.2)
- Consistently follow good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 19.2)
- Ensure that in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision maker considers *Hofstetter v LB Barnet* and *IRM [2009] EWCA 328 (Admin)* that it would be good discipline and appropriate for the decision maker to identify key arguments, considerations, additional information available to them, and their reasons (as listed on page 19). ('Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services July 2013', page 19)

Inspection judgements

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

Foster carers are well supported by supervising social workers. This focused support helps foster carers to improve children's experiences and life chances. One member of staff described their emphasis as, 'All roads lead to the young people.'

The agency supports a therapeutic 'team parenting' approach and offers skilled therapeutic support to all foster carers and at additional cost, direct work with children. This approach encourages children to lead healthy lives, make wise decisions and make progress in their education. The agency has a good record of placing brothers and sisters together in large foster homes and of supporting children into adulthood to 'stay put' with foster carers.

Positive matching for stability, including consideration of foster carers' preferences and the child's need, is not evident in the agency's documentation. This leaves the agency not able to show how their decision-making promotes children's welfare. The agency sometimes places children before a foster carer has received the training and development they need to carry out their role effectively. For example, foster carers can be inexperienced or untrained in behaviour management, self-harm and first aid. This means they may be unable to cope with children's needs and this may put unnecessary pressure on a child's placement stability. Matching was identified at the previous inspection in 2014 as an area for improvement. This has not been met.

Creative support from foster carers and supervising social workers helps children understand their journey in care. They help children to maintain positive feelings about their families. Together, they create tangible resources for children's futures, such as memory boxes and jars for collecting memorabilia. This helps children make sense of their pasts.

The agency makes time for active consultation and direct work with children by the growing team of support staff who coordinate great activities that promote inclusion for all. Children participate in staff recruitment and have been updating the 'Children's Guides' to fostering. They have been instrumental in setting up and running activities, such as the knitting group, two different youth clubs, girls' groups, sports skills courses, a new sexual health workshop and involvement in charity fundraising. Children enjoy these activities and events. These varied opportunities help to improve children's confidence and self-worth.

One child described their feelings about life in foster care by saying, 'Within a short space of time I felt as if I was part of their family, which coming from my background was all that I ever wanted. I have grown to become closer to my foster carers and their family and I can't wait to see what the future brings my way. My life has changed all thanks to the FCA and the local authority and I love it! Thank you!'

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires

improvement to be good

There have been a few isolated incidents of children being placed at risk of sexual exploitation, self-harm and neglectful foster carer responses. The agency has been unaware, despite regular supervision meetings and reviews, and seeing children alone, that some foster carers' attitudes and actions in relation to their foster children have not ensured that children are safeguarded from harm. The agency has not always gathered crucial pre-placement information necessary to ensure that children's welfare is protected. This has led to one child suffering significant harm. However, systems for managing serious incidents, allegations or complaints do ensure that individual cases are resolved, once they are known.

On one occasion, staff did not implement the organisation's safeguarding policy to refer a child's allegation to the local area safeguarding team, or share the information with the agency's managers. Staff recruitment processes do not ensure that the best references for employees or consultants are taken up. These weaknesses jeopardise the overall safeguarding approach.

Other safeguarding systems are solid and help to ensure that foster carer households are safe for children. For example, the agency makes sure that children are safe on their return from any missing from home episode. This includes developing a new approach to share information through focused discussions with children on their return home. Recent training, particularly in specialist knowledge about child sexual exploitation and regular meetings with foster carers at support groups, has helped to improve knowledge and response across the agency. Foster carers trust the agency to help them protect the children in their care. Children's responses to Ofsted's annual survey were unanimously positive. All children who completed the survey reported feeling safe in their foster homes.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

A creative vision and positive expectations of staff, foster carers and children mean that the agency has an active development plan for improvement. The registered manager is a qualified and experienced social worker and manager.

The fostering service has not had an effective system to carry out timely or full assessments on adults who are on the periphery or join an established approved fostering household in a parenting role. In one case, when a significant allegation of abuse was made against a fostering household, the agency had not concluded its full assessment of the new member after three years. This is not the case for new applicants, who progress to assessment after their initial enquiry. These new assessments are managed effectively and in good time by the parent company using consultant assessors.

The fostering panel and decision-maker operate effectively to ensure that only suitable people are approved as foster carers. However, on one occasion, when the advice from the foster carer review had been to refuse or terminate approval and the agency decision-maker disagreed with this, the record of the positive panel

recommendation and agency decision did not explain the context. However, the agency does terminate a foster carer's approval when it becomes clear that the quality of care is not good enough, especially after allegations, complaints and incidents.

The organisation shares national learning from serious case reviews. However, there has not been a prompt managerial review after serious events in their own organisation to draw out lessons to learn across the wider agency and to improve safeguarding, care and social work practice. Action was taken during the inspection to begin drawing together management information about known issues. However, this was not in place prior to the inspection.

There are plenty of discussions and progress meetings post-placement, especially for children placed under a separate arrangement by one local authority under a contract to provide foster placements specifically for children leaving residential care. Despite this positive feature, the agency is not always successful in obtaining the best information about children to inform the support that they provide to children, including to an up-to-date local authority plan or the most recent review of children's care.

The agency does not yet analyse learning about children's placements that unfortunately end early to improve the offer of placement stability in the future. Similarly, qualitative analysis of the take-up and effectiveness of foster carer training, educational outcomes, children who go missing from home and safeguarding also does not currently inform the monitoring and reporting about service improvement. However, the agency has a plan to improve this through increasingly well-organised systems so that they can better promote placement stability and a secure experience for children.

One local authority spoke highly of the agency's proactive approach by telling the inspector of 'their willingness to work in partnership to meet the needs of our most vulnerable young people'.

Foster carers are also overwhelmingly positive about the agency. They described the agency as, 'lovely to deal with' and 'informative and responsive'. They report regular, high-quality support and communication from all agency staff, including accessible senior leaders. One very experienced foster carer described feeling respected and involved: 'FCA do listen, from the bottom to the top.' Another foster carer said: 'Social workers have been superb. Always available and very supportive. They treat us with respect and professionalism.'

Staff supervision and appraisal, induction and training are good. The organisation has close links with local universities and offers regular student placements, which encourages a learning culture. Three geographical social work teams are sufficiently resourced under three fostering service managers and the overall coordination of the registered manager. There are good opportunities for internal promotion that create a culture of aspiration. The service often recruits from its student social work cohort. Staff speak very highly of their managers and are enthusiastic and thoughtful about their work with foster families.

The agency thinks creatively about opportunities for children. Agency staff generate good ideas for enrichment of children's lives and make this happen. Development work to better support disabled children is under way. Foster carers, staff and children feel very well engaged, respected and involved in the life of the agency.

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: SC045338

Registered provider: Foster Care Associates Limited

Registered provider address: Malvern View, Saxon Business Park, Hanbury Road,
Stoke Prior, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B60 4AD

Responsible individual: Mark Costello

Registered manager: Pamela Springer

Telephone number: 01527 839170

Email address: contactus@thefca.co.uk

Inspectors

Christy Wannop, social care inspector

Tracey Cogan Greig, social care inspector



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

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