

Foster Care Associates South East

Foster Care Associates Limited

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 company Foster Care Associates Ltd and was registered on 26 July 2004. The agency provides emergency, short-term, long-term and parent-and-child placements for children of all ages. This inspection covers the agency's registered office in Chandler's Ford near Southampton, and sub-offices in Faversham, Sutton Worthing and on the Isle of Wight.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering service had 96 carer households providing care for 114 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 13 to 17 August 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 26 June 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The dynamic registered manager has, in a relatively short time, changed the culture of the service and positively engaged staff in the improvement process. Staff say that they are becoming much more consistent in their practice through effective team-working and supervision.
- Children feel safe and valued by their foster carers. They build strong relationships and develop a sense of belonging. Many achieve permanency and some stay as part of the family into adulthood.
- Children benefit from a wide range of activities and experiences that help them develop in confidence and build happy memories.
- Children enjoy good health and do well in education, through the proactive and effective support of their foster carers.
- Foster carers benefit from support and training that equip them to care for children well.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Safer care plans, risk assessments and associated documents do not detail all known risks and vulnerabilities and are not explicit about the strategies to be used by foster carers to support children to keep safe.
- The quality assurance of assessments of potential foster carers is not consistently strong.
- The system for foster carers to record any consequences for behaviour does not support effective management oversight. This inhibits monitoring of such measures to ensure that they are reasonable and proportionate. It also misses opportunities to identify where additional support may be necessary to maintain a placement.

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
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals.</p> <p>the use of any measures of control, restraint or discipline in respect of children accommodated in a foster home. (Regulation 35(1)(a) Schedule 6 (8))</p>	31/10/2018
<p>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>In particular, ensure that safer care plans, risk assessments and associated documents detail all known risks and vulnerabilities and are explicit about the strategies to be used to support children to keep safe.</p>	31/10/2018

Recommendations

- Children communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. (NMS 1.3) In particular, ensure that action is taken in response to children's expressed concerns.
- Support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. (NMS 20.8) In particular, ensure that where training is identified as a need for foster carers in the matching process this is achieved in good time.
- Foster carers encourage children to take appropriate risks as a normal part of growing up. Children are helped to understand how to keep themselves safe, including when outside of the household or when using the internet or social media. (NMS 4.4) In particular, ensure that where there are restrictions in place there is evidence that all required parties have been involved in the decision-making and that the restriction has been reviewed to ensure that it remains appropriate.

- Assessment and appraisal of all staff involved in fostering work takes account of identified skills needed for particular roles and is used to identify individuals' learning and development needs. (NMS 23.5) In particular, ensure that the objectives set focus on staff development and include timescales.
- Being able to promote positive behaviour and manage children's behaviour well are central to the quality of care provided in any foster home. Negative behaviour should usually be managed through building positive relationships with children. Foster carers need to be able to respond positively to each child or young person's individual behaviour and to be skilled at both diffusing difficult situations and avoiding situations escalating. The child's placement plan must set out any specific behavioural issues that need to be addressed or approaches to be used. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4, paragraph 3.96)
- The manager exercises effective leadership of the staff and operation, such that the fostering service is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible childcare that meets the individual needs of each fostered child and of foster carers. (NMS 17.5) In particular, consider whether there is a potential conflict of interest in the registered manager acting as decision-maker.
- Panel/s provide a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel. (NMS 14.2) In particular, develop a formal system for the assessment manager to receive feedback on the quality of assessments from the panel.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Most children and young people develop secure relationships and a sense of belonging with their foster carers through the individualised care provided. Staff and foster carers are child-focused and know the needs of children in their care. A social worker noted, 'They have a good relationship, but the carer is able to still promote the young person's parenting capabilities and discuss worries about how things can be done better.' A young person said, 'FCA loves to help kids and make lives better and have fun. They try and build relationships, so we become a family.'

Children have opportunities to express their voices and views to a trusted adult. They can talk to agency staff and some have independent visitors or advocates. A young person said, 'I would come straight to the manager with any concerns or complaints.' There is some variation in the depth and quality of recording of the voice of the child, and in one case a concern raised with a supervising social worker was not acted on. The participation officer is working with a small group of children's representatives. The projects and work underway are successfully encouraging and enabling children and young people to share their views and have a voice in how they are supported by the agency. They have considered some questions they would like to ask prospective foster carers and future employees, and these are used.

Children are offered and enjoy a wide range of activities, opportunities and experiences, including holidays overseas, which successfully promote their self-esteem and development. A social worker said of a child, 'She has engaged in activities which she had not done previously.' One child wrote proudly of learning to swim and having friends home for dinner. Others join community groups such as police cadets, brownies and sailing clubs. The agency offers activities to all throughout the year and they also take part in national events such as 'The Big Sing Off', in Blackpool this year, which many people talked about enthusiastically. One foster carer commented that, although the number of activities had decreased, the quality and choice had increased, which encouraged greater participation.

Foster carers prepare children well for independence. Children learn self-care, social and personal development skills. The agency tool 'Steps to Independence' provides a useful framework and records progress. One young person really appreciated the foster carer's support to go to an interview using public transport, so she would be familiar with and confident on her next journey. There are some young adults in 'staying put' arrangements and the agency supports these effectively.

Children are well supported to address their health needs, with referral to specialists as required. Children who have identified complex needs are provided with additional support that includes access to therapists. Foster carers actively seek and obtain resources that help children understand their health issues and mitigate the impact of these. A few children with allocated support packages have not been able to access their sessions due to staff vacancies. Some gaps were filled by supervising social workers, and the appointment of new staff has now addressed this.

All children are engaged in education. Foster carers provide the level of support children need to participate in the full education experience, such as accompanying a child on forest school day to enable them to join in the activities. A child was

delighted to say, 'I got a really good school report and excellent in reading, gone up a whole level.' Another said, 'This carer is the best thing that ever happened to me, I gained education qualifications, which I wouldn't have.' There is a nominated education lead role who monitors children's education placements and achievements. There is no protected time allocated for this role. Some foster carers miss the dedicated education officer role which they described as very helpful in identifying and securing non-mainstream provision, liaison with the virtual school and working with the child, foster carers and the school to maintain a school place through challenging times.

Children maintain relationships with friends and family through well-planned and supported contact. Older young people happily describe being able to take responsibility for making their own contact arrangements.

The process of matching explores the child's needs and how they will be supported in placement. The agency has identified areas that require development to ensure that the process becomes more robust. Where there is a gap and carers need additional training, this has not always been achieved swiftly enough.

Foster carers describe planned moves into and out of their homes as well thought-through, and led by the needs of the child. An independent reviewing officer (IRO) reported favourably on the transition planning for a child who had previously experienced a number of unplanned moves. The IRO noted the progress the child has made in a relatively short time: his behaviour has changed dramatically since being placed, expressing feelings of affection to both foster carers, and he seems happier and more secure.

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

Children are safe and feel safe. One child wrote, 'I love living with my new family, and (foster carer) is a police officer and keeps us all safe.' Children are safeguarded by foster carers and staff who are generally alert to the individual child's potential risk factors and vulnerabilities. They demonstrate a sound understanding of risk, what is required to manage and minimise risk and how this should be done. However, this work is not well supported by the underpinning formal risk assessments. Neither the risk assessments nor the associated safer care plans explicitly identify the strategies to be used to support children to stay safe. Where children have been in placement for a number of years, risks identified at the beginning of the placement are not always brought forward or considered in updated plans. This does not ensure that staff and foster carers are alert to specific risks that may re-emerge, particularly in adolescence.

Foster carers and staff work together to manage incidents of missing and risk-taking behaviours effectively. Foster carers are persistent in maintaining contact with children during an episode of missing. For most children, missing incidents are reducing. Where this is not the case, agency staff work with others to ensure that there are robust plans and challenge the placing authority when return home interviews are not provided.

The majority of foster carers demonstrate secure knowledge and understanding of

the wide-ranging aspects of safeguarding, gained through relevant training. The staff team responds promptly to safeguarding concerns, making appropriate referrals to the host and placing authorities and sharing information effectively. This includes the management of allegations against foster carers, with suitable action taken by the agency where necessary.

Foster carers manage children's behaviour well, and the low-level use of physical intervention is recorded to facilitate monitoring by the registered manager. During supervision, foster carers discuss their use of behaviour management strategies to encourage children to change their behaviour, and they detail these in their daily logs. However, these strategies are not included in children's plans and there is no formal system that enables the registered manager to have oversight of such measures as required by regulation. This misses opportunities to identify successful strategies and potential difficulties in a placement; learning from both could maintain the stability of the placement.

Foster carers encourage and support most children effectively to take risks appropriate for their age and ability. A small minority of young people are restricted in their access to technology. It is not clear why these restrictions are in place, nor is there evidence that all required parties have been involved in the decision-making or that the restriction has been reviewed.

Agency staff make effective use of their established systems to ensure that foster homes maintain a safe, comfortable environment for children.

The agency recruitment of staff and foster carers is thorough and meets safer recruitment requirements.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The suitably qualified and experienced registered manager shows ambition and passion to improve standards in this fostering agency. She has made a significant difference to the agency since her appointment in November 2017. On arrival, she took time to get to know the staff, understand how the agency was functioning, and identify its strengths and areas for development. A young person said of her, 'She has made a big difference for good; turned the whole agency around, a real positive vibe.' Staff describe her as child-focused, supportive, positive and open.

The agency delivers the care as described in the agency's statement of purpose. The registered manager and the management team have been open and transparent with stakeholders and taken effective action to address the weaknesses identified at the last inspection. This has ensured that commissioners are confident in the good quality of care provided to children. Comments received include: 'Well-trained and supported, resilient carers. Able to offer good-quality placements to children with complex needs'; 'They only offer a placement if it is a good match'; and 'I have always had a good working rapport with the professionals working within FCA and communication is always good.'

The manager recognised the significant challenges posed by the geography of the area covered by the agency and its impact on team-functioning. She has improved the management structure, performance and stability of the team. She has successfully led the team in implementing systems to achieve greater consistency

across the agency. This in turn is leading to more challenge to improve foster carer practice.

Staff receive regular, effective supervision. One staff member said, 'This is the best level of supervision I have had in the four agencies I have worked for. It is regular, thorough with real space for monitoring, training and development. We are looking at how to build in more reflective time, but we do talk a lot between sessions.' The management team is reviewing the supervision format to increase opportunities for reflection. Managers use supervision to develop and improve staff performance. Staff access a wide variety of training relevant to their role. A national review is underway to consider how the organisation can improve staff retention, for example by adopting a career pathway.

Staff and panel members contribute to their appraisals. However, the objectives set do not focus sufficiently on staff development and do not include timescales.

Most carers report that they are well supported, with regular supervision and opportunities to engage in training and development. The out-of-hours support is of good quality, ensuring that foster carers have access to support when needed. Some carers have felt less well supported as a result of the instability in staffing and previous poor communication about agency changes. Leaders and managers are aware of this and have taken appropriate action.

The recruitment and assessment of foster carers is managed by a central team in the national organisation. An assessment manager, linked to the agency, contracts independent social workers to complete assessments. Since the last inspection, there has been a review of the work of assessors and a significant number are no longer used by the agency. However, the quality assurance processes for assessments have not been sufficiently robust in identifying the recent dip in the quality of some assessments. The panel chair meets with agency managers quarterly as a 'critical friend' but there is no formal system for the assessment manager to receive feedback on the quality of assessments from the panel. The registered manager is also the agency decision-maker. This is potentially a conflict of roles as it does not allow for consultation with the registered manager about any issues that arise during assessment.

There is a knowledgeable and experienced panel chair who is well supported by the panel adviser. The central list has increased in diversity and panel members have access to the full range of online training. Their training record is reviewed as part of the appraisal system. Panel members now have secure online access to the assessment information 10 working days before the scheduled panel date. Panel quality and assurance processes are improving. The quality of panel minutes is a known area of weakness and work on improving this is underway.

The registered manager models and encourages openness and transparency. She promotes a learning approach with 'lessons learned' from each significant event. This is underpinned by strong quality assurance and monitoring of the service, which is used to inform the service improvement plan. For example, the audit and analysis of unplanned placement endings has identified areas of weakness, and the manager has plans in place to address these.

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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