

# Foster Care Associates North East

Foster Care Associates Limited  
Ground Floor, Shannon House, Belmont, Durham DH1 1TH  
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Care Associates North East is a fostering service which is part of a national organisation providing a range of family placements for children.

The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children. The agency provides long and short-term foster carers for children who have a range of needs. A management team of four leads a team of nine social workers, two placement officers, a participation worker and an administration team of four. At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing care for 146 children placed in 111 fostering families.

**Inspection dates:** 22 to 29 August 2018

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

How well children and young people are helped and protected **Good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

**Date of last inspection:** 8 February 2016

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- The highly effective management of foster carers' capacity, capability and skills results in a very focused group of foster carers who are impressively committed to the children they foster.
- Very effective assessment, preparation supervision, support, training and review of foster carers means that they provide children with very stable placements that are well matched to meet their needs.
- Outcomes for children are significantly enhanced with children making good progress, which is outstanding in many cases.
- Children have impressive levels of input into their own lives and they are influential in the way that the agency operates. The participation and involvement of children is well embedded, innovative and widespread.
- Innovative practice, based on the implementation of research, enhances children's lives.
- Inspirational leadership has resulted in the establishment of an organisation structure that has enabled significant development and created a culture that focuses on providing excellent outcomes to children.
- Outstandingly effective monitoring and quality assurance of the agency's work ensures the high quality of the service it provides and allows excellent planning for future developments.
- The agency has developed high-quality relationships with other agencies. These relationships have promoted a high level of stakeholder involvement that is increasing and promoting the agency's continued development.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Although the agency takes great care in helping to match children with carers who are well suited to meet their needs, the factors considered when deciding a match are not recorded well enough to evidence the decision made.
- Annual unannounced visits to foster carers usually take place in the two or three weeks preceding their foster carer's review. This means that they are not sufficiently unpredictable to fully support their safeguarding function.
- Supervision of foster carers does not always monitor the completeness and appropriateness of foster carers' recording. This means that, although significant events happening to children are reported and dealt with, they may not always be recorded in the daily records kept by foster carers.

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

### **Recommendations**

- Ensure that the responsible authority has information and support from the fostering service which it needs to facilitate an appropriate match between the carers and the child. Specifically, that the agency's matching forms contain a suitably detailed narrative regarding how the matching criteria are met and how any shortfalls will be addressed. (NMS 15)
- Ensure that foster carers receive at least one unannounced visit per year. Specifically, that visits take place at times and on dates that are unpredictable. (NMS 21.8)
- Ensure that foster carers record children's significant life events. Specifically, that case monitoring and foster carers' supervision monitor carers' records to ensure they record all significant events. (NMS 26.7)

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding**

This agency is impressively well managed and has an outstanding focus on improving children's lives.

The agency is rigorous in the way it recruits, assesses, prepares, and manages its foster carers. They are very well supported and are provided with excellent training that is highly relevant to them and the children who they care for. Assessments are thorough and evidence based. They provide clear analysis of, and recommendations about, the applicants' suitability to foster and the nature and age of children they will be suited for. Preparation training is thorough and comprehensive. It includes input from foster carers, people fostered as children, as well as from professional staff. This helps to give applicants an insight into the impact that fostering will have on their lives.

Support and training for carers before and after their approval is excellent. This ensures that they have the necessary skills and aptitudes to care for children whose needs may be highly complex. The agency works highly effectively with carers about their capacity, capability, motivations and support needs. This work has resulted in a highly focused and dedicated group of foster carers who are committed to providing and maintaining placements for children. Foster carers' reviews are very thorough, and incorporate the views of children, placing social workers, children and other relevant people. This ensures that they provide a robust assessment of carers' continued suitability to foster, their strengths, development and any additional support or training needs. This excellent ongoing supervision, support, training and review of carers means that they provide high levels of stability for children in placements that are well matched to meet their needs.

The agency works hard to place children with foster carers who are suitable for them. Placement workers get to know the foster carers well and bring a consistent approach to making placements based on a clear knowledge of the placements available, foster carers' skills and situations and the needs of children. Matching decisions are formally recorded and made based on good information from the placing authority about the needs of children. Although matching is careful and well-considered, the detail of the matching record is not always good enough. Matching records do not contain sufficient narrative regarding the matching criteria, how well they are met and how any shortfalls will be addressed. This means that the reasons for placement decisions are not always recorded clearly.

The agency's high levels of support and training for its committed foster carers means that children form very good relationships with their foster carers. These relationships result in very high levels of placement stability within the agency. Many children, initially placed on a short-term basis, remain on a long-term basis with the improved outcomes that this stability brings.

The agency's supervising social workers work closely with foster carers and get to know children well. This helps them to deliver high levels of support, advice and

guidance to foster carers and the children placed with them. Work with placing authority social workers is effective, with the agency contributing well to supporting children's plans and advocating strongly on their behalf where there are service shortfalls. This effective joint working and support helps to change children's lives for the better. Children benefit from a significant improvement in their outcomes, well-being and quality of life and make good progress that is outstanding in many cases.

For example, two older children who were at significant risk from going missing when placed have seen the risks about this significantly reduced and are beginning to develop positive relationships with their foster carers. Another child with very complex needs and disabilities is making excellent progress in a very stable long-term placement, which would not have been thought possible prior to placement. Another two children are making excellent progress in a placement that keeps them safe from their extremely risky family situation. In situations where children are not at a point where they are able to accept help, or where changes in their situations mean that they are not making progress, the agency and its carers are tenacious in their work and committed to providing safety and stability as long as it is in the child's best interest.

The agency and its foster carers place a high priority on children's education and promote it well both at school and in a wider sense. Children all have full-time educational placements within a very short time of being fostered and levels of school absence are very low. Foster carers, supported by their supervising social workers, arrange for children to attend the most appropriate school for their fostered children. Children make good progress at school and either attain well or begin to catch up on learning missed previously.

Children's health needs are also promoted well. The agency ensures that children are registered with all primary health services and that any treatment required is provided. The agency supports foster carers to advocate for any specialist services required and works well with placing authorities to help ensure that children receive any support they need. The agency has developed a working relationship with a renowned childhood nutritionist who is bringing expertise and latest research to the organisation to support children's health. This innovative initiative is working to support positive childhood nutrition with its links to child and brain development, and mental health, ADHD and autism, as well more general health and dietary matters. This initiative is still developing and is likely to have a significantly positive ongoing impact on children's health.

The agency's work to help children to have a voice in their own care and in the work of the agency is highly impressive, creative and innovative. Supervising social workers know children well and the agency's participation worker works with other staff to arrange a wide range of events and activities. As well as providing a wide range of leisure activities for children, events also provide opportunities to seek children's views and input on a wide range of matters and helps them develop new skills. The agency runs a 'dare to dream' scheme which allows children to express their ambitions, then attempts to provide them with opportunities to begin to explore these. For example, as part of this scheme, a local university has provided sports taster sessions for fostered children. The agency has a very well-established

children's consultation group that meets regularly to undertake activities. This group helped to design public information for the agency's 'Safe and Happy' initiative, which has developed questions for the agency's panel to put to prospective carers, helped to redesign children's memory boxes and their contents, and developed 'activity passports' for children which track the activities undertaken by children and offer rewards based on these. Feedback from children was considered at the end of the participation worker's probationary period and an ex-fostered young person is a member of the agency's panel central list. The agency operated a 'you said, we did' pledge for children and took action based on the results.

The agency runs a highly successful registered Duke of Edinburgh Awards programme, which is bringing benefits to an increasing number of children. Commendably, these activities and consultation events are open to birth children of foster carers and also the children of agency staff. This demonstrates the agency's commitment to 'its children' and breaks down some of the stigma and barriers faced by children who are 'looked after'. It also means that children who are fostered are empowered to have high levels of control about what happens to them, as well as the way that the agency that provides their care works.

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: good**

The agency works well with placing authorities and foster carers when placements are made to identify any risks faced by children and develop strategies to manage these. Foster carers have their own, household, safe caring plans which they develop during their preparation process, and individualised and detailed plans are developed for each child placed.

As well as mandatory training in matters such as first aid, dealing with challenging behaviour and first aid, foster carers are provided with training that is relevant to their needs and those of the children they foster. For example, training is provided in a range of safeguarding matters including missing children, child sexual exploitation, trafficking, county lines and female genital mutilation. The safety and suitability of foster placements is well monitored by regular visits and very effective foster carer supervision, as well as regular contact with fostered children. Unannounced visits to foster carers take place annually. However, these usually take place in the few weeks leading up to the review of the foster carers concerned. As such, they are not sufficiently unpredictable and so do not fully support their safeguarding function.

The agency places a high priority on keeping children safe and has introduced an ethos known as 'Safe and Happy' which underpins the agency's work. This contains specific principles and guidelines for carers and staff to ensure that the care provided enables children to feel and be safe and to make progress. This work has included a strong focus on reducing the numbers and frequency of children going missing, which are now at levels broadly similar to those of other fostering agencies across the country. This focus has also concentrated on helping equip foster carers to reduce the risk of children going missing and respond should such a situation occur. In doing this work, the agency has worked very effectively with local stakeholders including the three police forces local to it. Contact people within these police forces have been identified and joint work undertaken with them to equip carers with the information that they need when reporting a child missing and who

to contact if they do not get the necessary response. This work has been supported by a child protection expert with many years' police experience engaged by the agency and who also sits on the agency's panel. Foster carers are well equipped and supported by this initiative and its associated training and advice to keep children safe.

The agency works well to protect children who are at risk of, or have been subject to, child sexual exploitation. Placements are made with experienced and well-trained carers within clear multi-agency plans. Very effective case supervision and monitoring ensures that children's safety and progress is closely monitored. This reduces the risk for children and provides them with additional protection.

The agency has highly effective reporting and monitoring processes in place, so any concerns or allegations are identified and referred appropriately. Robust monitoring takes place of critical incidents. This allows managers to identify any matters of concern or patterns and trends, and managers give all these situations close attention and support to ensure that correct action is taken to keep children safe.

The agency responds promptly to any potential child protection concerns and addresses these thoroughly within strong joint working arrangements with local authorities and partner agencies. The agency provides an appropriate challenge to other agencies in cases where it considers that the necessary action has not been taken to safeguard the child concerned. It takes robust action in the event of any allegation or complaint being made in respect of one of its foster carers. This ensures that children's safety is promoted and allows a thorough review of the foster carer's suitability once any investigation is concluded.

Recruitment processes for foster carers, staff and members of the central panel list are robust and thorough. This helps to ensure that people appointed are suitable to work with children.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding**

The leadership and management of the agency are highly effective at both a strategic and operational level. Inspirational leadership from the registered manager and effective work to re-shape and strengthen the agency's management team has created an organisational culture that puts children first and strives to make things better for them. There is an impressive focus on the quality of the service that is supported by highly effective quality assurance and monitoring processes.

Strategically, the agency benefits from a clear sense of direction that is understood by staff and foster carers. Plans to help the agency develop further are well developed and focus on improving the agency's ability to improve children's lives. The agency's development takes latest research and learning into account and is further supported by the agency's own work to bring in experts to advise and develop its work. Commendably, this focus on ongoing development is evident in the staff team and among foster carers. The manager is highly accessible and people across the agency understand the agency's aims, the commitment to quality and the planned developments.

The agency's management systems are very effective. Highly effective administrative

systems support the agency's practice and ensure that work undertaken is complete, thorough and timely, while very effective supervision and monitoring of work undertaken ensures that practice is of a high quality. The agency promotes high levels of stakeholder involvement, seeking their views on a regular basis to inform its own monitoring and planning. Foster carers are well represented in the agency's decision-making. For, example foster carers help plan the agency's main consultation event, are involved in staff recruitment, and provide a support role to panel.

The agency's staff team is skilled, well trained and experienced. The team members are well supervised and supported to fulfil their roles. Strong and supportive management ensures that the team members have caseloads that they can manage effectively and have the skills and training needed to do their jobs well. The staff team works together very effectively and staff demonstrate their commitment to providing high-quality services that put children first.

Effective processes and administrative arrangements support the agency's fostering panel to fulfil its role in a robust manner. The panel benefits from an excellent chair and highly committed panel members. As well as making very clear recommendations to the decision-maker based on its own discussions, it provides an excellent quality assurance function for the agency. In the words of the panel chair, the panel acts as a 'critical friend' to the agency and provides it with clear feedback and advice on appropriate matters. Decision-making arrangements support a consistent approach and allow for very closely considered decisions to be made based on possession of full information.

The agency works hard to maintain high-quality relationships with placing authorities and other agencies. The agency uses these relationships with local authorities to liaise with them and challenge where necessary to ensure that children receive the correct help and support services.

Recording in the agency is very good. Records contain full information about children and, where information from a placing authority is lacking, the agency works hard to gain access to this. Case files are clear and record the difference that the agency is making in children's lives and the progress that they are making. This not only allows the outcomes being achieved for children to be monitored effectively, but also helps to provide children's social workers with detailed information about the progress of the young people that they are responsible for. Foster carers generally maintain good records of the day-to-day care that they provide for children and the agency is effective in working to support this through supervision and training. However, supervision of foster carers does not always monitor the completeness and appropriateness of foster carers' recording. For example, in one file it was noted that, although two significant events were reported, discussed in supervision and recorded centrally by the agency with appropriate action being taken, the foster carer's recording did not contain reference to these events. In this case, the omission in the carer's recording was not identified and addressed in the carer's next supervision session. This means that, although significant events happening to children are reported and dealt with, they may not always be recorded in the daily records kept by foster carers.

Monitoring and quality assurance systems in the agency are impressively thorough. These mean that managers are always fully informed about, and in control of, the



agency's practice. Management systems are in place that allow access to performance data about all areas of the agency work. This is used to improve the agency's practice. Commendably, data systems and the analysis that arises from these cover both quantitative and qualitative matters. This data can be aggregated for reporting and compliance purposes, but can also be broken down to a case by case level to ensure that case work is as good as it should be. Detailed monitoring reports are provided to the organisation's senior managers on a regular basis, who give close scrutiny to these reports and follow up on matters identified. These reports also service to underpin the agency's comprehensive development plan, which is company detailed and evidence based.

## **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:** SC037579

**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:** Neil Morris

**Telephone number:** 0191 2173640

**Email address:** neil.morris@thefca.co.uk

## **Inspector(s)**

Stephen Smith, social care inspector  
Ian Young, 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](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
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