

Foster Care Associates Eastern

Foster Care Associates Limited

Office 17, Runwell Hall Farm, Hoe Lane, Rettendon Common, Chelmsford CM3 8DQ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Care Associates (FCA) is an independent fostering agency. It is a national organisation and has been operating since 1994. FCA Eastern Region consists of a regional office in Essex. FCA Eastern Region offers a range of placements, including emergency, short-term, long-term, bridging, parent and child and respite placements. Therapists, education and support-services staff provide a range of support to these placements. This includes activities, direct work with children and additional help for foster carers. At the time of this inspection, FCA Eastern Region was supporting 148 carers in 86 approved foster carer households that were looking after a total of 106 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 March 2019

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	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: 16 November 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children develop long-term, supportive and meaningful relationships with their foster carers.
- The children consistently spoke very positively about their carers and feel valued as members of the family.
- The children flourish in stable and nurturing homes. The children feel safe and loved. They know that their carers want the best for them and will support them through difficult situations.
- The children make good progress because of the help and support that they receive.
- Most carers feel well supported, respected and valued.
- The agency works well in partnership with the children, parents and other agencies to promote positive outcomes for the children.
- The agency employs enthusiastic and committed staff. Agency staff are highly child focused and readily available to the children and carers alike.
- The service is well managed and led.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Foster carers do not always understand the detail of delegated authority and the decisions that they are able to make on behalf of the child's placing local authority.
- Written records do not consistently robustly demonstrate the rationale for children being placed with other children, whether they are fostered or not. Neither does the matching documentation evidence a consistently robust approach to identifying and addressing gaps in the carers' skills and knowledge to meet the child's needs.
- The pre-panel quality assurance processes are not consistently effective. As a result, cases are, on occasion, presented to panel without robust evaluation of parenting capacity, or before it is appropriate to do so.
- Not all foster carers undertake training that helps to develop their awareness of the wider safeguarding agenda and to meet the specific needs of the children for whom they care or are expected to care.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that foster carers understand what is in the child's placement plan and have clarity about decisions that they can make about the day-to-day arrangements for the child. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 7.3)

In particular, ensure that carers understand the detail of the delegated authority agreed by the placing local authority.

- Ensure that children are carefully matched to a foster placement. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 11.2)

In particular, ensure that written records robustly demonstrate the rationale for placing non-related children together in the same household. Furthermore, when children have particular needs, identify how the carer's skills and knowledge will help them to meet these needs and what further support is needed to ensure that the child's needs are met.

- 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. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 14.3)

In particular, ensure that all information presented to panel is subject to a quality assurance process to enable the panel to fulfil its role effectively.

- Support and training are 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. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.8)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The children live in stable, secure and caring environments in which they receive individualised care and support. The children develop close relationships with their carers and feel part of the fostering family. A child's social worker said, 'The carers are very committed to him, and he is very attuned to them.' A child said, 'I love my foster carers. They are like family to me. They don't judge me. They love me and they accept me. They have opened their home and heart.' Another child said of their foster carer, 'She has supported me from the moment that I walked into her house.'

The majority of children are making good progress from their particular starting points because of the support from and encouraging attitude of their foster carers. Some children have progressed to further their studies at university or represent their local area at sports events. The children receive good support to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The carers and agency staff have high aspirations for children and encourage them to strive to achieve. A virtual headteacher said, 'The agency has seen a lot of success. There is solid commitment on the ground.' A member of school staff said, 'They are brilliant carers.'

Foster carers show empathy for and understanding of the children's experiences and situation. The carers spoke warmly and proudly of their foster child's achievements. The children respond positively to the encouraging attitude of their foster carers. A carer said, 'Each of the children that has come to us, we have learned something from. We hope that they have learned something from us.' The agency celebrates every child's individual achievements at the annual awards evenings.

New carers are welcomed, prepared and assessed effectively. Carers work positively in partnership with other professionals to promote the children's well-being. Placing authorities consistently hold the carers and agency in high regard.

There is no evidence to suggest that children have been placed at risk that has led to placement breakdown. However, it is not always clear how matching decisions have been reached. There is limited review of parenting capacity and what these arrangements may mean for the fostering household, including any birth children, as well as the child placed. Documentation does not always consider the impact of the needs of potential children being matched on existing children in the household. Clear consideration is not always given to whether the children in the fostering family may be protective or negative factors in the success of a placement. When disabled children or those who have complex needs are placed, there is a lack of consistently clear information that identifies gaps in carer's skills and knowledge, and how these gaps will be bridged. Therefore, there is potential for opportunities to provide valuable support strategies to be missed in the matching process.

The agency is supporting several older children to move into adulthood. Many of these young people choose to stay with their carers post 18. The young people continue to access suitable further education or employment, with the stable support

of their carers, while preparing for independent living. This helps to ensure a smoother transition into adult life. However, carers are not provided with appropriate training to fully support and guide the young people through this transition effectively.

Foster carers understand their child's placement plan and know which decisions they can make about the day-to-day arrangements for the child. However, on occasion, decisions made by carers have not been in accordance with the agreed delegated authority arrangements. For example, a carer agreed to a child's overnight stays with friends without the appropriate permission from the child's parent, contrary to the written delegated authority.

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

The children feel safe, secure and protected. They have good relationships with their foster family and feel able to talk to them about any worries. This enables carers to understand and manage risks effectively. As a result, risk-taking behaviour reduces for most children.

Carers have clear guidance on managing behaviour. Physical intervention is rare. When physical intervention is used, the agency social workers explore the reasons for it and whether any additional support is needed for the child or carers.

Safeguarding matters and quality of care concerns are managed effectively in partnership with other agencies, ensuring that the child's needs remain paramount. The carers follow the agency guidance when children go missing. Agency staff monitor the records of all significant events. There is a clear focus on ensuring that the children are safe and their welfare is promoted. A child said, 'I know that if I called [the fostering agency social worker] she would drop everything and come and get me.'

The positive relationships that the children have with their carers and agency social workers mean that opportunities to identify potential exploitation quickly are open to those carers who have enough knowledge to identify the warning signs. However, it is not clear whether all carers have enough knowledge to be alert to such issues. The agency has around 150 carers, but only 55 have undertaken training in understanding child sexual exploitation and only 43 carers have undertaken training in understanding radicalisation. This is particularly relevant, as the manager's own monitoring highlights that placement breakdown themes have included child exploitation. Carers who are caring for disabled children, or children whose behaviours include self-harm, do not always receive training in these areas.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The service is well led by the suitably qualified and experienced registered manager. There have been significant changes to the staffing and management of the service over the past two years. The manager has led the staff and carers effectively through this period of change. The manager and fostering agency staff have worked hard to limit the effect of these changes on carers and children. As a result, most

carers said that they continue to feel well supported by the agency. A carer who has been through a very difficult time said, 'The support from the agency was phenomenal. I was really, really lucky that I had people who fought for me.'

The staff said that they have been well supported by the manager and senior staff through this busy and challenging time. The staff, who feel valued by the manager, contribute to the development of the agency. The staff are keen to bring new ideas into the service and develop existing services further, such as children's participation and an education lead role. The staff know each of the carers and the children placed. A child said, 'The agency has been really great to me over the last seven years. It employs genuinely nice people.' A parent in a parent-and-child placement said, 'The actual agency staff themselves have done so much to help me. I can see that the team want me to succeed.'

Carers are well supported through regular, focused supervision from the agency social workers. A carer said, 'The agency support is absolutely amazing. Nothing is too much trouble. I don't feel that I am doing this alone.' The good-quality agency support means that the carers understand their role and that the agency gains a realistic view of the day-to-day parenting of each child. The agency is therefore able to understand the progress of each child and consider any appropriate support strategies in a timely manner.

There is a good variety of training available to carers. However, the manager has not ensured that all carers, including those who are hard to reach, have undertaken training in the wider areas of safeguarding. There is also a lack of individually targeted training to help carers to meet the specific needs of the children they are caring for, such as children who are considered at risk of self-harm, have autism spectrum disorders or epilepsy. Carers who have not had the specific training that they need may not be able to fully meet the needs of the child.

There are good partnership working arrangements. Agency staff challenge placing local authority professionals when their responses are not effective. The children, carers and placing authorities said that staff often go above and beyond, sometimes filling the gaps left by other professionals.

Panel discussions are challenging and are enhanced by membership drawn from a variety of life experience and professional backgrounds. As a result, the panel operates effectively as a gatekeeping process to ensure that only suitable prospective foster carers are recommended for approval. However, on occasion, poor quality assurance of information provided to panel means that the panel does not receive suitable information to make an informed recommendation. On one occasion, particular aspects of parenting capacity had not been fully explored. On another occasion, carers were returned to panel for an increase in the number of children they were approved for. The approval was reliant on an extra bedroom being built. This bedroom had not been built when the change to approval was submitted to panel for consideration.

The manager and staff have high expectations that carers will provide good-quality care and high aspirations for what the children can achieve. The manager has a

good understanding of the strengths of the agency and areas for further development. She has worked effectively with the staff team to ensure that the requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection have been met. As a result, the fostering service has improved. The manager monitors the fostering agency effectively, ensuring that the agency meets its aims and objectives, and that the children's individual needs are consistently prioritised.

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: SC061317

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