

Foster Care Associates Thames Valley

HF 5–6 Honours Building, 70–80 Akeman Street, Tring, Hertfordshire HP23 6AF

Monitoring visit

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Care Associates (FCA) Thames Valley is a regional branch of a large, privately owned independent fostering agency FCA. The agency provides emergency, short-term, long-term and parent-and-child placements for children of all ages.

The manager became registered with Ofsted on 1 April 2019.

Inspection date: 17 November 2020

Date of previous inspection: 8 May 2018

This monitoring visit

This inspection was undertaken in response to concerns being identified by Ofsted regarding the welfare and safety of children at another of the provider's services. The purpose of this inspection was to establish whether the failings identified at the other service were potentially systemic, leading to the safety and well-being of children placed by this agency being compromised.

The inspection was conducted remotely because of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. The inspector reviewed documentary evidence submitted by the registered manager and responsible individual. In addition, telephone interviews were conducted with the registered manager, the responsible individual and two members of staff. Two foster carers were also spoken to during the inspection process.

A new responsible individual was appointed by the organisation on 9 October 2020. The responsible individual quickly established an effective process for determining whether the circumstances contributing to poor practice at the other service were present at this service. An initial 'service position report' was completed by the registered manager and evaluated by the responsible individual. This was followed up by on-site monitoring activity conducted by senior staff and an independent person.

These review processes established that children were not likely to come to harm. Some areas for development were identified as a result of thorough monitoring activity. Development plans have been implemented to address those areas of practice needing improvement.

In response to the concerns identified at another of the organisation's services, relevant policies and procedures have been reviewed and updated. These provide greater clarity and guidance for staff regarding their responsibilities to maintain high standards of practice, particularly in relation to the care of young babies. The new guidance has been shared with staff and foster carers. Measures have been put in place to ensure that these are understood and so become embedded in practice. The staff and foster carers spoken to during this inspection demonstrated enthusiasm and commitment to developing their knowledge and skills in relation to some aspects of childcare.

The agency's quality of care monitoring systems are fit for purpose and effective tools for identifying areas where the service can develop. In recent months, monitoring activity has identified relatively high numbers of unplanned foster placement endings. Consequently, work was undertaken to reduce these and this has had a positive impact. This demonstrates how monitoring activity has resulted in better outcomes for some children.

Serious incidents and safeguarding concerns are monitored and a weekly report is produced. This enables the registered manager to maintain good oversight of how children are being supported to keep safe. Since the concerns were identified at the other service, the responsible individual has explored ways of increasing monitoring activity. Plans are being developed that will increase senior management scrutiny of the service.

In a small number of cases, organisational action plan targets have not been met in a timely way or are not on course to be met within timescales. This may be due to there being more than one action plan, resulting from the recently increased level of monitoring activity.

Work has been undertaken to improve safe care plans, particularly in relation to the placement of parents with children and babies. These are now child-specific and have a strong focus on the individual needs of the child or baby. A similar improvement has been made to household safe care plans. However, the degree of improvement across all children and young people's safe care plans is variable.

In one plan seen by the inspector, the risk of sexual exploitation had been carefully analysed and agreed multi-agency strategies for reducing risk had been clearly recorded. In this case, the young person had taken part in developing the plan and associated risk assessments. In another safe care plan reviewed during the inspection, no strategies were evident for how a child would be protected from bullying by school peers. The same child's missing-from-care risk assessment had

not been updated following a placement move. The 'voice of the child' section of the risk assessment had not been completed. A requirement and recommendation have been made to address the shortfalls in this area of practice.

The registered manager currently manages this service and one other fostering agency within the organisation. However, the recruitment of a manager specifically for this service is at an advanced stage. During her time at this service, the registered manager has worked to embed effective policies and procedures and create a learning culture. This is indicative of a manager seeking continuous improvement to the service being provided to vulnerable children.

In recent months, senior managers have provided more effective support to the registered manager. This has included the frequency and quality of practice-based supervision. In addition, the responsible individual has taken a proactive approach to embedding a strong safeguarding culture across the organisation.

Partnership working with other agencies is promoted and this has often resulted in more effective care planning for children. Where other professionals are perceived not to have acted quickly to promote a child's best interests, effective representation is made on their behalf. Staff, and the majority of foster carers, feel well supported. This is partly attributable to the provision of good training, often focused on the specific needs of the child.

This was a focused monitoring inspection. One new requirement and two new recommendations have been made in respect of areas of practice reviewed during the process. As not all aspects of practice were examined, the requirements and recommendations made at the last full inspection are also repeated in this report with the requirement due dates extended.

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>A person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person—</p> <p>is of integrity and good character,</p> <p>has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work they are to perform,</p> <p>is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform,</p> <p>and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1.</p> <p>(Regulation 20 (3)(a)(b)(c))</p>	28 December 2020
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them—</p> <p>receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal.</p> <p>(Regulation 21 (4)(a))</p>	28 December 2020
<p>Ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times.</p> <p>(Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that safe 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>	28 December 2020

Recommendations

- Children communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. (NMS 1.3) Specifically, that staff ensure that they seek the views of young children and those with impaired communication.
- Each foster carer is aware of all the necessary information available to the fostering service about a child's circumstances, including any significant recent events, to help the foster carer understand and predict the child's needs and behaviours and support the child within their household. The fostering service follows up with the responsible authority where all such necessary information has not been provided by the authority. (NMS 3.9)
- The service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. (NMS 4.5)
- Foster carers receive guidance and training to provide appropriate care if looking after children with complex health needs. (NMS 6.8)
- Children are carefully matched to a foster placement. Foster carers have full information about the child (as set out in standard 3.9). (NMS 11.2)
- The fostering service supports their foster carers to ensure that they provide foster children with care that reasonably meets those children's needs, takes the children's wishes and feelings into account, actively promotes individual care and supports the children's safety, health, enjoyment, education and preparation for the future. (NMS 21.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. (NMS 1.7) Specifically, ensure that where children's plans require the voice of the child to be recorded, these sections are completed and not left blank.
- The registered person takes action to address any issues of concern that they identify or which are raised with them. (NMS 25.8) Specifically, ensure that target dates for actions specified in monitoring reports are met or extended when it is appropriate to do so.

Information about this inspection

The purpose of this visit was to monitor the action taken and the progress made by the independent fostering agency since its last Ofsted inspection.

This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC047677

Registered provider: Foster Care Associates Limited

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

Responsible individual: John Platt

Inspector

Stephen Collett, social care inspector

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