

Foster Care Associates Midlands

Foster Care Associates Limited

FCA Midlands, Senate House, 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, including emergency, respite, bridging, step-down from residential, long- and short-term, parent and child, and unaccompanied children placements, and placements for young adults 'staying put'.

At the time of the inspection, there were 181 children living in 126 fostering households.

The registered manager is appropriately qualified and experienced.

Inspection dates: 2 to 6 October 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	outstanding
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	outstanding
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	outstanding
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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: 14 October 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Warm, welcoming and knowledgeable managers and staff respond well to people who are considering fostering. For example, a specific manager undertakes all 'hello and welcome' visits. This ensures there is consistent practice and a clear management overview of all applicants from the start of the process. This approach puts potential foster parents at ease and helps them to feel that they are part of a well-established family-focused agency.

Managers and staff recruit, assess, prepare and train foster parents effectively. This means that carers are well equipped to parent children and to provide children with stable and nurturing homes. Assessments are timely and the preparation of foster parents is comprehensive. The assessment, pre-approval training and preparation processes help applicants to understand the challenges that they may face and the strategies and support available to them. A foster parent described preparation training as 'informative and inspirational'.

Managers and staff have developed a systemic, theoretical and proactive approach to fostering. The support provided to foster parents and children is available through a wide range of initiatives and interventions that overlap seamlessly in practice. For example, 'Language that cares' is an initiative that ensures managers, staff and foster parents think about how they talk to children and record information about them. An impressive example of this is when the children move on from their foster families. Everyone from the agency involved in the child's life writes a testimony to the child celebrating their strengths and their positive experiences. These testimonies are presented in booklets that are adapted to be child-specific, for example for babies or in large print for a child who is partially sighted. This remains part of the child's record, so that whatever the reason for moving on, the child's history is well presented, in a kind and thoughtful way, should they want to access it as an adult.

An ethos of and commitment to promoting equality, diversity, inclusion and participation, including responding to children's and foster parents' voices, runs throughout practice. Children and foster parents say the focus on these areas is excellent. Youth council members described how a film made by two brothers and their foster carers resulted in the agency winning the bid to host the annual 'Big Sing-Off' contest this year. The choir representing the agency is made up of staff, foster carers and birth and foster children. This year's theme, 'Around the world - celebrating culture and diversity', is an example of how the agency seeks to promote equality. One foster family and their children described how they have supported the choir in putting sign language to their entry. This is an excellent example, one of many, where the values and ethos of the agency have been harnessed towards one aim.

Education, therapeutic services and support are provided to staff, foster parents and the children to ensure wraparound care. For example, staff provide educational support to those children who are excluded or waiting for a school placement. Based on their own experiences, one child and her foster parents have been integral to the development of a booklet to support other foster parents and their children with the move to secondary school. The therapeutic offer ranges from monthly drop-in sessions, 'Attune' sessions for new foster parents to develop their understanding of attachment, online support groups, individual consultations and virtual open conversations on a range of subject areas.

The children build trusted and secure relationships with their foster families. As a result, they make significant progress and flourish. They develop a strong sense of identity and experience a wide range of positive personal achievements. This is because of the nurturing care that they receive from their foster families and the agency staff, who promote a wider family feel and community. As a result, the children experience enjoyable childhoods and benefit from excellent parenting. They have a wide range of opportunities to develop their self-esteem and emotional resilience. They feel respected, heard, valued and celebrated.

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

Leaders and managers provide a range of safe, secure and enduring foster placements. These successfully meet the assessed needs of the children. An initiative called 'Safe and happy', a pledge to build a service that is centred on children feeling safe and happy while in care, is embedded in practice and promotes and safeguards children's, foster parents' and staff's welfare. The pledge to build an environment where children's safety and happiness is central underpins all safeguarding training delivered to staff and foster parents.

The children feel safe living with their foster parents and say they have positive relationships with their foster families and supporting staff. Foster parents and staff have an exceptional knowledge of the potential risks to the children and follow established procedures to keep them safe.

Risk assessments relating to the children are thorough and regularly reviewed. They are individualised and provide clear guidance to foster parents. This reduces risk to the children and promotes age-appropriate independence. As a result, the number of incidents is low, although when incidents do occur, they can be complex.

The registered manager and staff team's response to significant or complex risks, incidents and safeguarding concerns involving the children and foster parents is robust and effective. There is close partnership working with external agencies. Established systems allow managers to effectively track safeguarding referrals and the actions taken in response to serious concerns. There are systems in place that support the safety and rights of the children and foster parents.

Foster parents are supported following allegations about practice and during investigations. As a result of collaborative working, resilient foster parents and the children are supported to maintain and rebuild relationships where appropriate.

The registered manager appropriately uses auditing and reviewing procedures following safeguarding concerns being raised. Post-allegation reviews are detailed, are taken to panel and the agency decision-maker and are shared with local authority designated officers.

Foster parents are skilled at supporting children who are at risk of exploitation and children who go missing from care or who self-harm. The registered manager and staff team take appropriate and effective steps to help foster parents keep the children safe.

The registered manager and staff are proactive in holding stability meetings and provide a wide range of interventions to support foster parents and children. Managers proactively monitor unplanned endings and hold lessons-learned meetings after any breakdown. Placement breakdowns have significantly reduced since the introduction of a new matching tool. Patterns and trends are monitored by the registered manager and learning from reviews is fed back into practice.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The breadth and effectiveness of the agency's work are directly attributable to the quality of leadership and management of the service and the highly committed staff team.

Leaders and managers are innovative and inspirational. Effective monitoring means that there is a constant focus on the development of the service, staff well-being, support to foster families and quality of care and outcomes for the children.

The registered manager has a clear vision for excellence. She leads by example, sharing information with her staff team, who share the same aspirations for the children and their foster families.

Managers value the staff team. They are committed to ensuring there is good staff retention, thus ensuring consistency for the children and foster parents. This is evident in the staff welfare commitment strategy developed by managers in collaboration with the staff team. Staff consistently said they were valued/well cared for, with one saying they felt 'safe and held' by managers.

The staff's passion and commitment to their practice is used to inform and develop the service. Managers and staff have undertaken two focused pieces of research. These have resulted in changes to practices and systems. One has informed the matching process. As a result, the development and introduction of a new matching tool has meant a significant reduction in placement breakdowns and unplanned endings for those children placed using the tool.

The second piece of research has informed the support that staff provide to children turning 17 and moving on post-18. Changes have included 'staying put' training for all foster parents when a child in their care turns 17, focused work by the participation team with all children turning 17 and a support group and online group for all 17-year-olds and young adults post-18, wherever they are living. The registered manager has prioritised funding from the agency's budget to provide money for each young person's travel to meetings and a meal. Funds are also available for each child to have membership of a specialist service that provides counselling services, legal and financial advice, and general advice and information. The aim of this initiative is to support the children to stay safe and be emotionally resilient at 17 and beyond.

The highly skilled and longstanding staff team has significant experience in fostering and as a result provides exceptional individualised support for foster carers. Staff are passionate about their work and committed to providing the best outcomes to foster carers and children. Staff receive a comprehensive induction and have access to specialised training that supports continued professional development. There is a culture of high expectation and commitment to children. This ethos is supported by managers who provide staff with strong supervision and guidance. This helps the staff to reflect on their practice and focus on helping the children to thrive and achieve stability in their foster families.

The agency is a learning organisation, providing high-quality and effective training to equip foster parents, staff and panel members with the knowledge and skills to meet the children's complex needs and to provide the support to enable them to excel. Training is research-based and linked to emerging national themes. For example, training continues to be rolled out on cross-cultural placements and on adultification after the recent Child Q inquiry.

Panel members are suitably skilled and knowledgeable, from their personal and professional experience of fostering. Panel provides a robust quality assurance function, while being sensitive to applicants. Panel members provide feedback to managers on a regular basis on the quality of reports and presentations by social workers. This enables managers and staff to address any shortfalls swiftly. Managers keep panel members informed of developments in the agency through agency decision-making, training and a monthly newsletter. This helps to ensure that panel members keep up to date with changes in practice and can contribute to development.

There are positive working relationships with local authorities and partner agencies. Universities and specialist agencies have been consulted and are actively involved in the research initiatives. The staff team advocates well on behalf of the children. For example, two children are about to travel to India to explore their cultural backgrounds and heritage after staff supported them in challenging the decision by their schools and the local authority that they should not go. Feedback from professionals, including commissioning teams, is consistently complimentary about the agency.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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

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Inspectors

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