

Foster Care Associates Eastern

Foster Care Associates Limited

Unit 4, Blue Barns Business Park, Old Ipswich Road, Ardleigh, Colchester CO7 7FX

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Care Associates (FCA) is a national organisation. FCA Eastern has a regional office in Essex. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 90 foster carers in 50 households. The agency provides care and support for 73 children unable to live with their birth family. This agency provides emergency, short-term, permanent and some parent and child homes.

The registered manager has been in post since September 2022.

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 December 2025

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

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

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: 22 August 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The skilled foster parents are highly committed to meeting children's individual needs. They provide excellent care and ensure children are fully embedded as valued members of the family. Consequently, children feel safe, secure and nurtured. Foster parents have high aspirations for children and want what is best for them. They build children's confidence and self-belief and encourage them to pursue their interests and talents.

The strong bonds built ensure that the children become core members of the family. Children develop a strong sense of stability, love and belonging. Foster parents speak warmly about children with love and care. They consistently provide children with experiences that enhance their lives. Living with their foster parents has, in most cases, given children much better life outcomes and, in some cases, has been life changing. For example, one child is now able to walk due to the help and support of their foster parents.

Careful and considered matching of children with their foster families and well-planned moves into the family home help ensure that all children in the house settle well. Children develop sibling-type relationships with their foster brothers and sisters and look out for each other. The careful matching means that there are very low levels of children having to move on from the fostering household due to unplanned endings. Consequently, children experience high levels of stability in their foster family whatever challenges they face.

Foster families build strong, genuine, loving and caring relationships with children. They ensure that children receive all the help and support they need to maintain optimum health and succeed in education. The education lead ensures that children's educational experiences are well understood. She works collaboratively with virtual schools and local authorities to ensure that provisions continue to meet children's individual needs. One child said, 'I really value the support I've had that's helped me to think about my own goals.'

Many children have lived with their foster families for a long time, some for many years, and refer to their foster parents in terms such as 'Nanny and Grandpa'. When children turn 18, there is a natural and organic progression for many to remain with their foster parents under 'staying put' and shared lives arrangements. One child said, 'I am happy that I will be living with them [their foster parents] until I am an adult.'

Foster parents understand their roles and the importance of identity and continued family contact. They encourage and support children to build and maintain relationships with their parents, brothers and sisters when it is safe for this to happen. The needs of children, foster parents and adoptive parents are carefully considered when children move on to adoption. As a result, some foster parents

continue to maintain relationships with the children as they grow up in their adoptive families. This understanding of the importance of the child's journey is likely to help children's sense of identity and personal history as they grow.

The agency thoroughly assesses prospective foster parents and members of their household to ensure suitability. Prospective foster parents are well prepared for fostering. Support carers have suitability checks completed and have access to core training relevant to their role. The agency provides good-quality preparation training, which fostering applicants value.

The support of the therapeutic practitioner helps staff and foster parents start to understand and implement trauma-informed parenting. The bespoke support by the agency social worker and the therapeutic practitioner helps foster parents consider and manage challenges. The wraparound support from the agency helps ensure that children get the help they need from professionals outside the agency as well as within.

Foster parents who provide parent and child arrangements are well trained and supported. They meet the parents' needs with a non-judgemental approach. They role model positive parenting while keeping the focus on the safety and wellbeing of the child. One parent described their host foster family as 'kind' and the support they received as 'brilliant'.

Foster children value the variety of events and trips provided. One child said, 'We have had some lovely days out with the agency where we do lots of fun things, like wall climbing and holding reptiles, I have held a snake, that felt very weird, but it was great fun.' Children make positive connections and look forward to seeing friends again at future events. Foster parents ensure that the children have active lives and opportunities to build positive memories. Children enjoyed family holidays, charity fun days, Halloween events, award ceremonies, and being taken to watch their favourite football teams play. Children also said that they have enjoyed lots of trips to places such as the theatre, the aquarium, ninja warrior and trampoline parks.

Thoughtfulness about the needs of children who foster is threaded through the agency. Conversations are had with children at the point of assessment and remain ongoing through their fostering life. Children who foster can access all the same fun days and most activities and support systems that are in place for foster children. This approach ensures they feel valued.

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

All of the children spoken to during the inspection said that they feel safe, secure and loved by their foster parents. Children can talk to their foster parents about things that worry them. They feel confident that they will be helped to overcome any challenges and that their foster parents will always 'fight their corner'. Children know

the fostering agency social workers and identify them as trusted adults that they can talk to.

Risks to children are identified, understood and managed well by agency staff and foster parents. Agency staff work in extremely close partnership with the children and their foster parents to reduce risks to children. The agency staff ensure that risks are well understood at the point that children move in. These risks are kept under constant review and mitigated as much as possible. When children have moved in with vulnerabilities such as going missing from home, potential exploitation or self-harming behaviours, these behaviours have significantly reduced.

The agency social workers and therapeutic practitioner help foster parents create homes in which children feel safe. Foster parents value the roles of the therapeutic practitioner and agency social workers. They benefit from monthly therapeutic reflective support group meetings that help them deliver therapeutically informed parenting.

Agency social workers are quick to respond to any issues and provide bespoke enhanced support when needed. This enhanced support is highly responsive to help families through these difficult times and promotes placement stability. Foster parents describe 'exceptional support' including practical support at times of need, including out-of-hours support. One foster parent said, 'I feel like my supervising social worker is in my corner no matter what and I trust her completely.'

Agency social workers undertake creative work with foster parents and birth parents who are caring for their children within the fostering family. For example, agency staff developed a bespoke support plan in partnership with a parent when staff were concerned that the parent did not understand the expectations of them, their rights and the support they could and should access. This helped the parent to understand how to take the necessary next steps in accessing much-needed information and support. The placing social worker described the support for this parent as 'brilliant'.

Agency staff work closely with other professionals to ensure that children receive the help and support they need to keep safe. They are quick to escalate issues when there are concerns. Senior leaders challenge safeguarding partners when clear and decisive action to protect children is not taken swiftly.

Any concerns regarding the care and support provided to children are shared with relevant partner agencies and robustly investigated. The agency presents any standards of care investigations to panel. The good use of panel provides additional transparent scrutiny. The agency decision-maker shows professional curiosity and follows up any potential lines of enquiry to ensure that their decision-making about foster parents' suitability is well informed, balanced and fair. Any appeals to the independent review mechanism have not been upheld because of this thorough approach. Foster parents who are subject to an investigation and complaint have continued support from their fostering social worker and access to support systems such as 'foster talk'. Foster parents spoken to who have experienced investigation said they felt safe and cared for by the agency during this difficult time.

Senior leaders maintain a comprehensive approach to monitoring and managing risk as part of the newly implemented 'safe and happy framework'. The manager thoroughly reviews all events. Weekly safeguarding meetings take place, at which the manager and staff review incidents and those children who are at risk. These matters are pulled through to monthly senior leader reports. Incidents are further reviewed or sampled by senior leaders in the wider company.

There is a strong commitment to developing professional curiosity with foster parents and staff. Agency staff and foster parents understand their core safeguarding roles and responsibilities. They receive a variety of good-quality training that is regularly updated. However, not all foster parents have received training in identifying and responding to extremism.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The registered manager joined shortly after the last inspection. In partnership with other senior leaders, she has worked hard to drive improvement in the agency and developed reflective practice, for example, she has completed a review of all placements when they end, whether planned or unplanned, to identify successes and lessons learned. The drive for child-centred recording and language means that records are now much more child friendly and accessible should children wish to read them.

The manager, staff and senior leaders model consistent aspirations for children. The manager has brought with them a focus on therapeutic approaches to supporting staff, foster parents and children. While there are further plans for embedding this approach, it has begun to permeate through all aspects of the agency. The therapeutic practitioner provides highly valued support to foster parents. Some foster parents said this had helped them rethink their approach to supporting both their foster child and other children. Foster parents, including those who have been subject to investigation, said they feel incredibly well supported. One said, 'We can't praise our supervising social worker enough, she is a lifeline. They are all really good.'

The staff and foster parents say they are proud to work for the agency. Equality, diversity and inclusion are embedded in agency practice. Staff describe the agency as an inclusive employer. Foster parents and staff describe the manager in terms such as 'approachable', 'supportive' and 'non-judgemental' within a clear framework of expectations.

Panel and agency decision-making processes are effective and serve to ensure that only suitable people who are likely to offer loving homes to children are approved to be foster parents with this agency.

Senior leaders maintain a comprehensive approach to monitoring the fostering service. All requirements and recommendations set at the last inspection have been met. The manager has successfully led the agency through a period of change and

some challenge. She has maintained clear focus on what matters most for the children and foster parents. As a result, one staff returned to the agency. Foster parents describe the agency as retaining its 'family feel' despite these changes.

The meticulous management oversight and excellent levels of support mean that adults and children in fostering families are well matched and helped to overcome and stay together whatever challenges they face. As a result, most children experience high levels of stability and grow up in their foster family. One foster parent said, 'The whole company really care about the children and in the end, it is always about the children.'

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

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that preventing, identifying and responding to radicalisation training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.8)

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: SC061317

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