

Foster Care Associates North East

Foster Care Associates Limited

Evolve Centre, Cygnet Way, Houghton Le Spring DH4 5QY

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Care Associates North East is an independent fostering service, which is part of a national organisation. The agency assesses and supports foster parents to provide a range of placements for children. The agency provides placements on an emergency, long-term and short-term basis, including parent and child placements.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had 99 fostering households and 147 children and young people placed with its families. 14 young people are accommodated under 'staying put' arrangements. These are arrangements that enable children over the age of 18 to remain living with their foster parents.

Seven children were spoken with during the inspection.

Inspectors were aware during this inspection that a serious incident that occurred has been fully investigated by the police and has been reviewed independently in a multi-agency setting. While Ofsted does not have the power to investigate incidents of this kind, actions taken by the agency in response to the incident were considered alongside other evidence available at the time of the inspection to inform the inspector's judgements.

There is no registered manager. A new manager has been appointed and has applied to register with Ofsted.

Inspection dates: 17 to 21 February 2025

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

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: 4 July 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

Children make exceptional progress while living with their fostering families due to the agency matching the unique needs of the children to their foster parents exceptionally well before the children are placed.

A significant number of children are wholly embraced into their fostering family and experience long-term and permanent placements. In addition, children can stay with their foster parents as long as they need to, and 'staying put' arrangements are considered and planned in a timely way. Consequently, children settle, build trusted and secure relationships with their foster families and feel loved and cared for. Comments from children about their foster carers include:

- 'Life is amazing right now because I feel loved.'
- 'I like [foster parents] and living here because it is warm, and we play on the bikes.'
- 'When I moved into care, yes, it was devastating. I always felt sad and angry. I moved to live with [foster parents]. Now I love life.'

Equally, foster parents speak very proudly of the children in their care and are proactive in celebrating children's achievements. One foster parent recalled with fondness how the children they care for received bicycles for Christmas and how they learned to ride their bicycles within 30 minutes. The foster parent said, 'It is a privilege to look after the children and help them to reach their potential.' Another foster parent said that the child in their care 'is part of the family'.

The agency fully understands the enduring nature of sibling relationships and is strongly committed to making sure that children live with their brothers and sisters where possible and are safe to do so. As a result, a high number of brothers and sisters live together.

Children are warmly greeted when they move in with their fostering families. They are provided with bespoke memory boxes, full of essential information and practical items, which assist their transition into their new home. When children move on from their fostering families, they are provided with a personalised letter with beautiful comments from the foster parents which celebrate the child's time living with them and the child's achievements. This helps children to feel valued and supported at every stage of their journey.

Children are provided with care that celebrates and supports their individual needs arising out of their cultural heritage, complex health needs and disability. When a child lives with foster parent[s] from a different culture, a Cross Cultural and Supporting Children and Young People's Cultural Needs Assessment is completed to ensure that the child's cultural and linguistic needs are being met. For children with

complex health needs and disabilities, the agency supports foster parents to attend relevant training and health appointments. In the case of one foster family, the foster parents made the decision to move home so they could ensure that the children in their care had an accessible home environment.

Children's health and education needs are met extremely well. Fostering families benefit from access to a qualified nutritionist, a therapeutic practitioner and a specialist supervising social worker. All school-age children are in education and the agency's comprehensive education strategy enables foster parents to help children succeed with their education. In addition, the agency provides numerous education opportunities in the form of access to educational awards, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, tuition, work experience and university visits. The 'Stronger Futures Programme' helps children to develop their independent living skills and prepare them for adult life.

Children of all abilities take part in a range of positive family activities. The agency arranges family activity days, which are enjoyed by the whole fostering family. The participation officer goes to great lengths to ensure that such activities are accessible for all children. One child spoke with enthusiasm about attending the agency's Summer Bash with his foster family and how he had the opportunity to go rock climbing.

The agency places great significance on children remaining in contact with their birth families, and foster parents are expected to facilitate family where possible and safe to do so. In the case of three children, the foster parents have supported the children to prepare traditional food to take to their parents for family time. The foster parents also write a newsletter to the parents full of photographs and information about what the children have achieved since they last had family time. Another foster parent invited the child's parent to the foster home so they could celebrate Christmas with their child. Equally, where children have decided to not remain in contact with family members, this is respected.

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

Children feel safe because of the strong and trusted relationships that they have with their foster parents. Alongside this, children have access to a range of trusted adults they can talk to outside of their foster family about any worries they may have. This includes supervising social workers, the participation officer and an independent advocacy. Children are also provided with information booklets.

Children's individual risks are initially explored and identified through the referral and matching process and then through regular foster parent supervision. The agency is exceptionally diligent in making sure that it has all the information it requires from the placing authority about a child's individual needs and vulnerabilities before a child is placed. All information received from the placing authority is shared with the prospective foster parent[s] and their supervising social worker. This allows for a well-considered decision to be made about whether the foster parent[s] can meet

the needs of a child. It also provides the foster parent[s] with important information about the child[ren] so they can put appropriate safeguarding measures in place.

Each child has a bespoke risk management plan, which is updated either annually or as risks change. These are completed alongside foster parents and the local authority social worker to outline each child's risks or vulnerabilities and actions to be taken by the foster parents. The plans accurately reflect a child's known or emerging vulnerabilities, are easy to understand and help to support children to become increasingly safe.

When children go missing from care, foster parents follow safeguarding policies and procedures and report missing episodes appropriately and within the required timescales. Searches are undertaken and relevant professionals are informed. The agency is proactive in ensuring that independent return home interviews take place. This helps professionals and foster parents to understand the push-pull factors that have led to the child going missing from care and supports them to implement strategies to reduce future incidents.

The agency's response to allegations made in respect of foster carers is excellent. All allegations are responded to quickly, and appropriate steps are taken by the agency to ensure that the child is safeguarded and supported. The agency ensures that relevant professionals and agencies, including Ofsted, are notified. In addition, foster carers who are subject to an allegation are provided with appropriate support. Following the conclusion of an allegation of harm being made or concerns being raised about standards of care, foster carers are returned to the fostering panel in a timely way. Where appropriate, foster carers are deregistered, and referrals are made to the Disclosure and Barring Service. This prevents unsuitable adults from being able to care for children.

The agency has in place an embedded and ethical recruitment process, which attracts high-quality foster parents who can meet the needs of a diverse range of children. The process for the recruitment of foster carers, staff and panel members meets regulatory requirements. The assessment of prospective foster carers is thorough and subject to quality assurance checks during the assessment process and by the fostering panel. The fostering panel holds detailed discussions about the approval of carers, which are recorded. Both the panel chair and agency decision-maker are suitably qualified and experienced. This helps to ensure that adults who have the right skills and motivation to care for children are recruited by the agency.

The agency's safeguarding framework has been developed, strengthened and fully embedded since the last full inspection. Its presence is felt through all aspects of children's lives. Management oversight of safeguarding incidents is excellent, and any learning from incidents is quickly shared by the agency with staff, and foster parents and actions identified are quickly implemented. The safeguarding framework has been widely disseminated and adopted on a national basis.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers have acted quickly to recruit a manager to the service following the resignation of the previous registered manager. The manager is suitably qualified and experienced and has submitted her application to register with Ofsted.

Leaders and managers have addressed the shortfalls identified at the last inspection with pace and have made positive improvements to the service. They are confident and incredibly ambitious for children. They have high expectations of themselves, their staff and foster parents. Leaders and managers are highly effective, reflective, transparent, visible and innovative and show a high commitment to providing an evidence-based service that promotes positive outcomes for children.

The agency is cohesive and all areas of the service work in harmony. This supports children and their foster parents to experience a seamless journey during their time with the agency. The agency values their foster parents and has made changes to the service because of feedback from foster parents. Foster parents speak very positively about the agency and the support they receive. Comments from foster parents about the agency include:

- 'I think they are really supportive – everyone, the social workers, managers – and feel valued. They realise how difficult things can be and do support.'
- 'Would give them and 12 out of 10. I really love them, feel valued and supported and I am not going anywhere.'
- 'The agency is like my extended family.'
- 'Feels like a family and also feels like a therapeutic family.'
- 'I don't' have any problems, but I know that if I did, I could speak to the supervising social worker'.

The training offer for staff and foster parents is extremely comprehensive and is in line with the Statement of Purpose and is evidence-based. Staff and foster parents can quickly access training that is bespoke to a child's individual needs and vulnerabilities.

Staff morale is high, and staff are proud to work for the agency. They know the children and foster parents extremely well. Staff feel valued by leaders and managers and appreciate the opportunities they are provided by the agency to grow and develop within their professional practice. As a result, staff retention is exceptionally high, with no staff having left since the last inspection.

External professionals speak positively about the agency and describe positive working relationships and a good level of communication.

Case records reflect children's lives and the work that is carried out with them. They are written to the child and help the child to understand their journey. This helps children to understand part of their life story and how adults have helped them.

The Agency Decision Maker and Panel chair are suitably qualified and experienced and are excellent advocates for children. They are visionary and have influence within the agency. Leaders and managers value the input of the Agency Decision-Maker and Panel chair in improving the service.

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: 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: Neil Morris

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 0191 217 3640

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

Inspectors

Shirin Khan, Social Care Inspector
Tina Ruffles, 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
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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