

Fostering People Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Fostering People Ltd is an independent fostering agency based in Nottingham. In May 2006 the agency became a wholly owned subsidiary of Foster Care Associates (FCA) Limited. The agency has continued to operate as a 'stand alone' fostering agency, with no change of registered manager, but has incorporated many FCA policies, procedures and systems and adapted them to suit its own aims and objectives. The agency recruits and manages foster carers across the east Midlands area in order to provide family placements for children who need to be looked after by local authorities. At the time of this inspection the agency is supporting 33 fostering households and providing placements to 53 young people. Fostering People Limited purchased another independent fostering service in August 2007 and integration of that service's staff, carers and placements is scheduled to take place by January 2008. The integration will almost double the size of this agency. The registered manager is supported by an operational manager and four full-time social workers. Staffing levels will increase with the integration of staff currently employed by Independent Fostering Limited. The agency is currently looking to expand geographically and employs a service manager responsible for this development who will initially supervise a number of home based social workers who will provide assessment of and support to foster carers. This service manager is supervised by the registered manager and this development is currently in its very early stages. Administration services are provided by an office manager and three clerical/administration assistants. The agency also has access to freelance workers to undertake occasional work such as independent reviewing, assessments and direct childcare work. The agency's statement of purpose details its capacity to offer emergency, short-term, bridging, parent and child or long-term placements for children aged between 0 and 19 years old.

Summary

This was an announced inspection covering all of the key National Minimum Standards. At the time of the previous inspection both staff and carers were anxious about the potential impact of Fostering People becoming part of a large national fostering organisation. During this inspection they spoke positively about how well this transition had been managed with no adverse impact on the support they receive and improvements in training opportunities. This is a sound agency with some positive practices and good outcomes for young people in some areas. Currently the agency is poor at evidencing that young people are well matched to placements which can fully meet their identified needs and keep them completely safe, particularly where placements are made with very little notice. Although young people receive good information about the agency's complaints process and are encouraged to raise their concerns, there is no evidence that they are appropriately advised of outcomes. When young people are placed for respite there is no formal system for the sharing of information about their specific individual needs.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Eight recommendations were made during the previous inspection. The provider was asked to review the agency's recording practices and there have been significant improvements in the agency's recording systems with the adaptation of several FCA pro-forma bringing much greater

consistency to records retained by both staff and carers. Record keeping practices are now much more consistent providing better evidence of young people's progress whilst in placement. The fostering agency systems for monitoring young people's progress, particularly in relation to health and education were poor. Access to a more advanced database system now enables the agency to monitor young people's educational attendance and achievement and to better evidence educational progress made whilst in placement. Foster carers are now retaining separate records relating to health interventions, in a format which can move with the young person. The 'health passport' includes the requirement to record any medication administered to the young person. The agency has reviewed the foster placement agreement and included a consent to medical treatment form to ensure that, if necessary, carers are able to obtain emergency health interventions for young people in placement. The provider was recommended to review the frequency of safe care and child protection training provided to foster carers. Foster carers and staff have access to many more training opportunities because they are able to attend training courses organised by FCA as well as those arranged by Fostering People. A number of new courses are now available covering safe care and child protection and the requirement for carers to attend this training makes them more aware of safe caring practices. The provider was advised to develop written guidance for members of the fostering panel and to include clarification of the decision making process. Comprehensive operational guidelines have been developed and this has brought greater clarity about the panel's decision making processes. Two of the recommendations made during the previous inspection, concerning matching and safe care policies, have been reiterated within this report.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Since the previous inspection each young person placed has been issued with a 'health passport'. This constitutes an individual health record, which is updated during the young people's placement and moves with them. The foster carers visited were entering appropriate information into young people's 'health passports' and carers had an awareness of the importance of regular visits to doctors, dentists and opticians. The files retained by the agency contain little health information and the agency continues to experience difficulty in obtaining historical health information from placing authorities. The agency's initial referral form has been developed to ensure that, as far as possible, important health information is obtained verbally when a placement request is made. The files do not contain copies of the annual health plans, which result from young people's annual health assessments. First aid training is compulsory for all carers and a good range of additional training is available covering both general health matters, such as drug and alcohol abuse, and more specific health issues, such as autism. All Fostering People carers receive a quarterly copy of the 'Fostertalk' magazine, which regularly contains useful articles about promoting the health of looked after children. Since the previous inspection the agency has incorporated a consent to medical treatment form into its foster placement agreement. Signed consent forms were in place in relation to all young people tracked during this inspection. Young people said that their carers promoted healthy eating and encouraged them to take exercise. Those young people who had specific dietary needs, for example in relation to culture or religion, said that their carers provided appropriate meals. The agency commissions the services of a psychotherapist who offers a monthly 'clinic' for carers and social workers where specific issues relating to young people in placement can be discussed. Although not involved in direct work with young people, the psychotherapist is able to undertake assessments of presenting difficulties and support carers to manage these effectively or signpost them to appropriate services. Where a need is identified for referral to other health professionals

the psychotherapist is able to make that referral and often able to speed up that process because of his contacts and his capacity to identify particular individual difficulty and the level of urgency. Both social workers and foster carers are accessing this service well and the psychotherapist was able to identify cases where appropriate intervention had prevented placement breakdown.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The foster homes visited during the inspection provided comfortable accommodation to the young people placed and carers had an awareness of their responsibilities in respect of promoting young people's development and keeping them safe. The agency provides a good range of training around safe care and child protection and has recently introduced a comprehensive two day training package: 'Protecting Children and Supporting Carers'. Young people's questionnaire responses show that they feel safe in their placements. They feel able to speak to their carers and social workers if they are worried and say that carers give them good advice about keeping themselves safe. Placing social workers say that Fostering People carers establish clear boundaries for young people and are very aware about potential risks. The agency has clear and comprehensive recruitment procedures and practices. Three personnel files and records relating to panel members were examined during the inspection and all were retained in good order, containing full evidence of appropriate interview and appointment and subsequently of induction, supervision and performance appraisal. All current staff are appropriately qualified and experienced. Annual health and safety checks are undertaken on foster homes as an integral part of the annual review process. The agency has recently introduced a new format for these checks which requires the supervising social worker to work through a booklet with each carer to determine the household's compliance with all safety requirements. Any non-compliance results in the issuing of a compliance form detailing identified shortfalls and timescales for these to be addressed. This new system does not provide any written evidence that the check has been completed, where there are no shortfalls, and the agency cannot therefore always demonstrate that the carer home provides a safe environment for the young people accommodated. Safe caring statements were in place on all files examined during this inspection but these took the form of general house rules rather than constituting a working document, reflective of the individual needs of the young people in placement and subject to ongoing review as placements or needs of young people in placement alter. Safe caring statements are not always dated and are not currently signed by young people to demonstrate their awareness and understanding. Current safe care policies do not always indicate the actions taken by carers to keep each young person safe from harm. The young people visited during this inspection were appropriately placed and management and staff spoke of good systems of consultation in relation to placing young people, with high priority given to considering the match with young people already in placement. In one case a young person had a good introduction to placement with a number of introductory visits. Written records however, provide little evidence of the matching process. Two of the placement decisions examined during the inspection evidenced significant potential risks for young people and the files tracked contained no evidence of appropriate consideration of those risks, or of the consideration of young people's needs in relation to the carer's skills, or of the potential impact of the placement made on other young people already in the foster home. The agency has recently introduced the matching pro-forma used by FCA and the manager detailed her intention to adapt this for use with future placements. Where foster carers are to accommodate more than three young people the agency has a pro-forma request form for exemption to 'the usual fostering limit', which is forwarded

to the relevant local authority for authorisation. In one such case this authorisation had not been obtained. Local authority authorisation of such a placement is a legal requirement under the Children Act 1989. The fostering panel was observed during this inspection and the panel chair was interviewed. The agency currently lists two people as job-sharing one seat on the panel. At present there are only eight other panel members. The Fostering Services Regulations do not allow for panel membership to be on a job-share basis. There are clear written procedures for panel members and current members are appropriately knowledgeable and experienced. The panel chair has benefited from being involved in meetings and training opportunities involving the chairs of all FCA panels. There was some inconsistency noted in the panel procedures during observation, in relation to the panel chair not always clearly seeking the views of all members prior to detailing the panel's recommendations to the applicants. Some panel members are social workers employed by the agency and are therefore also responsible for completing and presenting assessments of prospective foster carers to the panel. During panel observation a Fostering People social worker, who was a panel member, presented a form F assessment to the panel without her temporary removal from panel membership being clearly stated and recorded. Some applications are being presented to the Fostering Panel before all checks are completed. Where assessments are presented for panel consideration, the panel must have full access to all relevant documentation including evidence of Criminal Records Bureau checks and all applicants' references. Currently the agency does not confirm the authenticity of references obtained from the prospective foster carer's employer. A member of the administrative staff team is responsible for panel minutes. The minute taker is seated behind the panel making it difficult to hear and therefore accurately record the discussions taking place.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The young people tracked during this inspection are achieving well educationally and have improved their social skills. Some of these young people have moved on to further education and are being well supported to gain useful employment experiences. Although the agency's files do not all contain copies of young people Personal Education Plans (PEP), all the carers visited were in possession of a copy of the current PEP. The expectation that carers will attend all educational meetings is clearly stated in the carers' handbook and they are well supported in this by their supervising social workers. In their questionnaire responses, young people say that their carers support them to access a wide range of leisure activities as well as helping them with homework and enabling them to see friends regularly. Placing social workers describe particularly good work done with individuals in relation to developing skills and building self-confidence and self-esteem. All Fostering People carers are now issued with a copy of the FCA education handbook, which contains a comprehensive range of information and advice about accessing the education system and promoting young people's achievement within it. The FCA Education Service employs a number of education liaison officers who work closely with carers, young people, placing authorities and schools to obtain and support appropriate school placements and currently 95% of young people in placement have a school place. Education service personnel are also actively involved in delivering carer training. Fostering People has access to the FCA database and is now able to produce statistical evidence relating to young people's attendance and achievements. Current statistics evidence that the young people in placement with this agency are exceeding the national average in terms of achievements of looked after children. The agency retains a separate education file in relation to each young person in placement and these records include certificates awarded by the agency

in recognition of educational achievement. These records have only recently been commenced and, in relation to some young people, contain minimal information. The agency has carers and staff from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and provides a good range of training opportunities, for staff and carers, around equality and diversity issues. Immediately prior to this inspection the agency held its first black history celebration event in Nottingham. The event was well supported by carers and young people and provided opportunities to sample Caribbean food and to try specific hair and beauty products. Staff are able to access support from the FCA black workers forum and through an intranet site for black workers. The redesigned foster placement agreement fully identifies young people's specific care needs in relation to ethnicity, religion, gender or disability.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The young people's questionnaire asks young people what Fostering People is good at. The responses included: 'looking after and listening to children'; 'doing trips'; and 'arranging parties'. Young people and carers value the range of informal activities arranged by the agency. The agency has a good pro-forma for securing the views of young people in foster care and birth children at the time of the carer's annual review. The records examined during this inspection evidence that these are well utilised by young people. The carers' handbook contains good advice about ways of obtaining young people's views and training is also provided on listening to young people. Foster carers spoken to, and those completing questionnaires, were very aware of their responsibilities in relation to promoting and facilitating contact and some carers were transporting young people over long distances to ensure that contact took place. The agency sends out a welcome letter to each young person placed giving details of the agency's complaints process and contact information for Ofsted. Since the previous inspection six complaints/allegations have been made by young people. Although the agency's records evidence that these have been appropriately investigated and resolved, there is no record of young people receiving any feedback or being notified of the outcomes. The agency is not retaining any record when young people are provided with verbal feedback.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

There are no key standards under Economic Well Being. During this inspection carers did not raise any concerns in relation to their payments. Payments are not related to carer experience or qualification but are at two levels according to the age of the young people fostered. Some young people tracked were approaching leaving care and pathway planning was just beginning. Carers visited were working, with young people of all ages, to develop self care skills and to promote independence. Agency statistics show that carers are successful in encouraging young people to move on to further education or to obtain employment. One placing social worker commented: 'The foster carers' skills have helped to transform a quite immature and selfish young person into a mature, polite and respectful young man'.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency's statement of purpose is fully reflective of the aims and objectives of Fostering People Limited and of the nature of placements provided and has been appropriately amended to reflect the changes inherent in the incorporation with Foster Care Associates. Questionnaire

responses were received from eight young people, nine placing social workers and eight foster carers. All questionnaires contained very positive comments about the agency's practices and the care provided by its foster carers: 'Impressed with the determination not to 'give up' on challenging children'; 'child focussed and support their carers'; 'Professional and competent social workers'; 'Proud to be part of a professional and caring team'. Young people made some very positive comments about the care they received: 'I would like every child that goes into fostering to get the same love I've gotten'. Personnel files and discussions with staff evidence a good level of formal support, supervision and appraisal and staff spoke highly of informal support systems, saying that managers operated an 'open door' policy, and of training opportunities provided by the agency. There is a good level of competent administrative support. The roles of the administrative staff are changing as the agency grows and are currently becoming more specialist. There has been good consultation about these changes. The agency has clear policies and procedures for the recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers. There have been significant improvements in the agency's recording systems since the previous inspection with the introduction of several pro-forma bringing much greater consistency to records retained by both staff and carers. The carers' handbook has been updated to include good guidance for carers on placement recording. Pro-forma developed for the carer review process are particularly good and link well with the initial assessment process in focussing on carer competencies. Currently the records of foster carer supervision do not follow any particular format and some were found to focus almost entirely on young people in placement with little reference to carer development or training needs. Signed supervision agreements are in place between carers and supervising social workers and records evidence regular contact. Carers speak highly of the continuity of support and of the professionalism of their supervising social workers: 'Always at the end of the phone'; 'Good at knowing its carers and its young people'. Placing social workers value the placements provided by the agency: 'By far the best carers I have ever worked with'. Carers' and young people's files are well retained but the agency needs to be more pro-active in obtaining LAC documentation from placing authorities. All foster carers are reviewed annually by an independent reviewing officer whose recommendations are presented to the Agency decision maker or, if there are changes to approval status, to the fostering panel. Agency carers have an entitlement to respite and this is generally provided by other Fostering People carers. Currently, carers providing respite do not always receive sufficient information about young people's specific individual needs to enable them to ensure that those needs are fully met.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that the matching process includes full consideration of the assessed needs of the child, the views of all relevant professionals and the prospective carers and the needs of

any other young people in placement and that placements requiring exemptions are supported by local authority authorisation (NMS 8.3)

- retain evidence that each foster home is free from avoidable hazards that might expose a young person to risk of injury or harm (NMS 6.6)
- ensure that a written safe care policy, reflective of the individual needs of the young people in placement and regularly reviewed, is in place for each carer household and is shared with young people and their social workers (NMS 9.3)
- ensure that the Fostering Panel operates in full accordance with the agency's written policies and procedures (NMS 30.1)
- provide young people with feedback about any concerns or complaints raised and notify them of the final outcomes (NMS 11.5)
- provide foster carers with full information about young people who are placed for respite (NMS 21.2, NMS 24.4)
- obtain, and provide to foster carers, all relevant information relating to young people in placement and, where such information is not forthcoming from the responsible local authority, keep copies of written requests for information on young people's files (NMS 24.6)

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.