

# The Foster Care Co-operative Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Dawn Taylor
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	24/08/2009

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

### 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

This independent fostering agency is registered as a co-operative under common ownership, and also registered as a limited company. It operates from branches within England and Wales. The head office of the English branch is in Malvern, Worcestershire, where the administrative headquarters are based. There are currently 74 approved foster carers, 22 carers offering respite to carer families. There are 150 placements available in total with 95 children and young people in placement.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This agency provides a consistently high quality service. The overall rating is good and all outcome areas are good with some outstanding features. There are no recommendations. The agency has a clear understanding of its strengths and areas for improvement which are proactively addressed in a planned and timely manner. Key features of this agency are the low caseloads for supervising social workers which helps them give outstanding support to foster carers. There is also a high level of stable placements experienced by children and young people and excellent training and resulting telephone consultation available to supervising social workers and foster carers.

### Improvements since the last inspection

Six recommendations were made after the last inspection. All have been met. All foster carers are provided with written details regarding the arrangements for giving consent for a child or young person placed with them to receive medical treatment. Staff and foster carers files no longer contain copies of Criminal Record Bureau checks. All children and young people are carefully matched with a foster carer capable of meeting their assessed needs. Safe caring guidelines reflect the assessment of risk carried out by the fostering service when a child or young person is placed. The children's guides are suitable for all children and young people fostered through the service and can be made available in a range of formats to make them more accessible. An up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each child and young person, which includes an up-to-date foster placement agreement.

The actions taken demonstrate the agency's commitment to the promotion of children and young people's welfare at all times.

## Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Foster carers are effectively promoting children and young people's physical and emotional health and development within the foster home.

Children and young people, some of whom have poor health when they are first placed with a foster carer, receive appropriate health interventions which result in their health needs being addressed. Foster carers provide healthy environments and ensure children and young people are registered with a General Practitioner, see a dentist regularly, attend any other relevant health appointments and meet specific responsibilities set out in their health care plan. In addition, the agency employs a health liaison worker, who is available to provide support to foster carers and young people when required. She also regularly monitors the health progress of all children and young people and keeps the agency up to date with current issues and trends in children's health.

Where children and young people have specific health issues or conditions, foster carers manage these sensitively to avoid any potential embarrassments or difficulties. All foster carers receive training on health issues in their core training programme, which covers administering basic first aid, minor illness treatment and the storage and administration of medication. They also have access to additional more focused training about matters such as foetal alcohol syndrome.

Children and young people understand their health needs because they have regular discussions with their foster carers. Foster carers are well informed because the agency provides them with good advice, support, guidance and training. One foster carer stated, 'we always encourage the children to be healthy anyway; however, this is discussed at our monthly meeting with the supervising social worker when we talk about the children and how they are doing'. The health liaison worker further supports foster carers by signposting them to health professionals and literature that enhances the care of the child or young person. As a result, children and young people are leading healthy lifestyles and making informed decisions about their health and future well being.

The agency continues to develop practice and has recently launched a website which provides specific support and information to children, young people and foster carers. This site continues to be developed to provide more links to an even wider range of services that give information on alcohol and illegal substance abuse, smoking, sex and relationships, sexual health and meeting cultural health needs.

Children and young people live in foster homes that provide comfortable homely accommodation. The standard of this accommodation is regularly monitored by supervising social workers on visits and unannounced inspections. Assessments of risk are undertaken on a regular basis and ensure that any concerns identified are addressed and minimised. Foster carers receive appropriate training and guidance that ensure they are able to promote and maintain safe environments.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

All supervising social workers and foster carers ensure the safety and well-being of children and young people is paramount. Foster carers are wholly committed to developing positive relationships with children and young people and generate a culture of openness and trust. As a result, children and young people feel safe and learn how to protect themselves and make sensible, safe decisions.

There are clear safeguarding policies, procedures and guidance that underpin an established programme of induction and on-going training. The agency has positive working relationships with local authorities and other agencies. Any allegation made by a child or young person is taken seriously and investigated in line with safeguarding procedures. Any child or young person who goes missing from foster carers is appropriately reported as missing. Proactive partnership work, in line with multi agency protocols, focus on meeting the specific needs of each child and young person and ensures they are kept safe and supported to change their high-risk behaviours.

Prior to, and throughout a placement, a young person's safety and well-being is regularly reviewed and monitored. A range of methods, including risk assessments and individual safe-caring policies, ensure changing needs are identified and strategies are put in place to address them. The agency endeavours not to be risk averse and seeks to be proactive in identifying and developing strategies to manage risk. Where particular concerns arise, risk management action plans are compiled with carers to ensure consistent practice and proactive partnership work with other agencies.

Foster carers are well equipped to address any instances of bullying, e-safety and cyber-bullying in consultation with their supervising social workers and young people's social workers. They have a good awareness of the particular vulnerability of looked after children and their susceptibility to bullying and always seek the views of the child or young person involved. The agency ensures foster carers have good awareness of current issues and practice. For example, their website contains links to a range of useful resources and promotes events such as anti-bullying week.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Children and young people enjoy positive relationships with their foster families. They feel comfortable with their foster carers and this results in them developing a sense of self and belonging in their placements. An outstanding feature of this agency is the high level of placement stability experienced by children and young people.

The agency proactively supports carers with the feelings and responses arising from caring for children and young people who have complex emotional difficulties that at times result in high risk behaviours. The agency provides very comprehensive and good quality training on child development, attachment, therapeutic strategies and safe intervention, including diffusion and de-escalation techniques. After completing this course of training sessions foster carers continue to have telephone or face to face contact with the consultants. They provide them with support specific to the children or young people they have living with them. Foster carers and supervising social workers feel this is an outstanding process, which enhances the already established and comprehensive wrap-around support provided by the agency. As a result, foster carers and supervising social workers offer stable environments that promote positive behaviour and celebrate success in a way that is appropriate to a child's or young person's age and ability.

Children and young people are able to pursue interests and are supported and encouraged to engage in new leisure and cultural activities. Children and young people have equal access to leisure pursuits and cultural activities. Foster carers are proactive and consistent with encouraging children and young people to participate in sports, arts and recreational hobbies. This helps to increase children and young people's self-confidence and sense of self-accomplishment.

Foster carers are confident in meeting the educational needs of children and young people and are supported in this task by supervising social workers and by the agency's education liaison worker. Additional educational advice and guidance is provided to foster carers through education workshops and guidance on the agency's website. All foster carers are involved in the personal education plan (PEP) process, attending planning meetings. The education liaison officer negotiates and liaises with key people in order to secure appropriate educational provision. This may take the form of securing a place at a particular school, advocating for a statutory assessment, or requesting an alternative curriculum for a young person to ensure that a child's or young person's needs are being met in school. Where a child or young person is not in education, the agency are proactive in addressing the shortfall in a timely manner. During this period, alternative short-term support is put in place to meet the needs of the foster carer as well as the child or young person. Foster carers are very positive about the support they and the children and young people placed with them receive. One foster carer stated, 'we have a child of 16 who needed support with study and so the agency have been funding the child with a private tutor in order to help her complete her exams. This is also going to continue so that she can re-sit two of her exams in November'.

Foster carers support and encourage education and celebrate achievement and success. They attend parents' evenings and other school activities, ensuring school attendance, facilitating homework as well as liaising with other professionals such as the designated teacher for looked after children at their school.

## Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency ensures children and young people's wishes and feelings are taken into account in every aspect of their care. Foster carers and supervising social workers strongly advocate for young people, ensuring their views and wishes are heard. The agency adopts different methods of gaining children and young people's views in line with their age, understanding, first language and communication method. There are many opportunities available for children and young people to express their views. A foster carer stated, 'my foster children have a good relationship with the agency and our supervising social worker. The children's needs are always paramount and dealt with sympathetically and with great empathy. They trust her and can talk openly to her'.

The agency also continues to seek the views of children and young people to improve the service they provide. Recently children and young people have helped review the children's guides and had input into the development of the agency's new website. A key aspect of the website has been the development of additional ways that children and young people can raise a question, concern or comment through 'kidz rep' or 'Captain FCC'. This sits alongside the already established agency complaints procedure. A key feature of this agency is the work they undertake to support fostering children, as well as fostered children. They stage regular events for fostered children and fostering children throughout the regions. These double as consultation events as well as activities. They take a variety of forms, including outdoor activity challenge days, picnics and barbeques. The agency recognises the importance of children and young people who foster being part of a support group and continue to develop events to meet this need.

Children and young people's social and emotional needs are actively promoted by foster carers and supervising social workers to enable them to develop emotional resilience, self-control and improved social skills. The agency continues to develop foster carers skills, and the resources available to them, to ensure they can meet the needs of the children and young people in their care. For example, since the last inspection the agency have launched a memory box to support the life story work already undertaken by foster carers. Every child and young person with the agency receives a memory box containing a welcoming letter, memory stick to hold photos, a Children's Guide, and a photo album to hold any actual photos. This memory box is for them to keep forever and encourages them to keep mementos and special items safe.

Children and young people have a positive self-view, and good understanding of their background. Children and young people benefit from foster carers who provide a safe and nurturing environment that results in them becoming more confident individuals. As children and young people progress within the fostering household, they develop an excellent sense of security and begin to trust adults around them. Communicating with children and young people is a core area of competence for foster carers and supervising social workers. This is reflected in the agency's training

programmes and is clear in foster carer and supervising social worker practice. This ensures children and young people feel listened to.

Foster carers support children and young people to have constructive contact with family and friends in accordance with their care plans. Foster carers, where appropriate, facilitate and supervise contact between children, young people and members of their families. They also provide very practical support. For example by providing transport and meeting at different venues. Children and young people are being effectively supported before, during and after contact visits. This means that children and young people keep in touch with their family and community, and are not isolated. Children and young people are carefully matched to their foster placements. They are welcomed into the foster home and leave the foster home, where possible, in a planned and sensitive manner. Introductions are conducted prior to planned placements and they are given information and photographs of their prospective carers and their families.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The agency makes sure that children and young people are prepared for, and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their potential and achieve economic well-being. Foster carers provide all children and young people with creative opportunities to learn independence skills. These are appropriate to their age and development. The agency employs a transitions and leaving care advisor who helps foster carers prepare and support children and young people in the transition to adult living. Foster carers work with children and young people to develop the necessary independence living skills. From an early starting point they are encouraged to develop practical skills related to cleaning, cooking, budgeting and taking personal responsibility.

Foster carers and young people are involved in the pathway planning process. Pathway plans are clear about how needs are addressed and what help is available to support and prepare young people towards a successful adulthood. Training for foster carers and supervising social workers, as well as support from the transitions and leaving care advisor, ensures that young people receive budgeting, finance and benefits advice. This helps to develop young people's knowledge base about the financial support options that are available for continued education and employment.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

This fostering service is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently and delivers a service that meets the needs of its users. The Registered Manager is the director and has management responsibility for the social work staff and the running of the service. The Registered Manager is based in the Malvern office and also travels across the country for the purposes of the service.

All previous recommendations from the last inspection are met and the agency continues to develop and improve practice. A key feature of this agency is the comprehensive understanding they have of their strengths and areas for development. They proactively monitor practice to ensure a consistent high standard and continue to develop systems to enable them to interrogate and analyse data to further improve outcomes.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose that accurately reflects the operation of the agency. This underpins a comprehensive range of detailed policies and procedures which effectively guide and support foster carers and supervising social workers. These documents, as well as the agency's newly updated website, ensure staff and foster carers understand the aims and objectives of the service.

Children and young people are also well-informed of the support they can expect. Effective communication is a key feature of this agency and they continue to develop to further improve practice. For example, the agency has recently revised the children's guides and there are now two versions available, so that the right guide can go to the right child or young person whatever their age. The agency has also developed a website which now features web pages specifically for children and young people. These include signposting to fostering, children's rights, help lines, emergency phone numbers and key contact numbers. The agency is continuing to develop links with other not-for-profit children's organisations and will be adding a variety of articles and guides on matters such as health, diet, cooking recipes and transition to independence.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency works closely with children, young people and foster carers to ensure that individual needs are identified clearly and met. The religious and cultural needs of children and young people are considered during the matching process and throughout placement. All staff and foster carers are given information and training with regard to equality and diversity.

Managers are qualified to work with children and young people and are highly respected by staff and foster carers. Foster carers stated, 'they always make themselves available', 'they are approachable', and 'they make a point of getting to know us, our family and our foster children'. The staff team are professional and enthusiastic. Foster carers stated: 'we receive absolutely fantastic support. You always know there is someone at the end of the phone any hour of the day. The managers, as well as supervising social workers, keep in contact. You have a consistent supervising social worker who knows you well'. The premises and administrative systems are suitable to enable the fostering service to run smoothly. For example, payments to foster carers are fair and paid in a timely way and foster carers are clear about the fostering service's payment structures and the payments due to them.

Recruitment procedures for staff ensure that all appropriate checks and references are undertaken and appropriately ratified. There are robust processes for the

selection of staff and fostering households. The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports a range of foster carers to meet the needs of children and young people. Assessments are detailed and analytical and identify the competencies and strengths they have or need to develop.

The role and constitution of the fostering panel and decision-maker has recently been reviewed. The agency is forming two panels, one for England and one for Wales. They are also currently developing an appraisal process for all panel members. The panel make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations and decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children and young people in foster care. The fostering panel has a diverse membership and is properly constituted from different disciplines. The members understand safeguarding and equality and diversity issues. Good quality assurance systems are in place to monitor the effectiveness of the panel in order to provide quality foster care placements. The panel operates fairly by ensuring applicants can attend panels and by monitoring that all assessments are thorough.

The agency undertakes effective matching of children and young people with foster carers which helps to ensure placement stability. There is a formal process to ensure that appropriate matching is taking place. This process successfully identifies any gaps and provides additional support, resources and training that are needed to support the young person's placement. Consequently, there is stability and children and young people make good progress.

Records are well maintained and clear, and contribute to a child's or young person's understanding of their life. For example, they include information about school or college placement, statement of educational needs status, attendance figures, exclusions, structured activities, achievements (including non-academic) and educational attainment.

Supervising social workers and foster carers receive the support, training and development they need to carry out their role effectively and meet the specific needs of children and young people. For example, foster carers receive regular excellent quality support and supervision from supervising social workers. There is also a highly effective out of hours service for foster carers and it is standard practice that foster carers join a support group local to their home address. The outcome for foster carers is that they are well-supported. In turn, they provide high quality care, support and guidance to children and young people in placement.

Foster carers are well-trained and know what steps to take if they receive an allegation. The Registered Manager notifies all significant events about the health and protection of children and young people to the appropriate authorities. The outcome for children and young people is that their safety and welfare is promoted at all times.