

10 September 2009



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Dear Sir/Madam,

Foster Care Associates (FCA) is the UK's largest independent fostering agency operating in partnership with Local Authorities and Health Trusts covering four countries. It was founded in 1994 and has its central base in Bromsgrove in the West Midlands but its frontline business is conducted in over 80 area offices across the UK which makes it a very diverse company. To undertake all the activities associated with running a social care organisation supporting more than 2,600 children and young people, FCA employs some 800 staff, with approximately 70% engaged in direct work with children {social workers, teachers (Education Liaison Officers), therapists, support workers}.

FCA's goal is to remain the leading Independent Fostering Agency in the UK, continuing to break new ground in developing and offering a range of creative services for children & young people looked after, working in partnership with statutory bodies and Foster Carers, to meet their specific needs and deliver positive outcomes. FCA will maintain a positive public image, influence policy and practice and continue to grow business opportunities.

FCA's vision is to ensure that children and young people achieve their full potential. A commitment to good outcomes for all the children and young people we care for underpins and informs all our policies, procedures and actions. All our services aim, incorporate and reflect the five key elements of the 'Every Child Matters' agenda.

FCA offers three specialist services to children and young people, their Carers and families. The Therapy Service, Educational Support Service and the Children and Young People's Support Service (or CHYPSS), are services which usually comprise part of the Team Parenting package. As a pro-active and innovative national social care agency FCA already monitors many aspects of the care it provides to the children and young people placed, via a wide range of methods and techniques. We welcome greater transparency in terms of financial/costs monitoring by Local Authorities and we also recognise the need to collate critical information concerning individual children as part of quality assuring the service provided and ensuring best possible outcomes for them.



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Within FCA we take these challenges very seriously, recognising that all children are unique and have different hopes, aspirations and interests. We aim to work creatively to meet the complex needs looked after children often have; to help them realise their ambitions and potential. We want their childhoods to be secure, healthy and enjoyable and our goals for them will be exactly the same as the goals for our own children. In short we want to provide a stable foundation through their care experience that gives them the best possible springboard for the rest of their lives – a care experience that makes a positive difference.

At all times, we remember that the child is more important than the system and whenever possible FCA seek the views of children and young people on all issues that affect their daily lives and futures.

#### **Question 1 - Gathering Information about the child**

The amount of Information shared with FCA varies greatly not only by the Local Authority, but also by circumstance.

With children new to the care system, it is understandable that information is extremely limited and that further information is disclosed following a period of stability in placement.

FCA approaches placements with the proviso that the safe care method has been considered across the board.

Information comes to FCA either from an established placement team; a 'duty' worker within the Local Authority (via the Local Authority Social Worker) and sometimes from CAFCASS. FCA is acutely aware that in many instances the information shared has been insufficient, and based on hearsay rather than fact. Behaviours by the child/young person can be exaggerated or minimised depending on how many 'filters' the information has gone through. Unfortunately, absence of information is often the case and we always need to consider whether the information presented is current or historical. The absence of LAC documentation suggests that this is not considered highly enough as a priority. From an educational point of view, it is rare to be informed whether or not a child has a Statement of Special Educational Needs or even if the child is on SEN register. Where there is Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) involvement we don't usually know who the child is involved with or why.

Having said this we have examples of extremely in-depth and informative knowledge of a child's needs being shared, which has assisted greatly in securing a good match with FCA Carers.

FCA depends heavily on the decisions reached for the welfare of the child by the LA and the LA remains very much accountable for the decisions made about a child's care. This tends to show when the LA attempts to place a child within a 20 mile radius of the child's home area.

### **Question 2 - Using that information**

There is a concern that though the CCSR Database seeks to identify possible 'spaces' or 'vacancies' with potential Carers within a certain area, it doesn't seem able to match a potential Carer with a child to be placed, as it does not consider character matching needs or gather information which a Local Authority Placements Officer would need to have in order to make an appropriate 'match' child with specific Carers.

As an Independent Fostering Agency, we do not have access to the results of 'searches' for a possible placement on the CCSR Database, however when we are told that a possible 'match' has been identified by a Local Authority, it is sometimes obvious that the 'match' identified is not always the best one available and may be influenced more by geographical area and may not highlight all possible suitable placement matches.

In other instances, the placement request may specify a placement with no other children and often Carers are identified by LAs who do have other children placed. Whilst such information is on the database, it doesn't somehow seem to be picked up in the 'search'.

Another example is the "tick box" section which identifies Carers' skills and abilities. FCA inputs the Carers' Approval status together with the presenting behaviours that the Carers can manage. However, it seems that the database cannot discriminate that the Carers may not be able to deal with a multitude of these behaviours at the same time.

It appears that the CCSR Database is unable to acknowledge qualitative information available from individuals and cannot distinguish between specific skills and personal traits of individual Carers.

The 'referral by tender' process dictates a sum of money for caring for children, which often does not fully meet the considerations for the child. Children are numbered and considerations around character matching are limited. This system tends to dehumanise the whole process, and lacks the consideration for the holistic needs of a child.

The commissioning system doesn't give us the freedom to ask questions, for example, if self harming is involved, we don't know whether it is current, past, habitual or a response to circumstance and this specific information at the matching stage makes a lot of difference in terms of how this could be managed and can be off putting for some carers when it needn't be.

### **Question 3 - The extent to which appropriate information is provided**

It is essential that up-to-date and reliable information, based on fact, is obtained which can assist a Carer in looking after a child.

In terms of labelling children, Looked After Children are the most scrutinised of children. Unsubstantiated, unproven information abounds. FCA is careful to pretext this information when passing this on; however, we are clear in how we describe this.

Finance does guide the decision as to where the placements are made. FCA does sometimes question whether behaviours are played down to enable a placement to start (and subsequently locking the Agency into a minimum of a 7 day notice period) or alternatively, behaviours could be enlarged so that access to another resource is gained (i.e. residential placement). FCA also questions why some LAs deem Residential Care more appropriate than a more imaginative 'around the clock' specialised foster placement with consideration for peripatetic Carers to be made available.

Communication could be improved by considering the following factors within LAs:-

- Staff Turnover
- Unallocated cases
- Duty workers
- Agency Workers

LA should trawl for all the information about the child in the first instance before requesting a placement. Currently, information tends to come 'drip by drip' after the placement has been made and supplementary 'digging' goes on after the placement is made.

Children tend to 'bounce around' a lot within the system and remain unplaced, and FCA may get a referral that is a couple of months old, but any new information is often not available, despite the child being in the LAC system. It appears that the more a placement becomes urgent the less information is available and emergency placements often have very little clear information, apart from name, date of birth and a brief reason for referral.

Out-of-hours placements tend not to be dependent on the CCSR Database and information sharing is communicated between LA referrer and FCA Out of Hours Social Worker in a more personalised way.

Carers often comment that they don't feel that they have had sufficient information about a child placed within their home, though many Carers are willing to take children with very limited information. FCA can assure Carers that all the information shared with FCA by the LA is passed on to the Carers. Carers abide by the Safe Care Policy in order to ensure that the child/young person (who arrives with no clear previous information on presenting behaviours) is cared for in a safe way.

#### **Question 4 - Extent to which placements are planned**

FCA has found that both North Wales and South Wales' placement requests tend to be emergency and short term.

70% of placements are same day placements in FCA North Wales whereas the majority of placements in South Wales seem to be Short term, Emergency and unplanned placements, irrespective of the Care plan.

Most placements start as short term 28-day placements but FCA understands that LAs need appropriate time to consider options and FCA Carers are aware that short term and emergency placements can, and often do, become longer term placements.

Short-term placements can vary between 7 days and 2 years. In response to this we have considered, and broadened, the categories of approval for FCA Carers in order to prevent placements ending unnecessarily. FCA does not place children outside of the category of approval of the Carers and we do not place 'over numbers'.

Court proceedings can actually impede planning for a young person, e.g. children stay longer than initially planned, become attached and then bond – obviously this wasn't originally identified as the plan, but does then 'become' the plan.

For specific Long Term Placements, FCA has a dedicated Long Term Placements Team. These placements are planned ahead; involve introductions, home visits, overnight stays and a great deal of information becoming available along the way. This process can take several months.

The only issue is that the LAs tend not to share information with the residing authority and follow the protocol to access education. Often a child can have a planned introduction without having the placing authority following the correct protocol of liaising between placing and residing Education Authorities and therefore in many instances the guarantee of a suitable educational provision has not been discussed prior to 'placing'.

This can be overcome where there are no obvious specific educational issues, but can be problematic where specific needs for Education provision and funding have not been discussed and planned before hand. The lack of educational provision puts a tremendous strain on the child in placement and on the Carers who try tirelessly to obtain appropriate educational provision through FCA's Education Liaison Officers who work with the LA ELO.

**Question 5 How 'risks' are explained to Foster Carers:-**

Negativity can abound in 'off the cuff' comments about the behaviours of a child and Risk Assessments are, too often, not prepared by the LA in regards to meeting the needs of the child – which, of course, can possibly lead to unsuitable placements being made which can lead to placement breakdowns.

It can appear that the LAs will often 'take' what ever type of Carers that are available in an emergency situation, but we are always honest in sharing all the information that is available.

FCA Carers trust in the skills of the people who carry out the 'matching' procedure and are more willing than not to provide care to children when they are spoken to in an honest way, safe in the knowledge that FCA works together to tackle issues which may, at times, challenge the stability of the placement.

We promote our Carers' need to ask questions prior to a child being placed with them through our Skills to Foster preparation training and, where possible, prior to introductions. However, FCA can only share the information that is available to us at that time.

FCA offers an abundance of core training which enables FCA Carers to have a clearer understanding of the needs of children placed in care. Furthermore, on-going training and support - via team parenting and carer support groups - continues the sharing process in planning a multi-disciplinary response. We promote our Carers to always consider the needs of the individual child placed with them.

FCA Carers are given both a Foster Carer's handbook and an Education Handbook and these are referred to on training days and in regular Supervising Social Worker Supervision with the Carers. Issues around emotional and behavioural issues are often highlighted and addressed and, where needed, further input can be offered through the Education and Therapy Service offered by FCA's Team Parenting package of care.

#### **Question 6 - The extent to which children and young people participate in their placement process**

Seldom do children have a choice in their placement, however, occasionally; this can happen more often by luck rather than design.

Again FCA North and South Wales show a regional difference – planning of placements allows better involvement for the children. However, in respect of respite, all children are introduced to their prospective Respite Carers. Where possible, on request of the Local authority, if FCA has a choice in placements this can be provided to the child along with visual information on the Carers being considered. As part of the form F assessment all Carers are asked to provide FCA with a portfolio which shows their family and gives a visual introduction to the child of the people considered to look after them.

By default, children who are being moved between FCA Carers, may recognise or 'know' the Carers, having met them at one of the extra curricular activities provided. (FCA events, days out, Football Training and tournaments etc). There is the capacity, over time, for children to choose to return to the same placement.

Where possible, Carers are identified specifically for respite care - and in some instances as Peripatetic Carers, which allows the child to remain in the home while Carers take respite. However this can sometimes be impacted by constraints around the availability of the Carers and their situation.

Children are given the opportunity to make comments and make their views known about their Carers via annual reviews and Children's Representative/ Children and Young People's Forums. The Children's Representatives meet twice a year and attend Senior Management Meetings, and the Children's Forum. Children are also given the opportunity to have sight of what the Carers write in respect of the placement, together with an opportunity to comment on this.

The Child Specific Safe Care policy adopted by FCA stipulates the need to gain the views of the child in care – and for FCA's Supervising Social Workers to have regular conversations with a child in placement without the Carer being present. This in turn stimulates an honest and clear attempt at gaining the child's view within the placement.

FCA's Resource Support Service also allows the opportunity for 1:1 contact with the child in placement - as does the chance that the child has to write about himself and to consider how he/she feels.

We do involve young people in disruption meetings where they are given opportunity to say what they think about their previous placement breakdowns and what they wish for the future.

We develop a sense of 'belonging' within FCA – and one benefit of this is that if/when children need to move within the company, the move has less negative impact. This is not about placement choice but they can move on to another placement and retain the feeling of belonging to the "family" of FCA.

FCA provides the opportunity for children and young people to see, and meet with, all those who are associated with their care within FCA including administrative and support staff.

**Question 7 - The extent to which a child's social worker remains engaged in their care; Responsibility for initially liaising with schools; Autonomy of Carers:**

There are distinct regional differences here between FCA North and South Wales.

LA Social Workers are clearly making the decisions, are very actively involved in the team parenting system and consulting with the other disciplines in the North Wales Region. In the South Wales region, however, there are obvious anomalies where the roles can change given the priorities of the Local Authority SW.

Difficulties can appear where any decision in respect of a child's placement requires additional funding. Whilst this is to be expected, it is true to say that a time delay can be (and often is) crucial in securing a placement.

There appears to be more 'Agency' Social Workers, or regular changeover of staff, in South Wales than in North Wales, and stability of LA Social Worker seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

Education provision is crucial to the success of any looked after 'placement'. This can be difficult on occasion where no clear Education Plan has been put in place. FCA promotes that education is part of the package of any child coming into care. Where the placing authority and the residing authority have not met prior to the placement being made, difficulties for educational provision often arise. With emergency placements this is unavoidable.

Children, who are placed out of county, and particularly those with more complex educational needs, remain vulnerable to delays in an appropriate educational provision being identified for them. While some LEAs adhere rigidly to the Belonging Regulations others are more flexible in responding to the needs of the child, i.e. they will provide funding for support on a temporary basis and while more permanent arrangements are being agreed, in order to prevent unnecessary disruption to a child's education.

LAC children with Statements of Special Educational Needs who move from an LEA where the policy is not to statement to an authority that does not share this policy are also particularly vulnerable

The Educational input varies greatly in each LA. Some local authority LAC Education Officers will be extremely proactive in securing appropriate educational provision. Whereas others will rely more on FCA's ELOs. During the period where a child remains in FCA's care, ELOs will, normally have clear input and make decisions in consultation with the FCA ELO, the Carers and the LA Social Worker.

FCA Carers are given an Education Handbook and training is presented regularly on how to make the best use of it. FCA suggests that when a child comes into a placement in a new area, the Carers make contact with the local or most suitable school. In many instances this allows for direct and open contact between the school and the Carer. Direct support for the Carer, as well as advice and guidance on school admission procedures, is provided by FCA's ELO, Local Authority LAC Education Officers and FCA's ELOs aim to work together to guarantee a successful transition.

Some LAs need to be respectfully reminded of their duty for educational provision.

**Question 8 - Qualitative Reviews; Cost benefit analysis.**

FCA is implementing a 'Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire' which relies on input from Carers and Supervising Social Workers with regards to what has been noticeable about a child newly placed. These are presented to LAs and other professionals during the first review for the child.

FCA holds regular reviews involving the Team Parenting Team (FCA ELO, Therapist, Support Worker, Social Worker, Team Manager etc.) in respect of each child/young person and we provide the subsequent report to the Local Authority - which outlines events in the placement over the few weeks under review.

The type of placement needed for a particular child/young person will dictate the level of funding for that placement – and, given that circumstances can change over time. Therefore, 'funding' is frequently re-assessed (at the above mentioned Reviews) by FCA and discussed with Local Authorities.

Whilst we, at FCA, already analyse 'outcomes' information in respect of young persons placed with FCA (longevity of placement, educational achievement etc.) we have a new FIT system (database) which is about to be introduced to FCA which will allow us to gather an even wider range of information – for analysis – to ensure that appropriate and positive outcomes are being reached for each child/young person.

Foster Carer Reviews take place on an annual basis. They tend to be driven by the regulatory requirement and target good practice of Carers in securing good outcomes for a child in their care.

LAC reviews for children, when well planned, can be comprehensive and lead to qualitative discussions in respect of the welfare of the child. They can be well attended with all the key people who have input into the child's welfare. This however can fall down when reviews are less planned or arranged at short notice.

FCA recognises that with Team Parenting placements, it becomes much easier to involve the key multi-disciplinary people involved with the child, gaining trust and understanding of the needs of the child and discussions become worthwhile and progressive.

#### **Question 9 – Further Comments**

It would be helpful if children who have been referred to a CAMHS team and who are on a waiting list can be transferred to another CAMHS team waiting list if they move area. Looked After Children who have been frequently moved often do not get a service. Why can't CAMHS teams be in touch with their sister teams so that the child's provision continues if they are moved? With other agencies, for example Education Departments, there is an expectation that services continue. This does not happen with CAMHS teams from our experience.

Information stored on children and their behaviour, how this is shared and who decides whether labels are useful, up to date and appropriate remains an issue. When behaviour pertains to the likelihood of risk to self and or others, how this is recorded remains controversial. Would it be pertinent to be able to submit risk profiles to key individuals with prior knowledge of the child to decide what is added and importantly why some matters are not considered risk? Could a time limit on how long information remains pertinent about a child when unsubstantiated, unproven or no longer observed.

Looked After Children are the most scrutinised of children and as stated earlier some information proves to be wrong, exaggerated or simply a reaction to a particular circumstance. Some information is not reported in context, but the weight given to such information can have long and profound impact on the opportunities for a Looked After Child.

Thank you for this opportunity,

Yours sincerely,



Michelle Jason  
Operations Manager.