

Foster Care Link

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Sandra Jacobs-Walls
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Address	159b Stoke Newington High Street London N16 0NY
Telephone number	020 7923 0330
Email	admin@fostercarelink.com
Registered person	Mohammed Munaf Zina
Registered manager	Peter William Howes
Responsible individual	
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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

Foster Care Link is an independent fostering service first registered with the Commission for Social Care Inspections in February 2004. Its primary aim is 'to provide foster carers for Muslim children in the care system'. Foster Care Link endeavours to provide foster care families that match young people's racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds as closely as possible. At the time of the inspection the fostering service had 17 approved foster carers and 17 young people in placement; all Looked After Children (LAC) and young people at this time were male. A large number of the young people in placement are asylum seekers or unaccompanied minors. Foster Care Link is an independent fostering service based in the Stoke Newington area of the London Borough of Hackney; the office premises are a first floor property easily accessible by bus and rail. Large meetings and foster carers' training sessions are conducted off site at a nearby community resource run by an associated organisation.

Summary

The purpose of the announced inspection of Foster Care Link is to assess the service against key National Minimum Standards and gauge improvements made to the service since the last inspection that was conducted 12 months ago. The inspection process was conducted over five days; its scope is wide ranging. Overall, Foster Care Link is judged to be a good service. It expertly matches looked after Muslim children and young people with foster carers who are able to address the very specifically ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic experiences of young people seeking placements. Staff of the fostering service are well qualified and experienced to provide this unique service and are committed to promoting good outcomes for young people. Muslim foster carers are attracted to the fostering agency because of its primary aim to provide quality substitute family placements for Muslim young people in the public care system. The assessment process for prospective carers and the support and training for approved foster carers are good. Young people are appreciative of the fostering service's efforts to identify well matched and successful foster care placements.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection report had resulted in six requirements. Two of these related to the follow up of local authority information and the monitoring of young people's health care issues. These have been satisfactorily resolved. Another requirement was related to enhancing the educational achievement of young people; this issue has also since been resolved. However, requirements regarding the vetting of members of the fostering service's fostering panel and the consistent evidence of some key records on file remain outstanding. The staffing numbers of the fostering service have improved since the last inspection as an additional qualified social worker has been recruited.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes the health and development of young people in their care. Many of the young people seeking placement with the fostering service are unaccompanied minors or are seeking asylum in the UK. As a result at the point of referral there is often very

limited health information to be shared by the placing authority with the fostering service. Despite this, however, good effort is made by staff of the fostering service and assigned foster carers to ensure that routine healthcare checks are completed soon after the placement is agreed. So, for example young people are promptly registered with GP services and files evidence that where necessary dental and optical appointments are scheduled. The fostering service monitors young people's participation in Looked After Children (LAC) statutory medicals. Young people's files have a dedicated section to record health care issues. However, little or no information is contained in these sections making them redundant. Nonetheless health care issues are well documented in other areas of young people's files such as records of supervisory visits and subsequent action plans. The service is exploring providing young people with specific information relating to sexual health and substance misuse in the near future. Foster carers understand their role in promoting the health care needs of young people in placement and this is enhanced by written guidance available in the service's foster carers' handbook. Similarly, supplementary information to the 'Children's Guide' distributed to young people includes guidance about healthy eating and food hygiene. A foster carer commented on the returned questionnaire, 'I am regularly updated with what health visits need to be done and also have information on healthy eating and lifestyle.' Young people in placement comment that they feel they live a healthy lifestyle and that their foster carers support them to do so. Meals provided by foster carers are nutritiously balanced and culturally appropriate; Halal meals are provided. The fostering service promotes well the emotional wellbeing of young people. Due to the particular social circumstances of some of the young people seeking placements, there is a need to explore issues of post war emotional stress and trauma. The fostering service seeks to provide young people with access to professional mental health support but this is often rejected by young people. The fostering service makes appropriate use of foster carers who share some of the experiences of asylum seeking young people who are in a good position to offer support. Young people also have access to an external Muslim counselling service. Foster Care Link is in a unique position to address the religious and spiritual needs of young people seeking placements. The service primarily offers placements of Muslim young people in Muslim substitute families. The senior supervising social worker is a scholar of the Islam faith and has in depth knowledge of theological and practice issues. Young people therefore have the opportunity to explore, if they wish, their religious and spiritual needs in a safe environment; for some of the young people this is the primary reason they were forced to flee their country of origin. The senior social worker is clear that the fostering service is able to support young people who practise the Islam faith regardless of their level of belief or practise. This is of clear benefit to young people of the Muslim faith seeking foster placements.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes the safety and protection of young people in placement. Staff working directly with young people and prospective and approved foster carers are qualified social workers and have good child protection experience. All staff personnel files evidence that staff have been appropriately recruited and contain all required information as per Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations. Equally, foster carers files evidence that the selection, vetting and assessment process is comprehensive and rigorously conducted. Individual foster carer files evidence the completion of all necessary vetting checks. Foster carers' homes provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment and young people comment they are happy with their surroundings. Assessing and supervisory social workers routinely conduct health and safety checks of foster carers' homes to ensure the safety of young people while in placement.

Where issues regarding accommodation arise this is well explored and documented by supervisory social workers and at times, via the fostering panel process. One foster carer shared, 'Initially he had an introductory weekend with us. He met the family and saw his room. It was (x's) choice and he wanted to stay.' The fostering service has sound child protection policies and procedures in place that are well known to foster carers. Prospective foster carers are required to participate in initial mandatory core training that includes exploration of child protection issues and safe caring. Training is supported by clear written guidance available in the foster carer's handbook. Foster carers' files generally contain individual safe caring plans, however, this was not the case for one foster carer's file that was reviewed. Also missing was a copy of the foster carer's foster care agreement. The responsible individual commented that these documents had been drawn up, but was yet to be placed on file. The assessment process explores thoroughly prospective foster carers' understanding and experience of child rearing practices and their ability to care safely for children and young people. The protection of young people is consistently explored with foster carers during supervisory home visits, some of which are unannounced. The fostering service has in place written policies that address bullying and young people who abscond from placement. One foster carer gave details of intervention she took in order to address bullying the young person was experiencing at his new school. At the time of the inspection the service had received an allegation made against a foster carer by young people in the placement. The service took action in accordance with its own child protection procedures which reflects the host local authority's safeguarding protocols. All related documentation was appropriately maintained and there was evidence of good liaison with the investigating local authority. The foster carer handbook contains written guidance to foster carers about the management of allegations made against foster carers. With regard to the matching process, this is a clear area of strength of the service. Staff of the fostering service give very careful consideration to the specific needs of young people and how best these are to be met by available foster carers. The cultural, religious and linguistic skills and experiences of foster carers are well documented; one young person was specifically placed with foster carers as one of the carers had direct experience of being a refugee in the UK. The experiences of this foster carer enabled the family to offer very valid guidance and support to the young person. Another young person spoke candidly about how life had improved since he had moved to a placement where the language and religion matched his own. He said, 'I think it's a good match, I'm happy here.' The case files of young people detail well the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious practices (if any) of those referred for placements. Staff endeavour to match these identified needs with carers; the service's referral form identifies the particular dialect of languages spoken by young people and in some instances the fostering service has matched young people with foster carers who speak very distinct dialects. Foster carers' files also identify the sect and nature of their religious practice so that young people with similar religious practices can be successfully matched. Foster carers are very much aware of the importance of appropriate matching and are appreciative of the successful efforts of staff to match young people with carers appropriately. Foster carers comment that it is this precision in the matching process that initially attracted them to the fostering agency. One foster carer's file detailed the foster carer's query with the placing authority whether the young person was comfortable not being placed within a family that shared the young person's ethnic background and religious practices, but one that had a differing cultural background. As part of the assessment process prospective foster carers are encouraged to identify the circumstances of young people they feel particularly skilled or unable to manage. This includes issues of disability, challenging behaviour, medical conditions etc. The responsible individual confirms that at the point of referral if the identified needs of young people cannot be met by available foster carers the placement request is refused.

One staff member commented, 'We don't jump at every referral - we take care of our carers.' Placement exemptions are appropriately explored and where exemptions to the approved status of foster carers are agreed, documentation supports decision making. The inspection process on this occasion did not include observation of a fostering panel meeting; the inspector reviewed two previous fostering panel meeting minutes. Records are appropriately detailed and highlight panel discussion and decision making. However, in one instance neither the prospective foster carer or the assessing social worker were present at the panel meeting convened to discuss initial approval of the carer. The panel agreed to approve the prospective carer despite some queries remaining outstanding. Approval was subject to the queries being clarified. It is best practice for outstanding issues to be resolved prior to the approval of prospective foster carers and for decisions such as in this case to be deferred until such a time that queries are clarified. The previous inspection had highlighted that required recruitment checks for panel members were not consistently in place. The responsible individual states that this situation largely remains the same; some files of panel members are missing necessary vetting information. This is not in accordance with Schedule 1 of the regulations and potentially compromises the safety of young people known to the fostering service.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service pays keen attention to issues of equality and diversity at all levels in its functioning. This is clearly a strength of the service and young people seeking placements benefit from the agency's well established policies and practice. The fostering service primarily provides Muslim foster care families for young people of the Muslim faith who are seeking foster care placements. The matching of young people with appropriate foster carers is given very careful consideration and involves consultation with all parties involved. The fostering service has relevant policies and procedures in place that encourage equal opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice; staff have recently participated in 'Working with Faith' training. Prospective foster carers are assessed against their ability to comply with these protocols and issues of diversity are consistently explored thereafter. Young people in placement indicate that their foster placements meet very well their spiritual, cultural, ethnic and linguistic needs and they talk openly about how they are able to take pride in themselves and have improved self belief. Foster carers comment that young people have a strong sense of identity and that Foster Care Link placements enhance young people's self confidence and feelings of self worth. Young people share this view also. With regard to respite or short breaks, the fostering service has the facility to offer this provision to its own foster carers, particularly if they travel abroad and young people are unable to accompany them. At the time of the inspection all young people in placement were male. The fostering service encourages young people to participate in numerous school and community based recreational activities of interest to them. This includes library attendance, swimming, football, cricket, rugby and martial arts. Some of the sporting activities attended are clubs that attract players from communities that reflect the backgrounds of the looked after young people. One foster carer is currently trying to identify a Pakistani cricket club for the young person placed with the family and has purchased cable television channels which offers programming that mirrors the language and ethnic culture of the young person in placement. The young person indicates that this makes him feel like a very valued member of the family. A foster carer's returned questionnaire says of staff of the fostering service, 'They are very supportive of the children and take interest in how they are progressing and if anything needs to be put in place so that they can achieve the best. They help by finding out what is in place in our local community that would interest the children.' With regards to

education, foster carers are very much aware of their role and responsibility in promoting the educational achievement of young people in their care and receive good information and training to support this understanding. Foster carers provide young people with an environment that is conducive to productive learning; most have access to home computers, books and other learning materials. Foster carers are actively involved in the schooling of young people placed with them and act as keen advocates to ensure young people have good opportunities to maximise their academic achievements. One foster carer described how she fought hard to ensure the young person placed with the family was enrolled in a high achieving academic secondary school. Young people's files evidence that foster carers and staff of the fostering service are working collaboratively with educational authorities and community resources to maximise educational achievement; one young person's LAC review is due to be convened at his new school. Young people confirm that they receive adequate assistance in completing homework tasks. One foster carer commented, 'We do a lot of reading which helps with his homework. His reading and writing has improved since he came and we have registered with the library. His English has improved and so has his Urdu. Communication is good.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Foster carers understand their role in promoting contact between young people and their significant others. Due to circumstances of many of the young people seeking placements, their significant others are either abroad or their whereabouts are unknown. Where this is not the case, young people indicate that they have good telephone access to family and friends and the freedom to visit. Written policies are in place that address the issue of contact, however, no information is available in the distributed foster carers' handbook that supports written policies. The fostering service promotes effective consultation with young people in placement. Files evidence consistent meetings between young people and supervising social workers and foster carers and young people confirm that these discussions are useful and relevant. All young people are supplied with the mobile telephone number of the supervising social workers for them to contact privately at any time if they so wish. A foster carer's returned questionnaire states, 'The children are asked on visits how they are doing and if they need support with any problems. They are encouraged to make decisions about their future.' Young people are encouraged to actively participate in statutory LAC reviews and most do attend. Young people comment that they have ample opportunities to share their views and opinions with foster carers. One young person's returned questionnaire states, 'My carers listen to me and they are good for me; anything I tell them, they listen to me. I live fine with them. They are asking me if I am ok with them and I say "yes I am."' In observing the interaction between one young person and his foster carer and the family, it is clear that the young person is at ease in expressing himself and sharing his views within the household. Young people and foster carers are aware of procedures to make complaints; relevant information is contained in both the foster carers' handbook and the children's guide.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service prepares young people for adulthood and there are relevant policies in place to support the efforts of foster carers and staff. Where appropriate, supervising social workers work with foster carers to increase the independence of young people. Foster carers confirm that they have attended training focussed on young people preparing to leave local

authority care. Most of the young people in placement with the fostering service at the time of the inspection were secondary school age and in their late teens. One foster carer shared how she was helping the young person develop independent living skills in preparation for when he moved to live independently within the wider community. The young person confirmed that he was learning to laundry his clothes, cook meals and budget. Foster Care Link placements encourage young people to save, shop sensibly and locate food items that are culturally appropriate within the community. Positive post placement relationships between carers and young people which are mutually agreed are encouraged especially where continued support needs are identified. With regards to foster carers' payments and fees, foster carers confirm that they receive prompt payment of allowances, fees and expenses at the expected rate. The foster carers' handbook includes details of the fostering service's policies on fostering allowances.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Foster Care Link has in place a clear statement of aims and objectives that accurately outlines services provided. The fostering service's Statement of Purpose is a well written, reader friendly document that contains all information as outlined in Standard 1 of the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards. The children's guide is a well written guide for young people that contains pertinent information for young people in placement. Young people confirm that they receive this information at the start of placements. The Statement of Purpose documents accurately reflects the service's written policies and procedures and written guidance available to staff and foster carers. Staff of the fostering service are managed and organised effectively. Staff indicate that they receive an induction, regular one to one supervision and annual appraisals; staff personnel records confirm this to be the case. Informal case discussion and advice is freely sought and provided within the team. The staff group is very well qualified and experienced to conduct their duties and is sufficient in numbers to achieve the aims and objectives of the service. There are clear lines of accountability. The staff group works cohesively to ensure that outcomes for young people are positive. One staff member commented, 'We work well together as a team, everyone is positive and approachable.' Another staff member commented about the service's management, 'We're a well run agency, we are small and have the opportunity to concentrate on quality. There is good support from the directors.' The fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers; this is outlined in the Statement of Purpose document and foster carers' handbook. Foster carers' files evidence that for the vast majority of carers supervisory visits were consistently conducted. The exception to this, however, was one foster carer's file where documented evidence suggested that no visits had taken place during a four month period. The responsible individual indicated that it was likely that file documentation confirming interim visits had not yet been placed on file. Foster carers are very satisfied with the level of support they receive from the fostering service. One foster carer said of the support they received, 'It's great support. The link worker is on twenty-four, seven. When I call or text, he always gets back to me' Another carer commented, 'They're very supportive; they listen to you and are very helpful. They deal with issues.' The service's administrative records are maintained as required. With regards to the case records of young people, these are generally well maintained by the fostering service. It is acknowledged that due to the particular circumstances of many of the young people that there is often limited information to be shared by the placing authority at the point of referral. There is good documentation on file of staff consistently requesting information from representatives of placing authorities. One foster carer's returned questionnaire comments, 'We are always given as much information as the fostering agency knows.' Another foster carer's returned

questionnaire states, 'It is very comforting to know I can have help if I need at any time. I can get support and understanding from people who know what they are doing.'

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
6	evidence all foster carers' individual safe caring documents on file (Regulation 11)	31 December 2007
15	follow clear procedures for the recruitment and selection of members of the fostering panel to ensure children are protected (Regulation 20)	31 December 2007
24	conduct regular supervisory visits to foster carers' homes which are consistently documented on file (Regulation 17)	31 December 2007
6	evidence all foster care agreements on file. (Regulation 28)	31 December 2007

Recommendations

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

- consider making better use of the dedicated health section in young people's case files.(NMS 12)
- consider including written guidance in the foster carers' handbook about promoting contact between young people and their significant others. (NMS 10)
- consider deferring decisions regarding the approval of foster carers at the foster care panel if there are outstanding queries. (NMS 30)

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.