

Foster Care Link

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 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

Foster Care Link is an independent fostering service. 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. The service provides foster care placements that are short term, long term, respite and in need on an emergency basis.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Overall the service is judged to be good with some outstanding features. Outcomes for children and young people progressively improve from the point that they are first placed with the agency's foster carers throughout the duration of the placement. The fostering service pays good attention to children and young people's health care matters and ensures that identified health care needs are well met. Children and young people thrive academically within placement and their general learning and development are excellent.

The service expertly recruits, assesses and supports Muslim carers to provide quality care to children and young people of the Islamic faith. The keen level of expertise demonstrated in these processes regularly results in almost the exact matching of placements with looked after children. Children and young people benefit highly from this and as a result placements are successful and sustained.

Children and young people are safe in placement and staff make good efforts to consult effectively with them throughout. The fostering service's promotion of equality and diversity is excellent, paying particular attention to children and young people's identity issues which in turn has an impact on their emotional well-being and sense of self-worth. Children and young people indicate that this is of great importance to them. The service has a good track record of working effectively with asylum seeking and unaccompanied minors.

Staff and foster carers are well trained and highly experienced. The fostering service provides keen support and supervision to both. The organisation's quality assurance systems are strong, as is the leadership of the service. Partnership working with external agencies, particularly local authorities, is creative and effective. The fostering service is efficiently run and as a result, outcomes for children and young people are very positive.

The agency should consider, however, sharing its child protection and missing person's procedures with relevant local authority personnel and the expansion of the fostering panel's membership.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection resulted in four actions. These related to foster carers' safe caring documents, the recruitment of fostering panel members, the consistent documentation of supervisory visits and foster care agreements. This inspection notes that all outstanding actions have been resolved satisfactorily and as a result outcomes for looked after children have improved. The previous inspection also made three recommendations. These related to case file information, written guidance regarding contact and the deferral of recommendations at the fostering panel. This inspection notes that all recommendations have also been addressed by the service satisfactorily; children and young people now benefit from these improvements to service operation.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people live in healthy environments where their physical, emotional and psychological health is promoted. They are able to readily access services necessary to meet their health care needs. Staff and foster carers ensure that children and young people in placement are promptly registered with primary health care services and all known health and medical needs are highlighted at placement negotiations. This ensures placements adequately meet health care needs of children and young people seeking foster care placements with the agency.

Looked after children's medical and health care needs are explored well during supervisory visits, and staff and foster carers encourage children and young people to be mindful of living healthy lifestyles. The service's children's guide provides young people with useful information about healthy eating and food hygiene. Staff and foster carers have access to good training opportunities that address health and medical needs. This includes first aid training. Foster carers' practice is supported by clear written guidance with regards to health promotion. Where specialist medical advice and support are required, foster carers proactively seek relevant information via a number of differing channels. This includes the use of the internet and health care professionals such as incontinence nurses who offer support and advice with regards to enuresis.

Staff and foster carers have access to comprehensive written guidance about the safe administration of medication and are aware of the record keeping which should be maintained in relation to this. Children and young people have access to a range of sport and physical activities that promote exercise. Staff and foster carers encourage them to identify appropriate interests to support this ethos. Some sporting activities identified include gym attendance, participation in cricket and football, boxing classes and swimming.

Children and young people live in foster homes which provide good private space and properties that are comfortable, well furnished and decorated. Foster carers'

homes are clean, hygienic and homely in appearance. Staff and foster carers have access to clear written guidance about health and safety issues and all foster carer homes are subject to a thorough health and safety inspection check at least annually. Children and young people are happy with their surroundings and can negotiate the sharing of bedrooms with their siblings only, with the agreement of the placing authority. Children and young people's bedrooms are appropriately decorated and furnished and meet their needs and individual tastes.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people feel safe and are safe. Issues of child protection and safe caring are high on the agency's agenda. Good attention is paid to the safeguarding of looked after children. Staff and foster carers regularly receive advice, information and training that promote the protection of children and young people. Children indicate that they have positive relationships with their foster carers and feel that this contributes to their feelings of safety. Foster carers proactively advise young people of the danger of risk taking and develop reasonable strategies to minimise risk. For example, some foster carers have a clear understanding with young people about remaining in contact with them while young people are away from the home, particularly in the evening. Staff ensure that supervisory visits routinely explore issues of child protection and that fostering households pay good attention to promoting the welfare and safety of children and young people.

Staff of the fostering service make effective use of the agency's newly developed risk assessment tool. This gauges the level of risk in relation to a range of activities and behaviours and offers foster carers clear guidance in addressing such behaviours. This assists to minimise risk and help keep children and young people safe. All foster carer households have a relevant and current safe caring policy in place. This is important to ensure that conduct in the home encourages safe practices.

Children and young people very rarely go missing from their foster care placements. Staff and foster carers have access to good written guidance that outlines policies and procedures to be followed in the event of unauthorised absences and looked after children who are deemed 'missing.' These protocols are yet to be shared with relevant bodies to ensure compliance with the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care procedures. The fostering service has an effective out-of-hours duty service in operation to support foster carers in the event of a child or young person going missing.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people share sound relationships with their foster families and largely behave appropriately. There have been no serious or significant incidents reported by foster carers or the agency since the last inspection. Placements are

positive, secure and sustained and children and young people clearly benefit from this. Foster carers are keen to provide looked after children with rewarding experiences that enhance the potential for positive outcomes in the future. Children and young people are appreciative of their foster families' efforts to provide them with an environment that promotes and supports positive behaviour. On rare occasions where young people display challenging behaviour foster carers document events carefully and share observations with staff and the local authority. Supervisory visits focus on behavioural issues. All children and young people's files evidence completed risk assessments that help identify actual and potential behavioural issues. These assessments offer foster carers strategies to minimise risk to children and young people's safety.

Children and young people participate in activities that are of interest to them and they engage in leisure activities. These enhance self-esteem and help to develop essential social skills. This is particularly crucial for asylum-seeking and unaccompanied minors who are new to the UK and are unfamiliar with cultural norms and traditions. Some young people are linked in community-based organisations offering services to young people who, for a range of issues are separated from their own families. Such resources prove invaluable to displaced young people who are unable to maintain links with family and friends abroad. Foster carers encourage young people to access news and information from their countries of origin. Some young people indicate they very much enjoy watching culturally specific television programmes, including 'Bollywood' movies. A number of young people also enjoy participating in a range of sporting activities such as football, boxing, gymnastics and cricket. Others participate in activities such as camping, networking with friends via the internet and participating in Ambulance Cadets.

The promotion of educational attainment of children and young people in placement is a clear strength of the fostering service and again is very high on the service's agenda. This is of clear benefit to children and young people. Foster carers proactively and consistently encourage children and young people to maximise their educational potential and success. Foster carers have access to written guidance and training that promotes educational attainment. Supervisory visits consistently explore children and young people's educational development. Foster carers are committed to ensuring children and young people have good command of the English language as this is seen as vital to educational progression. Many young people for whom English is not their primary language undertake English language classes to improve communication skills.

Staff and foster carers work effectively with educational professionals to ensure educational needs are well met. The service provides practical assistance where this is necessary, for example, travel cost to escort children to and from school. Foster carers are equally committed to ensuring children and young people have what they need to succeed educationally. For example, some foster carers have decided to purchase school uniforms and laptops at personal costs to themselves. Foster carers' homes are well equipped with play and learning materials appropriate to the learning and developmental needs of children and young people they care for.

Foster carers and the service as a whole are proud of the academic achievement of current and former looked after children, some of whom have graduated from university and others who achieve other accolades. All current children and young people in placement at the time of the inspection are attending either nursery, mainstream school or seeking part-time employment.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service makes good efforts to consult with children and young people, who feel listened to as a result. Their wishes and feelings are taken into account as part of the decision-making process with regards to care planning. Young people indicate that their foster carers and staff of the fostering service routinely enquire about their satisfaction with placement progress and issues. Child supervision records on file, confirm that staff regularly meet with children and young people for private interview. The fostering service makes accessible translation and interpreting services as required. Children and young people participate in formal arenas such as looked after children statutory reviews and foster carers annual reviews and make their views known. Children and young people have access to independent advocates who act on their behalf.

The fostering service provides looked after children with personalised care that meets their needs and promotes all aspects of their individual identity. Foster Care Link fostering service is specifically geared towards the recruitment, assessment and support of Muslim foster carers who in turn can provide high quality placements for children and young people of the Islamic faith. As a consequence, the service pays expert attention to the identity needs of looked after children and how best these needs can be met by the service. The fostering service is particularly skilled in meeting the specific needs of asylum-seeking and unaccompanied minors and has an excellent track record in providing quality and successful foster care placements to this target population.

Children and young people exercise choice in the meals they eat, which are largely culturally appropriate, although not necessarily so, if children indicate a different dietary preference. Equally, children and young people have choice with regards to the purchase of clothes and personal requisites. The service ensures appropriate funds are made available for this and individual personal allowances.

Children and young people are supported and encouraged to develop and maintain constructive contact with family members and friends if their whereabouts are known and it is safe to do so. The fostering service understands well its duty to promote contact, and staff and foster carers have access to clear written guidance and training. Children and young people's case files are explicit in outlining contact arrangements especially where contact is supervised or prohibited. Supervisory visits regularly review contact arrangements and the impact on children and young people. Where there are negative reactions, this is reported to the placing authority. Children and young people who originate from outside the UK have access to technological

systems for face-to-face liaison. Some young people also access social networking systems to maintain communication with friends and family. Where family members and friends are local to foster care households and it is safe to do so, young people enjoy social visits at foster carers' homes.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are prepared for and supported into adulthood. The fostering service provides foster carers with support and advice regarding the promotion of independence. Such matters are covered in the foster carers' handbook, supervision and training. Foster carers work with young people to help them develop the key skills they will need to live independently. This includes shopping, meal preparation, managing finances, public transport and travel.

Staff and foster carers ensure that the transition from foster care placement to alternative living arrangements is as smooth as possible. Many former fostered children maintain good contact with their foster carers and are often considered as extended members of the foster carers' family. These links are strong and, for example, some young people attend family celebrations of their former carers and in turn invite them to key celebratory occasions such as their university graduation.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Overall, the service has excellent arrangements in place for supporting staff, foster carers, children and young people. The service's Statement of Purpose clearly defines the services provided to all children and young people and it details the support available for foster carers. The service gives children its children's guide. This document provides children and young people with informative and creative information about its services. Children and young people benefit from the document's age-appropriate language and creative graphics. This document is also available in community languages. This gives children who do not speak or read English good access to key information.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The organisation operates within an anti-discriminatory framework and this is of benefit to children and young people. Foster carers and staff of the service are familiar with policy guidance relating to equality and diversity and they have access to relevant training opportunities. The service pays expert attention to the identity needs of looked after children and how best these needs can be met by the service. For example, the assessment process of potential foster carers includes careful scrutiny of issues such as religious practice, if any, linguistic skills, experience of racism, family dynamics, and regional and ethnic differentials. This acts to provide local authorities seeking to place children and young people of the Muslim faith with substitute families that best reflect the identity of looked after children. Issues of language are well met; the

service has a good track record of facilitating interpreters and translation services. The fostering service ensures children, young people and carers have access to internet translation applications.

The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports Muslim foster carers who offer a range of placements that meet the needs of children well. The fostering service has effective strategies in place that target potential foster carers to meet the needs of the population it seeks to serve. Since the last inspection, the organisation has established a satellite office based in the North West of England to meet the needs of looked after Muslim children in this region.

The service has recently appointed a marketing officer to coordinate publicity distribution and execute the service's marketing strategy in an effort to recruit additional carers in the London area. This is in an effort to provide looked after children with a greater pool of Muslim foster carers to facilitate increased placement choice, opportunity and experience. The marketing strategy is wide ranging, including effective networking within the Muslim communities and media.

The service manages all initial enquires from the public promptly and efficiently. As a result there is minimal delay in reviewing applicants' information. Staff of the service conduct initial home visits to potential applicants in order to establish their suitability to become foster carers. Applicants, if deemed suitable, then undergo a robust assessment process that thoroughly explores their background, qualities, skills and experience necessary to become foster carers for the service. Staff are highly skilled in the completion of assessments which are vigorous in their exploration. Foster care applicants are subject to all vetting checks as required by the regulations and these are clearly evident on files. The service's vigour in the assessment and vetting process of potential foster carers protects children and young people from those not suited to become foster carers.

Staff of the service are timely in completing foster carers' annual reviews and there are clear mechanisms in place to ensure this process is robust. Where there are concerns for the foster carer's performance, or significant changes to foster carers' circumstances, staff facilitate the early review of re-approval before the fostering panel.

The service has written policies and procedures with regard to the recruitment to and maintenance of its fostering panel. The service continues to explore the expansion of panel membership in the development of its central list. The fostering panel plays a key role in the service's quality assurance systems, providing feedback to staff on information presented to panel meetings and exploring the improvement of service provision and delivery. The service's fostering panel has expertise in key areas that ensure recommendations made are sound and based on panel member expertise. The fostering panel has access to medical and legal advice but lacks membership representation from an independent foster carer or a health care specialist. Panel meetings are consistently quorate and the administration of panel meetings is efficient. Records of meetings are accurate and a true reflection of discussion. The service's decision-making process with regard to foster carer approval and re-

approval is sound and the service maintains clear documentation of this process. Foster carers and prospective foster carers are promptly informed of decisions.

The service's matching process ensures that the holistic needs of children and young people are well met by foster care placements. Staff give careful consideration to placement objectives and the skills, knowledge and experience of available foster carers. The process is robust in addressing specific identity needs such as religious, linguistic, cultural and gender needs. This is a clear strength of the service and the pool of foster carers available to the service often results in exact placement matches for Muslim children and young people. This is of clear benefit to looked after children and acts to enhance placement success. Where placements are not an exact match, for example, linguistically, the service offers creative support such as internet translation applications and easy access to interpreters and translation services to support placements.

The service is well managed with an effective management structure. There are clear lines of accountability and all managers and social work staff are qualified social workers possessing extensive experience of child development, child protection, and the fostering task. Fostering staff are well supported through the provision of training, regular and meaningful supervision and annual appraisals. There is effective leadership of the staff group and its operation. This is of clear benefit to looked after children and foster carers.

The fostering service is financially viable and there is an effective action plan to enhance continued service development.

The service has robust recruitment practices that are supported by clear policies and procedures. All necessary vetting checks as outlined by the regulations are in place and this is well evidenced.

Foster carers receive the training and development they need to provide quality care to children and young people in placement. This inspection notes significant improvement to this aspect of the fostering service's function since the last inspection and is of clear benefit to children and young people. The service has a foster care training strategy that ensures that all foster carers have access to training processes and opportunities as outlined in the national minimum standards, to help improve outcomes for children and young people. Training opportunities includes key training around child protection and safeguarding, health care issues such as first aid and a host of other relevant subject matters. Foster carers are appreciative of the scope of training offered by the service and feel better equipped to meet the needs of children and young people. Staff of the service maintain keen records of training attended by foster carers and of individual development plans. This helps to enhance the caring practices of foster carers and improve the quality of care provided to children and young people.

Staff's access to training opportunities is equally resourceful. The service has a good quality staff training and development strategy which addresses the specific development needs of individual staff members. Newly employed staff participate in

an effective induction programme and the service encourages staff to pursue training events that are of interest to them. Staff have good access to both internal and external training opportunities.

The fostering service's supervision and support of foster carers are excellent, and this is viewed by foster carers as a clear strength of the service. Foster carers indicate that staff are highly visible, make themselves available and are easily accessed. This level of support extends to foster carers, children and young people, all of whom have access to the mobile telephone numbers of staff, who are technically on call at all times. This is the basis of the service's out-of-hours operation. The service facilitates peer support groups that are largely organised and managed by foster carers themselves, with input from staff as required. Upon approval, foster carers become members of a national foster care advocacy service.

The service allocates a qualified social worker to supervise each foster care household, and supervisory visits are frequent. These meetings have a clear purpose and monitor placement progress and issues. The needs of looked after children are central to discussion and decision making. Staff consistently conduct unannounced visits to foster care households on at least an annual basis and foster carers have access to comprehensive written guidance via the agency's foster carer handbook. Managers regularly review and update information contained in the handbook.

The service has clear written guidance about the making of complaints, and the management of allegations and procedures are clear. Since the last inspection the service has received no allegations or complaints against staff, foster carers or the service as a whole. No notification of significant events to Ofsted or other responsible authorities has been necessary since the last inspection. The fostering service, however, is yet to share its child protection procedures with relevant local authority personnel as required by the national minimum standards.

Managers of the service keenly monitor and control the functioning of the fostering service as required by the regulations. The service has responded effectively to legislative changes to the fostering regulations and this is reflected well in revised policy, procedures and other written guidance. The service produces quarterly financial reports that confirm its financial viability.

Foster carers report they receive allowance payment promptly and at the rate expected. This process has been enhanced by payments now being made electronically. The service has clear policies and procedures that address issues of finance and additional advice and information are available to foster carers in their handbooks.

The service's administrative support is effective and efficient in meeting the operational needs of the service. Newly developed information technology systems have enhanced the transfer and communication of information from the services London office and the North West regional sub office. Staff maintain clear and comprehensive documentation, which is supported by written guidance with regard to recording. Staff equally support foster carers to maintain relevant records that

detail placement issues and progress. Staff make good efforts to work collaboratively with placing authorities to encourage the efficient exchange of key information.

One local authority representative comments about the service: 'It has been my experience that Foster Care Link provide excellent service. They have always been prompt and well organised with their responses to our requests. They have always, in my experience done their best to offer as close and appropriate a match as possible when suggesting carers. The placements that I have made have all been good. The carers have clearly made appropriate efforts to ensure that the placement is as successful as possible and have been supported in this by the agency. It has been our collective experience that that agency is helpful and good at working hand-in-hand with the social workers to provide the service required to give the children the best possible experience they can of being in care.'

The service ensures that children are cared for in line with their placement plan. The service has rigorous placement planning processes in place. For example, the service will hold 'courtesy' planning meetings between staff and foster carers when the local authority has failed to facilitate a placement planning meeting. This ensures that within the agency all parties share a joint understanding of placement objectives. Staff and foster carers encourage children and young people to participate fully in formal planning meetings and looked after children review meetings to ensure they participate in placement and care planning processes. Staff of the fostering service assist children and young people to secure independent advocates if they so wish.

The fostering service is effectively and efficiently run. As a result, children and young people make significant progress while in placement and their outcomes are very positive.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- share the agency's missing persons procedures with relevant bodies to ensure compliance with local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols (NMS 5.6)
- ensure the fostering agency's child protection procedures are submitted for consideration and comment to the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and to the Local Authority Designated Officer for Child Protection NMS 22.4)
- consider expanding the central list of panel members to include a foster carer and an individual with health care experience as it relates to looked after children. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4; Fostering Services 5.8)