

Foster Care Link

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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, parent and child placements and placements required on an emergency basis.

Since the last inspection, the agency has successfully expanded to offer foster care placements via its satellite office based in the North West region of the country. Between the two offices, the agency currently has 24 approved foster care households with 21 Looked After Children (LAC) in placement.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The inspection finds that this fostering agency offers an outstanding quality service to looked after children in foster care placements. The outcomes for children and young people are excellent.

This fostering agency has significantly improved its services to Looked After Children (LAC) since the last inspection in July 2011. The service negotiates and maintains

very successful and stable foster placements. Children and young people, including several sibling groups have their welfare safeguarded and promoted. Unplanned endings are very rare and much below the national average. As a result, children and young people thrive in safe and stable placements, enjoying relationships that are nurturing and positive.

The fostering service facilitates effective consultation with children, young people, foster carers and other stakeholders. This ensures that a range of viewpoints, both internal and external help shape the development and improvement of the service.

Safeguarding practice and monitoring is a priority in this fostering agency. There are effective, proactive systems in place to ensure that children and young people are kept safe from harm or abuse. Thorough assessments of foster carers' skills are conducted and robust risk assessments are carried out. These ensure that children and young people's welfare is promoted and that they experience positive outcomes.

The quality of care provided by carers and staff is of a very high standard. Foster carers are adept at helping children and young people catch up on the things they have missed out on and feel safe. Children and young people's progress is closely tracked and monitored.

The agency's recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers are excellent. Staff are well supported and supervised and their partnership working with external professionals is very effective. The fostering panel is well organised and efficiently run. Staff and foster carers have access to quality training opportunities.

Leaders and managers provide very effective leadership and have a clear vision and ambition for the service. The fostering service is well managed, and there are strong quality assurance systems in place to ensure the service functions efficiently. The Registered Manager is very experienced and the entire staff team know the children and young people very well. Leaders regularly and efficiently monitor the progress they are making. All staff are very committed to ensuring the very best outcomes for children and young people in their care. Managers are very accessible and approachable to foster carers, staff, and children and young people alike. All those involved in the agency have high aspirations for future service development and its continued improvement.

No requirements have been raised at the inspection. One recommendation is made, relating to membership of the fostering panel.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- consider recruiting a representative of child health to the agency's central list to

inform and support panel recommendations. (NMS14.8)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The experiences, progress and outcomes for children and young people are excellent. Children and young people are very well cared for by the service and receive care that meets often very specific identified needs. Children and young people are expertly matched with their foster carers who understand what is required to ensure all placement objectives are achieved. Young people speak candidly about the significant difference the agency had made to their lives. This is the case in particular for unaccompanied minors, seeking asylum. These young people are highly appreciative of the expert advice and support that staff and their foster carers have provided. This results in the making significant progress and very positive outcomes. One young person comments, 'I was with another foster carer and didn't like it. I wanted to move. Here they understand me, care for me and help me. I'm now doing very well'.

Children and young people feel safe and very much at ease with their foster families and they have excellent opportunities to get to know their new families prior to moving. It is the fostering service's practice, where possible, to hold introductory visits between the children and young people and their prospective foster carers prior to placement agreement. This allows all those involved, but especially Looked After Children, an opportunity to gain an opinion and share their feelings about placements before they are agreed.

Children and young people have very good opportunities to express their wishes, feelings and views prior to and throughout their placements. The agency makes exceptional efforts to ensure that children and young people have appropriate means to communicate their views. Some of those in placement are unaccompanied asylum seeking minors and are new to the UK; some speak little or very limited English. The agency ensures children and young people make use of staff's linguistic skills, have good access to interpreters, and where the required language is obscure; they have use of relevant IT software. Where language is not a barrier, children and young people are equally encouraged to openly share their feelings and views. Children and young people regularly meet in private and speak with agency supervising social workers, and routinely participate in their statutory reviews and foster carers' annual reviews. Children and young people also participate in the agency's annual questionnaire survey. This encourages children and young people to share their views about how the agency should further develop the fostering service.

Whenever possible the agency tries to place sibling groups together.. Where this is not the case they enjoy safe and appropriate access to family members and others who are significant to them. Where children and young people are new to the UK, they are linked with organisations such as the Red Cross to help them maintain contact with their family abroad. This is important to ensure that children and young people remain connected to their family of origin and to assist with the development

of a positive identity. Children and young people very much feel loved and well cared for by their foster families; some benefit from the security and permanence of being placed long term with their foster carers.

Children and young people's identity needs are exceptionally well met by the fostering service and at all levels; issues of equality and diversity are well explored. For example, as required, children and young people have access to translation and interpreting services to ensure any language barrier is minimised. Children and young people are encouraged to explore and celebrate individual faith practices, if they so wish and placements are supportive in helping looked after children understand their backgrounds and the events that have happened to them. As a result children and young people have increased self-confidence and self-esteem. One foster carer said of her looked after a child who borrowed a prayer hat, 'M attended prayers at the Masjid (mosque) and has been wearing a prayer hat that he borrowed from a friend. M said it suited him better while looking in the mirror and asked if he could keep it!'

Young people have good access to information from the fostering agency with regards to making complaints. The fostering agency's two children's guides have very clear information about its complaints procedure. These guides are available in community languages so that key information is readily accessible. Children and young people's case files evidence routine enquiries being made about their satisfaction with placements. Since the last inspection, no complaints have been made against the fostering service. Children and young people have great influence on their day-to-day care. This is particularly in relation to agreement around placement choice, participation in events and activities, and options with regards to educational provision. Young people know whom to approach if they are unhappy. They essentially call upon the support of their foster carers and staff of the fostering agency to support them tackle issues of bullying and discrimination. Children and young people have access to independent advocates if they so wish.

Children and young people live healthy lifestyles and their individual health and medical care needs are very well met by the service. For example, children and young people have prompt access to primary health care soon after placement start; they routinely attend annual LAC medicals, and immunization checks are kept current. Children and young people benefit from effective monitoring systems that highlight among many other matters, health care issues that need to be addressed. As required, children and young people have access to community based mental health services to assist their emotional and psychological development. Children and young people also have good access to other specialist health care services. In recent months these have included the input of dieticians and access to enuresis clinics. In an effort to further promote healthy lifestyle, children and young people receive upon placement start a booklet focussed on healthy diets and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The booklet is a creative, informative, easy read to assist young people make healthy choices. Foster carers are instrumental in ensuring children and young people's health outcomes as positive and that they are equipped to deal with relevant and sensitive health care issues. Recent training discussions have focussed on issues such as Female Genital Mutilation, a key issue for some of the communities

served.

Children and young people achieve educational success and their academic progress increases the longer the placement continues. 100% of children and young people currently are engaged with educational provision, and most enjoy 100% school/college attendance. This is a remarkable achievement. Children and young people benefit from the agency's commitment to promoting educational success, which in turn motivates them to be ambitious and aim high. Some young people make exceptional academic progress since being in placement and have received high recognition from their schools. Many young people who previously spoke no English, now have a fair command of the language, which assists to enhance their development, independence and general experience of the UK. Children and young people enjoy celebrating their achievements via the agency's annual Achievement Awards Evening.

Children and young people participate in a wide range of recreational activities that are largely community based. Typically such activities include participation at local community youth groups, gym attendance, participation in professional sporting clubs; dance, holidays and trips out etc. If desired, children and young people are able to access spiritual guidance in line with their chosen level of participation with their faith. Some are not practicing Muslims, while others choose to attend Mosque, read the Qur'an and celebrate key festivals of Islam.

Early on in the placement, children and young people are encouraged to develop practical skills and emotional strategies to support them taking personal responsibility for their actions and behaviour. Foster carers understand and make appropriate use of both imposed boundaries and rewards to promote positive behaviour. One foster carer's documentation of the management of her foster child's poor behaviour reads, 'I told him that tomorrow was a new day and a new beginning. The next morning he gave me a hug and apologised for his behaviour last night'.

Young people are prepared for, and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their potential and achieve economic well-being. Foster carers provide children and young people with creative opportunities to take measured risks and to learn independence skills. These are appropriate to their age and ability. Older young people are supported to develop practical skills such as shopping, completing household chores and budgeting to prepare them for independent living. Some former looked after children remain in close contact with their foster families and continue to seek emotional support. One foster carer says of his former looked after child, 'Oh, he's always here. He is our family'. A small number of young people remain living with their foster families post 18 years as part of the 'Staying Put' initiative. This is clearly to their benefit as it allows a stable placement to progress, supporting the young person's continued development.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The quality of care offered by the fostering service is excellent, and this significantly contributes to the positive experiences and progress made by children and young people. Foster carers enjoy sound relationships with children and young people in their care and are committed to supporting them to meet their full potential. Feedback from foster carers overwhelmingly echo this sentiment. One foster carer comments, 'I just love these kids, and they need me. There's been such a change - if you had met them before! I feel I have played in big part in making them happy, and that's all that matters'.

Children and young people are carefully matched to their foster placements to ensure that individual needs are clearly identified and met. There is a formal process in place and the matching exercise is robustly conducted in each case. Staff make good use of matching recording tools that highlight how matching decisions are reached. This is important to ensure that decision-making is clear and transparent. The agency consistently requests comprehensive information from placing authorities to help them and foster carers make the most appropriate placements. Where information from the placing authority is not received, staff make persistent efforts to retrieve missing information. Foster carers are very much involved in placement negotiation and planning; they are clear that they experience no pressure from the agency to accept referrals. The specific needs of children and young people are thoroughly considered during the matching process and throughout the duration of the placement. In line with its statement of purpose, the fostering service is particularly skilled in matching well the ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic needs of children and young people. In some instances, even the region of children's geographical origins can be successfully matched with foster carers.

The fostering service has plans in place to increase the current number of approved foster carers both in London and in the North West region. Current planning involves the increased use of IT and the service's continually developing website. 'Word of mouth' continues to prove the service's most effective method of attracting new foster care applicants. Managers and staff are clear that the agency's primary focus and commitment is attracting, recruiting and assessing quality applicants.

Staff complete robust foster carer assessments to ensure applicants can safely meet the needs of children. Assessments are comprehensive, analytical and informed by research. They identify the competencies and strengths foster carers have or need to develop. All are completed within specified timeframes. Applicants' preparation to become approved foster carers are thorough and conducted with appropriate depth and rigor. The fostering service has clear systems in place to review the continued suitability of foster carers to care for children and young people. The reviewing process is efficient, comprehensive and conducted annually.

The support of approved foster carers is outstanding. Foster carers receive excellent support from staff through regular visits, telephone calls, supervision and support groups. Foster carers overwhelmingly place the quality of support they receive from the staff group as being exemplary. Feedback from foster carers about the agency's support is consistently positive. One foster carer comments, 'The team are great. You really feel appreciated and know you are making a difference. You can contact

staff anytime, for any little thing. It doesn't feel like work, we're like a family'. Another foster carer comments, 'It's all about the kids, and we all try to give 110%'. Foster carers feel highly valued within the agency. They feel a key strength of the agency is the support they receive to help achieve positive outcomes for children and young people.

Foster carers are also highly appreciative of the support they receive from other professionals employed by the agency to support placements. This is particularly the case for the outreach mentor, based in the North West office. This individual works closely with foster carers caring for children and young people who exhibit challenging behaviour. In these cases they have the opportunity to participate in creative activities while being guided to explore alternative methods to managing their behaviour. This support enhances placement success and longevity.

The fostering service recognises the importance of training and offers a very wide ranging programme of training. This ensures foster carers receive continuous professional development opportunities. Most foster carers are very experienced and bring with them a wealth of knowledge and skills. The vast majority of foster carers have completed the Training, Support and Development (TDS) Standards. All new carers are also working towards completing the TDS standards in order to increase their professional practice. Foster carers are extremely complimentary about the training provided by the fostering service. Training opportunities for foster carers have improved over the past year to include training that addresses risk-taking and challenging behaviour. Foster carers routinely participate in training focussed on child sexual exploitation, missing persons, and self-harming behaviour. This is in response to the changing needs of children and young people referred to the agency for placement.

The service's fostering panel is effective, efficient and well-managed with strong leadership via the chairperson. There are clear written procedures in place that support practice. The fostering panel has a clear and effective quality assurance role and has influence in a wider context within the fostering service, such as policy development. All panel meetings are quorate and members of the central list have extensive experience in their respective fields of expertise. The fostering panel is yet to secure the participation of a representative from child health. This will prove beneficial to panel deliberation and recommendations. Panel meeting minutes are appropriately detailed and accurate. Decision-making about approval or re-approval of foster carers is timely and appropriate. Panel members have access to relevant training opportunities.

Foster carers are committed to including children and young people within their family life and long-term arrangements are in place to provide permanence to young people. Partnership working is effective and foster carers understand their roles and accountabilities. They work closely with local authority social workers and supervising social workers within the agreed delegated authority. This ensures that timely decisions are made in the best interest of children and young people.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The fostering service staff team and foster carers ensure that the safety and well-being of children and young people is paramount. The service ensures that foster carers are aware of the vulnerabilities of the young people with whom they are working and are well informed about the underlying causes of the behaviours they can exhibit. This is supported by relevant, quality training focussed on safeguarding issues and regular supervisory visits that consistently focus on safe care.

The assessment, preparation, training and supervision of foster carers is excellent and emphasises safeguarding children and young people. Comprehensive policies and procedures are in place to guide foster carers and supervising social workers in caring for children and young people safely. These are regularly updated to ensure compliance with developing guidance and legislation.

Foster carers receive a range of safeguarding training, which starts during their Skills to Foster preparation course and continues throughout their fostering career. The staff team routinely ensure that supervisory visits explore and scrutinize issues of child protection as do foster carers' annual reviews and LAC reviews. Staff regularly interview children and young people in private to obtain their views of placement progress and issues. Staff consistently complete, at a minimum, one unannounced home visits to each fostering household per year. This is to further monitor the appropriateness and safety of fostering placements.

Foster carers confirm that they understand the impact of abuse upon young people's behaviour. Consequently, they are guided to respond to children and young people's changing needs for protection. This is particularly in cases where young people self-harm or are persistently absent from the placement without permission. In these instances, staff and foster carers demonstrate good knowledge and skills in dealing sensitively and effectively with such behaviour. Children and young people are encouraged to develop an understanding of how to protect themselves. For example, every child and young person at placement start receives a creative guide about keeping themselves safe. The guide includes useful information about bullying, safe internet and social media use, safe use of public transport and mobile phones.

Children and young people feel their foster carers and staff of the fostering service take their views seriously. They are aware how complaints are made. Any risks they are exposed to are discussed with them on an individual basis. Identified behaviour hazards are assessed so that children and young people are helped to develop and have new, safe experiences. Staff ensure that documented risk assessments and safe care policies are relevant to each individual in placement. These are consistently reviewed and updated to enhance the safe care of children and young people in line with any changing needs/behaviour.

The fostering service has strong and effective working partnerships with other agencies such as education and health professionals and the police. This assists to protect those children and young people who engage in risk-taking behaviour and

promotes an effective co-ordinated approach to safeguarding children and young people.

Allegations against foster carers are infrequent; there has been one allegation made against a foster carer since the last inspection. When these occur they are handled with vigour and in accordance with established child protection procedures. The fostering service's monitoring of such incidents is thorough and robust. Managers ensure that any learning from allegations or any serious incident is fully explored and shared within the staff team.

The fostering service has good systems in place for staff vetting and recruitment. These processes are well-organised and comprehensive. The organisation ensures that appropriate checks are carried out which confirm that all staff and members of the central list are suitable to work with children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The leadership and management of the fostering service is excellent. The management team is very strong in their leadership and are visible to interested parties. The Registered Manager is a very well qualified and experienced social worker, with extensive knowledge and experience of the fostering task. He is a panel member for a local authority fostering service and is a long standing member of the independent review panel. The directors of the organisation take a keen interest in the on-going development and expansion of service and have ambitious targets in place to further improve service provision. This is best illustrated by the successful expansion of the fostering service in the North West region, which currently has nine approved fostering households.

The fostering service is currently reviewing its IT systems, with plans in place to move towards a 'paperless' administrative and recording system. Leaders and managers have initiated other innovative projects such as plans to facilitate the downloading of the children's guides onto young people's smartphones. This is to make access to key information easy for children and young people in a method they are familiar with. There are plans to have the information available audibly, in popular community languages. The fostering service's policies and procedures are already available to download electronically by foster carers. The service continues to explore new and creative ways to improve service provision and delivery in line with its aims and objectives.

Stakeholders and interested parties have access to clear and comprehensive information that outline well the aims and objectives of the fostering service. The agency's statement of purpose is informative and explicit about what services and facilities the fostering service provides. The service is financially sound and well-resourced to meet the ambitious aims of the service in providing a very high quality of care to children and young people. The fostering agency's two children's guides, one for children and the other for older young people are age-appropriately

informative, providing key information about what to expect from the service. Both guides are currently available in written English and Arabic.

The fostering service facilitates effective communication with social workers and placing authorities. This effective partnership working between the parties enable the fostering service to ensure appropriate families are available to meet the needs of children and young people in need of fostering placements. Field social workers receive very regular updates of placement issues from the fostering agency. The staff team are proactive in exploring with local authority representatives placement difficulties and challenges as they arise. An entry on a child's file made at a recent LAC review reads, ' (The IRO) praised the quality of care being provided as this is the best update she has had on the children since they have been in care'.

An email received from another local authority social worker reads, 'Thank you for all your help and support. It is great to see such a child focusses and hands on approach from the fostering social worker - you have been great to work with'.

The fostering service has effective monitoring systems in place. These include for example, the tracking of individual children and young people's progress and outcomes, particularly in relation to looked after children's academic progress. Robust monitoring systems enhance the fostering service's ability to continually improve outcomes and experiences of children and young people. The fostering service routinely provides Ofsted and other stakeholders with quality of care and performance data as required. The fostering service is well-resourced and is financially viable.

Staff are appropriately qualified and extremely committed to providing good support to children young people and their fostering families. They are supported by quality training, regular supervision and appraisals. One staff member comments, 'It's a good team, really supportive. We're focused on achievement and we can see the outcomes with young people and our carers. It's a real team effort, making the change'. Another staff member says of the North West service, 'What has improved? Everything. We had nothing and now we have everything. I feel I am in my element and am enjoying working well with the children and youth. I have a lot to offer. I can be creative and develop things. Here there are no limits'.

The entire fostering team demonstrates a commitment to ensuring the experiences and outcomes for children and young people remain positive and continue to improve. The service has realistic plans in place to support its efforts to continue to offer high quality care. All those involved with the agency have high aspirations for future service development and its continued improvement.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.