

Foster Care Link

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66B Cazenove Road, Stoke Newington, London N16 6AA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency's primary aim is 'to provide foster carers for Muslim children'. The agency endeavours to provide fostering families that match children and young people's racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. The agency provides foster placements that are long- and short-term, respite, parent and child placements and placements that are required on an emergency basis.

Since the last inspection, the agency has successfully expanded to offer foster care placements via satellite offices based in the Midlands and North West regions of the country. At the time of this inspection, the agency was providing placements for 31 children and young people in 35 fostering households.

Inspection dates: 19 to 23 March 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 6 October 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- From their starting points, children and young people make exceptional progress in all areas of their lives.
- The quality of information provided to children and young people about prospective placements is outstanding.
- Children and young people live in stable and safe placements. They make excellent progress due to being matched with the right foster carers, with whom they develop positive familial relationships.
- Children and young people are supported to maintain a positive understanding of their racial, cultural and religious backgrounds which is underlined by a positive understanding of British values.
- Foster carers and agency staff hear the views and voices of children and young people, including those who have differing language skills. The views of children and young people play a central role in the continuing development of the agency's services.
- Leaders and managers are inspirational and passionate about improving the experiences and outcomes for all children and young people. Quality, not quantity, is the keyword of the service.
- Leaders and managers effectively monitor the agency and seek to improve the service at every opportunity.
- Stable and secure placements, underpinned by exceptionally supportive carers who promote emotional resilience and practical support, mean that children and young people do not go missing.
- Children and young people receive excellent emotional and professional educational support from their foster carers and the agency. This leads to an immediate understanding of any emerging concerns, thus enabling children and young people to successfully engage in their learning.
- The level of support provided by the agency to the foster carers is exceptional. This helps them to provide a high level of care for children.
- The agency makes the best use of research to inform practice. This is an agency that not only implements innovative work to support children and young people but is also an agency that uses its own expertise to inform other professionals and stakeholders on the specific needs of Muslim children.
- The agency's fostering panel members have a high level of skills and a wealth of experience. They provide a good level of scrutiny and challenge to the agency

when necessary. This leads to an agency with highly competent and skilled carers who are motivated to provide the best possible standard of care to children, young people and the wider community.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Ensure that the children's guide includes information on the children's commissioner.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Ensure suitable arrangements exist for the professional supervision of the agency's registered person. (national minimum standard 24.3)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The experiences, progress and outcomes for children and young people are outstanding. The agency meets the specific identity and religious needs of children and young people by expertly matching them with foster carers who fully understand and support these needs.

Foster carers work tirelessly with children and young people to break down any misconceived views on race, religion, gender equality and integration within the wider society. This is particularly relevant for unaccompanied minors and children and young people who have been placed due to radicalisation or separatist concerns.

Foster carers and agency staff skilfully support children and young people in understanding how their faith and individual culture can be celebrated while forming an integral part of British society and values. They help and support children and young people to breakdown the difference between faith and individual culture. A young person commented, 'I was extremely scared of moving to foster carers and at first was against it. But my carers have helped me to value my identity and to gain a better understanding of how my past and present cultural understanding can be blended in a good way. This makes me happy.'

Other notable comments by children and young people were:

- 'My foster carers have made me a learning room. I can now read and write better and do not spend so much time on the computer.'
- 'Aunty and Uncle care so much about us. Our clothes to wear for the family wedding were waiting for us when we first arrived. This made us so happy.'
- 'I do so many activities. I now have a best friend and can bring him home. I did not know there were so many different types of food that I love.'
- 'Aunty and Uncle make me feel so safe. I no longer feel afraid that people will try to take me away. I remember to say thank you every night for my new family, before I fall asleep.'

Excellent matching, pre-placement planning and placement meetings between placing authorities, children and young people, the agency and foster carers ensure that children and young people feel safe and quickly at ease with their foster carers.

Foster carers take pride in providing thoughtful and welcoming booklets to support children and young people who move to new families. A social worker commented, 'This is an exceptional agency. I work with a variety of agencies, but this agency really does go that extra mile not only in supporting children but also as a learning agency sharing knowledge of how best to support children to my entire team.'

The agency makes exceptional efforts to ensure that children's views are heard and

that they have the opportunity to express their concerns easily. The differing linguistic skills of supervising social workers and other staff are used particularly well and the agency has good access to interpreters when required. This is particularly relevant for the wide range of languages spoken by children and young people who are seeking asylum. A young adult employed by the agency has special responsibility for supporting children and young people who may have trouble in settling into a new community and/or education. Children and young people said that they found it especially useful to talk with a young adult who had similar experiences to themselves. As a result, for some children, this further helps to settle them in a new culture and community and makes them more ready to share any concerns.

The agency places the educational needs of children in high regard. All children and young people placed by the agency attend mainstream school or for those newly arrived in the country an alternative educational provision. Children and young people have excellent attendance. Those children and young people who spoke to the inspector aspire to do well and said that they understand the importance of education for their futures. Foster carers actively support and enable children and young people to learn by taking them to school, keeping education logs, attending meetings and advocating on their behalf.

There is an abundance of evidence on how well foster carers support educational attendance and achievement. An outstanding example of this was a fostering family that turned a large part of their home into an interactive education centre where the family was able to introduce positive education to a trafficked young person. The young person proudly showed the inspector his interactive pictorial learning album to evidence the exceptional progress that he had made. This not only raised the self-esteem of a highly vulnerable child but also gave him a real sense of pride in his achievements. The use of young adults who have experienced a new educational culture has further helped children to understand how their aspirations can become a reality in their lives.

The physical and emotional health needs of children are well supported by their foster carers and staff in the agency. Foster carers have excellent skills in supporting children in all aspects of their well-being. When necessary, carers work closely with professionals and will advocate to ensure that children and young people receive all the services that they are entitled to. Foster carers place children and young people at the heart of everything that they do and take their responsibilities seriously, ensuring that all the health needs are consistently met. The excellent training provided by the agency further enhances this.

Children and young people participate in age-appropriate activities that develop their social skills and their ability to engage with their peer groups, such as playing cricket and engaging in youth support groups. They developed a sense of social awareness and community through taking part in charity events through local mosques and other community-based projects.

Children and young people are fully included in all aspects of the fostering family. Foster carers prefer to rely on their own family, friends and informal arrangements with other approved carers from the agency for support if needed. This reflects an

agency and foster carers who work together as 'one family' and who place the needs of children at the centre of all that they do.

Several young people have remained with their carers under staying put arrangements or permanency plans. This reflects not only the positive attachments formed with the carers but the excellent progress that young people have made. A young person commented, 'My carers are the best. I have chosen to stay here because they are my family.'

The agency provides exceptional support for foster carers to assist them in their care of children and young people. Foster carers receive training, monthly supervision and regular home visits, along with practice-related group sessions on a monthly basis. Managers are keen to ensure that carers are the best that they can be. To this end, they use a variety of learning tools, including theoretical discussions and interactive role plays. Group meetings are well attended and allow foster carers to share their expertise, placement difficulties and develop their practice.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: outstanding

Agency staff and foster carers have successfully established a culture that ensures that the safety and well-being of children and young people are paramount. The recruitment, assessment, preparation, training and supervision of foster carers has a robust focus on safeguarding children and young people. For example, where English is not the first language of a fostering family, the deputy manager will outline with them a hypothetical safeguarding concern. Should the foster carers fail to articulate this concern and identify what actions to take, they are supported to undertake English as a second language training prior to the placement of any child or young person. This ensures that all foster carers are trained to the highest standard to understand signs, symptoms and behaviours that children and young people may display and how to respond sensitively.

Agency staff complete foster care assessments that are comprehensive, analytical and that identify the strengths and competencies that foster carers already have or that need to be developed. A foster carer commented, 'I appreciate the sensitivity and understanding taken during my assessment. It gave me the opportunity to look back and have a really good overview of my family life.' Assessments are completed with rigour and in a timely manner, enabling foster carers to be clear on their roles, that of the agency and those of placing authorities.

The functioning of the fostering panel is an absolute strength of the agency. Members are exceptionally skilled and experienced professionals, with strong leadership via the chairperson. They provide a detailed analysis of the information obtained from the assessment process of potential applicants and make reliable recommendations. Panel meetings are robust, with sound administration procedures in place. Relevant policies and procedures are in place to support the panel.

Training opportunities for foster carers are impressive. Both foster carers and older young people living in foster families benefit from the agency's extensive training

programme. A number of foster carers report that the quality of training is excellent, and noted that the agency will always supplement the programme with individual specialist training to support the needs of a child or young person. A foster carer said, 'We do not have our own children. However, the training provided by the agency has taught us how to be good parents.'

Children and young people spoken with during the inspection all reported feeling safe and said that they feel able to discuss any issues or concerns with their foster carers or agency staff. Some of these children and young people have been placed due to radicalisation and trafficking concerns. For many of these children and young people, foster carers and agency staff have been positive role models in supporting them through difficult periods of adjusting. A young person said, 'While I understand and wish to respect my parents' views, I understand to grow and develop and be who I want to be I have to accept the safety and security being given to me.' Foster carers demonstrate a commendably high level of sensitivity, skills and resilience in responding to complex situations.

Supervising social workers and foster carers strive to maintain cultural and secular expectations of families whose children or young people are in placement. However, the agency's focus is on supporting children and young people to adapt and to be responsible and contributory members of a society that promotes British values. Foster carers and agency staff represent a number of differing Muslim communities and are able to support children and young people to explore and understand their faith and individual practices.

A highly effective approach ensures that the agency places the need to minimise risk to children and young people at the forefront of practice. This begins from initial placement planning and into the actual placement itself. Social work staff are particularly effective and creative in ensuring that risk assessments and safer carer plans are individualised and extremely detailed. The staff team consistently reviews documentation through discussions with foster carers and children and young people to identify any necessary changes with regards to behaviours. This is not a complacent agency. Foster carers receive regular supervision and visits, particularly those who look after children and young people who pose specific challenges. Forward thinking and planning ensure that strategies are in place for preventing behaviours that could lead to placement disruption. There have been very few placement breakdowns and any potential disruption is managed in a planned manner.

Missing from care episodes are not a significant issue for this agency. There have been fewer than five incidents of children going missing in the past three years.

The agency has sound systems in place for the safe vetting and recruitment of staff and others working on behalf of the agency. These processes are comprehensive and robust. The agency ensures that appropriate checks are carried out which confirm that all staff are suitable to work with vulnerable children and young people.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The leadership and management of the fostering agency are exceptional. Leaders and managers are inspirational and highly visible throughout the agency. This provides them with good opportunities to know all of the children, young people, foster carers and stakeholders. The registered manager is a highly skilled and experienced social worker, with extensive knowledge and experience of the fostering task. He sits on local authority fostering panels and acts as a professional adviser to the independent reviewing mechanism.

The agency's statement of purpose is a detailed, comprehensive document that accurately outlines the aims and objectives of the fostering service. The children's guides are well written and there are creative summaries of the services provided by the agency. These are easy to read and appropriately child-focused.

An excellent quality assurance system permeates all aspects of the service's work and contributes to continuing improvement. The agency utilises effective technology, which contributes to comprehensive monitoring systems to provide staff with up-to-date information and to identify any shortfalls that need addressing. For example, staff can determine if any individual child's education attendance has fallen short and whether additional support is needed. Such systems have a positive impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the service and contribute to better evidence recording for children.

The leaders and managers have a real drive and commitment to continual improvement and development of the agency, which offers a unique specialist service to meet the needs of Muslim children holistically. For example, by providing the highest levels of care through the use of experienced and highly trained foster carers. The agency, through the work of the deputy manager who is a qualified 'Alim', a leader of prayer in the community, has obtained a 'fatwa' explicitly expressing the permissibility of fostering in the Muslim community.

The growth of the agency has been carefully monitored by managers, thus allowing the agency to maintain a highly professional yet family atmosphere. Managers display excellent knowledge and understanding of children's needs, and the skills and abilities required of foster carers. The registered manager's view of 'quality over quantity' has directly assisted in children having stable placements, resulting in some returning home or going on to lead independent lives with children of their own.

The agency has a local and national interest in promoting learning and affecting change and understanding on the importance of cultural and faith matching for stable placements. To this end, leaders and managers have worked on research documents with local safeguarding boards and the children and family court advisory and support service. They have also been asked to take part in making representation to parliament on the importance of cultural and religious matching as part of the changes to the children and families bill. Alongside this, the agency has worked within the Muslim and other faith communities to help dispel some of the myths about fostering and to enable greater understanding on the needs and vulnerabilities of black and ethnic minority children.

The agency is used by a number of placing authorities for advice and understanding

on the specific care needs of Muslim children. A social worker described an agency staff member as 'one of the best supervising social workers I have worked with'. Social workers also commented that the agency provides children and young people with an 'excellent quality of care'.

The agency benefits from highly motivated and experienced staff who work as a seamless team, clearly focused on improving progress and outcomes for children. Staff feel that their views are valued and that they are actively involved in the development of the service. A supervising social worker commented, 'I am proud to say I work for the agency.' Staff keep abreast of developments within the childcare field by regular access to training opportunities and current research trends. The agency operates with a full complement of staff who carry appropriate caseloads.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC049096

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