

MATCHING POLICY



Introduction

This paper has been produced to outline to children, parents, foster carers and social workers Foster Care Link's policy on matching children with foster carers. Foster Care Link's primary aim is to make safe, successful placements for children and foster carers.

Statutory framework

Fostering Services Regulation 2011 states that a responsible authority shall not place a child with a foster carer unless it is satisfied that a placement with the particular carer is the most suitable placement having regard to all the circumstances.

The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011 requires that local authority fostering services ensure that each child placed in foster care is carefully matched with a carer capable of meeting her/his assessed needs (Standard 11.2) and that as much information as possible is given to foster parents (Standard 3.9).

Standards also require providers to local authorities, such as Foster Care Link, to only offer carers if they represent appropriate matches for the child for whom the local authority is seeking a carer.

Further requirements of the National Minimum Standards include:

- The need to take into account the child's care plan and recent assessments of the child and family
- Achieving matches by all relevant parties sharing information
- Identifying factors taken into account in matching in placement agreements and identifying carers support needs to compensate for any gaps in matching
- Considering the child's assessed racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic needs and matching these with the carer
- Providing additional support where transracial or transcommunity placements are made
- Where possible, giving the child the opportunity of a period of introduction to the proposed carer

Assessing Children's Needs

While the referring agency will have the primary responsibility for assessing children's needs, staff and carers working for Foster Care Link need to understand how this is done.

There will be occasions, such as a child moving from one Foster Care Link placement to another, when Foster Care Link staff are directly involved in this process.

Children entering the looked after system

Wherever the need for care or accommodation is being considered, the child's social worker must complete an assessment of the child's needs before a decision is made for the child to become looked after and a placement sought.

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The nature and depth of this assessment will vary from case to case depending on many factors including:

- Whether the child was previously known
- The urgency of the need for a placement
- The level of co-operation of the child's parents and others involved in the child's life
- The child's age and understanding

In some cases a great deal of written information will be available, such as Initial and Core Assessments completed under the Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families. The child's social worker may also be able to draw on other written reports and assessments, such as Education, Health and Care Plans or medical assessments.

In other cases there will be very little information available on which to base an assessment, for example where a child has been trafficked or is an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker.

Whatever the circumstances, the social worker should ensure that they address the elements of the LAC Care Plan as fully as possible before seeking a placement.

Although the full details may not be recorded on the Care Plan until after the placement has been made, with the plan being formally adopted at the first childcare review, no child should be placed in foster care without the following issues being addressed:

- Whether the child was previously known
- The legal basis for current work with the child
- The reasons why the child needs to be looked after
- The attempts made to arrange for the child to live with a relative or friend
- Who has been consulted about the child's current situation
- What is the immediate plan for the child
- Why this plan has been chosen
- What needs to happen to achieve the immediate plan
- What is the longer term plan

Children already looked after

There will be reasons why a child may need a new placement. Some will need to move because of placement breakdown, others to achieve a plan for a permanent placement.

Whatever the reason, the fact that the child is already looked after should ensure that the child's needs have been fully assessed and the information available to assist in the matching process should be much more detailed.

Social workers should make sure that they consider all the information available to them such as:

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- Case File Notes
- School reports
- Medical assessments
- Reports from current carers
- Assessment and Action Records
- Childcare reviews
- Court reports

Who is involved in matching?

Matches will be achieved by means of information sharing and consideration involving all relevant professionals, the child and her/his family, potential carers and their families and other children in the placement.

Relevant professionals may include:

- The child's social worker
- The supervising social worker for the carer
- Line managers
- Health and education staff
- Fostering/Permanency Panel
- Agency Decision-Maker

The extent to which any or all of the above will be involved will be determined by the specific circumstances of the case, in particular the urgency of the need for a placement.

Workers should consult as widely as possible and ensure that any dissenting views on the proposed placement are recorded on the child's file.

Issues to be considered in Matching

There are as many issues to consider in matching, as there are children needing placement. The experiences of some children may mean that they would be best placed in families with older children or where there are no children. Others will need to be placed with carers who are skilled in working with children who have experienced serious abuse.

While the diversity of children needing to be looked after and the range of carers available at the point a placement, makes it inappropriate to be overly prescriptive, there are a number of issues that will need to be considered in every case.

Contact

Finding a placement that meets the child's assessed contact needs should be one of the most important considerations in selecting an appropriate placement.

Issues to be considered include:

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- The plan for the child (if the plan is for rehabilitation contact will be crucial, if the plan is permanence, other factors may be more important)
- The frequency of the desired contact
- Who is the child to have contact with?
- The nature of the contact – is it direct or indirect?
- Where will contact take place?
- Does contact need to be supervised?

Siblings

Where siblings become looked after, they will normally be expected to be placed together unless there are clear indications that this will not be in the best interests of one or more of the children.

Such a conclusion should only normally be reached after a comprehensive assessment of the needs of all the children concerned. While it may therefore be necessary to seek separate permanent placements for siblings after an assessment, the assumption should be at the point children become looked after, that siblings will be placed together.

Where it is not possible to find a foster placement to keep siblings together, consideration of the use of alternative provision should be made. For some siblings the use of residential resources to keep the family together may be appropriate.

Where Foster Care Link receives a request to place siblings separately, no such placement will be made without Foster Care Link being provided with evidence that this is in the best interests of one or more of the children being referred.

If siblings need to be placed separately, either because of their assessed needs or due to the lack of a placement to keep them together, consideration must be given to their need for contact and how this will be met.

Education

For children of statutory school age, the need to maintain or secure a stable education placement is also of vital importance.

Wherever possible placements should be identified that ensure continuity of education, unless there are other overriding considerations such as the child's safety that outweigh this consideration.

For younger children the carer's ability to take the child to school should be considered and if this is not possible, whether anyone else can transport the child or if the use of escorted taxis is appropriate and safe.

For older children the child's ability to get to school themselves will need to be assessed. The length and complexity of the journey will need to be considered as will the safety of the child and whether the child has a record of non-attendance that a long journey may exacerbate.

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Where there is a proposal to use a placement that will involve a change of school, the child's social workers must ensure that an appropriate educational placement must be found within 20 school days of the placement and suitable appropriate provision made until this is available.

Race, Culture and Language

Foster Care Link believes that wherever possible children's needs will be best met by placement with a carer that reflects the child's racial, cultural and linguistic background.

Where a placement is made in an emergency and this is not possible, steps must be taken to achieve this within six weeks. This will mean that the search for an appropriate placement continues and is reviewed at the first childcare review. This review should also consider what further steps will be taken if an appropriate placement cannot be found within six weeks.

When an appropriate placement is identified, consideration will need to be given to whether a placement move is in the child's best interests. The stability of the placement and the usual need to avoid placement moves will need to be weighed against the shortfall in the placement in terms of the child's needs.

The child's long term welfare should be the paramount consideration and any decision to keep the child in a racially, culturally or linguistically inappropriate placement should be made on this basis rather than because not to move might appear the easier short term decision.

Where transracial or transcommunity placements are made, the carer should be provided with additional training, support and information to enable the child to be provided with the best possible care and to develop a positive understanding of her/his heritage.

The input of birth family, friends and other carers may help to achieve this.

Where a child's first language is different from their carers, the child's social worker should ensure that the child has access to interpreters on a frequent and regular basis, not just at formal occasions such as meetings.

Religion

Matching issues with regard to religion are similar to those with regard to race and culture. Matching will be sensitive to the specific sect of religion adhered to by the child as this is a key concern for Muslims and followers other faiths.

Again active steps should be taken to secure such a placement within 6 weeks if this was not possible initially and the process outlined above followed.

Where a child does practice a religion, the carer's own ability to facilitate and promote the child's religious practice will need careful consideration.

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Although Foster Care Link is an agency specialising in recruiting Muslim carers, we recognise that religion does not play a significant role in the lives of some carers who may not be 'practising'. While this may suggest that a proposed placement does not present a conflict for the child's beliefs, the lack of any faith on the part of the carer may in itself present a conflict.

Workers will need to be satisfied that carers are able and willing to respect the child's views. This may mean the carer needs to be willing to transport the child to a place of worship or respect the child's views in terms of diet and dress. These issues can be as difficult for carers who do not have a faith or are non-practising as for carers with a faith different from the child.

Disability

Children's needs arising from a disability need careful consideration.

Placement decisions should reflect these needs and where in an emergency this is not possible, active steps should be taken to identify such a placement within 6 weeks and the process outlined above in respect of race, culture and language should be followed.

Where it is not possible to make such a placement, either initially or within 6 weeks, workers will need to ensure that other support is in place to meet needs arising from the child's disability.

This will include access to required medical care and specialist education where needed. The carer may need practical support by way of equipment or access to specialist advice or training.

The use of respite care may need to be considered.

Bedrooms

The nature of fostering is that many carers do not have spare rooms available for the sole use of foster children and many children therefore have to share a room with either another looked after child or a birth child of the carer.

The matching process should take account the proposed sleeping arrangements for the child. Where this means sharing a room the views of the other child should be considered. If that child is looked after, their social worker should also be consulted.

The age and gender of children will need to be considered as will the background of all children who it is proposed will share a bedroom.

Where a child has been abused or has abused another child, then the child's needs and the needs of other children in the household must be assessed before any decision is made to allow the sharing of bedrooms. The outcome of this assessment must be recorded on the child's and carer's files.

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Safe Caring Guidelines

The Fostering Services Regulations 2002 required each foster home to provide safe caring guidelines. The 2011 Regulations do not require this, but Foster Care Link policy is to continue with this practice. These must be cleared with the child's social worker and explained clearly and appropriately to the child.

The child's social worker should consider the implications of a carer's safe caring guidelines before or at the point of placement and ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place for the child, the carer and all other members of the household.

Introductions

Wherever possible, children should have the opportunity for a period of introduction to a proposed carer so that both child and carer can express an informed view about the proposed placement.

This should always be the case where a permanent placement is proposed.

Where the need for an immediate placement makes this impractical, both child and carer should be provided with as much information as possible and their views considered before the match is confirmed.

The provision of household profiles or pen pictures of the carers will be helpful in this regard and Foster Care Link will ensure that these are completed by all carers and made available to referring social workers.

Matching with Foster Care Link Carers

Matching decisions will always be made on the basis of providing a carer appropriate to the child's needs and not on the basis of a wish to generate business for Foster Care Link.

Detailed procedures can be found in Foster Care Link's procedure manual.

Short term and time limited placements

All requests for a short-term placement will be first considered through the duty system. Carers will only be offered to referring agencies where most of the needs of the child appear to fit with the strengths of the carer.

Where there are needs that the carer may not be able to meet, these will be explained clearly to the referring agency and agreement reached as to whether these are significant enough to make the placement suitable.

Where Foster Care Link remain concerned about the suitability of a proposed match, they will not allow the placement to proceed.

Permanent Placements

Although there is no statutory requirement to do so, Foster Care Link expects referring agencies to agree not to make permanent placements until a matching report has been considered by Foster Care Link's Fostering Panel. Most carers will have been considered by Panel as short term carers and Foster Care Link believes that their Panel should consider any proposed changes to a carer's use in particular, proposed permanent placements.

Matches of carers and children for permanent placements and potential will always be referred to Foster Care Link's Fostering Panel. The Panel will be provided with a BAAF Form E on the child by the child's social worker and a matching report from the child's social worker and the carer's supervising social worker.

The Panel will make a recommendation to the registered manager (in his/her capacity as Foster Care Link's agency decision-maker) who will need to give his/her approval before the placement can go ahead.

Recording Matching Considerations and Decisions

Details of the matching process, including the names and views of those consulted, must be recorded on the child's file.

For permanent placements, a written matching report, the minutes of the Fostering Panel and the record of the decision of the Agency Decision-Maker must also be placed on the child's and carer's files.

Foster placement agreements must contain specific reference to elements of matching which were taken into consideration when agreeing the placement and identify areas where carers need additional support to compensate for any gaps in the match between the child and carer.