

By the Bridge North West

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC066501
Inspection date	08/03/2012
Inspector	Sue Winson
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

Setting address	The Barn, Beech Farm, 122 Hollin Lane, Styal, Cheshire, SK9 4LD
Telephone number	0845 8948092
Email	
Registered person	By the Bridge North West Limited
Registered manager	Judith Lois Staples
Responsible individual	Stephen Adkin
Date of last inspection	13/08/2007

© Crown copyright 2012

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

By the Bridge is a privately run fostering agency that has several offices managed from a central services office in the South East. By the Bridge North West has carers located in a number of different local authority areas in the North West of England. The agency provides respite care and short term, long term and emergency foster care placements for children and young people from birth up to age 17. Young people who reach the age of 18 are able to continue living with their foster carers as young adults.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service with several outstanding aspects. Children and young people enjoy placement stability, are safeguarded and have good outcomes due to the agency's policies and practices. A strong aspect of the agency is the training and support which foster carers receive to enable them to meet children's needs. Their education is very well promoted and the agency's education advisor ensures that they have appropriate support to achieve their potential. There is a focus on children's physical and emotional health and they receive excellent care which encourages them to develop self-esteem and confidence. This is strengthened by the agency's psychotherapist who delivers training and has a consultative role. Contact with family and friends is well promoted and children are helped to understand their pasts. Children and young people are informed of their rights and are actively encouraged to voice their views about all aspects of their care and the development of the agency. The managers and staff are appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced; they are committed to achieving the best possible outcomes for children, in conjunction with other professionals. They are supported to do so by effective and efficient administrative support.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has acted on the four recommendations made at the last inspection. They are active in continuing to request full information from placing social workers. Improvements in preparing young people for adulthood and leaving care have been implemented. All staff have received safeguarding training and full information is gained when employing staff.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people live in healthy environments where their physical, emotional and psychological health is very well promoted and where their care is focussed on individual need. Children's responses about health promotion, in pre-inspections surveys, are positive. Foster carers have an excellent awareness of their role in ensuring children's health needs are met and ensure they are promptly registered with primary health care services. Foster carers and the agency work together to ensure children and young people have access to specialist services. Foster carers' training equips them to meet the health needs of children in their care; topics include health promotion, drug and alcohol awareness and attachment. Where children have specific medical needs the agency ensures that their foster carers are trained by appropriate medical professionals, which means they are able to care effectively for children with disabilities and complex health needs. Foster carers and link workers have access to consultation with the company psychotherapist, which they say benefits the children in their care.

Health outcomes for children are monitored through supervisory visits and unannounced visits. In addition foster carers complete a monthly healthcare record for each child which is submitted to the agency and allows link workers to monitor accidents, illnesses and medication.

Children and young people live in homes which provide adequate space to a suitable standard. They are further protected by policies, procedures and practices, for example concerning safety of children in vehicles. Foster homes are checked during assessments, on supervisory visits and as part of foster carer reviews. Examples were seen where records demonstrate that issues were logged and monitored, for example, when fire extinguishers need replacement. Health and safety training is mandatory for foster carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children's safety and welfare is extremely well promoted and they say that they feel safe and are safe. Foster carers and staff understand their roles in protecting children. The organisation's safeguarding manager monitors all concerns and events and provides advice, consultation and regular meetings with the social work team. In addition, an email is sent to all new foster carers outlining the importance of safeguarding and issuing guidance on incident reporting to ensure that children are protected. Foster carers receive a range of training on safe-care practices and caring for children who have been abused, which further serves to promote their welfare. The agency consistently takes appropriate actions to safeguard young people, including prompt notification to all concerned people when serious incidents occur.

The agency expects risk assessments from placing local authorities, at the time of

placement or shortly afterwards, to provide guidance to foster carers on all aspects of a child's care. The agency is active and persistent in continuing to request these if they are not forthcoming. Children and young people are largely supported to understand how to keep themselves safe, including when using the internet or social networks. During the assessment process, the suitability of the home is assessed and health and safety checklists compiled. However, these are not updated to meet the needs of specific children in placement, although some of the information is contained in safe caring plans and risk assessments.

Young people rarely go missing from care. When this does occur, they are protected as far as possible and responded to positively on their return. Clear policies and procedures are in place to provide guidance. Where young people are persistently missing from care, the agency is active in pressing for meetings to consider their safety. Examples were given where young people who have a history of being missing from care have been supported to significantly reduce or cease to do so. Children are supported to understand the nature of bullying, and know of a range of people they can talk to if they are concerned. They are informed of their rights and receive a complaints leaflet with the welcome letter from the agency when they first move into a foster home.

Young people are further protected by the agency's encouragement of meaningful participation. The managers and staff know the individual young people well and speak to them at agency events, and when they visit the offices. Link workers regularly meet with children on supervisory visits. The young people know what the agency does, express confidence in staff and say they can speak to them if they have a problem.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people in foster care enjoy positive relationships with their foster carers and say that they are well cared for. They benefit from highly stable placements and the fact that their foster carers receive excellent support to meet their holistic needs. The high-quality training provided by the agency is effective in helping foster carers to appreciate that children are affected by past events in their lives. Foster carers provide a nurturing environment where children and young people feel safe and make progress. Link workers and foster carers have access to the agency's psychotherapist for advice or discussion about children's needs. Foster carers respect children's privacy and confidentiality in a manner that is consistent with good parenting.

Education is very well promoted and young people are supported to attend school and achieve. The education advisor supports foster carers to ensure children and young people are in appropriate schools where their needs are met, or have access to alternative education where appropriate. In addition she monitors their progress and is available to foster carers for advice, which is highly valued. The advisor has developed working links with schools and local authorities which have been highly

effective in reducing delays for young people. Young people comment positively about the education advisor and the help they get with education. They also express satisfaction with the range of leisure activities, including events organised by the agency, for them, their carers and their families.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Young people know that their views, wishes and feelings are taken into account in all aspects of their care. They say that they are listened to by their foster carers and by the agency. The agency has recently started a young people's forum with a small group, who are looking at ways to involve more young people in the benefits that this has brought them. The group recently organised a cake-bake day to raise funds for charity. Children and young people are actively encouraged to attend their reviews and express their opinions. The link workers provide opportunities for them to add their comments to foster carers' annual reviews. All young people have 'keep in touch' cards which they value as they can contact someone in the agency at any time if they cannot talk to their foster carers. The sons and daughters of foster carers have access to a group to discuss issues which are specific to them. All are consulted as part of the events which the agency holds and which are clearly enjoyed by all. Young people know the agency staff and feel they are welcomed when they visit the offices and that staff 'take into account young people's wishes and feelings'.

Individualised care helps children and young people to develop self-esteem, positive views of their identity and confidence. They gain from being cared for by foster carers who are trained in life-story work and who keep memory boxes and mementos for them to take with them when they move on. Contact is well promoted and young people are encouraged and supported to maintain positive relationships with families and friends, where appropriate. Foster carers understand the importance of continuing contact and their role in maintaining positive relationships with parents and family members.

Where possible, placements are planned so that children and young people can have introductory visits prior to moving to foster homes. Foster carers prepare books about themselves, their families and their home to assist young people in formats that are specific to their age, understanding and ability. Young people say that their foster carers help them settle in and care for them well as part of the family.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are extremely well prepared for and supported to gain life skills in preparation for independent living. Organised, formal-skills training is done in a way which appeals to young people and they benefit because this begins at an earlier stage than formal pathway planning, so that they can proceed at their own pace.

Foster carers ensure that young people have opportunities to increase their skills as part of everyday life; this includes helping around the house and learning to cook and budget. Young people engage well in this process and are making progress. The agency's education advisor is available to help young people with accessing further and higher education, vocational courses and work experience.

The 'Get-A-Lifestyle' programme gives young people the opportunity to gain awards to contribute to their curriculum vitae. This is run by the education advisor and aims to raise young people's confidence and skills. Young people have very much enjoyed completing a film project and arts project. They also have the opportunity to undertake and achieve Duke of Edinburgh awards.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Children and young people receive highly individualised care, are informed of their rights and are encouraged to participate in the development of the agency. Foster carers' preparation and training groups are accessible to all. Equality and diversity and the promotion of equal opportunities for looked after children runs through the agency's policies and practice.

The agency's Statement of Purpose gives clear information about its aims and objectives and the services provided. The children's guide is available in two formats for different age groups, both of which are child friendly, informative and of high quality.

There are clear procedures for the recruitment and assessment of foster carers, which are robust in ensuring that all the necessary checks are carried out and that foster carers are competent. Reports demonstrate in-depth interviews with referees which focus on the applicant's ability to provide positive care for children and young people. Arrangements are coordinated from the agency's main office in the south of England and overseen by the recruitment manager. Independent assessors are contracted to complete the assessments and do so in a timely manner. The agency is building a group of assessors in the local area, to ensure consistent quality of reports. As a result the quality of assessments has improved and they include more analysis of information. There have been no occasions where panel has been unable to make a recommendation due to lack of information. Training is open to assessors, to allow them to become familiar with the ethos and practices of the agency. Link workers continue to assess the competencies of foster carers through regular supervisory visits; comprehensive reports are provided for reviews which include the views of children placed, children of the family and social workers.

The panel chair and members have a range of relevant experience and are challenging and child focused. However, the vice-chair is not independent of the agency. The agency decision maker is appropriately qualified and decisions are made in a timely manner. There is access to medical advice as needed. Applicants are

invited to panel meetings and are given opportunities to comment on the assessment process. Discussion with them is valued by panel members. The panel's comments about the service are listened to and consistently acted upon by the agency. There have been a small number of occasions where the panel members have not received papers early enough and the minutes are not always clearly written to cover key issues, views expressed and the reasons for recommendations. There has been no induction of panel members, training or appraisal since their recruitment to the central list.

The agency maintains high levels of placement stability for children and young people. There is a central referral system run from the south of England by staff who are not social workers. They are active in gaining information from referring social workers and then approaching foster carers who are encouraged to make initial decisions about their ability to meet children's needs. Good communication between the social work teams and these staff ensure they have up-to-date information about individual foster carers. Foster carers and link workers are involved in the placement-planning process and meetings. Some foster carers express concerns about this system while others welcome their part in decision making during the matching process.

Foster carers are positive about their initial contact, introduction evenings and preparation groups. They particularly welcome having access to experienced foster carers at the groups, which they feel prepares them well for the challenges of fostering. Foster carer training is a strength of the agency and foster carers expressed high degrees of satisfaction with the range and quality of training. A well-organised programme of training events ensures that they are able to access both mandatory training and further training to aid their development and increase their skills in caring for children and achieving positive outcomes. A group of foster carers has recently embarked on a course which involves considerable time commitment and leads to a certificate in therapeutic foster care.

Foster carers receive high levels of support to assist them in meeting children's needs, and understand that supervisory visits monitor their practice and outcomes for children. They value the fact that they have access to someone in the agency at any time of the day or night. They express high levels of satisfaction with the support provided by their link workers who are knowledgeable, helpful and available to them. Comments made include, 'we are very well supported', 'to date they have exceeded our expectations', and 'link workers go out of their way to help you'. They also find that support groups enable them to air their views and opinions and that they are listened to and offered appropriate support.

The agency is managed by appropriately-qualified managers, who have considerable experience and knowledge of foster care and management. They provide effective leadership to a committed and skilled group of workers all of whom have experience in children's social care and are committed to achieving positive outcomes for children and young people. They are well supervised and supported and have access to training to continue their professional development.

The fostering agency has a range of quality assurance and monitoring systems, some of which are not yet at a stage where they are fully embedded to demonstrate that they are having a positive effect on outcomes for children and young people. Allegations and suspicions of harm are handled in a way that provides effective protection and support for children, as are complaints. Significant events are notified to all the relevant people in a timely manner, and social workers report effective communication with the agency.

Foster carers are clear about the agency's payment structures and the systems to ensure they are paid on time are effective. The agency is financially viable and there is a business development plan in place. However, this does not outline many of the ideas for improvement that the manager and staff have planned.

There is careful selection of staff, fostering households and the central list of persons for panel. All checks are done prior to foster carers' approval, including employment references and in-depth discussions during visits to referees. References are routinely verified for staff and panel members. Safe recruitment of staff is evident.

Records are largely clear and up-to-date and file audits have begun. The service uses an electronic records system which is secure. The premises provide safe storage of records and are suitable to enable the service to meet the objectives of its Statement of Purpose. Staff, foster carers, children and young people like the premises and say that they are welcomed. There is sufficient space to hold training events and fun days and the quality of the accommodation is extremely high.

Records are well organised and up-to-date. Case files demonstrate that children are cared for in line with their placement plans. Foster carers are clear about the agency's expectations in regard to day-to-day recording.

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):

- ensure that children are helped to understand how to keep themselves safe (NMS 4.4)
- implement clear written policies and procedures on the recruitment to, and maintenance of, the central list of persons considered to be suitable to be members of a fostering panel (NMS 14.1)
- ensure there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service (NMS 25.1)
- ensure that a development plan for the future of the service is in place and is reviewed annually. (NMS 18.2)