

# By The Bridge

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

By the Bridge is an independent fostering agency. It is a limited company run by a senior management team which reports to a board of directors. Its headquarters are based near Sittingbourne in Kent with separate offices in Kent, Billericay, Rugby and the Thames Valley. The organisation has a second registered, independent fostering agency based in the north-west of England.

The agency provides therapeutic services. A psychotherapist oversees the implementation of this work which underpins all elements of the fostering provision. The agency uses the descriptive 'foster parents' as opposed to 'foster carers' in keeping with its organisational therapeutic ethos. The agency require at least one of the 'foster parents' to undertake the professional 'parenting' role full time.

The agency provides short-term, long-term and emergencies placements, foster care for children with disabilities, parent and child placements, and placements for young people on remand. At the time of the inspection 356 young people were being accommodated in 246 fostering households.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **outstanding**.

This fostering service provides an outstanding level of care for the children and young people it accommodates. Placements are stable and children are happy and feel safe. This is achieved by the promotion of a therapeutic model of care understood by social workers and foster parents whose work is supervised and supported by an effective management team. Young people are able to maintain contact with their birth families where appropriate and are supported by the agency in doing so. Birth families are very appreciative of the service. Compared to looked after children generally, young people achieve well educationally with very few school exclusions. The service continually monitors the quality of its provision and is research active in improving both its own internal fostering service, and in promoting

the quality of fostering generally. The agency meets the regulations and national minimum standards.

### **Outcomes for children and young people**

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

Young people benefit from good placement stability. Children and young people very rarely experience unplanned endings to their placements. Although the agency currently has 356 young people placed there have only been three fostering placement breakdowns in the past 12 months. These were appropriately reviewed and the agency ensured that learning points arising from these reviews were applied to practice. Young people said that they feel secure with their foster families and that they are made to feel part of the larger fostering 'family' which the agency promotes. One element of this is the agency preference to use the term foster 'parent' and opposed to 'carer'. One young person commented, 'I really feel like I'm part of one big family. I feel happy where I am and wouldn't want to be anywhere else.'

Young people are encouraged to attend their care plan reviews. The agency ensures that there are good arrangements in place to ensure that all children and young people are able to actively participate in day-to-day and more complex decisions about their lives, including all aspects of their individual care planning. There are arrangements in place to consult children about their proposed placement and to ensure that the placement is of their choice. Children are given all the information they need about their proposed foster carers both verbally and in writing. Carers construct written and photographic personal profiles about themselves and their households, which help children in making decisions about their choice of placement. The agency has access to a translation service to convert profiles into different languages for those children whose first language is not English.

A referrals officer ensures that all young people and carers are appropriately matched. There is currently a good balance in the numbers of children placed from black and minority ethnic groups and the carers available from these groups. Young people say that their cultural and racial differences are respected. Carers show consideration and awareness of the religious and cultural beliefs of the young people in their care. Foster parents receive advice and guidance related to children's racial and cultural needs. Foster parents receive training in life story work and every young person placed with the agency works with foster parents to produce a 'Memory Box'. These working practices help to provide children and young people with knowledge, understanding and acceptance of their background.

Birth parents are generally invited to attend the initial and review meetings of care plans unless this is otherwise thought to be detrimental to children's well-being. Birth parents always receive a copy of the placement plan review meeting. The agency works well with birth parents and will assist with transport and contact arrangements. One birth parent commented: 'It is like having a friend looking after my daughter.'

Young people are aware that they have access to an advocacy service provided by their placing authority if they wish to have support with their involvement in care planning. They also knew that the agency also provides them with good avenues of support and representation while they are being looked after. The agency has developed a 'Get a Lifestyle' programme which provides children and young people with a high level of social support. This includes regular forum meetings for young people which are facilitated by regional Education Advisor and 'Get a Lifestyle' (EAGals) consultants who will also conduct individual work with young people, including preparation work for leaving care. The EAGals constructs a periodic newsletter for young people and there is also a website specifically for looked after children and this allows them to access a wealth of information and to communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support and provides them with another forum where they can contribute to the development of the service. This service helps young people to be actively engaged in all aspects of their care planning and in their own social development.

Young people receive an exceptional level of support with their educational progress. There are very few children excluded from mainstream school and in the past 12 months, young people placed within the agency have achieved higher grades overall than the national figures for looked after children. Several young people had achieved university places. Support is provided by a team of educational support advisors who will work with young people and foster parents to ensure that children will receive all of the educational support they require. The EAGals also provide young people with a range of social and personal development opportunities. This includes giving advice on smoking and drug cessation and maintaining good general and sexual health. Placing authorities conduct the initial medical examinations of young people and annual looked after children review medicals. An effective system ensures that all children are registered with a GP, dentist and optician and that all routine check-ups are up to date. Children are given their own health care record which lists all of their illnesses, accidents, inoculations and provides them personalised information on their health history. All of these resources contribute to young people enjoying good health and in taking responsibility for their own health.

Young people confirm that they receive a standard rate of pocket money and are also provided with a weekly savings amount which is saved on their behalf and which they receive on leaving the agency. An element of the fostering allowance paid to foster parents is used for young people's clothing requirements and there is also an initial clothing allowance paid at the time of placement. Young people of an appropriate age are able to make their own clothes choices. A sum is included in the fostering allowance to allow for celebration and birthday presents. Foster parents are also provided with an additional holiday allowance to ensure that children remain part of the family and young people confirm that they are taken on holiday with their carers. Young people confirmed they have experienced a wide range of social and leisure activities and weekend events while in their foster placements. Several young people spoken to were members of social or sporting clubs. These measures promote children's enjoyment, life experiences and help them to integrate into their local community and improve their self-confidence.

## Quality of service

The quality of the service is **outstanding**.

Foster parents are extremely well trained and prepared for the fostering task and are introduced at an early stage of recruitment to the therapeutic methodology which underpins the agency service provision. The agency mainly use external assessors to recruit, prepare and assess foster parents, although this work is also undertaken by some of the link workers within the agency. Young people are heavily involved in this process by making contributions to the selection process and the introductory information evenings and the preparation groups. One young person is currently being trained to participate as a member of the foster panel. Induction and on-going training for foster parents is extensive and allied to the therapeutic model employed. Foster parents are supervised to a high level by both monthly individual home visit supervision and monthly group supervision. The latter often using the agency psychotherapist to provide clinical supervision.

Carers come from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences and includes single carers, same sex carers and carer couples. The agency requires at least one member of the fostering household to be a full-time foster parent. Foster parents' assessments are all completed well within timescales required by the standards. There is a designated manager who carries out the quality monitoring of assessments before they are presented to the fostering panel. This helps to ensure that the right people are approved and that placements will be secure and stable.

Foster parents undertake the Children's Workforce Development Council qualification immediately after approval and are encouraged by financial incentive to undertake the Certificate in Therapeutic Fostering Award. This has been developed by the agency and is accredited by a higher academic institution. Foster parents are also encouraged and supported to undertake an MA in Therapeutic Fostering, also developed by the agency and accredited by a higher academic institution. These extensive training and personal development opportunities give foster parents access to a range of further skills designed to promote a high level of care for fostered children and young people. Upon approval foster parents are provided with free membership of an organisation that gives them personal advice and guidance about fostering and this further enhances their knowledge and understanding of the fostering task.

There is a central list of fostering panel members in place in accordance with regulations. Panel members are well trained and supervised with an annual performance appraisal being undertaken. Minutes of panel meetings record clearly the detail of the discussions of issues raised by panel members and give evidence that there is due rigour in the considerations of foster carers' approval. Recommendations made to the agency decision maker are responded to in a timely manner.

## Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **outstanding** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Staff are inducted and well trained in safeguarding children and this training is regularly updated. Senior managers of the organisation undertake higher level training commensurate with their responsibilities in this area. Young people comment that they feel safe and that if they are unhappy about any element of their care they know how to complain and how to talk to people to express any concerns. Many of them said that they would raise concerns with the EAGals who they meet on a regular basis. A clearly written complaints procedure is in place and children are provided with an information sheet which explains the process to be followed. Complaints are investigated and responded to within determined timescales. Two complaints have been received by the agency within the past 12 months. Both of these were properly addressed and appropriate actions taken.

A policy is in place to address any incidents of bullying experienced by looked after children and children are given information leaflets to advise them where they can go to get help in this regard. Children felt confident that any bullying incidents reported to the agency would be dealt with effectively. Young people can also access independent advocacy services provided by their placing authority.

Foster parents' receive a high level of training as part of their preparation and on-going training which includes a focus on safeguarding, elements of safe caring and current child protection practice. This training is refreshed over time and takes place before and after approval. Foster parents also receive training on the effects of attachment and loss and birth trauma on children and this is also included on the Certificate of Therapeutic Fostering award which they can undertake. This ensures that carers have a clear understanding of the safeguarding procedures to be followed and the ways that they can support children who have been abused. Foster parents demonstrate a high awareness of current theoretical knowledge and the impact of abuse on a child's behaviour and development.

There are good systems in place to check that the care of young people is safe. Unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place more than once a year and there is a system in place to record this. Children are always seen alone by placing social workers and asked if they feel safe in placement. Any concerns about foster carers' care practice which is identified by supervising social workers is shared with management and this can result in the reconsideration of carers' approval. No foster parents have been deregistered within the past 12 months because of concerns about their practice. Staff and carers' recruitment and vetting is thorough and organised to ensure that staff appointed and carers approved are vetted correctly and are aware of their responsibilities to keep looked after children safe. Staff and carers files are subject to periodic audit to ensure that vetting practice is kept up to date.

A clearly written 'Missing Child' policy is in place. The incidence of children or young people going missing is decreasing and the overall number is comparatively low. Foster parents are aware of their responsibilities to report children missing from their

care and the procedures to be followed should this occur. The service try to develop good collaborative relationships with local police in the areas where children are placed so that they will take seriously the safety of looked after children who go missing and will actively search for looked after children who have gone missing. The agency have developed a 'Missing Child Return Interview' and appointed members of staff conduct these interviews and gather relevant information for review, the findings of which have a direct impact on the development of the service.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **outstanding**.

The performance and delivery of the fostering service is well monitored and is formally reported on to the board of directors at least every month. An annual panel report is also conducted and presented to the board. The agency produces an annual business development and improvement plan and revises their recruitment strategy annually. This extensive internal monitoring ensures that the level of care that fostered children receive within this agency is constantly being scrutinized and improved. There are clear action plans in place which identify areas of necessary service development. The agency also uses current theoretical research to direct practice and is research active. Research work has been undertaken with a number of academic institutions on various fostering related studies, all of which contribute to the exceptionally high standards of service which have been maintained over a number of years. The two recommendations made at the last inspection have been implemented to further improvement the service.

In order to help to make sure that fostered children's needs are properly attended and practice is professionally applied, social work staff in the fostering service are appointed with relevant knowledge and experience of fostering and are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council. Several social workers have a higher post qualifying award in child care work. There is an extensive induction process for new staff which acquaints them with the necessary core skills. Appraisals of social workers and managers competency take place at least annually. There is mandatory updated training for social work staff in safeguarding children.

Regular and frequent staff supervision takes place and there are fortnightly team meetings. Social workers have access to a good level of on-going training provided and are supported in undertaking higher social work qualifications. The manager of the service is a professionally qualified social worker who is registered with the Health and Care Professions Council and they have many years' experience in child care work, and they have an appropriate management qualification. On-going staff training and supervision ensures that children receive good quality care from carers whose work is supervised by skilled professionals.

Foster carers support group meetings and on-going training and information events are available and this further ensures that children are cared for by informed and professional carers who contribute to the development of the service. Managers of

the service have developed a working relationship with other agencies including the placing authorities, police, education and health services to ensure that there is a joint approach when assessing and meeting looked after children's needs.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are clearly written, frequently reviewed and describe the service aims and objectives. The children's guide is available in collective leaflet form and is also available in a form which makes it more accessible and inclusive for younger children. There are regular social events for young people, foster and birth parents which are enjoyed by all. These arrangements add to the 'sense of family' that the agency promote.

## 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 and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

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.