

By The Bridge

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

By the Bridge is a branch of a privately run national independent fostering agency. Its headquarters are 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, they joined up with Cambian Fostering last year. The agency provides therapeutic services and makes provision for the main carer to undertake additional therapeutic training. The agency refers to registered carers as foster parents to reflect the ethos of the agency; this terminology is reflected in this report. The agency provides short-term, long-term and emergency placements for children with disabilities, parent and child placements and placements for young people on remand. Young people who reach the age of 18 are able to remain living with their foster parents into adulthood. At the time of the inspection 394 children and young people were being accommodated in 259 approved fostering households.

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**

Children and young people with complex and challenging emotional and behavioural needs make good or excellent progress across all aspects of their development from their starting points. Meticulous matching processes result in the vast majority of children and young people benefitting from secure, stable placements which ensure they develop appropriate, loving relationships with their foster parents. Their chances of success considerably improve as a direct result.

Children and young people benefit from having a wide range of support networks which relentlessly persevere to teach, encourage and educate them to think for themselves and make positive life choices. Young people are very well prepared for adulthood. Children and young people who initially present with significantly risky behaviours learn to develop safer coping mechanisms to deal with their difficulties in healthier ways. Instances of engaging in risk-taking behaviours dramatically reduce over time.

Children and young people develop a thirst for learning. They positively respond to the excellent role modelling and encouragement of their foster parents and agency staff. Attendance and attainment figures rapidly improve. Older young people find their preferred styles of learning because the agency provides access to a wide range of both academic and vocational schemes and providers.

Prospective foster parents undergo rigorous assessment procedures, resulting in only the very best candidates being successfully approved and remaining with the agency. Robust safeguarding guidance is fully implemented. Children and young people are kept safe within a culture that promotes their learning and development through taking measured risks.

Foster parents feel respected and valued. This is demonstrated through rich and meaningful opportunities which provide them with superior training; this develops the skills and knowledge they need to enhance the quality of care they offer. Children's experiences are enriched as a result.

Strong panel involvement provides added quality assurance and safeguarding oversight. Foster parents and the agency are held to account for the quality and impact of their practices.

Research-informed practice ensures the agency remains up-to-date with changing legislation and best practice guidance. Senior leaders continue to monitor, question and evaluate. Excellent standards of practice are maintained and the agency continues to seek to improve.

A small minority of co-foster parents do not always feel fully supported, particularly at challenging times. As such, their ability to enhance the quality of care provided by the main foster parent is reduced. Better inclusion and targeted individual support for such individuals is recommended.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

Ensure support and training is made available to foster parents, including hard to reach foster parents, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. Specifically, ensure all co-foster

parents receive the supervision, support and guidance they need, especially at challenging times (NMS 20.8)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people are routinely well prepared with helpful knowledge and information about their prospective foster parents and households before they move in. Individual profiles are regularly updated; they are accurate, readily accessible and shared with children and young people prior to placements being made. This proactive approach answers some of their immediate questions and helps them to settle into their new homes. In addition, wherever possible, children and young people have introductory visits, including overnight stays. This empowers children who said, 'I liked visiting first' and 'I chose where I wanted to go'.

Emergency placements and unplanned endings do sometimes occur, this reflects the number of children and young people who have highly complex needs and challenging behaviours. Where placements end prematurely the child or young person often remains with the agency by moving to another of the agency's fostering households. This means vital information is not lost; it is effectively shared and successfully used to inform the next foster parents, often resulting in settled subsequent placements.

Statistically, fewer young people placed with the agency are shown to remain with their foster parents beyond the age of 18 when compared with national data. However, this does not accurately reflect the different types of arrangements that do exist. A separate department within the agency is dedicated to working on the 'Staying Put' agenda and this has resulted in flexible and creative arrangements which assist such placements to continue well into adulthood. One foster carer said 'I currently have three children placed through the agency but by next year, one will have changed to the adult shared lives scheme, another will stay through their local authority and the third will remain unchanged because of their age. Nothing will actually change in our family composition but I will need to speak with more people!' Another young person returned to the agency during the inspection; they stated, 'I moved into my own accommodation but I am in regular contact with my previous carer and still feel part of their extended family. I'm thinking of becoming a panel member because I still feel part of this agency and want to influence its work'.

Children and young people enjoy a wide variety of opportunities to engage in hobbies and activities of their own choosing. This brings new friendships and experiences whilst valuing the current and historic relationships that young people hold dear. Where appropriate, foster parents ensure excellent and bespoke contact arrangements with birth families are maintained. This is of immense value to children and young people. One example, a foster carer working very closely with family members about Christening arrangements, demonstrated respect and dignity for the whole family.

Children and young people routinely speak of loving relationships with their foster parents. Quotes include, 'I am treated as a real member of the family' and 'my foster carer is cool, he keeps his promises and never lies'. Social workers and independent

reviewing officers (IRO's) said 'the children are settling well and progressing in all areas' and 'she has improved in education in the last year and is now achieving to a high standard'.

Fostering households are suitably equipped with learning materials, appropriate toys and access to resources which aid the growth, learning and development of the children and young people. This drive and support provided to children is reflected by positive, improving results. In the last academic year average school attendance figures were 95.5% and SAT results for those children in Key Stage 2 were 2% above the national average for looked after children. Further analysis demonstrates the excellent progress being made by older young people. Last year's GCSE results showed that, on average, young people with this agency achieved above the national average for looked after children.

This thirst for learning is expressed by older young people who sometimes have histories of negative school experiences. The creative use of accessing alternative provisions includes examples of a young person producing their own music CD and others successfully gaining apprenticeships. One young person is currently applying to join the Army and another has just started at University.

Further opportunities are aimed at broadening young people's life experiences to encourage their hunger to seek new challenges and explore the wider world. Some young people are completing the Duke of Edinburgh Award and others are very excited at the prospect of travelling abroad later in the year to work as volunteers due to the agency's link with two development charities. Last year a group travelled to Borneo and reported on this fantastic experience in the young person's newsletter. This wide range of learning and personal development opportunities gives young people the chance to find out about their own strengths and interests and to take an active role in directing their own futures. One carer said 'It's about challenging the system on their behalf, getting the best resources and reminding children constantly that they can achieve. Positive attitude!'

Regular forums enable children and young people to actively contribute to the day-to-day operation and continuing development of the agency. Representatives of the group told inspectors they were busy writing a list of essential and desirable skills for job descriptions to help the agency's recruitment team. Their influence particularly impacts upon planned activities which are typically very well attended. This active and influential group is representative of children and young people who know how to express their views and make themselves heard. Excellent practice is further demonstrated by the agency's robust complaint's procedures. Examples show detailed responses which describe the action the agency has taken to address their concerns. Young people are also given the opportunity to discuss the outcomes further with the Registered Manager.

Children and young people's health is very well promoted. Supervision visits are effectively used to accurately monitor that all necessary health appointments are attended. Foster parents receive appropriate health-related training on core topics aimed at the type and nature of placements they provide. This gives young people the confidence to ask their foster parents for help and guidance; for example, about

sex and relationships. Some young people engage in risky behaviours which are damaging to their health and well-being; including smoking, using alcohol and drugs misuse. Such young people receive a high level of multi-agency support. Foster parents know local services and act as strong advocates to gain appointments and on-going input; for example, from children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). This approach, coupled with the security of safe and nurturing parenting, typically sees these behaviours reduce as young people learn to make safer lifestyle choices.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency strives to recruit extremely committed foster parents who can consistently provide dedicated, unwavering care and support to the most vulnerable children and young people; many of whom have experienced significant trauma and multiple placement breakdowns. A wide and varied advertising campaign reaches potential foster parents through radio, social media, local and national advertising, and through recommendation by existing foster parents. Enquiries are stringently monitored to ensure the agency is reaching its intended audience of individuals and couples, representative of all sections of the community.

The challenge to be successfully approved is endorsed by current foster parents who said, 'as our application progressed, the majority of the others either left or did not get to panel. Lots of people are put off because the agency is so honest about its expectations of us'. This statement is endorsed by figures which demonstrate that only 3% of those who made initial enquiries last year were successfully approved.

Placing authorities routinely refer their more difficult to place young people because they are confident in the quality of the care provided. Comments from social workers include, 'the child came displaying distressing levels of self-harming and disruptive behaviour and is now showing no signs of these behaviours'. As a trusted and preferred provider, the agency maintains placement occupancy levels which are higher than the national average of all independent fostering agencies. In March 2015, the agency had 71% of places filled, compared with a national average of 44%.

Children's educational attendance and achievement is creatively encouraged and richly rewarded throughout the agency. Prizes, awards and commendations within agency newsletters are commonplace. Young people with previous negative experiences told inspectors they feel inspired and encouraged to re-engage with education providers. The importance of the role of foster parents in supporting educational progress is reinforced from their very first panel meeting, in subsequent supervision meetings and through being a standing agenda item at carer forum groups. Foster parents are encouraged and directed to liaise with schools, be active at education review meetings and to challenge decisions, aims and targets on their child's behalf.

The agency's team of 'Education Advisor and Get a Lifestyle' (EAGaLS) workers, led by the agency's education lead, play a pivotal role in providing additional support to foster parents, individual children by liaising with local schools and colleges. Examples of their practice include, providing training to pastoral leads within mainstream settings, designing bespoke learning and work experience arrangements for young people and taking groups of children to visit colleges and universities to instil and encourage aspirations. Placing social workers and IRO's said, 'the education worker role is an excellent addition to the service' and 'By the Bridge have a 365 24/7 operation and tend to choose high quality foster families who put the child at the centre and make them feel part of the foster family. Their supervising social workers are active partners'.

Comprehensive and robust carer assessments add to the safeguards which protect children and young people from potentially unsuitable adults. The assessment process obtains robust evidence which is skilfully evaluated. Risk and protective factors are clearly evidenced throughout this extensive piece of work. Research-based practice enhances the assessment process which examines the impact of the applicant's own parenting experience and how they will or do parent children. Key issues are rigorously explored, as well as their impact; such as domestic violence, physical abuse and racism. Assessments also take full account of the views of birth children and family members.

An efficient, well run panel is very well supported by a panel manager, administrator and minute taker. This support ensures meetings are extremely well organised and smoothly run. New recruits undergo rigorous recruitment checks; current members are provided with on-going relevant training and professional appraisal. Consequently, the central list shows a wide and varied range of relevant experience, skills and expertise in order that all panel business is robustly scrutinised and deliberated.

The combination of high quality assessments and a robust, confident panel, enables the agency's decision maker to deliver clear, evidence-based final approval decisions. The panel chair values the excellent quality of the assessments. She always seeks feedback from all panel members to reliably inform the assessments manager of the calibre of the independent workers commissioned by the agency. High standards are maintained. Since the last inspection, 51 de-registrations have occurred, reducing the agency's total number of approved fostering households by five. Senior leaders fully understand the variety and context for this movement; some of which is attributed to quality of care and practice issues which have been brought to the panel, resulting in de-registration decisions. The quality of such decisions and actions are further demonstrated in that no referrals to the independent review mechanism have been made.

Foster parents and other staff overwhelmingly commend the content, relevance and frequency of training and support provided. A small number say they have experienced difficulties with regards to training venues and times but this is continually being reviewed with a wider variety of venues and dates being offered. This commitment is further demonstrated by the agency's thoughtful approach in

providing forums and support groups to co-foster parents; many of whom have separate full-time work commitments. Such meetings are held at convenient times and locations; thus increasing participation.

The agency's high expectations about training attendance is communicated at the very first panel to newly approved foster parents and monitored throughout their time with the agency. Despite this explicitly clear expectation, a shortfall with regards to the completion of the Training, Support and Development Standards (TSD) workbooks within 12 months of approval is noted for last year. Robust action is being taken to address this deficit which is not a reflection of foster parents' routine commitment to continuing professional development. Some foster parents' comments captured their typical enthusiasm, 'By the Bridge seemed a cut above the rest because of the professionalism and support package offered. Once we passed panel, the further professional development and support was fantastic, far beyond any of our expectations' and 'I am always asking for one-off courses and things to enhance my knowledge and the agency always says yes!'

Highly skilled foster parents demonstrate vast experience and expertise. Over time, many become expert in their chosen preferred areas, such as parent and child placements or looking after children with disabilities and additional learning needs. Other foster parents are particularly good at working alongside mental health services to support and stabilise young people with additional mental health and emotional needs. It is this vast range of skills and experience that is beginning to be better used in terms of existing foster parents acting as mentors and trainers to less experienced ones.

There remains a continuing uptake and waiting list for the agency's own certificate in therapeutic fostering, validated by the University of Greenwich. Some foster parents have gone on to study to advanced and degree level. Children and young people with complex needs and challenging behaviours are thriving in stable, nurturing placements. Foster parents demonstrate a great depth of understanding and skill to successfully hold and nurture them. One carer said 'I am confident in dealing with the difficult times; understanding the pull factors for going missing, getting it with regards to attachment difficulties, it all makes sense to me'. This work is complemented through the agency's own therapy team which runs regular surgeries for foster families who are looking after children displaying significant challenging and potentially harmful behaviours.

The superior quality of the overall support package for foster parents increases the likelihood of placement stability and success for the young people. This is demonstrated by last year's figure of 5% unplanned endings, compared to the national figure of 12%. Children and young people are thriving within an agency that constantly evolves and improves upon the ways in which it responds to the changing demands of the sector.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The safety and welfare of children and young people is at the very centre of the agency's practice. A highly experienced and appropriately qualified safeguarding manager works closely with the Registered Manager and designated safeguarding leads across the area offices; all of whom have completed advanced safeguarding training.

The agency works with many children and young people, whose circumstances and behaviours place them at significant risk of harm. They are extremely vulnerable. This is never underestimated and therefore training for foster parents focuses on developing their understanding, knowledge and skills to promote and protect children's welfare and safety. This includes training on child sexual exploitation (CSE), radicalisation, behaviour management, managing risks and reporting safeguarding concerns. The agency has developed its 'Prevent Strategy' and provided staff and foster parents with relevant training and guidance.

Children's files show that where children are identified as at risk of CSE and going missing, reporting to relevant agencies is prompt and effective. The number of safeguarding referrals and notifications made by the agency is comparatively higher than national figures but this reflects the nature and backgrounds of the children and young people routinely placed. The role of the EAGaLS, with agreement from the relevant local authorities, includes conducting interviews with children on their return from being missing. In many instances their already established and trusting relationship with the young person successfully engages them to talk more openly about where they went and why. In one case a young person maintained contact with their EAGaL during their absence providing an additional protective factor.

Comprehensive risk assessments and safe care strategies detail the agreed action and monitoring arrangements for foster parents and staff. Foster parents understand different contributing factors, for example, where internet use places a child at risk of CSE. Another example of effective risk assessment, is where the plan describes the need for the child's bedroom window to be kept locked due to their disability and inability to appreciate the risk for themselves.

Foster parents are given the tools and resources to effectively and safely manage challenging behaviours. This is reinforced through a clear behaviour management policy which sets out and reinforces the agency's therapeutic approach. A rolling programme of physical intervention training is led with a de-escalation focus which reinforces the use of physical restraint only as a last resort.

Timely annual reviews of foster parents include the views of children through questionnaires or face to face meetings with link workers. Where children are unable to contribute due to their age or understanding, observation of their interaction and relationship with their foster carer is used. Placing social workers also contribute to this process. The purpose of gathering this information is to explore whether children

feel safe and secure in their placement.

Full information is usually obtained prior to a child's placement, or rigorously chased with the placing authority soon after. Care plans, devised by the agency and foster parents specifically target safety factors. Diligent matching processes investigate fully, the foster parents' likely ability to keep children safe.

Strong arrangements to deal with allegations against foster parents and to manage complaints serve to protect children. Clear records of all complaints and allegations are kept and include a monthly analysis of progress. Managers are updated of all complaints as part of performance management systems. Some complaints have resulted in foster parents being suspended from fostering for a period of time while suitability assessments are undertaken. For some, decisions are made not to re-approve.

Effective partnership arrangements exist with safeguarding agencies, including the local authority designated officer (LADO) and the police, who have facilitated training with foster parents on children going missing. Regular liaison between the agency and external safeguarding agencies strengthens everyone's awareness and practice.

Children and young people receive excellent guidance and advice; they learn how to keep themselves safe. Bespoke support from the EAGaLs is further complemented by the 'Get a Lifestyle' programme which provides topical workshops for young people over the age of 14 on issues such as bullying, keeping safe on line and sexual relationships.

Thorough recruitment and induction processes are keenly implemented and effective. The same diligent recruitment and vetting checks are conducted for all staff, including foster parents and panel members. Anomalies and information gaps are questioned to ensure excellent safer recruitment practice which protects children.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

A well-qualified, experienced Registered Manager effectively leads the agency. Working closely with the Responsible Individual and safeguarding manager since July 2012, she efficiently delegates tasks to operational leads whilst maintaining rigorous monitoring oversight. This approach enables staff development and grows internal expertise. Staff said, 'I have learnt so much here' and 'we all support each other, no decision is ever made alone'. Innovative practice is exemplified by the head of therapy's current research project on therapeutic placements, endorsed by Middlesex University.

Senior leaders fully understand the potential risks of running a large organisation. Consequently, strong quality assurance mechanisms ensure records and practice evidence are routinely dip tested to reassure themselves of continuing high

standards. Staff across the agency share common appraisal targets which impact on each other. Hence, a team approach is strongly evident throughout all departments and functions of the agency. In accordance with its statement of purpose, the team approach is to demonstrate positive and successful outcomes for the children and young people.

This group working ethos and shared accountability results in safe working practices. Staff across all departments respectfully challenge each other and where necessary, external agencies, in the best interests of the children. Examples include holding local authorities to account about placement decisions; one carer described an example of challenging a school about its behaviour management practice. They said 'I would never put up with that for my own child so it is unacceptable for looked after children'.

This tenacious approach is typical from foster parents, they comment 'I am treated as an equal professional' and 'my opinions matter; they are heard'. From the onset of the assessment process, new foster parents are told to expect and where necessary, demand, to be treated as equal professionals, an integral and essential part of the child's life.

Excellent staff supervision practice is challenging and reflective. Safeguarding is well considered and includes case discussions. This ensures that managers are able to monitor progress and ensure care plans are being implemented as directed. The impact of training on practice is clearly featured; staff are able to identify their achievements and the impact of their work on children and foster parents.

Challenging development plans ensure the agency continues to evolve. Positive change is embraced by the majority. More recently, the agency has joined with a large national provider of children's services; thus ensuring continued financial viability and expansion. This has not been well received by every stakeholder, resulting in some foster parents choosing to leave the agency because of concerns it will lose its 'family feel'. Senior leaders, whilst sympathetic, are undeterred and view the change as necessary to secure the agency's continuing financial viability. Leaders recognise the positive aspects of maintaining intimate relationships with localised groups of foster parents. With this in mind, clear plans are being made to register a number of local offices as separate branches; thus promoting their individual identity within a large organisation.

Further improvements includes the development of a new recording system, the Customer Relationship Manager. This has enabled the organisation to better focus and diligently track its work, such as notifications, episodes of missing and incidents of CSE, more effectively. Good oversight of safeguarding incidents is achieved at quarterly meetings where managers review placements, including the strategies in use to keep them safe. Safeguarding incidents are analysed for learning and managers examine month on month data, such as the number of children going missing, the number of CSE cases and how these are being managed. Cases not concluded the previous month are routinely brought back until they are satisfactorily

resolved.

No requirements or recommendations were made at the inspection in March 2013. As a learning organisation, strong systems of quality assurance routinely scrutinise practice, such as managing complaints and responding to feedback from foster parents and placing authorities.

Strong partnership arrangements ensure positive relationships exist with local authority safeguarding boards, LADOs, the police and health services. Timely communication with Ofsted ensures all significant events are promptly notified; anomalies and questions about appropriate notifications have been asked and respectfully challenged in the spirit of working together.

The agency demonstrates transparency and seeks to continually improve its practices in the very best interests of achieving positive and safe outcomes for children and young people.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 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.