

Stepping Stones Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Stepping Stones Fostering is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Ilford, Essex. The service registered with Ofsted in May 2015. This is the fostering service's first inspection following registration. The service provides the following types of foster care placements: long term, short term, bridging, respite, emergency, and solo and sibling placements.

The agency's statement of purpose states that the service aims to offer a 'prompt, coordinated service, which provides packages of care to meet the needs of individual children and young people, especially children from ethnic minorities.' In addition to the main London office, the agency is in the early stages of developing a fostering service in the West Midlands area.

At the time of the inspection, the fostering service had three approved fostering households with three children and young people in placement. The foster carers and children in placement have transferred from the provider's previous fostering service, which has since closed. Two former children looked after, who recently turned 18 years, remain living with their foster carers under Staying Put arrangements.

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: **Inadequate**

The leadership and management of the service are not sufficiently effective or efficient. The progress of service development has been slow and the inspection notes a number of key breaches of the regulations. Management oversight is weak, and so key functions of the fostering service are not robust in ensuring that the service provides a quality service to all stakeholders.

The protection of children requires improvement to ensure that children in placement are safe. In particular, the recruitment and vetting of staff and volunteers are a cause for concern. Actions taken when allegations are made against foster carers are not in compliance with safeguarding protocols, and records are incomplete.

The recruitment of foster carers has been slow. The number of approved foster carers has not increased since the transfer of foster carers from the provider's former fostering agency. The service, therefore, is unable to offer a diverse range of foster care placements, as stated in the agency's statement of purpose.

The service has no registered manager in place. The management of the fostering service is not sufficiently stable to ensure that there is adequate oversight of the service's operation and function. This has a negative impact on the service's ability to comply with key regulations or to fulfil stated ambitions.

Children make good progress while living with their foster carers. Placements are secure and stable, children's and young people's individual needs are well met and they thrive. Children and young people are able to express their views and opinions and they have influence on the day-to-day care they receive.

Foster carers are part of a team working with the child and they contribute to care planning and decision-making. They benefit from supportive relationships with the fostering service and with local authority social workers.

Areas of improvement

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person(s) meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Regulation 17: Provide foster parents with such training, advice information and support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))	1 February 2017
Regulation 23: Appoint panel members, including one or two persons, ('the vice chairs') who may act as chair if the person appointed to chair the panel is absent or that office is vacant. (Regulation 23 (4)(ii))	1 February 2017
Regulation 23: Must ensure that the fostering panel has sufficient members, and that individual members have between them the experience and expertise necessary, to effectively discharge the functions of the panel. In particular, to appoint an independent foster carer, a former child looked after and representatives from education and child health. (Regulation 23 (7))	1 February 2017
Regulation 25: Obtain such information as the fostering panel considers necessary and send that information to the panel, and provide such other information to the panel, so far as is reasonably practicable. (Regulation 25 (3))	1 February 2017
Regulation 20: Ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to persons working for the purposes of the fostering service in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20)	1 February 2017
Regulation 36: Must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table in Schedule 7. In particular to notify Ofsted of any allegation made against a foster carer. (Regulation 36 (1))	1 September 2016

<p>Regulation 35: Maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals and provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted under this regulation. (Regulation 35 (1)(2))</p>	<p>1 February 2017</p>
<p>Regulation 4: Keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children’s guide. In particular, to provide accurate information about the service’s complaints procedures and make explicit children’s rights to independent advocacy. (Regulation 4 (a))</p>	<p>1 February 2017</p>
<p>Regulation 21: Must ensure that all persons employed receive appropriate supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))</p>	<p>3 October 2016</p>
<p>Regulation 32: Must ensure that records are kept securely. (Regulation 32 (5))</p>	<p>3 October 2016</p>

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- Implement an effective strategy to ensure that there are sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service, as outlined in the service’s statement of purpose. (NMS 13.1)
- Ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval. (NMS 20.3)
- Ensure that staff understand the nature of records maintained, and ensure that there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (NMS 26.2)
- Ensure that foster carers are trained in appropriate safer-care practice. In

particular, that safe care policies are devised which meet the specific needs of each individual child. (NMS 4.6)

- Ensure that staff work effectively in partnership with other agencies concerned with child protection, particularly with local authority social workers where allegations against foster carers have been made. (NMS 4.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children benefit from the service's focus on promoting progress and positive experiences for children looked after. As a result, their outcomes are good. Children receive personalised care, tailored to meet individual needs. Foster carers share sound relationships with those they care for and are fully committed to supporting them to meet their full potential. Similarly, children and young people feel loved and well cared for by their foster carers. They have a very strong sense of belonging.

Children are able to express their views through statutory review meetings, through foster carers' reviews, through their social workers and through their supervising social worker. The agency supports this effort further by the distribution of feedback forms to gauge children's and young people's satisfaction with the service. This is to ensure that service development takes into account users' expertise and experiences to help shape the future of the service. Children receive information about how to make complaints. However, this information, and information about how to access independent advocacy services, is not as clear as it could be in the children's guide.

The fostering service promotes children and young people's educational achievement. Young people attend school and college regularly and are making good educational progress from their starting points. This is particularly the case for young people with special educational needs. Children make positive progress due to their foster carers' keen interest in meeting their educational objectives. They benefit academically from the input of their foster carers and staff of the service.

Children lead healthy lifestyles. Foster carers promptly register them with primary care services, they have children looked after medical assessments completed annually and immunisations are updated. Children have good access to any required specialist services. These include a range of paediatric specialist services to address disability and complex health issues. Children have access to appropriate counselling and mental health support services as required.

Children's and young people's identity needs are very well met by the service, and staff explore thoroughly issues of equality and diversity. For example, children have good access to interpreting services. They are encouraged to practise and celebrate their chosen faiths and placements are supportive in helping children looked after to understand their backgrounds and events that have happened to them. As a result, they have a better understanding and develop pride in their heritage. The agency recognises the importance of family heritage and faith. For one sibling group, the agency has provided funding for them to attend Sikh Camp over the summer period. This is with the full agreement of the children's and young people's parents. Foster families offer expert and compassionate care for children living with disabilities. This promotes young people's independence and confidence and maximises their chances of reaching their full potential.

Children engage in a range of physical and social activities that are of their choosing. These typically include sport, attendance at local youth clubs, holidays and participation with their foster family's social events. They also enjoy activities organised and facilitated by the fostering service. This assists young people to enjoy healthy lifestyles and to socialise, and offers good opportunities for play. Young people enjoy well-balanced, nutritious diets, which meet their cultural and religious needs.

Children generally do not exhibit challenging behaviour. Incidents of children going missing or being involved in risk-taking behaviour are rare. Foster carers understand the need for children to become independent and allow them to take age-appropriate risks. Foster carers routinely speak with children about the potential consequences of any such behaviour, in an effort to make them aware and to take responsibility for their own actions.

Children have good, safe opportunities to meet with their parents, friends, brothers and sisters. Staff and foster carers support and facilitate clear contact arrangements ensuring that children maintain positive family relationships. Young people formerly looked after by their foster carers have the opportunity to remain with them once they reach 18 years. This has been the case recently for two young people. These arrangements allow young people to remain living with the family they love and feel a strong sense of belonging, while continuing to receive emotional and practical support in preparation for adulthood.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The fostering agency has failed to recruit and approve any additional foster carers other than those foster carers who transferred from the provider's former agency. This is not in line with the scope of diverse foster care placements outlined in the service's statement of purpose. Children and young people do not benefit from the small pool of foster care available to provide placements.

The inspection was unable to assess the preparation and assessment of foster carers, as no applicants have been approved since the service started to operate. The training of existing foster carers is of concern. Since its registration, the fostering service has run only three formal training programmes. This amount of training is insufficient to ensure that foster carers benefit from ongoing, quality training that meets their development needs. Additionally, not all foster carers had achieved the training, support and development standards within the 12-month post-approval period, as specified in the national minimum standards. Foster carers do not receive regular, current training opportunities to help enhance their knowledge and skills in caring for vulnerable children.

The function and operation of the service's fostering panel require improvement. The service is yet to recruit key representatives of relevant childcare fields to assist the

panel in making recommendations about the suitability of applicants. The service is yet to appoint a vice-chair, an independent foster carer, a former child looked after or a representative from child health. This is not to the benefit of children looked after seeking placements. The vetting of panel members is poor and panel training opportunities are limited and are not in compliance with the service's own panel procedures. Staff do not consistently follow through panel recommendations, as ratified by the agency decision-maker. This was the case for a recommendation and subsequent decision for updated foster carer information to be presented to panel members within a six-month period. This did not happen. Panel recommendations and subsequent decisions require compliance to confirm that approved foster carers remain suitable to care for children looked after.

Placements are stable and secure, and unplanned endings are rare. Staff and foster carers feel no pressure to accept placements, and only do so if it is clear that this is in the best interests of children. Foster carers have a good understanding of delegated authority and exercise this practice appropriately. Foster carers and staff of the fostering team work effectively with social workers and other professionals. This is to establish placement objectives and how, collectively, children's and young people's needs are best met.

Foster carers receive excellent support from staff through supervision, regular home visits and weekly telephone calls. They feel highly valued by the agency, and this contributes to their loyalty to the service and the provider in particular. Foster carers feel the key strength of the service is the support that they receive to achieve positive outcomes for children in their care. One foster carer comments: 'We treat each other like family. This is not just a business; it's always all about the children.' The out-of-hours service responds effectively in supporting foster carers to manage emergencies.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

Despite the strong commitment of managers, staff and foster carers to keep children safe from harm and abuse, the practices of the service do not support the robust protection of children and young people. In addition, safe care policies are not available for individual children in placement and so do not highlight appropriate day-to-day safe care practices to help curb risky behaviour.

The staff recruitment and vetting practices of the agency are a cause for concern. The personnel information of staff and panel members does not confirm that recruitment and vetting procedures are consistently thorough. While all files evidence completion of Disclosure and Barring Service reports, managers failed to produce other key vetting information as required. Staff vetting information does not consistently include two written references, confirmation of the applicant's identification or qualifications or confirmation of work histories. Poor vetting practices do not confirm that staff and volunteers are suitable to work with children and on behalf of the agency.

The management of allegations is poor. The service has received one allegation against a foster carer. Records of the incident are incomplete and do not illustrate the nature of support offered to the foster carer. Managers of the service indicate that appropriate support and guidance was provided to the foster carer, but the records do not support this. Contrary to the Fostering Services Regulations, managers failed to inform Ofsted of the allegation. This is a clear breach of the regulations.

Additionally, managers are unclear about the outcome of the subsequent investigation undertaken by the host local authority. Managers confirmed the outcome of the investigation only following prompting by the inspector to re-contact the relevant local authority. Managers are unable to confirm the status of the foster carer during this investigation. These circumstances do not demonstrate the effective and robust management of allegations and the protection of children.

The fostering service ensures that foster carers are aware of the vulnerabilities of children and young people. Foster carers have good insight into the underlying causes of risky and challenging behaviours that children and young people sometimes exhibit. Staff and foster carers participate in multi-disciplinary forums to collectively explore and help to reduce the risk of child sexual exploitation. This helps to promote the protection of young people, when there are suspicions of child sexual exploitation.

Children and young people do not regularly go missing and the frequency of young people being involved in sexual exploitation is very low. When such incidents do occur, staff manage the incidents promptly and effectively, promoting the safety of children and young people. Foster carers are familiar with relevant safeguarding policies and protocols and strictly adhere to them. This also helps to protect children and young people.

Children and young people receive clear information about making complaints and have good opportunities to speak with staff of the service in private. Staff complete at least one unannounced visit annually to foster carers' homes to monitor and promote the safety of children.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

The leadership and management of the service are not sufficiently effective or efficient. The progress of service development and improvement has been slow and the inspection notes a number of key breaches of the regulations. Management oversight is weak, and so key functions of the fostering service are not robust in ensuring a quality service.

The fostering service has no registered manager in place, and management arrangements have been inconsistent. The failure to secure stable management for the service has contributed to shortfalls identified in the operation of the fostering service. This is not in the best interests of children seeking placements with the agency.

Leaders' and managers' oversight of the service is insufficiently robust. For example, leaders failed to produce any quality of care reviews, as required by the regulations, to help assess the quality of the service and to identify remedial action required for improvement. As noted elsewhere in this report, leaders failed to notify Ofsted of an allegation as required, and failed to conduct the safe recruitment of staff and volunteers. The recruitment of new foster carers has not progressed, and key policies and procedures, such as the complaints procedure and panel meeting procedures, require review to ensure that they support good practice.

Supervisory systems for senior staff are poor. Arrangements for supervision are not formal in nature and so do not offer leaders insight into staff performances. This is particularly important where the work performances of staff are concerning. In addition, staff are not subject to annual appraisals. As a result, leaders lack understanding of staff practices and training needs.

The quality of some case recordings requires improvement. Staff do not consistently sign and date records, making it difficult to identify when key events occur. Foster care agreements do not always reflect the approval status of foster carers, while other key records are missing. Some staff documentation is inconsistent, so this does not provide a good understanding of a child's life.

The service's statement of purpose and children's guide both require revision. In particular, to provide clear and accurate information about how the service manages complaints and children's and young people's rights to independent advocacy.

Leaders of the service display ambitions for positive change. They have a realistic business plan in place to help to improve service provision and establish the future direction of the agency. Plans are in place to recruit additional staff and foster carers, and for improvements to existing IT systems. A detailed training plan is in place for the forthcoming year. Managers, leaders and the staff team are committed to delivering a quality service to all stakeholders. Currently, shortfalls in the effectiveness of the management and leadership of the service have a negative impact on the robust protection of children and the efficient development of a good quality fostering service.

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.