

# By the Bridge North West

By the Bridge North West Limited

The Barn, Beech Farm, 122 Hollin Lane, Styal, Cheshire SK9 4LD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

By the Bridge North West is a branch of a privately run national fostering agency. It has offices in Cheshire and West Yorkshire. Carers are located within several local authority areas in North West England and in Yorkshire. They provide long-term, short-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.

The agency provides families for children who have complex and challenging emotional and/or behavioural needs, including parent and child placements, as well as respite placements and families for children who have complex health needs. By the Bridge offers placements to children who need therapeutic foster families.

The fostering service has doubled in size within the past 12 months as a result of the amalgamation of this agency with another run by the same provider. It currently supports 220 children living in 152 foster families.

**Inspection dates:** 18 to 22 September 2017

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people,</b> taking into account	<b>good</b>
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

**Date of last inspection:** 5 October 2015

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** monitoring inspection 3 May 2016

## Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The service is well led by an experienced and competent manager, in collaboration with the national senior leadership team. The oversight and monitoring processes have improved significantly since the last inspection, so that the provider is better able to focus on what matters most and areas for improvement.
- The vast majority of children have a very positive experience of being fostered and make extremely good progress in all aspects of their development.
- Foster carers are well supported to meet children's emotional and psychological health needs. Consequently, most children live in secure, stable placements and benefit from a sense of belonging.
- Children and carers are listened to, and their views inform the operation and development of the service.
- Education advisors provide children with excellent support to return to and engage with education. This improves their life chances. Ninety-seven per cent of children have good school attendance and, overall, they achieve above the national average for children looked after.
- Following a serious incident in 2016, improved safety measures have been implemented. Individually tailored risk management plans are based on strong assessment of risk. They provide good guidance for carers, which promotes children's safety and well-being. Consequently, children are safer and said that they feel safe.
- The amalgamation of two fostering agencies has been well managed so that foster carers feel well supported and part of the team. The agency has done much to upskill carers with a focus on ensuring that all carers are familiar with the agency's aims, ethos and strategies for looking after children. The agency has made good progress in this, but there is more to be done.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The four requirements and ten recommendations made following the last inspection and subsequent monitoring visit have been partially met, which has led to improvements in the service. However, some remain unmet.
- There are shortfalls in placement planning and matching. The agency does not use all the information that it holds to inform a placement match. Nor does it ensure that it has good-quality information about the child before placement, even when this information is held by the placing authority. This undermines the quality of the match.

- A recommendation to improve transition arrangements, and thereby reduce children's anxieties at a time of crisis, has not been met. The agency does not routinely provide children with information about its service or the foster family before a child moves to a new family.
- Some carers do not have the information that they need to meet children's specific needs. Action taken by the agency to obtain missing information, including delegated authority and care plans has been, in many instances, intermittent and unsuccessful. The agency has recently taken action to address this.
- Many carers have gaps in their training portfolios, which means that the agency cannot be confident that all carers have the skills to provide high-quality care.
- The arrangements for annual carer reviews are not strong. They do not clearly set out what carers must do to meet the agency's standards and children's needs. Changes to a carer's situation are not always considered when reviewing their approval status. Many children do not contribute to foster carer reviews. The agency is not doing enough to encourage this.
- Restraints are not well recorded and not all carers who have restrained children are trained to do so. Recorded details of restraint do not hold sufficient information to demonstrate that the child has been held safely, to prevent serious harm, and for no longer than is necessary.
- The statement of purpose and children's guide require further improvement to meet regulation.

## What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet 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
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6 (3) (d) of the Care Planning Regulations.</p> <p>In order to meet this regulation, the registered person must ensure that it obtains and supplies to foster carers a copy of the child's local authority care plan and other relevant plans, including delegated authority, prior to or at the point of a placement with foster carers. Information relating to children placed in an emergency should be provided within five working days of the placement. The agency should use these plans to help the foster carers identify how they will meet the child's assessed needs. (Regulation 17 (3))</p>	17/11/2017
<p>Ensure that the registered person notifies Ofsted of any revision to the statement of purpose or the children's guide within 28 days and, if the children's guide is revised, supply a copy to each foster carer approved by the fostering service provider, and to each child placed by them, (subject to the child's age and understanding). (Regulation 4 (a,b,c))</p>	17/11/2017

### Recommendations

- Obtain children's views on all aspects of their care. In particular, increase children's engagement in the foster carer review process. (NMS 1.3)
- Ensure that children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, (including photographic information and the children's guide) in a format

appropriate to their age and understanding. Where this information is held electronically, do more to make it available to children, including those who are moving to a new foster home in an emergency. (NMS 11.3)

- Ensure that foster carers' ongoing training and development portfolios demonstrate how they are meeting the skills required of them by the agency. In particular, ensure they demonstrate that foster carers have received training to meet the particular individual needs of the children they are caring for. (NMS 20.4)
- Ensure that children are carefully matched to a foster placement and that foster carers have full information about the child. (NMS 11.2)
- Ensure that reviews of foster carers are sufficiently thorough as to allow the fostering agency to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster. (NMS 13.8)
- Ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way that will be helpful to the child when they access their files, now or in the future. In particular, ensure that details about restraints demonstrate that the child has been held safely, only to prevent serious harm and for no longer than is necessary. (NMS 26.6)
- Ensure that foster carers understand what is in the child's placement plan and have clarity about decisions they can make about the day-to-day arrangements for the child, including such matters as education, leisure activities, overnight stays, holidays, and personal issues such as haircuts. (NMS 7.3)

## Inspection judgements

### Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The quality of individualised care and support to children is overwhelmingly good. Most children are very settled in placement and speak highly of their foster families and of the support that they receive from the agency, saying that they are happy and feel 'at home' because carers are 'nice people'. They value the good care and warmth that carers provide. For example, one child entered his carer into a 'FosterTalk' competition and his carer was awarded 'best new carer of the year'.

The vast majority of children make extremely good progress across all aspects of their development. For example, in education some children receive support from an Eagles worker who helps children who have had poor attendance and engagement with education in the past, to return to education. Children receive additional tuition as required and, over time, many catch up with peers and achieve good educational outcomes. This improves their life chances.

Ninety-seven per cent of children have good school attendance and, overall, they achieve above the national average for children looked after, with some going on to further education and training, including apprenticeships and university. A foster carer gave an example: 'The child I look after is unrecognisable – she was in set eight, now she is doing A levels. She achieved 10 GCSEs, including five A's. The agency arranged a trip to Manchester University when she was lower down the school. It totally changed her view about going to university.'

Through a series of events and workshops and the 'Get a Life' programme of developing practical, financial and self-care skills, children receive very good support to prepare for future independence and to have safe social and sexual relationships. Many of those approaching adulthood have the opportunity to remain with their carers under staying-put arrangements. Others are supported into independent living. For example, a carer is supporting an asylum-seeking young person to apply for the right to remain in the UK, before he moves on to independence.

Children are encouraged to participate fully in the life of the foster family, school and local community, and most do so. They enjoy and benefit from many positive experiences, including new hobbies, holidays and positive family life. In addition, children enjoy a range of challenging and exciting activities by participating in a programme of activities run by the Eagles. They meet up with peers who are also fostered, and those who attend the participation group to discuss topics relevant to growing up in foster care. This helps them to develop self-confidence, share their views about their experiences and make valuable contributions to the development of the service.

Children are encouraged to grasp opportunities and take a full and active part in society. For example, one young person has recently returned from a 10-week trip to Nepal where she engaged in charitable work with underprivileged people. The agency fully supported the trip, providing opportunities for her to canvas support

and fundraise. When she needed reassurance during the early weeks of the trip, the agency enabled her to receive this through contact with her foster carer via social media. This once-in-a-lifetime experience has made a huge difference to her life. It has massively improved her self-esteem, resilience and confidence.

Children's cultural and identity needs are respected and well promoted. A number of immigrant children are given effective support to integrate into British society. A social worker commented: 'The carer shows good awareness of the child's cross-cultural support needs.' Sibling placements are encouraged and well supported. For example, the agency supports a number of large sibling groups, enabling exemptions to the usual fostering limit. Living with their siblings helps the children to feel secure and recognises the importance of maintaining family ties.

Supervising social workers maintain close supervision of those who have particular health needs, including those who have previously had unhealthy eating patterns. The agency trains carers to provide nutritious, well-balanced meals and opportunities for exercise. Consequently, some children's health and self-esteem have grown enormously since their placements began. Children with mental health needs are appropriately referred to the child and adolescent mental health team. There are delays for some children in accessing therapy and psychological support, but the agency ensures that the referral is kept under constant review and advocates for children to receive the support that they need.

Social workers recognise and speak positively about the quality of care that children receive. For example, one said: 'The children have come on in leaps and bounds under her care and I could not think of a better foster carer for these children. I am very impressed by the support she is able to access from the agency and this is clearly evidenced in the high standard of care that she provides to the three children placed with her.'

Listening to children is mostly good, and there are pockets of extremely good practice, but this is not consistent. Children reported that they are listened to and that their views are understood and taken into account in their plans and day-to-day lives. But the arrangements for gathering children's views about their carers are not strong and do not support children to be open and transparent about any concerns that they may have. When children give written comments to inform a foster carer review, records do not always demonstrate that they are taken seriously.

Transitions are, for the most part, well managed. Children appreciate the warm welcome that they receive from their foster families. One said that although he moved in an emergency, this was a positive experience compared to a number of previous, planned moves in other agencies. He said that the carer was friendly, thoughtful and sensitive to his needs and feelings. Many said that they moved in an emergency but ended up quickly asking to stay with their carers because the carers are so nice. Children spoke about the anxiety of moving to a new home when they know nothing about it. They said that they would value some written information and photographs of the family that they are moving to. This point was raised by different children at the last inspection, but the service has not taken action to address it.

Some children get frustrated because their carers don't have appropriately delegated authority, and some carers don't have clear arrangements for enabling sleepovers. One child explained: 'When I want to have sleepovers with friends, I'm told I can't because social workers have to do DBS [Disclosure and Barring Service] checks on my friends' families.' This shows that some carers are not clear about the procedures for agreeing sleepovers. Another child said, 'My carers don't like it because it makes more work for them, so I can't go. I'm missing out on fun.' Another child explained how he declines invitations to sleep over with friends because getting permission to go is so cumbersome. He does not want his friends' parents to have to undergo the checks that foster carers say that they must. He said, 'It feels like I'm the odd one out.' This is not the case for all children, and, where foster carers have delegated authority, children enjoy full participation in their friendship groups.

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: good**

Following a serious incident in 2016, Ofsted carried out a monitoring visit and found shortfalls in placement matching and assessment of risk. Since then, the agency has strengthened its arrangements for assessing risks. However, obtaining information from placing authorities to inform effective matching, and to ensure that all known risks are shared, remains a challenge.

Foster carers and supervising social workers work together with placing social workers, and in some instances children, to devise individually tailored, written risk assessments which inform clear and robust risk management plans. These are regularly reviewed and updated, taking into account any changes or incidents that impact on a child's safety. They provide good guidance for carers, which promotes children's safety and well-being. Consequently, children are safer and said that they feel safe.

Health and safety checks on foster homes and family-led safer caring plans ensure good arrangements for keeping children safe and comfortable within the foster home. Twice-yearly, unannounced visits by an independent person enable objective scrutiny of the foster home's safeguarding arrangements, and promote consistency in the standards of care and accommodation.

The recruitment, assessment, initial training and support given to foster carers have a strong focus on protecting children, which helps carers to have a comprehensive understanding of the reasons for safeguarding practices. For example, the agency runs a good-quality training programme which provides staff and carers with the knowledge and skills to understand and support children at risk of online grooming, child sexual exploitation and going missing. Not all carers have completed this training, but the agency is rolling it out and encouraging all carers to do so.

Teenage children and, in particular, those considered to be at risk of child sexual exploitation, are offered specialist workshops run by the Eagles. The workshops are child led, responsive to need and informative. They help children to have a better understanding of risk and of how to stay safe.



Children said that their safety is a high priority. They understand how to stay safe online and showed a good understanding of the reasons for safeguarding practices. Some bemoaned the good safety measures as too restrictive. For example, one said, 'They keep us too safe. I don't get enough leeway to make my own mistakes. I was at a party and was sick, so since then, my carers are stricter and I can't get drunk. We should be taught about drinking safely so we don't go off the rails when we're 18.' But others appreciate the good safety measures and said, 'We get more responsibility for ourselves as we get older.'

Foster carers take swift action to protect children who go missing and, in many cases, search locally for the child and contact the child and their known associates in an attempt to secure their safe return. The agency safeguards children at risk of sexual exploitation and those who go missing, by challenging other professionals to take robust action in response to safeguarding concerns. They escalate concerns to the placing authority safeguarding team or to the local authority designated officers for safeguarding when they consider that the response from placing authorities is not sufficiently robust.

Designated safeguarding officers express confidence in the way that the service protects children and report that the agency responds appropriately to allegations and safeguarding concerns, in a timely manner. Investigations into allegations are thorough, and action taken serves to keep children safe. For example, concerns about a foster family's ability to provide a safe environment for children were presented to panel and the agency decision-maker. This led to de-registration of the foster carers and an appropriate referral to the disclosure and barring service.

The incidence of children going missing has increased within the last 12 months since the two services amalgamated. In the year up to 31 March 2017, 11.5% of children went missing from home on a total of 165 occasions. This is high compared to all independent fostering agencies and reflects the complex emotional and/or behavioural needs of the children who are cared for by the agency.

The agency's efforts to influence placing authorities to arrange independent return interviews have not been successful. Independent return interviews have been held only 29 times during the same reporting period. The agency has been creative in its response to this ongoing problem. Eagals have begun to carry out independent return interviews with children whose placing authorities are slow to set up these interviews. This is a valuable service that ensures that children are interviewed quickly on their return and gives them the opportunity to speak to an independent person whom they know well and trust.

The agency has worked in close partnership with safeguarding agencies to promote the safety of asylum-seeking children and those at risk of human trafficking. Despite this, one young asylum seeker went missing and has never been found.

Robust and effective action has been taken in response to concerns about radicalisation. This includes working directly with young people to raise their knowledge and awareness. A minority of carers have been trained to recognise and

prevent children from engaging in extremism. The registered manager intends to strengthen practice further by training more staff and carers to develop the skills to recognise and take action when a child may be vulnerable to extremism.

The agency provides good support to families who foster children who have dangerous and challenging behaviour. A foster carer said: 'The out of hours service is exceptionally supportive and reassuring.' Another explained: 'When I was experiencing difficulty with a young person who was displaying some very challenging behaviour, the agency supported me well and arranged respite at short notice which enabled me to recharge my batteries.'

There have been some instances where a child has been restrained by a carer who is not appropriately trained in restraint practice. Although there is nothing to indicate that a child has been harmed, recorded details of restraint do not clearly demonstrate that the child has been held safely, and only to prevent serious harm and for no longer than is necessary.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good**

The service is well led by an experienced and competent registered manager in collaboration with the national senior leadership team. Leaders and managers place children firmly at the centre of the organisation's practice. They are inspirational, confident and ambitious, creating a culture of aspiration and positivity which permeates the agency. Senior members of the leadership team are actively involved in research which is reflected in a forward-thinking service that meets children's needs well.

Over the past year, the agency has focused on building systems and practices that can effectively support the much larger fostering service that has resulted from the amalgamation of two agencies. It has developed better strategies for managing and monitoring the operation of the service. It has reviewed the training needs of staff and carers and set up a programme of training aimed at developing the knowledge and skills of its workforce. While there is more to be done, there are clear indications that the building blocks put into place are sound. They are likely to lead to overall continuous improvement in the quality of the service and in children's progress and outcomes.

The registered manager is ably assisted by two regional managers and a deputy who take responsibility for the day-to-day supervision of work in the two area offices. Between them, the management team members have a good knowledge of their carers and they maintain effective oversight of children's experiences and progress.

Some aspects of the service are managed centrally. These include recruitment, assessment and training of carers and matching children to placements. While this arrangement has many strengths, it has not enabled the registered manager to maintain full day-to-day oversight of all the agency's work. The provider has recently taken steps to address this. The new responsible individual is working closely with the registered manager to implement more effective and comprehensive regional working.

Foster carers value the training in therapeutic fostering that underpins the ethos and work of the agency. One explained: 'The reason I chose this agency is because I think their model of care is excellent. The information and training provided to me before the assessment commenced was very informative and gave me a greater understanding of the role. I feel the support provided is of a very high standard.'

The monitoring processes have improved significantly since the last inspection, with the recent introduction of a multi-faceted electronic risk management tool. This enables rigorous and effective monitoring of the operation of the service and children's safety, progress and outcomes. By providing reliable data, the tool assists the provider to identify and address practice shortfalls. Its use is likely to lead to further improvements in the operation of the service.

The provider knows the strengths and weaknesses of the service and continues to promote improvement through advances in practice. For example, recent developments include the introduction of an annual Eid al-Adha celebration, and the appointment, in each office, of a lead member of staff responsible for driving improved practice with children at risk of sexual exploitation.

Collaborative working with partners is mostly strong. Commissioners and social work professionals, including those responsible for safeguarding children, speak positively about the high quality of the service and good communication. The agency actively advocates for children and challenges poor practice when this means that children are not getting the services that they need. For example, they successfully challenged a placing authority's education arrangements for a child. Consequently, the child is making very good progress in a school that more appropriately meets his needs. In addition, the agency provides training to schools in 'applying understanding of trauma recovery'. Schools report that this is very useful, as it gives them a much better understanding of how to reach children who have complex emotional and/or behavioural needs. This leads to children's improved engagement with learning and better educational progress.

Staff recruitment is effective in engaging skilled and diverse practitioners who understand the complexities of the fostering task. Social work and support staff are well supervised by managers who are visible, approachable and personable. In addition, supervising social workers receive monthly training and guidance from the agency's therapist. This is helping them to develop a good understanding of therapeutic fostering. It provides an opportunity for group consultation and reflective practice with colleagues, which enables consistent, appropriate advice and guidance to carers.

The vast majority of foster carers express a high degree of satisfaction about the quality of the service. For example, one said: 'The support provided is excellent... all the staff appear to know you well.' Foster carers report that this is an inclusive agency where their views are valued and inform the development of the service. Carers have a sense of belonging, and they thrive on the support and encouragement that they receive, which promotes good outcomes for children. Learning from research, the provider has introduced a programme of training aimed

at engaging newly approved carers. This enables new carers to build relationships with key personnel in the agency and with each other. It nurtures a sense of belonging and confidence and aims to reduce the number of carers who resign within a year of approval.

Foster carers are central to care planning and understand that they have a key role in working as part of a multi-disciplinary team around each child. This enables the holistic needs of the child to be addressed. Experienced foster carers assist in developing new talent by mentoring new carers and contributing to training.

Most carers are trained and supported to provide a therapeutic fostering environment which engenders stability of placements for children. This is evident in the low number of disrupted placements, which is consistently below the average for independent fostering agencies.

Through regular, monthly carer supervision, the agency continually reviews and promotes children's progress, providing carers with good guidance and advice. Some children benefit from being looked after by families who continually develop their knowledge and skills through good-quality training and group supervision. The latter includes thematic discussions about relevant topics. Although the agency encourages and incentivises foster carers to attend the training that they need, many have gaps in their training portfolios, which means that the agency cannot be confident that all carers have the skills to provide high-quality care.

Although most children are suitably matched to their foster families, shortfalls in placement planning undermine the quality of placement matching for some. For example, the agency does not routinely take into account the views of the supervising social worker assigned to a family before a placement is made. This means that valuable information held by the agency does not inform a placement match.

Unsuccessful efforts to obtain relevant plans for children, including care plans and delegated authority, mean that some carers do not have relevant documentation to enable them to be confident that they are compliant with the child's care plan and the placing authority's expectations. Some information has been outstanding for a long time. The agency has taken action to chase the missing documents, with a newly strengthened escalation process.

The system for the annual review of foster carers is not robust. Foster carers rarely attend their annual reviews, and not enough effort is made to obtain and consider children's views about the foster family. Although reports are presented to panel, minutes from panel meetings do not show that shortfalls in practice or concerns about the carer, such as poor attendance at training, are explored. Changes to a carer's situation are not always considered when reviewing their approval status. There are no clear recommendations from the review, and an opportunity to ensure that the foster carer has all relevant documents about a child is missed.

The agency is achieving its stated aims and objectives. However, the statement of purpose and children's guide are currently under review, and the agency recognises

that these documents need updating to reflect the changes in the service offered. The office premises, while pleasant and inviting, are cramped and in need of expanding in line with the agency's growth.

## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

## **Independent fostering agency details**

**Unique reference number:** SC066501

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