

Stepping Stones Fostering

Stepping Stones Fostering Limited

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Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Stepping Stones Fostering is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Ilford, Essex. The service aims to provide the following types of foster care placements: short-term, bridging, respite, emergency and solo and sibling placements. Additionally, the service aims to provide foster care placements for children seeking asylum, children who have disabilities and those requiring intensive support placements.

At the time of the inspection, the fostering service had three approved fostering households with two children in placement.

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 September 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **requires improvement to be good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **requires improvement to be good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **requires improvement to be good**

The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 4 July 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: inadequate

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because:

- The fostering service has failed to increase the number of approved foster carers since the last inspection.
- Foster carers' training does not meet their training needs sufficiently. This is particularly the case for child protection and first aid training.
- Staff do not always complete unannounced visits to foster carers' homes.
- The fostering panel is cause for concern. Panel membership lacks key areas of expertise. Training opportunities for panel members are insufficient and they do not receive annual appraisals.
- The registered manager does not receive regular supervision and the manager's appraisal is overdue.
- The recruitment of panel members is not in accordance with safe recruitment practices.
- The foster carers annual review process is insufficiently robust and staff do not manage the process in accordance with the agency's policies and procedures.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- Children have positive experiences and make good progress.
- Children have trusted, secure relationships with their foster carers and foster families.
- Children feel safe. The service protects them from harm, abuse and neglect.
- Children's health and educational outcomes are good.
- There have been no complaints, allegations or standards of care issues since the last inspection. Children do not go missing.
- Staff of the fostering service work in close partnership with external professionals.
- There are improved monitoring systems in place. Leaders and managers have better insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the service and are in a better position to drive improvement.

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>Support, training and information for foster parents</p> <p>The registered provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))</p> <p>In particular, to provide foster carers with first aid and child protection training that includes the management of allegations.</p>	01/01/2018
<p>Fitness of workers</p> <p>The registered provider must ensure 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)</p>	01/01/2018
<p>Employment of staff</p> <p>The registered provider must ensure all persons employed receive appropriate supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4) (a))</p> <p>This relates in particular to the registered manager and members of the fostering panel.</p>	01/01/2018
<p>Constitution and membership of fostering panel</p> <p>The registered provider 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. (Regulation 23 (7))</p> <p>In particular, to appoint an independent foster carer and a former child looked after.</p>	01/01/2018
<p>The registered provider must ensure all persons employed receive appropriate training. (Regulation 21 (4) (a))</p> <p>This relates to the training of panel members.</p>	01/01/2018

<p>Reviews and terminations of approval</p> <p>The registered person must make such enquiries and obtain such information as they consider necessary in order to review whether the foster parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent's household continues to be suitable. (Regulation 28 (3) (a))</p> <p>In particular, to ensure that staff of the fostering service are present at and contribute to foster parents' annual review meetings.</p>	01/01/2018
<p>Review of the statement of purpose and children's guide</p> <p>The registered person must keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children's guide. (Regulation 4 (a))</p>	01/01/2018

Recommendations

- To implement an effective strategy to ensure 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)
- To ensure each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. (NMS 21.8)
- To ensure carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval. (NMS 20.3)
- To ensure all staff's work and all fostering activity is consistent with the 2011 Regulations and NMS and with the service's policies and procedures. (NMS 25.3)
- To ensure managers, staff and volunteers and foster carers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. The level of delegation and responsibility of the manager, and lines of accountability, are clearly defined. (NMS 25.4)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

Children make good progress while in placement with their foster carers. The outcome area is judged to be requiring improvement. This is due to shortfalls in the leadership and management and help and protection outcome areas, which has an influence on the overall inspection judgement.

Children largely build trusted relationships and have secure relationships with their foster carers. Children have a strong sense of belonging in their families. A child said of her foster carers, 'I'm very happy. I love them and the rest of the family. They're like a proper family, like my real mum and dad.' Children benefit from the fostering service's focus on promoting effective relationships and ensuring that children have positive experiences. As a result, their progress and outcomes are good. There have been two unplanned endings since the last inspection.

Children attend school very regularly. Some have 100% school attendance and this helps them to achieve their educational targets. Children benefit from the support that they receive at home, for example in completing homework, and participating in educational activities. This also helps children to achieve academically. Children who have learning disabilities receive appropriate educational and emotional support. This promotes good learning outcomes.

Children have access to a range of leisure activities, which are of their choosing. Recent activities for children have included a holiday to Lincolnshire, swimming lessons, participation with football and netball teams and multi-sports activities. Children also regularly attend family and social events that they very much enjoy.

Children live healthy lifestyles. They access primary care services to help them maintain good health. Foster carers are aware of the impact of learning disabilities on children's lives and offer appropriate care and support. For example, individualised safe care policies take into account the child's level of understanding. Foster carers ensure that children attend annual health assessments and ensure that immunisations are kept up to date. However, foster carers are yet to receive first aid training. They are therefore unable to safely assist children in the event of a medical emergency. This is not in children's best interests.

Children's identity needs are well met by the service. Staff ensure that they obtain clear information about issues of identity, including age, gender, religious and cultural considerations. The fostering service's matching process is effective and children benefit from this process. For example, they have the opportunity to attend their chosen places of worship, where they receive spiritual guidance. Some children, at the request of their parents, attend Sikh camp. Children eat culturally appropriate food, have private space for prayer and engage in community events. The service is also able to offer appropriate care to children who have learning disabilities. Foster carers and staff help children to understand

their backgrounds and events that have happened to them.

Children receive information about advocacy and how to complain, but do not do so. There have been no complaints made against the fostering agency since the last inspection. Children say that they feel listened to by their families and the staff team. This has an influence in the shaping of the service. This is true, for example, of the activities made available to children and their participation in creating the agency's guide for children.

Children benefit from their families' clear and consistent boundary setting. This is largely successful. Children understand household rules and families encourage them to abide by them accordingly.

Foster carers are a part of the team around the child, striving to meet their identified needs. Feedback from local authority staff on children's progress and care planning is largely positive. A child's social worker comments, 'The quality of care is good. The children have been with the foster carers for five years now and they're showing significant improvement and progress.'

Children maintain good contact with their family members and friends if it is safe for them to do so. Staff and foster carers negotiate contact arrangements that facilitate safe meetings between children and their significant others. This is to maintain established family relationships and to promote children's positive sense of heritage. If children choose not to have contact with their parents, staff and foster carers respect this and explore issues with children sensitively. This gives them an opportunity to explore in a safe environment their family relationships and dynamics.

Children benefit from the close partnership working between their foster carers, staff of the fostering service and other professionals. Communication is regular and effective. This is particularly true with local authority social workers, education and health professionals. This supports the effective coordination of children's care. A local authority social worker comments, 'Communication is good. I'm kept updated. There is an improved working relationship now.'

Prospective foster carers making enquiries with the fostering service feel valued and welcomed by the staff team. The assessment process is timely and sensitive to the needs of carers. A newly approved foster carer said of her assessment report, 'When I read it, it was wonderful. It was my life.' Foster care assessments are comprehensive, analytical and identify the strengths and competencies that foster carers have or need to develop. This is to ensure that they are well equipped to meet the needs of children safely.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

The fostering service's protection of children and young people is adequate and children are safe from harm and abuse. The service ensures that foster carers are aware of the vulnerabilities of the children who they care for.

Since the last inspection, there have been no allegations against foster carers, any standard of care issues, complaints or restraint of a child. There have been no accidents or episodes of young people going missing.

Children benefit from the fostering service's clear child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures. However, the service is yet to provide all foster carers with comprehensive child protection training. This is to ensure that they are able to provide children with effective, safe care. In addition, foster carers do not receive adequate training specific to managing allegations. This is to ensure that if children make allegations, foster carers know what action to take to protect them and seek appropriate support for themselves.

Children receive clear information about making complaints and have opportunities to speak with staff of the service in private. However, staff do not consistently conduct annual unannounced visits to homes as required. This is to further promote the safety of children.

The fostering agency's recruitment and vetting of panel members is not robust or in accordance with safe recruitment practices. In some cases, managers failed to obtain two written references. This does not confirm that members of the panel are suitable to work with vulnerable children.

The previous inspection highlighted that not all safe care policies were specific to the child in placement. Managers have since addressed this shortfall. Staff and foster carers now tailor safe care policies to individual children. Written risk assessments are appropriately detailed. These help to keep children safe, by alerting those working with them to actual or potential harm or risk.

Staff ensure that there is effective partnership working with other professionals when there are child protection enquiries. This was evident in records of a young person who was at risk of child sexual exploitation. Foster carers and staff contributed to developing strategies to help curb the young person's risk-taking behaviour.

The recruitment, assessment, preparation and support of foster carers have a strong focus on keeping children safe. Managers and leaders monitor, reflect and report on any safeguarding incidents. Since the last inspection, there has been one incident of a child protection nature. The foster carer and staff took appropriate action to ensure the safety of the young person and others.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The leadership and management of the fostering service requires improving. Leaders of the service are ambitious for change and some aspects of the fostering service's leadership and management show improvement since the last inspection.

The fostering service currently has three approved fostering households. The service is yet to develop and implement a clear and effective recruitment strategy to attract

and secure a larger pool of foster carers. This is important if the service is to meet its stated aim to provide foster care placements that meet the diverse needs of children looked after.

The registered manager is a qualified social worker with good experience of managing fostering services. Leaders are enthusiastic about new developments already taking shape as a result of the registered manager's appointment. However, the provider must ensure that the completion of the registered manager's appraisal occurs annually, that she receives regular supervision and that there are records of these sessions. Currently, this is not the case. The fostering service is seeking to appoint a supervising social worker to support the registered manager.

The service's fostering panel is cause for concern. The previous inspection highlighted the need for the central list to include an independent foster carer, a former child looked after and a vice chair. The service is yet to recruit an independent foster carer or a child previously looked after.

Other members of the central list have no personal or professional experience of children in care that would make them good candidates to recommend the approval of prospective foster carers. This is the case for one of the two newly appointed vice chairs.

Current panel members have thus far received only one training session. This occurred on the same day as the agency's only panel meeting since the last inspection. New members of the central list do not undergo an induction or observe a panel meeting prior to participating on the fostering panel. This is contrary to the agency's fostering panel policies and procedures. The lack of appropriate training does not ensure that panel members are sufficiently equipped to fulfil their roles. Long-standing panel members are yet to have an appraisal as required.

The foster carer annual reviewing process requires improvement. In one recent case, the foster carers' annual review was held in the absence of the registered manager. This was at the insistence of the foster carers. Panel members subsequently recommended the re-approval of the foster carers, and appear not to have questioned the reason for the foster carers' stance. Panel members require additional training to ensure that they have a good understanding of their roles, responsibilities and the foster carer re-approval process.

The training of foster carers is also identified as an area for improvement. Managers do not always follow up on the training needs identified for individual foster carers. Some foster carers who have been approved for 12 months or more have not attained the required training, support and development standards. The last inspection identified this issue as a weakness of the service. The fostering service is yet to provide foster carers with prioritised training such as child protection and first aid. This is to broaden the skills and knowledge base of existing and potential foster carers and to help them to provide safe care.

The fostering service's support of foster carers is good. Foster carers indicate that this is a key strength of the service. Staff are approachable and readily available to offer support and supervision. Staff's home visits to placements are regular. One foster carer said of the service, 'Stepping Stones is a family-type agency. Small, but everyone works well together.'

The fostering service continues to develop monitoring systems to assist managers and leaders to evaluate the function and operation of the service. For example, since the last inspection, managers have developed tools to track the progress made by individual children and young people, their outcomes and to review key policies and documents.

The service has recently recruited an independent consultant to help streamline and drive improvement across the service. This is to ensure that placements provide children with high-quality care and that children's experiences and outcomes are positive. Managers complete quarterly overview reports and quality of care reports as required by the regulations. This ensures that leaders and managers have insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the fostering service and take remedial action as required.

Stakeholders and interested parties have access to clear and comprehensive information that outlines the aims and objectives of the fostering service. The agency's revised statement of purpose is informative and outlines the services and facilities that the fostering service aims to provide. Further revision of the document is required to ensure that information about the service's staffing structure is accurate. The children's guide is a child-focused summary of services offered, which contains information about advocacy and making complaints.

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: SC484803

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