

Stepping Stones Fostering

Stepping Stones Fostering Ltd

Sir Robert Peel House, Suite 106, 344-348 High Road, Ilford, Essex IG1 1QP

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, long-term, respite, emergency and sibling placements. Additionally, the service aims to provide foster care placements for children seeking asylum and children who have disabilities.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency had five approved fostering households with three children in placement.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 November 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	Good
How well children and young people are helped and protected	Good
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 11 September 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children have positive experiences and make progress from their starting points.
- Children are protected from harm and abuse. They have good relationships with their foster carers and staff of the service.
- Children achieve at school and live healthy lifestyles.
- The preparation, training, supervision and support of foster carers is very good.
- Leaders and managers prioritise the needs of children, ensuring that they receive individualised care.
- Managers and staff of the service work in partnership with other professionals.
- The staff team feels well supported by managers, who are appropriately skilled and experienced.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The recruitment of new foster carers is slow.
- The quality of record-keeping requires improvement.
- The recruitment and vetting of some staff is not thorough.
- The training and supervision of some staff is inconsistent.

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>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>	01/04/2019
<p>Employment of staff</p> <p>The registered provider must ensure all persons employed receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21(4)(a))</p> <p>This relates in particular to the agency's outreach worker.</p>	01/04/2019

Recommendations

- To implement an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service as outlined in the service's statement of purpose. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 13.1)
- Staff, volunteers, panel members and fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files (including files removed from the premises). There is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 26.2) In particular, this relates to risk assessments, unannounced visit, summary reports and records of foster carer support group meetings.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make steady progress from their original starting points. Their overall experiences are positive and they develop strong attachments to their foster families. One child said of their foster family, 'It's fun. I'm getting help with my homework, there's yummy food and I get help to tidy up my room. I give it 10 out of 10!'

Children receive personalised care that meets their needs well, and is in accordance with local authority care planning. Children live in stable environments and enjoy sound relationships with their foster carers who, in turn, clearly enjoy caring for them.

Children benefit from the service's careful placement planning. Introductions between children and their prospective foster carers are sensitively co-ordinated. The fostering service's matching process is sound and placements are appropriate.

Children know staff of the fostering service well. This helps them to share their views and opinions about their placements and a range of other issues. A child told the inspector, 'I like (the supervising social worker), he comes to see me all the time. We play football together in the garden.' Children receive clear, age-appropriate information about how to make complaints. Since the last inspection, no child has made a complaint against the service.

Children live healthy lifestyles. The fostering service encourages the children's physical, emotional and social well-being. Children access primary healthcare services and receive advice and support from specialist services when this is required. Staff's documented health information ensures that children receive the advice and treatment that they need.

Children attend school regularly and make educational progress from their original starting points. Foster carers are strong advocates for children's educational success and are very much involved in promoting their achievements. Staff of the fostering service and foster carers communicate regularly with educational professionals. This is to ensure that children's learning needs are well met. Foster carers support children's increasing independence. For example, some children travel to their secondary schools independent of their foster carers. Children are also encouraged to clean and tidy their rooms, understand how to manage their pocket money and to complete simple personal care tasks.

Children engage in a wide range of physical, social and religious activities that are of their choosing. Typically, these include sports, clubs and attendance at places of worship. Children also enjoy family holidays with their foster carers. In addition, they enjoy social events and activities organised and funded by the fostering agency. For example, this summer children enjoyed a visit to Legoland.

Children have contact with their brothers and sisters, family members and others when it is safe for them to do so. The fostering agency manages arrangements for contact carefully, ensuring that there is a consistent focus on the best interests of

children. Where children do not wish to meet with family members, this is respected.

Children are treated with dignity and respect. Their identity needs are well met by the fostering service. For example, a sibling group attend Gurdwara for religious instruction, traditional Punjabi musical instrument lessons and martial arts. These activities help children to develop positive self-image and to help them understand and embrace their heritage.

Staff and foster carers contribute well to pathway planning. The fostering service has 'Staying Put' policies in place to support former looked after children remain with their foster families if they so wish.

Prospective foster carers who make 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. Assessments are comprehensive, analytical and identify the strengths and competencies that foster carers have or need to develop. The support offered to foster carers is excellent. Foster carers identified the support that they receive from the staff team as being the primary strength of the service. This view was consistently echoed by foster carers in all feedback obtained.

Children benefit from the partnership working between their foster carers, fostering service staff and other professionals. Communication is regular and effective. This supports the effective co-ordination of children's care.

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

The fostering service protects children from neglect, harm, abuse and bullying. The staff team and foster carers ensure that the safety and well-being of children is central to the service's work. The service ensures that foster carers are aware of the vulnerabilities of children and of the underlying causes of the behaviours that they can exhibit. Children benefit from the fostering service's child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures.

Since the last inspection, there have been no incidents of children going missing, incidents involving physical intervention, any child's involvement in criminal exploitation or child sexual exploitation. Investigations into allegations are prompt and appropriate. They involve safeguarding specialists such as designated officers. One designated officer said of the service, 'I can confirm that I have no concerns at this time regarding the safeguarding procedures of the fostering agency. There has been one previous allegation made against one of their foster carers and this was managed appropriately.'

Placement plans address any changing needs and promote strategies that help to reduce risk-taking behaviour. Staff complete risk assessments early after the placement start. This is to help identify known and potential risks to children's safety. However, some risk assessments are incomplete and do not include guidance on how to curb risk-taking behaviour. This reduces the effectiveness of these assessments of risk.

The assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers has a strong focus on child protection and this supports their safe care of vulnerable children. Family safe

care policies lay the foundations to how fostering households will keep children safe.

Children receive clear information about how to complain and have good opportunities to speak with staff in private. Staff complete at least one unannounced visit annually to foster carers' homes. This is to further enhance the safety of placements.

Foster carers receive good written guidance and training to keep children safe from harm and abuse. Managers of the fostering service monitor and have good overview of and insight into all safeguarding occurrences. Recently, staff and foster carers have received information and training on radicalisation and the prevention of extremism.

Foster carers' homes are safe and secure. Staff conduct checks that ensure that homes are well maintained, comfortable and that there are no health and safety concerns.

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

The leadership and management of the service require improvement. The progress of service development has been slow. This is illustrated by the fostering service's inability to significantly increase its pool of foster carers since the last inspection. The service's current number of approved fostering households does not meet the demands of placing authorities seeking a diverse range of foster care placements for children.

Managers' oversight of the service shows some improvement since the last inspection. However, this is not yet fully effective. For example, regular case file audits do not take place. As a result, some key documents are incomplete or insufficiently detailed. These include reports of unannounced visits, documented risk assessments, and summary reports to the local authority.

Gaps are noted in the safe vetting and recruitment of some staff and panel members. For example, some personnel files do not evidence two written references as required. There are no records of some staff interviews, and prospective panel members do not always observe panel meetings as a feature of their induction. The service's outreach worker does not receive regular training or supervision.

The registered manager is appropriately qualified and experienced. She is a qualified social worker with extensive experience of managing fostering services and staff. She is currently completing her NVQ management training at level 5. There are now clear lines of accountability and the staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities. This was not the case at the last inspection. The service is financially viable and has plans in place to improve practice and to set the future direction and expansion of the fostering service.

Since the last inspection, the service has appointed a supervising social worker to support the duties of the registered manager. Newly appointed staff receive good support and supervision from the registered manager. A staff member said, 'I felt welcomed into the agency. It's been good. The registered manager is supportive, and a good manager. She's helping me to understand the regulations and the

national minimum standards. Training is also good.' Staff are highly motivated and share the same ambition for the development of the service as managers and leaders do.

The fostering service has improved monitoring systems in place for most aspects of the service's operation. These include, for example, the tracking of individual children and young people's progress and outcomes, the review and revision of key policies and procedures, and the review of the quality of care provided. Regulation 25 and 35 reports are appropriately detailed and provide an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the service.

The fostering service's preparation of foster carers is effective. This ensures that prospective and approved foster carers have good insight into the needs of those children they look after and are skilled in meeting identified needs. All foster carers have completed identified core training and have personal development plans. Foster carers complete the Training, Support and Development Standards within the 12-month timeframe following their initial approval. This was not the case at the last inspection. The fostering service provides foster carers with useful core and specialist training. This is to support their safe care practices.

The service is well resourced to meet the needs of foster carers and children. Foster carers overwhelmingly indicate that support from the fostering service is excellent. Staff maintain good communication with foster carers and regularly visit them and children at their homes. A foster carer said, 'The entire team is trustworthy. Staff care for the carers and the children. They do not lie, they do what they say they will. Training and support is very good.' Another foster carer said, 'They're down to earth. They know what they're talking about, they can relate to you. We feel comfortable.'

Staff encourage foster carers to attend the support group. However, the service does not maintain records of support group discussions. It is, therefore, unclear what action is taken by the agency as a result of foster carers' discussions or of any foster carers' requests.

The service's fostering panel operates effectively and benefits by having membership drawn from a diverse range of professional backgrounds. The panel undertakes clear and appropriate analysis of the work that is presented at panel meetings. The administration of the fostering panel is effective and panel meeting minutes are sufficiently detailed.

Stakeholders and interested parties have access to clear and comprehensive information that outlines well the aims and objectives of the fostering service. Staff communication with other professionals is largely consistent. The statement of purpose is informative and explicit about what services and facilities the fostering service provides. Information available to children is equally informative. The service has three children's guides, creatively written and illustrated for three specific age groups.

The leadership and management of the fostering service shows some improvement since the last inspection. Gaps are noted in the development of the service. However, these shortfalls do not adversely affect the outcomes, experiences and progress of children, which are largely positive.

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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Inspector

Sandra Jacobs-Walls, social care inspector



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