

By the Bridge

By the Bridge Limited

The Oast House, Wrens Road, Borden, Sittingbourne, Kent ME9 8JE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

By the Bridge is a branch of a privately run national independent fostering agency. Its headquarters are near Sittingbourne with separate offices in Kent, Billericay, Rugby and the Thames Valley. The agency makes provision for the main carer to undertake additional therapeutic training. The agency refers to registered carers as foster parents to reflect the ethos of the agency; this terminology is used in this report. The agency provides short-term, long-term and emergency placements for children who have disabilities, parent and child placements and placements for young people on remand. Young people who reach the age of 18 can remain living with their foster parents into adulthood. At the time of the inspection, 426 children and young people were being accommodated in 324 approved fostering households.

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since May 2012.

Inspection dates: 4 to 8 March 2019

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	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 provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 18 January 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The agency provides many opportunities for children to express their views on the quality of care they are receiving.
- The enrichment and activity work undertaken with children is widespread. It builds self-esteem and allows children to experience adventurous activities that build their confidence. Small successes are identified and regularly celebrated.
- The clear majority of children form strong, secure relationships with their foster parents. They feel part of the foster carers' family and develop an enduring sense of security.
- There is a substantial investment by the agency in helping children quickly engage in schooling. Staff challenge professionals, when delayed processes adversely affect children's progress, through an active advocacy approach.
- Excellent welcome packs are available to children prior to moving in with their foster family. The packs are informative and have words and pictures easily accessible to children.
- Foster parents are highly motivated to ensure that the children they care for have the best possible outcomes.
- New foster carers are prepared well for taking on the role.
- The majority of children make exceptional progress across all aspects of their lives.
- There is a highly effective, robust and rigorous panel in place that is complemented by a very experienced panel manager.
- Overall, it is the quality of back-up support that distinguishes this agency from other fostering agencies for the foster parents. Foster parents feel the agency cares about their welfare.
- Foster parents and their whole family are supported by the organisation.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Safeguarding processes are not consistently strong. The quality of practice relating to the protection of children is variable.
- The inconsistent standard of risk assessment and risk management means that opportunities to minimise the potential for children to come to harm are often missed.
- The fostering agency does not have a consistent approach to undertaking investigations into complaints and allegations.
- Some aspects of management oversight and performance management are weak. There are some shortfalls in the systems for the monitoring of the service by managers. This means that ineffective practice is not always recognised and

rectified.

- Quality assurance procedures are not always effective in identifying trends and patterns to aid learning and development. This includes learning from any representations and complaints made to the agency.

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 registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a)) In particular, ensure that all staff and carers understand how to manage risk and can demonstrate their understanding.</p>	01/06/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which— is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect. The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for— written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response. (Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b)(3)(d))</p>	01/06/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that foster parents are familiar with, and act in accordance with the policies established in accordance with regulations 12(1) and 13(1) and (3). (Regulation 17 (2))</p>	01/06/2019
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for— monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b))</p>	01/06/2019

Recommendations

- Foster carers meet children's individual needs as set out in the child's placement plan as part of the wider family context. (National minimum standards, 2.3) Specifically, ensure that systems used to record children's needs fully reflect individual circumstances and current best practice.
- The service has the facilities to work with children with physical, sensory and learning impairments, communication difficulties or for whom English is not their first language. Oral and written communications are made available in a format which is appropriate to the physical, sensory and learning impairments, communication difficulties and language of the individual. The procedures include arrangements for reading, translating, Makaton, pictures, tape recording and explaining documents to those people who are unable to understand the document. (National minimum standards, 25.12)
- Children are carefully matched to a foster placement. Foster carers have full information about the child (as set out in standard 3.9), particularly when moved internally. (National minimum standards, 11.2)
- Foster carers know and implement what the fostering service and the responsible authority's policy is in relation to children going missing. (National minimum standards, 5.2)
- The manager exercises effective leadership of the staff and operation, such that the fostering service is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible child care that meets the individual needs of each fostered child and of foster carers. (National minimum standards, 17.5)
- 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. Meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. The frequency of meetings for short break foster carers are proportionate to the amount of care provided. Foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings. (National minimum standards, 21.8)
- Current and prospective foster carers are able to make a complaint about any aspect of the service which affects them directly. Records are kept of representations and complaints, how they are dealt with, the outcome and any action taken. These records are reviewed regularly so that the service's practice is improved where necessary. (National minimum standards, 21.11)
- Children can take up issues in the most appropriate way with support, without fear that this will result in any adverse consequences. Children receive prompt feedback on any concerns or complaints raised and are kept informed of progress. (National minimum standards, 1.6)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The vast majority of children placed with this agency make good progress and have positive day-to-day experiences with their foster families. The weaknesses found in some of the standards of practice relating to how children are helped and protected, as well as the weaknesses in leadership and management, have not had a negative impact on the lives of children and no children have come to harm.

Children form strong, secure relationships with their foster parents. They feel part of the foster carers' family and develop an enduring sense of security. As one social worker commented, 'The foster parents provide excellent care and have claimed [the child] as part of the family.' As a result, the clear majority of children make good progress in terms of their emotional well-being and in their education and health. One child said, 'I first met By the Bridge back in 2014, when I was placed with one of their foster parents. I had experienced some immense trauma and they supported me in reintegrating back into the community, socialising with individuals of my age, returning to school and allowing me to become independent.'

Arrangements are made for all children to receive as much information as possible about the agency and about their prospective foster parents before they are placed. This includes age-appropriate guides and excellent welcome packs. These are informative and written in language and pictures easily accessible to children.

Foster parents enable children to express their views and make choices. However, there is an inconsistent approach to dealing with complaints from children. Two examples were found when children had raised a concern but did not receive prompt feedback about the matters raised.

There is a substantial investment by the agency in helping children quickly engage in schooling. Staff challenge professionals when delays adversely affect children's progress in education, through an active advocacy approach. All children who are missing education, or not receiving the expected 25 hours a week, are known, tracked, and their needs are raised with the relevant agencies until their provision and outcomes improve. The service and foster parents have a good understanding of the difficulties children looked after face in attending and achieving in education. They actively work with schools and the child's network to change schools' perceptions of behaviours, in order that school staff understand the child's actions as a consequence of their experiences. Excellent examples include foster parents learning the method with which their children are being taught to read at school and implementing this consistently at home. This has resulted in some children making unexpected and significant progress in terms of educational achievements.

The enrichment and activity work undertaken with children is widespread and effective. It builds self-esteem and allows children to experience adventurous activities to gain confidence. Small successes are identified and celebrated. Participation is a strong aspect of the agency and involves individual initiatives, such

as children chairing their reviews, as well as wider initiatives. Accredited programmes are offered and completed to provide goals and recognition for children's engagement. Participation and inclusion are systemic and include foster parents, link workers and school representatives. Education workers are tenacious in pursuing actions and advocating for the children. The education workers essentially offer a youth-work model centred on effective direct work and relationship building with children. The service undoubtedly adds value, and it holds local authorities accountable for delays and escalates as appropriate.

Independence training is effective and accredited and is available to all children in the agency. Individual and group programmes are offered, and foster parents are closely involved. This programme has been delivered to over 100 young people. Some foster parents plan early on to ensure that children can remain with them if it best suits their needs. For example, one foster parent is being assessed for a shared lives arrangement to ensure continuity.

The agency has acted to ensure that children are supported with their mental health, through the provision of an external organisation that children can access confidentially. Children's physical and mental health needs are afforded equal priority by foster parents. Many examples of excellent and committed practice were identified, including foster parents completing training on the health needs of the child's family as well as for the specific child; a sensory room being built; and a child making significant progress in improved eating and communication skills.

Foster parents highly rate the accredited therapeutic fostering certificate. One foster parent stated, 'I completed the certificate a couple of years ago – if I hadn't done this, I wouldn't have been able to deal with what my child presents. It is really valuable training and helped me to learn about myself, as well as how to help children.'

The registered manager monitors health checks across the agency and this ensures that the vast majority are up to date. Health forms are completed by foster parents and held on children's files. Inspectors checked a sample of these forms. All forms sampled did not contain clear, detailed information about medication, immunisation and health checks or the strategies to support children's individual needs.

Foster parents act as champions for the children placed with them. The foster parents are actively involved in their children's day-to-day planning and challenge professionals when they believe decisions made are not in the best interests of children. As one foster parent said, '[My foster child] is one of my most favourite human beings.'

The agency provides opportunities for children to give their views on the quality of care they are receiving. There are several youth forums which encourage children to put forward suggestions for developing the services they receive. They can also become involved in the recruitment of staff and foster carers. The children who attend these groups develop valuable life skills and often gain confidence. The staff facilitating these groups provide encouragement and support, and this often results in the children's suggestions being implemented in practice. This commitment to

ensuring that children have opportunities to participate in the development of services is a protective factor. It gives children the message that there is a culture of listening and responding, and that it is safe to speak out about any worries or concerns.

The foster parent assessments examined were evaluative and well presented. They give a clear indication of the strengths and weaknesses of the foster parent and specified areas for development. They contextualised applicants' histories and contained reflective analytical summaries. The new foster parent mentor scheme offers support at pre- and post-approval stages. Foster parents are intrinsically involved in information evenings and intensive 'skills to foster' training.

The foster parents are highly motivated to ensure that children have the best possible outcomes.

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

The quality of practice relating to the protection of children is variable. Although many examples of good and effective practice were found, the inspectors identified a minority of cases when practice failed to address the potential for children to come to harm.

Some weaknesses were found in the assessment and management of risk. Link workers do not always ensure that they are familiar with the background information which would enable them to create effective risk management plans. Some link workers do not clearly identify all of the triggers that may cause a child to engage in unsafe behaviours. A small number of individual risk management plans did not contain clear strategies for reducing the potential for the child to come to harm. However, those foster parents spoken with during the inspection were able to identify risks and name effective strategies that had worked.

There have been occasions when children's individual risk assessments were not promptly updated following a serious incident. In one case, critical information pertaining to suicidal ideation was not included in a child's individual risk assessment. There is also room for improvement in other safe care plans. This includes detailing how internet safety will be promoted in the foster home.

Assessments pertaining to child sexual exploitation are not completed in a timely way. The strategies to be used are often generic and fail to identify the practical steps that will be taken to keep the child or young person safe. Complicating factors, such as the child's mental health or substance misuse, are not always taken into account when the assessments are completed.

The inconsistent standard of risk assessment and risk management means that opportunities to minimise the potential for children to come to harm are being missed.

There are shortfalls in matching for a minority of children when they move to

alternative foster parents in the agency. Insufficient consideration is given to the impact the new admission may have on children already living at the foster home. There is no recognition of the potential for the safety and well-being of all children, young people and the foster parents to be compromised.

There are clear procedures for foster parents to follow when children go missing. However, on one occasion, the failure to follow procedures could have resulted in a young person coming to harm.

Foster parents report concerns regarding the safety and well-being of children. These concerns are subsequently reported to the relevant safeguarding professionals. In one case, there was no record of the action taken following a referral being made to the local safeguarding children team, in October 2018.

While managers provide assurances that the agency does not support the use of physical intervention, an example was found where a foster parent had restrained a child without the appropriate training. The foster parent had failed to inform the agency of the incident. This was identified and addressed by the agency. Although the behaviour management policy makes references to the need for behaviour management plans, this is not current practice. The therapeutic plans in use do not identify behaviours and the strategies to manage them.

The standard of record keeping in relation to child protection practice is inconsistent. Detailed chronologies of the planning process and actions taken in response to the concern are not always kept. In the cases reviewed by inspectors, there was no clear audit trail because information is recorded in different places. This makes it difficult for leaders and managers to monitor and to give a clear account of the steps being taken to protect children.

Over the last year, the agency has introduced staff 'champions' who lead on the development of practice relating to children who face exploitation or who go missing. A group of staff, led by the organisation's safeguarding lead, are exploring ways to increase local intelligence and to share good practice. The work of this group is still at a developmental stage.

The agency takes prompt action when allegations are made against foster parents, with good liaison with relevant agencies. When necessary, foster parents are suspended from fostering and are subject to additional assessments to determine their continued suitability to foster. When decisions are made to deregister following an allegation, the foster parents are provided with reasons for the decision.

However, the fostering agency does not have a consistent approach to undertaking investigations into complaints and allegations. The quality of reports is variable, and findings and conclusions not fully evidenced. In some cases, the investigation did not include a clear methodology, conclusion or recommendation.

A creative approach is taken to supporting children to keep themselves safe and increase their knowledge of the risks they could be exposed to when accessing the internet. Much of this work is done in children's workshops or at youth forum

groups. The strategy for supporting children who do not attend these events, and are harder to engage, is less well developed.

There are effective measures in place to minimise the potential for unsuitable adults to become employed or recruited as foster parents. Foster care reviews are all scrutinised by the panel chair, providing a safety net.

Despite the shortfalls identified at this inspection no children have come to harm as a result, to date. However, the safety and well-being of children is likely to be compromised if action is not taken to improve standards.

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

This very large agency is managed by one registered manager working with several more localised regional managers. Despite the commitment and drive of the registered manager, she was not aware of some of the weaknesses in the service. This included safeguarding shortfalls, poor-quality risk assessments, generic therapeutic plans, the absence of health plans and weakness in the home visit reports. Management oversight, performance management and quality assurance procedures are not robust.

There is no clear quality assurance framework based on evaluated evidence for this service and an absence of a clear link with the wider organisational framework. This lack of effective quality assurance audits means there is insufficient management oversight of all cases, practice and the work. The quality of records overall is not consistently of a high enough standard, as evidenced by those risk assessments and foster parent supervision records seen during the inspection.

The staff and foster parents feel well supported. Staff supervision provides an opportunity for them to reflect on their practice and to evaluate how well children's needs are being met.

The systems in place for referral and matching are strong, with good-quality referral information identifying the child's story, reasons why previous placements have broken down, known risks and the type of placement needed. Appropriate information is shared with foster parents and this was confirmed by social workers spoken with.

Foster parents are provided with the necessary information to help them to decide about whether they can support the child and fully meet their needs. In some cases, when the information was not shared by the placing authority there is evidence to demonstrate that this is pursued by the agency.

The agency fostering panel functions well and carefully scrutinises foster parent assessments and annual reviews. The fostering panel is appropriately quorate and includes among its members care leavers and those who have experience of fostering. This provides an opportunity for members to share first-hand experiences

of fostering.

The panel is chaired by an experienced panel chair, supported by the panel manager. Panel members have good-quality annual appraisals which explore competency and areas for development. Checks of foster panel members' continued suitability are up to date, and a robust recruitment process is established. The panel makes recommendations for areas of improvement to the agency, for example the quality of the assessments, and procedures to avoid delays. Foster parents are supported to understand the Independent Reviewing Mechanism process. When this has been used, the hearing is thorough, setting out the reasons for the decisions.

Children's therapeutic plans are of poor quality. They do not identify key areas of need, the support and strategies to meet needs and how the foster parent should support the child. This is particularly significant because therapeutic plans are the agency's documentary guidance given to foster parents to support them in caring for the children.

Foster parents are highly complimentary about the support they receive from the agency. Foster parents described strong and available support from staff and peers. Training is highly regarded, and the out-of-hours service is widely appreciated and is not used solely in crisis situations, but also for reflective conversations when parents feel tired, stressed and overwhelmed. The easy availability of link workers and managers out of hours was also widely praised. Foster parents stated that the agency supports the entire family, not just the foster parents.

Training is provided at weekends for co-parents and there are ambitions to expand this. Training provision was highly regarded and considered a strength of the agency. Overall, for the foster parents, it is the quality of back-up support that distinguishes this agency from other fostering agencies. Foster parents feel the agency cares about their welfare.

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: SC047407

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