

By The Bridge

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

Inspection date: 19 and 20 February 2020

Date of previous inspection: 4 March 2019

This monitoring visit

This monitoring visit was conducted in response to concerns shared with Ofsted relating to the leadership and management of the agency and some safeguarding practice. Information received said that there had been a high turnover of staff, low staff morale, a lack of communication and visibility from senior managers, unsafe recruitment practice, unqualified workers undertaking tasks outside of their role, and poor training and supervision of staff and managers.

To evaluate the progress that the agency has made in addressing these concerns, an unannounced monitoring visit was undertaken on 19 and 20 February 2020.

The inspectors found that, since 7 January 2020, a new senior leadership team has been established. These managers have been given the lead responsibility for business transformation, service delivery and quality and service improvement. These arrangements were put into place by the responsible individual as part of a company restructure and to address the gaps within the management team. The responsible individual is also in the process of filling other senior roles including Head of Human Resources, Head of Therapeutic Services and Head of Learning & Development.

The senior leadership team has a clear vision for the agency which aims to bring services and decisions closer to the people responsible for the care of children and young people. The agency has not had a registered manager since July 2019.

However, the newly appointed interim manager is working hard to improve the service. This includes addressing the requirements made at the last inspection in March 2019. The organisation is intending to register three new agencies with Ofsted and is actively recruiting three new managers. This will allow carers and children to be supported at a more local level.

Leaders and managers are aware that the staff and the foster carers are affected by the major changes in the agency. Recent staff surveys highlighted both the strengths of the service and the areas for improvement. The surveys captured that a number of staff in one office are unhappy about the changes and are worried about the impact on their jobs. To address this, the senior managers have put a range of communication methods in place to keep staff updated. Senior managers have also delivered 'roadshows' that explain the reasons for the changes and the future direction of the agency.

The safeguarding arrangements in the agency have been strengthened. On his appointment, the interim manager identified some areas of practice that were unacceptable. Some of these related to the staff managing high caseloads and unqualified workers undertaking tasks outside of their role. This was stopped immediately, and all practice is now overseen by the qualified workers and the managers. Other improvements made include training for the staff that promotes a clear message that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, clearer roles, responsibilities and recording expectations, updated policies and procedures, and a new safeguarding board made up of senior managers to oversee the arrangements.

The agency has a clear complaints system in place. There is evidence that foster carers know how to complain. Records show that the managers respond to their complaints appropriately, they are thoroughly investigated, well recorded and clear action is taken to resolve them.

Staff vacancies, including key management roles, have had an impact on some areas of practice. In some cases, there were gaps in pre-employment checks of new staff and gaps in the frequency of formal staff supervision. When supervision had taken place more regularly, not all staff had been given the opportunity to read and sign the record of the meeting. While there is no evidence of this having any negative impact on the safety and well-being of the children and young people, it does create vulnerabilities. However, senior managers are addressing some of these issues by recruiting to vacant posts and creating new posts to improve the quality of the care provided.

The training available for the supervising social workers is not sufficient, the new senior leadership team is addressing this shortfall. While there is opportunity for them to undertake mandatory training, the current offer is limited. The lack of specialist training means that the staff do not have the opportunity to enhance their skills and knowledge, particularly in meeting the range of needs of the children and families that they support.

The overall monitoring systems have been improved. Regular managers' meetings and monthly reports provide an accurate picture of how the service is doing across a

range of areas. This information enables senior managers to devise clear action plans. As a result, they now have good oversight of the agency. However, the previous managers have failed to provide Ofsted with a written report following a review of the quality of care.

Ofsted will consider the findings of this monitoring visit to determine any further action to take.

The requirements and recommendations made at the last full inspection in March 2019 have not been reviewed and therefore remain in force.

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
<p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. (Regulation 35 (2))</p>	31/03/2020

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)

- All people working in or for the fostering service, and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel, are interviewed as part of the selection process and have references checked to assess suitability before taking on responsibilities. Telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references. (National minimum standards, 19.1)
- The fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. This includes CRB checks. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. (National minimum standards, 19.2)
- The fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for foster carers and those working (including as volunteers) for the fostering service which includes: identity checks. (National minimum standards, 19.3a)
- There is a good quality learning and development programme, which includes induction, post-qualifying and in-service training, that staff and volunteers are supported to undertake. The programme equips them with the skills required to meet the needs of the children, keeps them up to date with professional, legal and practice developments and reflects the policies, legal obligations and business needs of the fostering service. (National minimum standards, 23.1)
- Staff have access to support and advice, and are provided with regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff. (National minimum standards, 24.4)
- A written record is kept by the fostering service detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision. (National minimum standards, 24.5)

Information about this inspection

The purpose of this visit was to monitor the action taken and the progress made by the independent fostering agency since its last Ofsted inspection.

This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC047407

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