

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 registered 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 with 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, there were 292 approved foster carers, with 359 children in placement.

There has not been a registered manager in post since 7 August 2019.

Inspection date: 8 February 2021

Date of previous inspection: 4 March 2019

This monitoring visit

This monitoring visit was conducted in response to concerns shared with Ofsted relating to safeguarding notifications and practice. There have been a high number of safeguarding notifications; specifically, allegations against foster carers. To evaluate the progress that the agency had made in addressing these concerns a monitoring visit was undertaken on the 8 and 9 February 2021. The visit took place remotely due to COVID-19 (coronavirus) restrictions.

Leaders and managers have reported and referred safeguarding matters to other agencies. However, they have not collectively ensured that all safeguarding matters have been thoroughly addressed or explored in a timely way. Not all records detail all discussions, actions and outcomes, including strategy discussions with other agencies. This has created gaps in leaders' and managers' knowledge and understanding about situations, any action required and the outcomes to concerns raised. For example, when an allegation was made about a foster carer, leaders and managers did not consider the impact on other children who had resided at the

foster carer's home. There was no consideration of their safety or their experiences when in the home of the foster carer. Supervising social workers and managers have not consistently been inquisitive or challenging of other professionals' practice to ensure that there is a robust safeguarding culture and ethos in the organisation.

Leaders, managers and staff have not routinely escalated concerns when agency professionals have not responded to safeguarding concerns as required or in line with guidance. Although there is an escalation policy in place, this was not consistently used or followed when concerns arose. In one example, leaders and managers did not effectively challenge other professionals, leading to unnecessary drift and delay in progressing a significant safeguarding concern.

Children and foster carers have not been seen frequently enough when concerns have arisen over the past year. Records do not always evidence the rationale for not attending a foster carer's home to complete a face-to-face visit. This has had a negative impact on children who have not been spoken to regularly alone to gain their views or to understand their experiences. Foster carers have engaged with supervising social workers via virtual platforms, but this has not provided sufficient information to enable supervising social workers to have a good understanding of circumstances, situations or concerns that have arisen. Supervising social workers have been reliant on foster carers' self-reporting situations and children's views rather than being able to explore these themselves. Some records of home visits do not explicitly state if they occurred virtually or face to face.

Staff currently offer most of their support to foster carers via virtual meetings. In some cases, this has not been enough to support foster carers when children's support needs increase or when children's behaviour escalates, causing placements to become unstable or at risk of breakdown. Staff have not consistently identified or acted quickly enough to identify when situations are deteriorating and have been slow to intervene to address and provide the required support.

Leaders complete investigations when concerns regarding staff's or foster carers' conduct or practice arise. However, there have been missed opportunities within these investigations to thoroughly consider all known information and historical information, or to identify any potential learning to inform and improve future practice. In one case, a 'standards of care' investigation was presented to panel as a household review. This does not allow for enough scrutiny and oversight by the panel to fully complete their role of quality assuring and exploring findings from a standards of care investigation.

Leaders previously identified that there were concerns and performance issues regarding the assessment and recruitment of foster carers and have subsequently strengthened their processes. However, there has not been a thorough review of carers who were approved in 2019. Senior leaders have not assured themselves that these specific carers are suitable to provide safe and effective care to this vulnerable group of children.

Staff and foster carers have been supported well this year by leaders and managers through regular supervision, performance management, team meetings, training sessions and workshops. However, supervision records do not consistently evidence that regular explorative, reflective and challenging discussions about safeguarding occur.

Leaders and managers are currently undertaking a review of the organisation's approach to behaviour management and de-escalation techniques. Records of incidents of physical intervention do not consistently include a clear account of what has taken place. In one example, there was not enough information recorded about the incident for the manager to review whether the restraint was appropriate, proportionate or in line with the agency's policy. The child was not spoken to following the incident. Records are not sufficiently thorough to evidence whether the matter was fully explored or investigated to identify if any lessons could be learned or if the foster carer or child required additional support.

The agency has gone through a great deal of change over the past year to 18 months. There have been several staff changes at all levels. There have also been changes to processes and procedures, and changes in foster carers. Some of the positive changes aspired to by the organisation to improve and develop some areas of practice have yet to be implemented and fully embedded. Some of these changes have been hindered or are slow to progress. This is due to a variety of factors, including the staff changes and the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders and managers have clear plans which identify the further improvements to practice, systems, processes and procedures required to embed the safeguarding culture that they aspire to.

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))</p>	<p>9 May 2021</p>
<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.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for—</p> <p>liaison and co-operation with any local authority which is, or may be, making child protection enquiries in relation to any child placed by the fostering service provider,</p> <p>the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider,</p> <p>notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider, to the Chief Inspector,</p> <p>written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response,</p> <p>consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>In this regulation “child protection enquiries” means any enquiries carried out by a local authority in the exercise of any of its functions conferred by or under the 1989 Act relating to the protection of children.</p>	<p>9 May 2021</p>

(Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b) (3)(a)(b)(c)(d)(e) (5))	
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable, and</p> <p>restraint is used on a child only where it is necessary to prevent injury to the child or other persons, or serious damage to property. (Regulation 13 (1) (2)(b)(c))</p>	9 May 2021
<p>The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation.</p> <p>A review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year.</p> <p>When undertaking a review, the fostering service provider 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, and seek and take into account the views of any child placed with the foster parent (subject to the child's age and understanding).</p> <p>At the conclusion of the review, the fostering service provider must prepare a written report, setting out 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 (1) (2) (3)(a)(b)(ii) (4)(a))</p> <p>In particular, to ensure that 'standards of care' investigations are presented to panel as a standalone item.</p>	9 May 2021
<p>If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36 (1))</p>	9 May 2021

*These requirements are subject to a compliance notice.

Recommendations

- 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 childcare that meets the individual needs of each fostered child and of foster carers. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 17.5)

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

Registered provider: By The Bridge Limited

Registered provider address: Metropolitan House, 3 Darkes Lane, Potters Bar EN6 1AG

Responsible individual: Lynn Webb

Inspectors

Amanda Maxwell, Social Care Inspector

Stephen Collett, Social Care Inspector

Sarah Olliver, Social Care Inspector

Tracey Scott, Social Care Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children’s social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children’s services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence>, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

© Crown copyright 2021