

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 disabled children, 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 278 approved foster carers, with 357 children in placement.

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

Inspection date: 13 May 2021

Date of previous inspection: 4 March 2019

This monitoring visit

Ofsted conducted a monitoring visit on 8 and 9 February 2021, due to concerns shared with Ofsted that related to safeguarding notifications and practice.

From that monitoring visit, the inspectors identified significant gaps in the agency's practice with regards to the management of allegations against foster carers. Consequently, Ofsted issued a compliance notice under regulation 11, independent fostering agencies – duty to secure welfare. Other areas of shortfall were also identified and resulted in a further four requirements being made. These were in relation to the agency's failure to fully explore all safeguarding concerns in a robust and timely manner; the failure to monitor foster carers' use of physical restraint effectively; the failure to consistently review and monitor the ongoing suitability and approval of foster carers and the failure to notify Ofsted of significant events in accordance with the regulations.

Since that monitoring visit, Ofsted has received additional information of concern through complaints and notifications. The purpose of this monitoring visit was to measure the progress made by the agency in meeting the compliance notice and to

identify if additional breaches of regulations had occurred. The previous requirements were also considered.

Since the last monitoring visit, the agency has experienced instability due to staff resignations. This places an additional burden on the remaining staff which is exacerbated by the increasing use of agency and temporary workers. While a staff recruitment programme is under way, it is concerning to note gaps in the recruitment process, for example in respect of the new manager. Although most of the recruitment checks are complete, these shortfalls represent avoidable risks in the safe recruitment of staff.

During this visit, time was spent with senior leaders and agency staff to explore the action taken so far by the agency to meet the steps of the compliance notice.

Step 1

'Complete a written review of the supervision of all staff and foster carers to ensure that there is effective challenge of practice and reflection of matters which ensures that children are safeguarded, and their welfare is promoted. Detail areas for improvement and how and when this will be achieved by.'

Senior leaders have undertaken a detailed review of the supervision process for the staff and the foster carers. This has included dip sampling and tracking of such records. The inspectors sampled how the agency conducted this review and found that detailed and critical analysis of previous supervision records has occurred. The findings resulted in the leadership's decision to adopt and implement a different supervision method for the agency. So far, training and workshops have been given and continue to be delivered on the provider's chosen model of supervision and the framework is starting to be used in practice.

Senior leaders fully appreciate the need to monitor the implementation of a new model at various stages, and they have processes in place to do this. In addition, the component parts of the model are highlighted by the provision of targeted training on contextual safeguarding, professional curiosity, critical thinking, defensible decision-making and assessment intuition.

The training sessions provided so far have been well attended, with more dates scheduled in June and July 2021 to ensure that every staff member will have completed these. Leaders, in conjunction with the provider's quality assurance team, are continuing to monitor and review the impact of the training through a range of activities.

Senior leaders recognise that while the agency has made some progress in improving the regularity, quality and impact of supervision, there is more to do. Current practice in this area is variable. While some of the records demonstrate a positive start for some staff, the new manager has not yet received formal supervision in line with the new process.

Step 2

'Develop and implement a clear process and procedure which supports you to escalate concerns with external parties when they arise. Ensure this process records the decision and rationale when you have escalated concerns.'

The quality team has led on this step and introduced an 'escalation policy' which was ratified at the safeguarding board meeting in March 2021. Regional teams within the agency have reviewed and discussed the policy at their team meetings and the new manager now conducts checks of associated documents.

The inspectors found that the staff spoken with demonstrate a clear understanding of how the new policy and guidance should be used. However, the agency is not yet demonstrating that everyone is fully conversant with implementing the policy in practice. One area linked to this relates to the agency's practice of notifying Ofsted about significant events. A requirement was made in relation to this from the last inspection, and examples of current practice show that gaps and omissions are still evident. Ofsted has not always been notified of events in an accurate or timely manner. In addition, descriptions of the immediate actions taken in response to some incidents do not always demonstrate that all the potential risks have been considered.

Step 3

'Review the policy pertaining to face to face visits to children, both during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic restrictions and beyond. Report on any amendments that are made to the policy as a result of this review.'

Policy and practice guidance relating to face-to-face visits have been reviewed and updated in respect of COVID-19. Communication between the agency, its staff and foster carers has improved as a result.

An initial review conducted by the agency examined 134 records of visits to fostering households. A risk analysis of these records identified where and why concerns were evident and subsequent visits to follow up on concerns were prioritised. The review also found that not all previous supervising social worker records clearly captured whether children had been physically seen, even when they had been, and had also been seen by education and therapy staff.

Consequently, in line with the changes to increase face-to-face contact, records of visits now require greater evidence and clarity to demonstrate the time spent directly with children and capturing their voice.

Step 4

'Review standards of care processes. Report on any amendments made as a result of this review.'

A detailed review of all the 2019 standards of care cases identified at the previous inspection has been completed. Gaps and omissions identified from the findings have

been used to inform and shape the new guidance that is now in place.

Step 5

'Review those who were recruited within the identified poorer historical process in 2019 to assure yourselves of their appropriateness to be approved. Record the review and outcome alongside any concerns that have been identified. Take action to rectify any concerns identified and record the actions you have taken.'

The agency's review of the fostering households that were assessed and approved in 2019 identified concerning practice shortfalls, with significant gaps and omissions in the previous recruitment and assessment process. As a result, managers have undertaken a major restructure of the recruitment and assessment team and reviewed the quality of the work previously completed by them and the independent assessors who were conducting this work during 2019.

The restructuring of this critical aspect of the agency's work demonstrates a thoughtful and measured approach. By better aligning the administrative aspects alongside social work practice, and bringing about more regional ownership, the entire process is now better punctuated with clear stages of scrutiny and review along the way.

The immediate challenge for the agency is to embed this process and simultaneously address the shortfalls identified from the review. Currently, there are some fostering households where concerns exist, and further action is still required. This had already been identified by leaders and managers and is underway.

Step 6

'Provide training to all relevant staff, including the manager, on how written records are to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response.'

In conjunction with step 1 of the compliance notice, a rolling programme of relevant training has been implemented and continues to be delivered throughout the agency. The underpinning training, such as critical thinking and professional curiosity, is clearly linked to a separate course on the role of the supervising social worker.

In summary, the agency has demonstrated, through its response so far, that the steps of the compliance notice are met.

In broader terms, the immediate challenge for the agency is to embed the new policies and procedures while taking necessary retrospective actions that have not been fully completed. Leaders understand the prevalent risks and have identified lines of responsibility and accountability to progress these. Much of this work is directly linked to the provider's quality improvement framework, which is monitored and overseen by the quality team and systems such as the safeguarding board.

The requirements from the previous inspection are repeated because the initial action that has been taken in terms of reviewing policies and procedures has not yet resulted in consistently safe and robust practice throughout all areas of the agency.

In particular, immediate focus is required to address the gaps and shortfalls in respect

of staff recruitment and action to ensure that all significant events are notified to Ofsted in accordance with the regulation and without delay.

Ofsted will continue to monitor the agency through further inspection activities and will pay particular attention to the agency's placement decisions during this ongoing period of instability.

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 fostering service provider must not—</p> <p>employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so, or</p> <p>allow a person to whom paragraph (2) applies, to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so.</p> <p>This paragraph applies to any person who is employed, other than by the fostering service provider, in a position in which that person may in the course of their duties have regular contact with children placed by the fostering service.</p> <p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person—</p> <p>is of integrity and good character,</p> <p>has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work they are to perform,</p> <p>is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform,</p> <p>and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1.</p> <p>(Regulation 20 (1)(a)(b) (2) (3)(a)(b)(c))</p>	<p>31 July 2021</p>
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times.</p> <p>(Regulation 11(a))</p>	<p>30 August 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. (Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b) (3)(a)(b)(c)(d)(e) (5))</p>	<p>30 August 2021</p>
<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>	<p>30 August 2021</p>

<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 stand-alone item.</p>	<p>30 August 2021</p>
<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>	<p>31 July 2021</p>

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. (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

Registered manager: Post vacant

Inspectors:

Sophie Wood, Regulatory Inspection Manager

Lee Kirwin, Regulatory Inspection Manager

John Pledger, Social Care Inspector

Suzy Lemmy, Social Care Inspector



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