

By the Bridge North West

By the Bridge North West Limited

The Barn, Beech Farm, 122 Hollin Lane, Styal, Cheshire SK9 4LD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

By the Bridge North West is a branch of a privately run national fostering agency. It has offices in Cheshire and West Yorkshire. Carers are located in several local authority areas in north west England and in Yorkshire. They provide long-term, short-term and emergency foster care placements for children from birth up to age 17. When they reach the age of 18, children can continue living with their foster carers as young adults.

The agency provides families for children who may have complex needs, including parent and child placements, as well as respite placements and families for children who have complex health needs.

By the Bridge North West was registered in 2006. It currently provides 156 approved fostering households for 220 children.

The manager was registered in September 2020.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 21 to 25 June 2021

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 September 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children enjoy trusting and secure relationships with their foster carers. These relationships underpin the individual progress that children make.

Children are overwhelmingly positive about living with their foster carers. Children's views are reflected in comments they make. For example, they say that they could not imagine living anywhere else and describe their foster parents as 'the best'. One child said, 'They have helped me so much, and I am doing things I never thought I would be able to do.' Professionals spoken to echo these positive views regarding the quality of care that is provided.

Foster carers are well supported to meet children's physical and emotional health needs. The agency's therapy team helps foster carers understand how previous life experiences have an impact on children's development. The training, advice and support provided to foster carers contributes to children feeling well cared for, happy and secure in their homes. The majority of children enjoy the benefits of a positive family life.

Children say they are listened to by their foster carers and their views contribute to their day-to-day care and support. Children's cultural and identity needs are respected and well promoted. Recent implementation of an online engagement tool by the fostering agency has improved how children can submit their views.

The agency is developing the information given to children about its service and the foster family. For example, foster families are being encouraged to make welcome videos about themselves and their home. These can be accessed before children move in. This is especially welcome for children who have to move in an emergency and do not have the benefit of introductory visits.

The process of matching children's needs to foster carers' skills is sensitive and carefully considered. The newly introduced processes, together with supervising social workers being integral to decision-making, are supporting the improvements.

In line with their plans, young people are supported to stay with their foster carers after they turn 18. Over time, children develop a sense of permanence with their foster carers.

Most children and foster carers feel well supported by the agency. When issues arise, foster carers and children know how to make a complaint or representation to the agency. Foster carers particularly value monthly peer-group sessions. These sessions are attended by supervising social workers and the agency's therapists.

During periods of national restrictions, the agency has creatively engaged children and supported foster carers. They have made daily phone calls to foster carers and provided online learning resources, quizzes and events for children. During this time,

in collaboration with children, the agency has updated the children's guide. Children and their foster carers speak highly of the support they receive from the agency's education team.

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

Safeguarding training provides carers with a strong understanding of their role in keeping children safe. When a child is missing from home, carers know the procedure to follow and make every attempt to find and encourage the child to return. On some occasions, foster carers have provided care that has gone above and beyond, such as driving to Scotland to collect a child.

Children who spoke to inspectors or provided written feedback said that they feel safe and protected from harm. Foster carers understand the children they care for and how to provide individualised care.

Foster carers receive monthly supervision, alongside other forms of support provided by the agency. However, where some records state unannounced visits this is not always the case. For example, a planned visit to foster carers was recorded as an unannounced visit.

Since the last inspection, the recording of physical interventions has improved. Previously, there was a high number of physical interventions, however, these have significantly reduced.

When risks are increasing, there is evidence of the agency advocating on behalf of children. There has also been appropriate challenge when the local authority is not acting in the child's interests.

Managers are in the process of introducing new safer-care plans for children and their foster carers. The involvement of children in this process remains under review. Discussions are ongoing as to how to capture their input and views. However, there is evidence of good practice examples, such as when supervising social workers have adapted and tailored the forms to individual children.

Investigations into allegations are appropriately shared with the placing authority. Although these matters had received appropriate investigation from the local authority, not all safeguarding matters have been appropriately referred to the designated officer. Managers were not aware of this shortfall.

Managers were unaware of one fostering family having been approved to foster without an appropriate physical visit being made to the family home. In addition, the fostering panel had failed to address this shortfall prior to approval. During the recent national and local restrictions, the fostering panel has not assured itself that reasonable checks have been made.

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

The service is led by an experienced registered manager who is supported by two regional managers. These regional managers and assistant regional managers provide day-to-day supervision of the service.

There were two requirements and seven recommendations made following the last inspection. All the recommendations and one requirement have been met and this has led to improvements in the service. However, one requirement relating to the statement of purpose is unmet. Although the statement of purpose was updated, it was not submitted to Ofsted.

Since the last inspection, there have been changes to the computer system used to record and capture information about the foster carers, children and young people. The implementation of this new system has created difficulties for managers in reviewing and evaluating the service. The transfer of information from the previous system to the new system has not fully dovetailed. Therefore, reports generated from the new system are not comprehensive, requiring numerous reports needing to be run and cross-referenced.

Managers are aware of these shortfalls and, to compensate, have created additional means of capturing information. These difficulties negatively affect the managerial oversight and the resources required to manage two systems and additional reports. For example, managers were not aware of how many face-to-face visits had taken place to foster carers' homes since the easing of restrictions. Managers do not currently provide evaluation or analysis of unplanned endings. Some entries are misfiled and require extensive searching of entries to locate information.

During 2019-2020, the number of carers leaving the agency outnumbered those joining the agency. This has been recognised and addressed by the agency in several ways. There is now greater information given to prospective foster parents at the point of enquiry. The 'skills-to-foster' training has been increased, with a full day dedicated to therapeutic expectations. Prospective carers are also required to attend workshops during the assessment period. These workshops improve their understanding of what is required of them and are also taken into consideration as part of the assessment process.

The agency has recently improved their plans for children. The new plans provide foster carers with greater clarity of children's needs, within a therapeutic framework. These changes are ongoing and are yet to be implemented across all children's files.

It has been recognised by managers that the recruitment of foster carers from multicultural backgrounds could be improved. To address this, the manager has recently secured funding for an additional member of staff to focus on the diversity of carers.

The central list for panel membership includes people with a range of experiences and skills. Children's input to the foster carer review process has improved and is evidenced. However, minutes of panel meetings do not always reflect the decision-making and discussion that underpins recommendations. In addition, the minutes are written in such a way that suggests panel approval prior to the agency decision-maker's decision.

The recording of foster carers' supervision is variable. This is in part due to new supervision forms having recently been introduced. Some supervising social workers report that these formats are lengthy and overcomplicated. Managers are aware of this feedback and a review of the forms is taking place.

Foster carers value the wide range of training that is available to them. This strengthens and embeds the therapeutic model of care that the agency promotes and increases foster carers' skills and knowledge base.

Collaborative working with partners is mostly strong. Commissioners and social work professionals speak positively about the high quality of the service and good communication. The vast majority of foster carers express a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of the service.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>Ensure that the registered person notifies Ofsted of any revision to the statement of purpose or the children's guide within 28 days and, if the children's guide is revised, supply a copy to each foster carer approved by the fostering service provider, and to each child placed by them (subject to the child's age and understanding). (Regulation 4(b)(c))</p>	31 July 2021
<p>Where a person ("X") applies to become a foster parent and the fostering service provider decide to assess X's suitability to become a foster parent, any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation.</p> <p>Subject to paragraph (1B), the fostering service provider—</p> <p>must, as soon as reasonably practicable, obtain the information specified in Part 1 of Schedule 3 relating to X and other members of X's household and family. (Regulation 26 (1)(1A) (a))</p> <p>To meet this regulation, the registered person must ensure that the property of the person applying has been visited.</p>	31 July 2021
<p>Ensure that the service provider must not approve X as a foster parent unless they have completed their assessment of X's suitability, and the fostering panel has considered the application. (Regulation 27 (2)(a)(b))</p> <p>To meet this regulation, the fostering panel must ensure that a physical visit to the applicants' household has been undertaken during an assessment.</p>	31 July 2021
<p>Ensure that there is prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider. (Regulation 12 (3)(b))</p>	31 July 2021

<p>To meet this regulation, the registered person must ensure referral is made to the designated officer when an allegation is made against a foster carer.</p>	
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(b))</p> <p>To meet this regulation, the registered person must ensure there are efficient and robust administrative systems, including IT and communication systems, and that these provide comprehensive information in a streamlined manner.</p>	<p>30 September 2021</p>

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that approved foster carers receive an unannounced visit each year from a qualified social worker. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that written minutes of panel meeting are accurate and cover key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. This relates to minutes reflecting appropriate challenge, clearly demonstrating decision-making behind recommendations and written in a manner that does not presume approval of applicants. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 14.7)
- The registered person should ensure that meetings with foster carers for the purposes of supervision are recorded to reflect discussion about meeting the child's needs, offering support to the foster carer and assess the carer's performance, competencies and skills. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 21.8)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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: SC066501

Registered provider: By the Bridge North West Limited

Registered provider address: 4th Floor, Waterfront Building, Hammersmith Embankment, Chancellors Road, London W6 9RU

Responsible individual: Lynn Webb

Registered manager: Pamela Talbot-Leake

Telephone number: 0161 490 7551

Email address: pam.talbot@bythebridge.co.uk

Inspectors

Pauline Yates, Social Care Inspector
Sarah Oldham, Social Care Inspector
Caroline Bertram, Social Care Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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

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