

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 continue to live with their foster carers into adulthood. At the time of the inspection, there were 330 approved foster carers, with 247 children in placement.

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

Inspection date: 20 December 2021

Date of previous inspection: 4 March 2019

This monitoring visit

Ofsted conducted a monitoring visit on 13 May 2021. The purpose of the visit was to measure the progress made by the agency in meeting the requirements of a compliance notice issued following a monitoring visit on 8 and 9 February 2021, and to follow up additional information of concern. At the visit in May, the agency demonstrated through its response that the steps of the compliance notice had been met.

The focus of this visit was to follow up more recent concerns arising from various safeguarding notifications and complaints made directly to Ofsted about the agency. In particular, the information received referred to large numbers of staff leaving, staff sickness, recruitment and induction issues, high caseloads, lack of support to foster carers and poor management decision-making and oversight of safeguarding incidents. The requirements from the previous inspection were not looked at during this visit and are therefore repeated.

Since the last monitoring visit, in May 2021, the agency has continued to experience a high turnover of staff in one of its offices. According to staff records, the reasons for this vary but, in some cases, the turnover reflects a breakdown in employee relations. Because of this, experienced temporary staff are being used to cover the vacancies while new staff are being recruited.

Plans are already in place to fill some of the vacancies by the end of January 2022. However, new staff will continue to be appointed throughout the year to address any ongoing shortfalls in staffing. As a result of the turnover, social workers' caseloads are slightly above the agency's average levels. Senior managers recognise that this is not ideal and they are working hard to stabilise the agency to avoid any further disruption in staffing.

The impact of some key staff leaving to work at another agency has led to some foster carers also deciding to move to that agency. Senior managers are working closely with the new agency to minimise disruption and to ensure that the correct protocols are followed. This includes sharing all relevant information. If concerns have arisen regarding standards of care, these are resolved before transfer.

Staff sickness and, in part, COVID-19, have recently had an impact on the completion of induction and the frequency of supervision for some staff. Senior managers are aware of this and have plans in place to address this immediately. One senior member of staff told inspectors that, while they had not received formal supervision since starting, they were in regular contact with senior managers for support. The weaknesses in induction and supervision processes mean that opportunities are missed to ensure that new staff are clear about their role and task. A requirement has been made to address this.

Over the past seven months, senior managers have continued to put the learning from previous monitoring visits into practice. The new quality assurance manager is building on the work started by their predecessor. The safeguarding arrangements in the agency are multi-layered. Senior managers maintain good oversight and, as a result, children receive immediate support when necessary. The overall safeguarding system is continually evolving. Incidents are now being reported to Ofsted in a more timely way, and work continues with regard to improving the quality of information provided.

Ofsted will continue to monitor the agency through further inspection activities. We will pay particular attention to the agency's leadership and management arrangements and 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. (Regulation 20 (1)(a)(b) (2) (3)(a)(b)(c))</p>	<p>31 January 2022</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. (Regulation 11(a))</p>	<p>31 January 2022</p>

<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect and</p> <p>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>31 January 2022</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—</p> <p>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>31 January 2022</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>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—</p> <p>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</p> <p>seek and take into account the views of—</p> <p>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—</p> <p>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>31 January 2022</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 January 2022</p>
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them—</p> <p>receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))</p>	<p>31 January 2022</p>

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that 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: Kevin Bailey

Inspectors

Amanda Harvey, Social Care Inspector

Vevene Muhammad, 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 children looked after, 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 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: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2021