

By The Bridge

By The Bridge Limited

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

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 additional separate offices in Rugby, Tamworth and the Thames Valley.

The agency provides short-term, long-term, respite and emergency placements for children who need foster families. The agency foster carers are able to meet the needs of brothers and sisters who wish to live together, children with disabilities/additional needs, asylum-seeker children and children on remand. The agency provides parent and child placements and 'staying put' support for young people who remain living with their foster parents past the age of 18.

At the time of the inspection, 181 children and young people were being accommodated in 141 approved fostering households.

There has been no registered manager since August 2019.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 22 to 26 May 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account

requires improvement to be 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 is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 4 March 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection:

A compliance notice was served in 2021 in respect of management arrangements.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

This inspection identified shortfalls in some areas, including help and protection, and leadership and management. This means that, despite the positive support that children receive from their foster carers and agency staff, the fostering agency has been judged overall as requires improvement to be good.

The agency has been through a time of instability and has lost many foster carers to other fostering providers in the past two years. This caused greater instability in some regions of the agency than others. Foster carers report variable experiences regarding the communication and support that they receive.

Foster carers have not received suitable face-to-face first-aid training in the past three years. As a result, the agency manager has not satisfied themselves that foster carers are always well equipped to respond to emergencies. This has the potential to place children, particularly babies and those with complex health needs, at risk. Training is now scheduled, but senior agency staff have been aware of this shortfall for nearly a year.

New foster carers are suitably assessed and prepared to help them begin to undertake the fostering role. Assessments presented to panel are of good quality and show professional curiosity.

The majority of children benefit from good stability within the fostering family. The children live in caring homes where they receive the individualised care and support that they need. However, children's case records do not demonstrate how there was considered matching for two children living with foster carers from a different racial and cultural background. Nor do records show active thought about how these children will be supported to celebrate their identity and heritage.

The foster carers build meaningful bonds with their foster children. One child said: 'It is like my family home. I am part of the family and I do not feel like I am fostered.' Consequently, most children grow in confidence and maturity as valued members of the fostering family.

The foster carers recognise that positive mental health is as important as physical well-being. They help children to pursue activities and interests of their choice and celebrate their successes in life. This helps build children's confidence and resilience.

The therapeutic ethos of the agency is referred to by staff and carers as a 'golden thread'. This is demonstrated in practice from the start of prospective foster carers' relationships with the agency and developed through therapeutic parenting training sessions. Bespoke training and support are provided to fostering families

to help foster carers develop the skills to be effective in therapeutically parenting children who have experienced trauma and loss.

The children make good progress in education because of the encouragement of their foster carers and the agency Education Grow Achieve and Learn (EGAL) workers. The activities and groups run by the EGAL workers enhance children's learning and development.

There is effective engagement and consultation with children. A wide variety of events and holiday activity programmes are operated by the agency. All children linked with the agency, whether they are looked after, children who are fostered or staff's children, are able to participate. These events are highly valued by children, foster carers and staff alike.

The agency website provides useful information for children encompassing different age groups, needs and interests. The imaginative children's guide is translated into many different languages.

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

Recruitment procedures for fostering agency staff are not consistently strong. In most cases, the agency undertakes appropriate suitability checks on prospective staff. However, one staff recruitment file sampled did not demonstrate that appropriate written references had been taken up and verified. This demonstrates a lack of consistent practice to identify and reduce risk. Consequently, information that has the potential to have a bearing on suitability may not be identified.

Each fostering family has a household safety plan and each child a risk assessment and management plan. However, the quality of these is variable. On occasion, these have not been updated following changing levels of risk. As a result, there is the potential for increasing levels of risk or vulnerability to be missed.

The foster carers and agency staff understand that their most important role is to ensure that children are safeguarded. Foster carers report that the agency out-of-hours service is responsive and helpful. The agency responds to any concerns appropriately. However, in one example, the details of a historical allegation by a child against a foster carer and the actions taken were not clear.

Foster carers benefit from a good basic online training and therapeutic offer which helps them meet the needs of children who are considered at risk of self-harm or exploitation.

Weekly safeguarding meetings ensure that agency staff have an understanding of the most vulnerable children and the multi-agency support that they need and/or receive. The agency has introduced the use of the agency panel to consider

internal standards of care reviews. This provides further levels of transparent scrutiny.

The children said that they trust their carers. The children also have confidence in the agency staff that they have regular contact with. The children know who they can talk to and have confidence that these trusted adults will help them resolve any worries or concern that they have.

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

The agency lacks effective management and oversight in some areas. It is of concern that while there have been two acting managers in post, there has been no registered manager since August 2019. In this time, there have also been changes within the senior leadership team. The current manager had submitted an application for registration but has since withdrawn it. The cumulative effect of these changes has been insufficient management oversight across the registration and some instability in staffing in particular offices.

Following previous concerns in respect of management oversight, senior managers had reached agreement to separate the agency into smaller regional agencies and register each separately. This has not yet happened. There are two current acting managers, one for the South and Thames Valley and one for the Midlands and East Anglia. The manager for the South and Thames Valley was not fully aware that they had responsibility for the whole agency and did not have oversight of the Midlands and East Anglia areas. Consequently, the quality of support and social work practice is variable across the service.

The agency provides foster carers with a variety of suitable training. Foster carers value the therapeutic parenting training particularly highly. However, foster carers do not have a formal personal development plan which sets out how the agency will support them to undertake appropriate ongoing training and development.

Panel processes are effective. Panel members are provided with pre-panel paperwork in a timely manner and panel minutes demonstrate how suitability decisions are reached. While there are no concerns regarding the skills and experience of the new agency decision-maker, they are not a trustee, director or senior manager in the fostering service. This could undermine the pivotal role and accountability of the agency decision-maker.

Foster carers' annual reviews have not consistently taken place within a year of the anniversary of their approval and foster and birth children's views are not always captured.

The strategy for maintaining and storing records is not consistently implemented. On occasion, there is a lack of attention to detail and records do not demonstrate effectively the described level of support provided to children or foster carers. Matching documents were on one occasion completed some time after the

children moved in. The agency has been subject to a cyber-attack and it is not yet clear what information was harvested. While the agency has put in place support, foster carers remain anxious about this.

The agency's statement of purpose contains inaccurate information which indicates that the agency potentially offers some adoption support services. This has the potential to misinform commissioners and adoptive families about the services that the agency offers.

Managers have not provided to Ofsted a suitably current quality of care review. However, senior managers are aware of the areas for improvement in the agency and have developed action plans to address some of the issues noted.

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, The 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 provider must appoint an individual to manage the fostering agency. (Regulation 6 (1))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that an application for registration of a suitably qualified and experienced person to manage the service is submitted to Ofsted.</p>	28 August 2023
<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>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, 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) 3(a)(b)(c))</p>	26 June 2023
<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>	3 July 2023

<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. (Regulation 28 (1) (2)(a) 3(a))</p>	
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Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that 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)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers receive sufficient training on health and hygiene issues and first aid. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 6.7)
- The registered person should ensure that there are efficient and robust administrative systems, including IT and communication systems. Premises have:
 - a. Facilities for the secure retention of records;
 - b. appropriate measures to safeguard IT systems; and
 - c. an appropriate security system.
 ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 27.1)
- The registered person should ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes the financial viability of the service, any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality of the service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.1)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.5)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service's decision-maker is a senior person within the fostering service, or is a trustee or director of the fostering service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.12)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service has a clear statement of purpose which accurately reflects the services provided and is reflected in any policies, procedures and guidance. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 16.1)

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: SC047407

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