

# Stepping Stones Fostering

Stepping Stones Fostering Limited

38 Cambridge Road, Ilford, Essex IG3 8LU

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

Stepping Stones Fostering is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Ilford, Essex. The service aims to provide the following types of foster care placements: short-term, bridging, long-term, respite, emergency and sibling placements. Additionally, the service aims to provide foster care placements for children seeking asylum and children with disabilities.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency had three approved fostering households with two children in placement.

### Inspection dates: 22 to 26 January 2024

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account</b>	<b>good</b>
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

**Date of last inspection:** 12 November 2018

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good**

Foster carers have positive and nurturing relationships with children. Foster carers treat children as members of their own family, and children are happy and settled living with them.

Foster carers have a good understanding of children's needs. This means that children's social, emotional and health needs are met consistently. When asked about the best thing regarding their foster carer, one child said, 'She gets me up when I'm down.' Another child said that they 'love' living with their foster carer.

Foster carers play an important role in promoting children's education. Foster carers attend meetings and work in partnership with schools to provide a consistent approach to learning. One child is preparing for GCSE exams this year. This is being regularly discussed in the foster home, and additional tuition is provided for the child. Consequently, children are making good progress in education.

Foster carers understand children's health needs and work hard to ensure that they are met. Children are registered with local health services and are up to date with their routine health checks, such as optical and dental check-ups. Foster carers advocate for children and support them to attend specialist health appointments. This focus on children's health ensures that the children receive the medical treatment that they require.

Children take part in a range of activities that support them to develop hobbies and interests. Children are encouraged to attend after-school activities and join local groups. Foster carers also support children to get involved in activities they show an interest in. For example, one child has taken up swimming and has recently been accepted into a swimming club. However, the activities organised by the agency for the children are limited.

The support provided to foster carers is a strong aspect of this agency. Foster carers appreciate that they can contact the out-of-hours service at any time and their calls are answered promptly by the responsible individual who knows them and the children in their care. One foster carer said, 'They are always at hand, no matter what time. I had to call at midnight, but they are there and pick up. This is the biggest ease.' This helps foster carers to overcome challenges and means that children experience stability.

Prospective foster carers say that staff were responsive, thorough and considerate of their needs during the assessment process. Training provided helped prospective carers feel prepared for meeting the needs of the children that may be placed with them.

## **How well children and young people are helped and protected: good**

Foster carers understand the risks for children, and they are proactive in keeping children safe. Children's risk assessments are individualised and provide guidance to foster carers about how to minimise risk-taking behaviours. However, when new risks emerge, risk assessments are not always revised to provide clear strategies to enable foster carers to respond effectively.

Safer care practice is taken seriously. Safer care plans are detailed and amended as changes arise. In addition, annual unannounced visits and health and safety checks ensure that the home environment is safe and free from hazards. When possible, children are spoken to alone during a supervising social worker's visit. This helps to keep children and foster carers safe.

Children rarely go missing from home. When they do, their foster carers act in line with the agency's missing-from-home procedures. The agency works well with all professionals working with the child and, when appropriate, their families to ensure that children are safe and return home quickly.

The agency manages allegations against members of the fostering households appropriately. If concerns are raised, the registered manager shares information with relevant safeguarding agencies, including the local authority designated officer. This ensures that children are appropriately safeguarded. However, Ofsted was not notified about two allegations against one foster carer's family member. This compromises external oversight of the agency.

All foster carers are trained in the agency's approved behaviour management model. This ensures that carers are aware that physical intervention is to be used as a last resort to prevent children from harming themselves or others. Subsequently, physical restraint has not been used since the last inspection.

The registered manager takes reasonable steps to ensure that staff and foster carers are suitable to work with and care for children. The recruitment of foster carers, staff and panel members is in line with safer recruitment practice. Relevant checks and references are completed, and gaps in employment are explored.

## **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good**

The registered manager has been in her role since November 2016. She is committed to ensuring that the children experience the best care and have good outcomes. The registered manager has a good knowledge and understanding of the agency's strengths and areas for development.

The registered manager has systems in place that support her to monitor the quality of care. However, the system is not always effective, and the quality of some of the children's records needs to improve as they contain inaccurate information.

Staff describe having a very good experience working for this agency. Managers ensure that social workers receive regular, good-quality supervision and an annual appraisal of their performance. This provides opportunities for reflective discussions about practice and staff development.

Staff, panel members and foster carers have access to in-house training that supports their practice. Staff are also encouraged to expand their knowledge through external training. However, staff engagement in training varies.

The approval of foster carers is of good quality. The fostering panel is led by an experienced chair and supported by panel members who have a wide range of experience. Paperwork is sent to panel members in a timely manner. This allows a good review and oversight of the quality of assessments. A good level of curiosity is shown during panel meetings, and the questions asked are helping panel members to make informed recommendations.

Foster carers and professionals spoken to share a consistently positive view of the agency. One social worker said, '[Name of child] has come such a long way, and I am happy where he is now. My hope is he will remain there.' One foster carer said, 'Contact is absolutely brilliant. It doesn't matter what time it is, you can call and get the director, and she will be on the phone with you.'

## 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
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))	30 April 2024

### Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that staff, volunteers, panel members and fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files (including files removed from the premises). There should be a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-keeping and take action when needed. In particular, this relates to ensuring that staff and foster carers complete and submit their records within expected timescales. (Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 26.2)
- The registered person should ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. This specifically relates to leaders and managers ensuring that children's risk assessments are thorough and take account of all known risks. (Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 4.5)
- The registered person should ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action should be taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. In particular, the leaders and managers should ensure that all records contain accurate information. (Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 25.2)

### Information about this inspection

The inspector has 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:** SC484803

**Registered provider:** Stepping Stones Fostering Limited

**Registered provider address:** Suite E 1-3 Canfield Place, London NW6 3BT

**Responsible individual:** Nalini Joshi

**Registered manager:** Esther Jeedigunta

**Telephone number:** 02084780840

## **Inspector**

Aneta Wasilewska, Social Care Inspector

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