

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 parents are able to meet the needs of brothers and sisters who wish to live together, children with disabilities or 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, 147 children and young people were accommodated in 113 approved fostering households.

There has been no registered manager since August 2019. The current manager has submitted an application for registration.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 April 2024

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 22 May 2023

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Foster parents are skilled and committed to meeting children's individual needs. They provide children with experiences that enhance their lives. As a result, children make good progress and receive the specific support they need.

Stability for children in their foster families is good. Many children have lived with their foster families for a long time. As a result, children say they feel 'safe, secure, nurtured and loved'.

Professionals describe the children as 'thriving' in the care of foster parents. The children are core members of the fostering household and are made to feel a part of the family. One child said, 'I am very grateful for their [foster parent] support, help and guidance. They are there for me when I need support. It has just been wonderful.'

The quality of relationships between professionals and children is good. Agency social workers are very present in foster families' lives. Overall, they have regular contact with families and spend time with the children. Foster parents value the support from the agency professionals, including the effective out-of-hours service.

The agency provides foster families with additional internal support from specialist teams. This includes the Education Advisor and Grow, Achieve, Learn (EAGAL) team. The EAGAL team provides educational support to children, foster parents, education professionals and social workers. It is skilled in ensuring that positive relationships with children are formed and their voices heard. This bespoke service is invaluable to foster parents and children. It is valued by all.

Therapeutic practice is embedded throughout the agency. The internal therapeutic team provides support across the agency and to external professionals. It offers expert advice and support in understanding the individual therapeutic needs of each child. This therapeutic support is interwoven into all stages of the foster parents' journey with the agency. The team offers a high-quality level of training for foster parents and staff. Consequently, the therapeutic team is highly appreciated.

Children's health needs are well considered. Relevant information is uploaded to children's files. Since the last inspection, the agency has ensured that foster parents receive face-to-face first-aid training. This is now on a rolling programme to ensure all foster parents receive this training.

Staff seek the child's voice at every opportunity. Children are encouraged to express their views in a variety of creative platforms. This includes an app, the 'mind of my own' feedback tool, a shadow panel and youth forums. Children's feedback is valued and taken into consideration to improve the service. One child was asked, 'What's good in my life right now?' and they replied, 'Where I live.'

Children are well supported in their moves towards independence. Children are settled in their foster homes, and plans for their futures are well considered. Living with their foster parents under 'staying put' and 'shared lives' types of arrangements is encouraged. One child said their foster parent 'helped me to be independent and prepare for university. I feel ready to go as I can cook, do washing and manage my own money most of the time. I have a job as well!'

Foster parents support children to explore their interests and talents. One child hopes to have a career in musical theatre. They enjoy trips to the theatre with their foster parents and have extra private lessons in dance and music. This child said that their foster parent is helping them to achieve their 'goals and dreams'.

Foster parents are committed to ensuring children stay connected with their families. One foster parent described how they regularly travel long distances to ensure the child can have safe and enjoyable family time. This commitment to maintaining contact with birth families ensures children maintain a good sense of their identity and positive family links.

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

Safeguarding practice is good across the agency. Risks to children are identified, understood and managed effectively. Appropriate bespoke support, through agency social workers and the therapeutic and EAGAL teams, is provided to foster parents and children. This additional targeted support is well recorded.

There is a good level of safeguarding oversight and monitoring across the organisation. Weekly safeguarding meetings are held in each region. Important information from these meetings is shared with senior leaders who have further oversight. The out-of-hours service is updated daily on any concerns or vulnerabilities in foster families. This means they have a good understanding of complex situations and the support needed.

Foster parents respond appropriately to situations when children go missing from home. They act as caring parents and secure the child's safe return whenever possible. They contact the out-of-hours team for support and follow the relevant procedures to safeguard children. The support from agency staff is good, with clear and direct instructions on further actions to take.

The agency ensures that foster parents are prepared and supported to manage children's behavioural needs. The very small number of restraints that have occurred in the last year have been appropriately reviewed. These have been responded to with appropriate child-focused practice and professional curiosity. When individual support is identified as needed, the agency therapy and EAGAL teams step in.

Allegations made by children regarding foster parents are responded to effectively by the manager. Agency staff work to support foster families repair their relationships. Any allegations against a foster parent are routinely included in the agency's annual

review of their approval. These are taken back to the panel for further oversight. This demonstrates a solid approach to safeguarding children.

Children told inspectors that they feel safe and well cared for. Professionals said that children tell them that they feel safe with their foster parents.

Since the last inspection, managers have improved the safer recruitment processes for staff and panel members. Files now demonstrate strong, safer recruitment practice.

The agency does generally notify Ofsted of safeguarding concerns. However, two incidents were noted that had not been notified. The agency had undertaken all other relevant actions to safeguard the child. However, the failure to notify potentially undermines Ofsted's ability to monitor whether actions taken by the agency keep children safe.

Standards of care investigations regarding foster parents are now routinely returned to the panel for further oversight. However, the agency did not review concerns about standards of care and one foster parent's suitability in an acceptable timescale. Consequently, there was not swift action taken to address the shortfalls.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The current manager has been in post since July 2023. Leaders and managers have aspirations and visions for the service. This has driven positive improvements since the last inspection. The senior leadership team members are accessible and responsive. They have taken on board findings from the last inspection and have acted on them. They have worked to try and stabilise the staffing teams and to address any concerns raised by foster parents.

The agency has submitted an application to separate the current registration into two separate regional agencies. This is because the agency covers a great geographical area, and maintaining comprehensive oversight has previously been a struggle. There are clear plans for how this regional separation will work.

Children's needs are prioritised by leaders and managers. Examples of this include the EAGAL and therapeutic teams. The shadow panel is an example of how the agency has prioritised the voice of children since the previous inspection. Children are given the opportunity to be involved in the approval process of prospective foster parents by ensuring their voice and views are heard. They provide possible important questions to ask new foster parents from a child's perspective.

Foster parents are articulate and clear in their views about the agency. While a very small number raise some issues for development, the vast majority of foster parents speak positively about the agency and agency staff. Most foster parents have their foster children live with them for a long time. They say that this is because of the support that they have received. They are consistently positive about supervising

social workers. Foster parents said, 'I feel privileged to be part of this organisation,' and 'You feel valued by everybody.'

External professionals said that they have positive working relationships and effective communication with the agency. The agency attends all meetings and helps to ensure that the children receive the care and support they need from other agencies.

Agency social workers have regular, good-quality supervision sessions and feel well supported. They routinely have annual appraisals. However, the quality of these is variable. This inconsistency is also reflected in foster parents' practice development plans, which do not always provide reflections on learning. While this is discussed in some supervision sessions, foster parents are not given a clear plan on their targets and development plans for the forthcoming year. Work is ongoing in this area. However, it is not yet fully embedded. There continues to be some disconnect around oversight and monitoring of record-keeping. While there are some mechanisms being introduced, these are not yet embedded into practice.

Managers have not completed, and submitted to Ofsted, a suitable quality of care review in the past year. It is therefore difficult for the regulator to understand the oversight and monitoring of the service in between inspections.

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 person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and</p> <p>improving the quality of foster carer provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any reviewed conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b) (2))</p>	28 June 2024
<p>If any 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>	28 June 2024

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the areas of concern, or need for additional support, that are identified between reviews are addressed. These matters identified between reviews should be addressed at the time they are identified, where appropriate, rather than waiting for a review. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 13.9)
- 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 are appropriate to their development needs and experience. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.5)

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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Rebecca Fisher, Social Care Inspector
Sara Stoker, Social Care Inspector (shadow)

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