

# By The Bridge

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

By the Bridge is an independent fostering agency, based near Sittingbourne in Kent. According to its mission statement, it seeks to provide "a wide range of the highest quality services to meet the needs of traumatised young people 'looked after' by Local Authorities, in order to ensure they can access all of their human rights."

The agency is run by a qualified and experienced senior management team, which reports to a board of directors and recent developments include the continued development of the Essex office and the introduction of an additional office in the Midlands.

Staff and foster parents receive generous remuneration packages and ongoing access to training, which ensures their continued professional development. Much emphasis is placed upon providing therapeutic services, from within and outside of the agency. Children and young people receive holistic packages of care and are placed with families who can meet their needs.

Placements include short and long term, emergencies, bridging and respite care, and the agency offers placements to babies, young children, teenagers, sibling groups, mothers and their babies and youngsters who present difficult and challenging behaviours.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

This announced key inspection was conducted by one inspector and all of the key standards were inspected. The requirements and recommendations made under the previous inspectorate were explored and were found to have been fully implemented. This is an outstanding service which continues to strive for excellence on behalf of the children and young people it serves. Robust processes protect all stakeholders and the agency works closely with placing authorities and external professionals in order to fully meet the diverse needs of those in placement. Foster parents and agency staff are highly valued; they receive the training, support and ongoing professional development they need to further enhance their existing expertise. Such factors maintain and enhance the excellent standards of care currently being enjoyed by those placed with the agency.

### Improvements since the last inspection

From the previous inspection, the agency was required to address shortfalls in respect of unqualified personnel undertaking Form F assessments and the supervision of foster parents. It was also asked to improve upon the quality of health records and matching information for those in placement and to expand upon the detail of foster parent supervision records. Appropriate steps have been taken to fully comply with these requests, with improved safeguards being provided for all parties as a direct result.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people receive excellent levels of support and guidance to maintain a healthy lifestyle. All are registered with local health services and where necessary, any specialist services they need are provided. Written records hold clear details of immunisation histories and medical backgrounds and foster parents support those in their care to maintain a comprehensive ongoing health record. All Looked After Children's (LAC) medicals are up to date.

Written health guidance for foster parents is detailed, specific and clear. It can be found within the foster parents' handbook and includes a range of relevant topics, including diet, medical conditions, growth and development, personal hygiene, eating disorders, advice for teenagers and many others. Such guidance is further enhanced by a comprehensive ongoing training programme, which is equally broad and informative. Foster parents are very well informed and this ensures they give competent support to those they look after. They are all provided with membership of 'Foster Talk', a not-for-profit organisation, that provides independent support and guidance for fostering households. Members can access counselling services and a health and first aid advice line. Foster parents maintain a detailed electronic diary that covers 23 elements of health matters; examples include accidents, illnesses and the use of any medicines. This information is routinely shared with placing social workers and is used to reliably inform children's statutory reviews.

Children and young people say they are very well looked after and that their foster parents help them to stay healthy. Foster parents say the agency provides them with the guidance and training they need to effectively promote the health and development of those in their care.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency is comprised of a motivated, well-qualified and experienced management team. Individuals bring a wide range of relevant skills and experience, which positively impacts upon service delivery. Each person is ideally suited to their individual role.

The strict application of robust recruitment procedures ensures safety for all stakeholders and the agency has recruited three qualified social workers since the last inspection. Individuals do not commence with their duties until all required checks and references are satisfactorily returned.

Prospective foster parents undergo the same style of vigorous vetting, with Form F assessments now being completed only by qualified and experienced social work personnel. The assessment process is detailed and comprehensive and is followed by a full and thorough annual review process. Current foster parents say they receive clear and explicit guidance which describes their role and the expectations of the agency. Ongoing monitoring systems ensure their homes are subject to regular health and safety inspections and they confirm they receive at least one unannounced visit each year.

Children and young people can be assured the agency fully takes into account their presenting needs in determining whether they have a suitable placement to offer. The matching process explicitly identifies all presenting areas of need of the child and the skills and approval status of the prospective foster parents. This process also describes the potential additional support and training needs of the foster parents and how these will be met.

Clear safeguarding policies and procedures are being implemented in practice. These, alongside detailed behaviour management guidelines and complaints processes serve to protect children and young people. Safeguarding training is provided for all staff and foster parents. This is routinely updated. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is contracted to deliver an auditing service and it also provides supervision and consultation for the agency's own safeguarding manager. Incidents of complaints and allegations are robustly monitored and a service to provide foster parents with additional guidance and support, should they be subject to an allegation is currently being developed. Every fostering household has its own safe care policy in place. The quality of these varies and not all are specific to the child or young person in placement. Foster parents understand and implement the agency's missing persons guidance in practice. They liaise closely with the local police and placing authorities to return the young person home as quickly and safely as possible. The agency is fully aware of the potential for its children and young people to become victims of bullying and is pro-active in providing clear guidance and training to enable foster parents to recognise signs and symptoms as early as possible.

The panel comprises of a range of eight independent members and two staff members who bring a wealth of relevant skills and expertise. Members are recruited in line with regulatory guidance and a new panel chair commenced this April. Terms of reference are clear and the panel have recently attended a full study day as a team. Written minutes of panel meetings are detailed and clear, meetings are quorate and the group performs a specific quality assurance role in terms of the assessments presented.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

Sound policies and procedures effectively promote equality and diversity. The agency recruits foster parents who are able to meet the diverse range of needs of the children and young people in placement. Valuing diversity training is provided during the initial recruitment stage and becomes an ongoing feature of the annual training programme for foster parents and staff. The agency makes excellent use of its own resources, such as an experienced foster parent presenting a workshop on caring for Muslim children.

There is a good mix of staff that reflects diversity in terms of age, gender and racial origin. Equally, foster parents represent a broad range of age groups, racial backgrounds and religious beliefs, and there is a good mix of married and cohabiting couples, single foster parents and gay couples.

Children and young people positively benefit by being actively encouraged to explore, understand and value their heritage through the completion of life story work.

Additional festival allowances are payable to foster parents to encourage those in their care to maintain positive links with their own heritage and culture, hence, their self image is enhanced because they feel valued by their foster parents.

The agency actively promotes educational achievement and works hard to ensure children and young people are placed in schools and colleges that meet their needs. There are clear expectations that foster parents will provide positive support and guidance to help children to achieve; these are described within the foster care agreement and foster parent handbook. Additional allowances are payable to assist with the provision of school uniform and additional necessary equipment and resources for individual children.

More recently, a dedicated education support officer post has been created. This has been filled by a dynamic and motivated existing staff member, who has many years teaching experience and is passionate about her new role. School attendance and attainment is now being robustly monitored and foster parents advocate strongly on behalf of those in their care. Fostering households are well-equipped with the necessary resources to aid and promote study and the agency routinely rewards individual children for trying their best and working hard.

Foster parents are pro-active in seeking school placements early on in the placement and a number travel long distances to maintain children in existing schools, whereby they have had to move foster placement, but have been very settled at their current school.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency is committed to promoting positive family contact for children and young people, in accordance with their placement plans. Training for foster parents is provided during the initial Skills to Foster induction period and beyond. Foster parents provide excellent support and many travel long distances to ensure contact is maintained. The agency enters into specific and individual agreements with placing authorities and is able to provide appropriate venues and workers who can supervise such visits and produce detailed reports. Children benefit by maintaining links with their birth families and the agency offers clear safeguards in the arrangements it undertakes.

Sound consultation processes ensure the views and opinions of children and young people are heard and responded to. Thus, they really do have an influence upon service provision. The agency has improved upon its consultation forms in respect of LAC's reviews and foster parent annual reviews because those in placement have been asked for their ideas on how to improve the agency's paperwork. Older teenagers, who have moved on into independent living are influencing how the agency is developing its leaving care service, 'Get a Lifestyle' and numerous activity days are planned throughout the year by the child and family events coordinator. Whilst the emphasis for these forums is to have fun and join in with activities, agency staff ensure they ask pertinent questions regarding the operation of the agency.

This practice extends to foster parents, who say they are given plenty of opportunities to

be heard through supervision groups, training meetings and the annual review process. Placing authorities are always asked for feedback at the end of placement and in preparation for the foster parents' annual reviews. The agency's website has a dedicated section for birth parents, which invites consultation from this valued group. As a result, all stakeholders have an active voice and a real influence upon the service.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is outstanding.

Foster parents benefit by having their allowances and expenses paid correctly and on time. Financial procedures are clearly explained and the agency pays additional allowances for the benefit of all concerned. Such payments ensure children and young people are provided with school uniforms, necessary equipment and festival allowances.

Additional funding has been allocated to further develop the agency's leaving care service, (Get a Lifestyle) and all foster parents are required to assist those in their care to save a minimum of 10 pounds every week. The system in place ensures local authority social workers receive a cheque and closing statement on behalf of the child when they leave the agency.

Numerous schemes are in place to encourage and reward children and young people for showing initiative; they receive certificates and gift vouchers as rewards for helping to develop the service. One young person assisted the agency to secure the services of a guest speaker to give a talk to a group of teenagers about leaving care.

Individual foster parents are innovative and creative in how they assist those in their care to prepare for independence. One couple have made excellent use of a local shop to provide a work experience placement, which provides much more than a paid activity; the benefits to this young person's confidence and development of social skills is proving to be invaluable.

Foster parents and those in placement further benefit through the agency's discount schemes and legal and education advice lines. Free membership with Foster Talk enables them to access these services as soon as they are approved.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is outstanding.

Clear information is effectively communicated to all stakeholders in a variety of ways. These ideally suit the needs of each individual group. Documents including the Statement of Purpose and guides for children and young people are produced in written formats and on the website. They can be speedily translated if necessary. Children and young people say they understand the policies and processes that directly affect them, such as how to make a complaint. They confirm they are given this information in writing, but most importantly, they confirm such processes are also clearly verbally explained.

The service is managed and staffed by an experienced, motivated and energetic team.

This impacts positively upon foster parents and those in their care. Staff are competent and lines of responsibility and accountability are clear and understood by all parties. The total number of staff in post ensures each department is effectively being run, with any absences easily absorbed. Handovers and team meetings occur daily and weekly. Information is therefore shared expediently between those who need to know. Agency staff are very well supported by the registered manager and responsible individual and all members of the agency, including foster parents talk of an open door policy, which makes them feel valued and respected. Hence, there is a very real sense of pride and ownership throughout the organisation. Guidance, including the staff handbook and appraisal system is currently being revised and updated, further demonstrating the agency's desire to continue to improve and move forwards. This is a constantly evolving service.

Robust monitoring systems impact positively upon quality assurance. The service routinely engages reputable external agencies to conduct financial audits and a further good example is the use of the NSPCC, which is used to monitor child protection processes.

The Board of Directors is comprised of individuals from a wide range of professional backgrounds, including business and child care fields at the highest level. Foster parents and children can be assured the agency is being led by a competent, well-informed group who continue to strive for excellence.

The comprehensive training programme for staff and foster parents continues to meet the needs of all involved. The agency actively encourages and supports the attainment of professional qualifications for foster parents and staff, including NVQ and the Certificate in Therapeutic Foster Care. All link workers, (previously called fostering mentors), without a recognised social work qualification are currently enrolled to complete the Open University Degree in social work and all training courses, seminars and workshops are evaluated by attendees. The training manager works hard to deliver an informative and broad package. She fully utilises the skills of staff and foster parents. Courses are also led by external professionals and care leavers. This results in personnel receiving the training they need to ensure children and young people are provided with an excellent standard of care and support.

Support groups and individual supervision meetings for foster parents receive a very high profile. These are planned in advance and there is a clear requirement for all concerned that these will happen in practice. Foster parents say they feel very well supported and value these forums. The role of the supervisor is clear and written records show all areas of the fostering task are being covered. Although foster parents sign their individual supervision records, not all confirm they receive a copy of them.

Case records for children and young people are comprehensive. They contain all of the elements required and are being securely stored. The same applies to other pertinent administrative records and the continuing development of software packages ensures information is securely stored, yet easily retrievable.

## **What must be done to secure future improvement?**

## Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure the safe care policies in place refer to each individual currently in placement and monitor the quality of these at each annual review (NMS 9).
- ensure all foster parents receive copies of their own supervision records (NMS 21).