

Brighter Futures for Children: Fostering Service

Reading Borough Council, Bridge Street, Reading, Berkshire RG1 2LU

Assurance visit

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency registered in January 2019. It was formerly part of Reading Borough Council and is now part of Brighter Futures for Children Limited.

The agency offers mainstream, short- and long-term, emergency, and parent and child placements.

There are currently 76 fostering households and there are 56 children placed with the agency.

Visit dates: 24 to 25 November 2020

Previous inspection date: 10 February 2020

Previous inspection judgement: Requires improvement to be good

Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings from the visit

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

The care of children

Children have been well supported by their carers through the pandemic. Foster carers have helped children to understand and make sense of the world around them. Carers provide stability, security, support and good-quality care to children. Children form good, trusting relationships with their carers and seek their help and comfort when they are worried or upset. Children's views, aspirations and wishes about their care are regularly sought by their foster carers. However, this information is not well reflected in written records or care reviews.

Foster carers support children to maintain relationships with their family and friends. There is good consideration of individual needs and wishes to ensure that time spent with family is child centred. When concerns regarding arrangements arise, these are shared and reviewed with the placing authority.

Children's emotional and physical health and well-being needs are well supported by their foster carers. For some children, there has been a negative impact on their well-being and development where specialist therapies and support were paused or delayed during the lockdown period. Not all children have been able to return to previous activities from which they benefited.

Foster carers have provided stability and consistency to children through the varied learning activities, opportunities, outings and new experiences that have been offered. All children are encouraged to attend full-time education.

The agency has improved its matching processes through the development of more effective systems and better consideration of children's needs. However, there continues to be a high number of placement breakdowns. While gaps in service provision to address children's needs are identified, individual plans do not always thoroughly consider how to address these, particularly diversity issues. Leaders and managers have undertaken a review of children's plans and identified key contributing factors. However, they are yet to implement effective strategies to improve placement stability and reduce placement breakdowns.

The newly developed foster carer profiles which are shared with children are child centred, helpful and informative. Children can meet their carers before moving into the home, which helps them to settle in with their new foster families.

The safety of children

Children feel safe and secure while living with their foster carers. Children have a trusted adult they can confide in and seek help and advice from when they are worried or upset. Foster carers and staff have good understanding of risk.

Managers and staff refer, report and respond promptly to safeguarding concerns when these are brought to their attention. Established systems are in place to ensure effective tracking and oversight of concerns, accidents and allegations. However, identified actions are not consistently completed, and Ofsted is not always informed of allegations that have been made against staff.

Some risks highlighted within the matching processes and safer care plans are not thoroughly explored. Not all risks identified include detailed or clear practical strategies, advice and guidance to support foster carers to be consistent in their response to and management of risk. Social workers and foster carers regularly discuss and explore risk and consider how to respond, but this is not consistently evidenced in plans.

Recruitment of staff has improved. Recruitment records now evidence that all appropriate checks are completed.

Leaders and managers

Leaders and managers have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the agency. A number of weaknesses identified previously have been successfully addressed. Considerable effort has been undertaken to ensure that all foster carers were transferred to the new agency following the previous inspection. However, further work is required to ensure that all changes are embedded into practice and to develop and improve remaining areas of weakness.

Leaders and managers have focused on improving the culture of the agency, although there is more to do to ensure this change is embraced by all. While the current staff team is stable, there has been a high turnover of staff in the agency this year. Some foster carers report that, on occasions, the quality of communication between them and the agency is poor. The manager is aware of this and has implemented strategies and plans to improve this. There has been one complaint about the agency this year, which has been responded to appropriately.

There have been a high number of placement breakdowns this year. Currently there are no formal processes in place to ensure that lessons can be learned from placement breakdowns to inform practice development or avoid any reoccurrence. Leaders and managers have stated that it is their intention to formalise and embed a process to follow when placements come to an early end. This will involve children, carers and others to ensure learning is systemically captured. The process will also involve gathering feedback routinely after breakdowns to inform the development of the service.

Staff and foster carers have been well supported this year through regular effective supervision, performance management, team meetings and training. Staff and foster carers report that they have good access to the manager. Staff and foster carers can access online training that equips them for their roles and foster carers complete their required mandatory training. Most of the support available has been virtual and some carers would now benefit from face-to-face supervision and interaction. The additional support provided by the out-of-hours service has been well received.

The independent fostering agency committee is effective in ensuring that the agency considers strategic issues and monitors the agency’s risk register. Where tasks are not completed due to operational demands, for example on placement breakdown during the lockdown period, the committee has held the agency to account and ensured that tasks are actioned to drive improvement.

The quality of panel minutes and the agency decision-maker notes has improved. They now clearly evidence exploration of matters brought to them with detailed rationale and recommendations 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, 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 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, and</p> <p>before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child’s—</p> <p>religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. (Regulation 11 (a)(b)(ii))</p> <p>With specific reference to ensuring that issues of equality and diversity are identified and well managed.</p>	<p>31 January 2021</p>

<p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for—</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. (Regulation 12 (3)(e))</p> <p>This specifically relates to ensuring that individual safer caring policies and plans are comprehensive and cover all known risks.</p>	<p>31 January 2021</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.</p> <p>Any notification made in accordance with this regulation which is given orally must be confirmed in writing. (Regulation 36 (1)(2))</p>	<p>31 January 2021</p>
<p>When undertaking a review, the fostering service provider must—</p> <p>seek and take into account the views of—</p> <p>the foster parent,</p> <p>any child placed with the foster parent (subject to the child's age and understanding). (Regulation 28 (3)(b)(i)(ii))</p>	<p>31 January 2021</p>

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the views of the child, the child's family, social worker and independent reviewing officer are sought regularly on the child's care, unless in individual cases this is not appropriate. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 1.4)

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: 2502331

Registered provider: Brighter Futures for Children

Registered provider address: Reading Borough Council, Civic Offices, Bridge Street, Reading, Berkshire RG1 2LU

Responsible individual: Biri Yaya

Registered manager: Stefanie Roth

Inspectors

Amanda Maxwell, Social Care Inspector
Suzy Lemmy, Social Care Inspector
Alexander Dignan, Social Care Inspector

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