

Bridging Gaps Fostering Agency,

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Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Mr James Harmon
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Date of last inspection 14 July 2014

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Bridging Gaps is an independent fostering agency, based in Slough. The fostering service offers foster placements to children and young people on a planned or emergency basis, for short- and long-term duration, for bridging and for respite care. The service also offers placements for sibling groups and for parents and their babies.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so that they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards (NMS), but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or NMS but these are not widespread or serious. All children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures that result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency has successfully undertaken the appropriate steps to improve the service following its last inspection in 2014. The overall effectiveness judgement of good reflects the hard work undertaken by the agency staff. The agency is good in leadership and management, safeguarding, and experiences and progress of children and young people.

There were a few shortcomings in the quality of service, which resulted in a judgement that just fell short of being good. The issues identified have not had a negative consequence for the children and young people placed. If the manager meets the requirements and recommendations, the agency would improve in the quality of service.

The previous registered manager resigned shortly after the last inspection. A new manager was employed and successfully registered. The new management arrangements have complied with the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection.

The small staff team remains committed to the carers, children and young people. The children and young people are safe, enjoying living in their placements. The agency celebrates their achievements and accomplishments while effectively monitoring their progress. The majority of carers feel supported through all aspects of their care and have a great relationship with the agency.

Areas for improvement

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the NMS. The registered persons must comply with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure that the welfare of children placed is safeguarded and promoted at all times. This is in relation to children and young people being matched with carers that can meet their needs and behaviours (Regulation 11 (a)).	28/6/2016
Ensure that foster carers are provided with such training as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. This is in relation to parent and child placements (Regulation 17 (1)).	28/06/2016
The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that the foster parents are familiar with, and act in accordance with, the policies established in accordance with regulations 12(1). This applies to foster carers understanding how formal child protection matters will be conducted (Regulation 17(2)).	28/06/2016

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- Ensure that the fostering service provider and foster carer contribute effectively to each child's placement plan review and statutory review of the child's case plan (NMS 31.7).
- Implement the policy on the maintenance of the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of the fostering panel (NMS 14.1).
- Ensure that the registered person has a system in place to notify within 24 hours the appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 36. This relates to updating of notifiable events (NMS 29.1).

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The views of the children and young people are very important to the agency. The children and young people appreciate that opportunities are provided for them to share their views. They routinely are asked about the care that they receive and about the agency performance. The children and young people feel safe while presenting as having good relationships with their carers. Several positive interactions between the agency staff, carers and children and young people were observed during the inspection.

The children and young people understand their rights and know how to complain. A memory box is provided for them when they are initially placed. It contains the children's guide and other useful information about the agency. The box also contains a photo album so that they can immediately start to document their experiences. The children and young people settle quickly into placement due to the welcoming that they receive.

The children and young people have their health needs met to a very good standard. Some experience significant improvements in their health. They attend routine appointments with the dentist, general practitioner and optician, along with any additional specialist appointments.

The children and young people make progress in their educational attainment. Some have never attended school regularly. They improve their attendance and academic performance while developing an appreciation for education. The agency has good links in the community and these can assist the educational needs of the children and young people.

Inclusion in the wider family of their carers is a benefit that children and young people enjoy. They feel accepted which leads to good relationships with the birth children of their carers. The children and young people participate in family outings and undertake activities with their carers. 'My carer treats me like family. If something is being done for her children, she makes sure the same is done for me.' These were the positive words of a young person about their foster carer.

When necessary, carers establish safe, trusting relationships with the significant others of the children and young people. This allows them to maintain family ties and identity.

The agency has provided extensive support to children and young people who are seeking asylum. These children and young people are provided with opportunities to adapt and progress their aspirations of being contributing members of society. Almost all the young people have learned to speak English, travel independently and secure legal representation with the support of their carer and the agency.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The agency has completed a small number of informative assessments for potential applicants. The applicants have good engagement due to having a clear

understanding of the process. The agency assessor focuses on the needs of the children and young people, which has resulted in some applicants being removed from consideration due to their unsuitability.

The majority of the placements for the children and young people are stable. The carers that have been with the agency for a considerable amount of time are committed and skilled in caring for them. Many have children of their own, and value working with children and young people in different situations. The children and young people continue to benefit from the patience and understanding shown by their carers.

The attendance of foster carers at training opportunities provided by the agency has improved. They enjoy attending and believe that they are being supplied with the skills to look after children and young people successfully. The agency provides midyear and annual reviews for all carers to ensure that they continue to care for children and young people at a good standard. The carers believe in the agency and its ethos, specifically their roles and the responsibility of being attached to the service

Carers show an interest and many actively contribute to the care planning of the children and young people. They are involved in their day-to-day planning. They engage with the agency and supervising social worker by updating them with daily logs. All information pertaining to the children and young people is maintained in files provided by the agency. Several carers proudly offered their folders for review.

The agency received mixed reviews from placing social workers regarding the contribution of the agency and carers to the reviews held for children and young people. Several placing social workers believed that the agency communicated very well while carers contributed greatly. Others expressed concerns for the ability of the agency and carers to contribute, communicate and attend meetings. On balance, the agency should seek to ensure that all professionals are happy with their performance, and contribution to the care planning in relation to the children and young people.

The agency has a small number of parent and child placements that are currently stable. The process for becoming a carer in these types of placements involves a weak process consisting of one day of training. The training is generic in content. Parent and child placements are specialist placements that involve a variety of observations and recordings for cases currently in court.

An area that is in great need of improvement is the matching of children and young people with carers. Since the last inspection, the agency received mostly referrals for short-term emergency placements. Some of these placements experienced difficulties that could have been prevented if detailed attention had been given to the matching process.

The performance of the panel has improved. It is now considered a strength of the agency. The members provide various perspectives that assist in the approval of foster carers for children and young people. Steps are taken to ensure that each time that the panel sits it is quorate and all meetings are documented accordingly. The central list for panel members needs to reflect all those individuals who are currently able to sit on the panel.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency has complied with the four requirements and two recommendations relating to safeguarding, from the last inspection. By addressing these key areas, the agency has improved its ability to ensure that the welfare of children and young people placed is safeguarded and promoted at all times.

The agency's policies on safeguarding and child protection have been updated so that they present as clear and relevant to the agency staff, carers, children and young people. The policies that have been updated include those on risk assessments, missing from care, child sexual exploitation, radicalisation, and bullying. The overall policy has been submitted to the local authority designated officer and the safeguarding board for review. There has been no feedback despite the efforts of management to obtain a view.

Children and young people feel extremely safe and well protected by the agency. The agency provides safe placements for all children and young people, through carrying out routine unannounced visits, providing child protection training to carers and, most importantly, taking into consideration the views of the children and young people.

The carers are provided with safeguarding training to ensure that children and young people are protected. They understand the risks associated with the children and young people they care for while being extremely sensitive to their issues. The carers develop skills that assist them in managing the negative behaviours of the children and young people in their care.

Several children and young people expressed that they feel safe in their placements. They believe that their carers with the support of the agency staff will address any concern that makes them feel unsafe. When children and young people do make allegations against foster carers, the agency response follows the appropriate safeguarding procedures. They have good engagement with professionals who keep children and young people safe while an outcome is being determined. Unfortunately, during one specific incident the staff were slow to provide support and information to a foster carer leading to the carer feeling isolated and anxious.

The improved missing from care policy developed by the management effectively outlines the necessary actions to be followed when children and young people go missing from their placements. The policy was tested when a young person consistently went missing. Records evidenced an extensive response by the staff, consisting of timely reporting, updating risk assessments and providing advice to the carer.

The agency recruitment process now reflects that new members of staff are recruited safely. All staff including those that do not work directly with the children and young people are employed by safe recruitment practices. The children and young people benefit from the agency employing individuals with good character and intentions.

The process of notifying Ofsted of significant events has improved, but on several occasions the update to the notifications were provided very late by the manager. The lateness did not have an impact on the safety and well-being of the children and young people. It would greatly improve the practice of the agency if updates referencing the outcome of incidents were reported in a timely manner. The manager accepted this shortcoming.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The management has worked hard to maintain a positive working relationship with the placing local authorities that consistently use the service. Commissioning officers expressed positive comments regarding the agency. One said, 'The manager and responsible individual will try to resolve any issues raised with them as quickly as possible.' Another commissioning officer added, 'I have a high opinion of the agency. Placements offered to young people with complex needs are managed well in the service.'

A new experienced registered manager has been in post for over a year. He works well with the responsible individual in managing the agency effectively, with each member of staff understanding their assigned roles. The management team is well liked for its knowledge and active involvement in services, specifically by the carers, children and young people.

Children and young people placed with the agency are provided with opportunities in which their achievements are celebrated, for example the annual End of Year Party. The annual art contest is open to children and young people and the birth children of the carers. The winner has their artwork placed on the cover of the agency calendar and a celebrity presents the award. A group of young foster children was observed meeting and planning a talent show for everyone involved with the agency.

Management of the agency is able to track effectively the progress that children and young people make. They take a proactive approach to monitoring every placement and its impact on how children and young people develop. Placing social workers all agree that the agency responds to the needs of the children and young people by adjusting their level of care if needed.

The statement of purpose, updated in August 2015, is a detailed document that is easily accessible on the agency's website and upon request. The aims and objectives of the agency are presented clearly. The children's guide, available to all children and young people placed with the agency, is an age-appropriate document that offers guidance in all areas. A fostering network support group was observed during inspection. The carers can discuss and contribute ideas to the agency in this formal arena.

Management displays a high level of professionalism when addressing any complaint regarding the agency. Every effort is made to resolve the matter so that everyone feels heard and agrees with the actions taken to resolve the matter.

Monitoring of the service has been effective. Annual reports are supplied to Ofsted promptly. The development plan is forward thinking with modest aspirations that can be achieved.

The agency is financially viable with ample resources to ensure safe and successful placements. Some of the resources available include safely recruited drivers to enable contact and other matters relating to the children and young people. The agency has access to a person who can undertake minor alterations to premises if placements have potential health and safety concerns.

The staff speak highly of the support that they receive in relation to their assigned roles within the agency. They are committed to the agency ethos and have played an instrumental role in improving the agency. Supervision occurs regularly for all the staff, including management. Potential panel members have a thorough training process prior to sitting for any panel. All staff have discussions that develop their practice and management skills. All staff who have been employed over a year have had their appraisals.

A detailed plan for the recruitment of new carers has been in place for some time. Several recruitment drives were held with limited success. The responsible individual chose to focus on improving the overall inspection judgement before increasing recruitment events.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the NMS, and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet NMS. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.