

Little Acorns Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Setting address	Rook Tree Barn, Withersfield Road, Great Wratting, HAVERHILL, Suffolk, CB9 7HD
Telephone number	07891677379
Email	cjillions@littleacornsfostering.com
Registered person	Little Acorns Fostering Ltd
Registered manager	Cheryl Ann Jillions
Responsible individual	Leonard David Gelernter
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Little Acorns Fostering is a privately owned independent fostering agency operating from one office based outside Haverhill in Suffolk. The agency provides emergency, short-term, bridging, respite, long-term and parent and child placements. Currently, there are 10 households with a total of 19 carers offering 23 possible foster places. There are currently 15 children in placement spread across the East of England.

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 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 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 national minimum standards 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 which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good.**

This is a new independent fostering agency, registered in February 2013. There is a Registered Manager in post who provides good leadership and management. They are supported by the responsible individual who has oversight of the work of the agency. Children placed with the agency make good progress and have good outcomes in areas such as education. Some go on to further education and have clear plans for their future employment. Children are able to stay in placement beyond their 18th birthday if they require this. This provides them with support during what can be an important and difficult time of their lives.

Children are encouraged and supported to develop their interests through attendance at clubs and taking part in activities. They are helped to take age-appropriate risks and develop their ability to keep themselves safe. Risk-taking

behaviour is addressed and reduces over time. There are processes to ensure the physical safety of children in foster placements, including health and safety checks and unannounced visits to carers' homes. Assessments of carers' suitability take place and the fostering panel provides a robust oversight of the suitability and safety of carers. Equality and diversity is covered in carers' assessments, but not always in as much depth as other areas. However, issues of equality and diversity are looked at in training and in discussions between carers and their supervising social workers.

The foster care agreement and the complaints information in the Statement of Purpose and children's guide lacked some details, such as the contact details of Ofsted. These matters were addressed during the inspection. There are good professional relationships between the agency, carers and placing authorities to ensure suitable placements that meet children's needs and keep them safe. There is good support for children from carers and the agency, and for carers from the agency. This helps to provide stable placements.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

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

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
27 (2011)	ensure that the foster care agreement covers the matters specified in Schedule 5 (Regulation 27(5)(b))	29/11/2013
18 (2011)	include the address (including email address), and telephone number of Ofsted in the complaints information. (Regulation 18(3)(a))	29/11/2013

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision, in particular an in depth assessment of the carers' understanding and knowledge of equality and diversity. (NMS 13.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children placed with the fostering agency make good progress and achieve good outcomes. Although the agency is relatively new and some children have had limited time in their placements, there is evidence of good progress in education. One social worker commented on a child who was exceeding their targets and 'doing very well' in their education. Children receive support from carers and agency staff to help get them into appropriate education and to do well; they have good levels of school attendance. For some children this means that they receive tutoring and help outside school, so that they can catch up and overcome any barriers to education. Children make informed choices about their future education with their careers in mind. Some children who start with a negative view of school are able to overcome this with support from their carers, and move to a position where they have clear educational goals.

Children are also able to pursue their interests, which may be related to their future and employment possibilities, or more recreational. They are provided with good opportunities to develop interests and to take part in activities such as regular clubs or special and inspirational school trips. This helps them to develop self-confidence and to learn socialisation skills that will help them form relationships in their future lives. It also allows them to enjoy normal childhood experiences. Children are exceptionally well supported by both carers and the agency in terms of health and emotional health. They are helped during difficult times. A social worker commented on the high level of support from carers and the agency at such times, both for children concerned directly and other children in the placement with them. They said that carers were 'amazing' and had gone 'above and beyond' to support the child.

Although the agency has been registered for less than one year, several carers have transferred into the agency with long-term placements. Consequently, some children have been in their current placements for significant periods of time and have formed good, secure attachments to their carers. In addition, children placed by the agency are also beginning to form these attachments. Both existing placements and some new placements have moved to 'staying put' arrangements. This allows children to stay in their placements beyond the age of 18 years, so that they can benefit from the stability and support during crucial times of their lives; for example, as they move into further education or work.

Children are able to express their views and have them taken seriously. This includes their views on contact and their placements. Consequently, they are able to be actively involved in decisions about their lives. They have access to advocates and when necessary, the agency will make representations to ensure this happens. As a result, children can receive independent support and advice to guide and support them.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has recruited and assessed three sets of new carers in addition to the

seven sets of carers who have transferred from other agencies. This core of experienced carers is used to help provide mentoring and informal support for the newer carers. All transferring carers have completed their relevant development standards and there are clear expectations that all new carers complete their standards within 12 months of approval. Training is provided for carers, including initial training. This focuses on helping carers to provide safe and good care for children. All carers have regular supervision, which provides support and focuses on the needs of the children in placement. Carers speak very highly of the support that they receive from the agency. This results in well-supported carers who are well trained and experienced to meet the needs of children.

The carers have professional and effective relationships with the agency. Both carers and the agency work effectively with children's social workers and commissioning officers. This means that suitable placements are identified; carers and children are matched well and carers are an effective part of the team around the child. Their in-depth knowledge of the children is used to inform planning, so that it is relevant and effective. There are some occasions when matching cannot meet all of a child's needs, but the placement is still in the best interests of the child; for example, in emergency placements, or when there is one over-riding area of need such as safety. In these cases, plans are put in place to support the placement in covering these areas. This may include the carer and child working with other carers or drawing on other resources to ensure that children's needs are met. Assessments of carers are undertaken by qualified social workers and are subject to in-depth review at the fostering panel. For the most part, the assessments are in depth and focus on the carers' potential to provide suitable care for fostered children. In some assessments, while equality and diversity is covered, it is not in such depth as other areas of the assessment. Equality and diversity is covered in training and in discussions between the supervising social worker and carers, so that approved carers are aware of the issues around caring for a child with particular needs relating to diversity. However, not covering this in depth at the assessment stage, limits the information available to the panel and decision maker.

Children in foster placements are welcomed into the carers' families. They form good relationships with the carers' own family and benefit from these relationships. The carers' own children are provided with support by the agency to help ensure stable, supportive placements. There are foster care agreements, which set out the expectations of the agency and the carers in providing good care for children. Mostly these are in line with requirements of Schedule 5 of The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, but a very few areas, were not. For example, the agreements do not specifically require carers to care for a fostered child as if they were a child of the family. However, in effect, carers are aware of this requirement and do provide such care. The foster care agreement was amended during the inspection.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Carers help children to take age-appropriate risks and develop an awareness of how

to behave in ways that protect themselves. This learning also means that children are less likely to miss out on opportunities, because concerns for their safety have not been addressed. One social worker commented on a child being able to take part in a special activity as 'a chance he will not get again'.

If children take part in risk-taking behaviours, such as going missing from care, there are discussions with them to help understand the reasons behind this, so that carers can effectively help them to reduce the behaviour. The risks themselves are also discussed so that children are informed of the potential consequences of their behaviour. This helps to reduce risk-taking behaviour for children.

There is information on complaints readily available for children in the children's guide and for foster carers and others in the Statement of Purpose. It is also available on the website. Placing social workers say that they know how to make a complaint or raise any concerns. They also say that they find the Registered Manager very responsive in dealing with any issues that they raise. Staff and carers are aware of whistleblowing procedures. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board has been consulted over the agency's safeguarding procedures. These procedures are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that carers and staff have access to effective guidance on protecting children. Safeguarding training also prepares carers to manage any disclosures of alleged abuse. While there have not been any disclosures or safeguarding issues since the agency registered, the processes that are in place help to ensure appropriate responses to safeguard children if any such issues arise. This is aided by the open culture within the agency.

There are robust processes in place to help ensure that children live in physically safe placements and are looked after by carers who do not pose a risk to them. The recruitment and assessment of carers includes checks and references, as well as in-depth discussions that are analysed by the worker who completes the assessment. There are health and safety risk assessments on carers' homes and additional checks on animals or pets. Unannounced visits take place to carers at least once a year. During these visits, supervising social workers look at safety issues and speak to children alone, so that they can make good use of the visit in ensuring children are looked after well and safely. Supervising social workers also speak to children regularly during their supervision visits to carers' homes. The fostering panel play an effective part in ensuring that all checks on carers and their homes are in place before carers are approved.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency is well managed by the Registered Manager, with oversight by the responsible individual. As the agency is still small, the Registered Manager has a very good knowledge of carers, children and any areas of concern or issues for individual children. This helps her to ensure that children's needs are met and that any developing issues are addressed. Systems are in the process of being developed to facilitate this high level of monitoring and awareness as the agency grows. A

business manager has been appointed to help ensure that all of the agency's work is of a high standard and electronic monitoring and recording systems are being tested prior to implementation.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose that is provided to social workers and foster carers. There are some details in the Statement of Purpose and children's guide that are inaccurate, such as the contact details for Ofsted in relation to the complaints procedure. These do not have a negative impact on children and the agency made the required amendments during the inspection. The children's guide is available in two different formats for children of different ages and understanding. Some children have been involved in developing the welcome pack that includes the children's guide. This provides information in a way that is easily accessible to children and also gives them easy access to details of relevant helplines and web sites.

There are good working relationships with placing social workers and commissioning officers. The Registered Manager is aware of the placing needs of these local authorities and targeted recruitment is underway to meet these needs. A commissioning officer described the agency as 'brilliant, very helpful, always contactable, even out of hours'. These relationships help to ensure that suitable placements are made and that there is on-going joint work to meet children's needs. The Registered Manager makes appropriate notifications to Ofsted of significant events as specified in the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011. This allows Ofsted, as the regulator, to be aware of significant issues within the agency.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards 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 national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.