

Little Acorns Fostering

Little Acorns Fostering Ltd

Rook Tree Barn, Withersfield Road, Great Wratting, HAVERHILL, Suffolk CB9 7HD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Little Acorns Fostering is a privately owned independent fostering agency operating from one office based outside Haverhill in Suffolk. The agency focuses on providing local placements to local children. The agency provides emergency, short-term, bridging, respite, long-term and parent and child placements.

Inspection dates: 7 to 11 August 2017

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 11 November 2013

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- The agency makes a great difference in children's lives.
- Meticulous matching of placements promotes the children's stability.
- Children benefit from nurturing homes where they thrive. They develop lifelong supportive and meaningful relationships with their foster carers.
- The children feel safe, loved and valued. Their carers and the agency have high aspirations for them, which helps them to succeed.
- The children are secure in the knowledge that their carers will support and advocate for them. The children develop positive relationships with the agency staff, who are easily accessible to them at all times.
- Due to the help and support they receive, the children individually make excellent progress. They grow in confidence, independence and maturity, which contributes to their increased self-esteem.
- The agency works extremely well in partnership with the children, parents and other agencies to promote positive outcomes for the children.
- Children's views are central to all aspects of care and support. The agency has been highly creative in its partnership with the children. As a result, levels of engagement between the children and the agency are exceptional.
- Carers and children who foster are extremely well supported. They feel respected and highly valued.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development :

- Foster carers do not always provide a landline or household mobile telephone for children's use.
- The children's guide is not easily accessible for young children or those with very low literacy levels.
- On occasion, some records do not accurately reflect changes in household arrangements.
- Foster carers do not have written personal development plans.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Ensure foster carers are given practical help to support appropriate contact, including financial help where needed. (National Minimum Standards 9.2) In particular, provide a household mobile telephone for children's use when carers do not have a household landline telephone.
- Ensure there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-keeping and take action when needed. (National Minimum Standards 26.2) In particular, ensure household safe care policies reflect the current arrangements in place. In addition, ensure when an exemption to the 'usual fostering limit' is agreed it is recorded as reviewed and approved by panel and/or the agency decision maker.
- Ensure, subject to the child's age and understanding, that the child receives the children's guide at the point of placement and that the foster carer explains the contents of the children's guide in a way that is accessible. (National Minimum Standards 16.3) In particular, ensure the children's guide is accessible to younger children and those with limited literacy.
- Ensure foster carers have a personal development plan which sets out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. (National Minimum Standards 20.5)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The children thrive in secure and nurturing environments, where they are welcomed by their peers. The children have the opportunity to grow up in stable environments with their brothers and sisters. Placements are well planned, which helps children to settle, and as a result placement breakdowns are rare. When they do occur, in most cases the children have moved within the agency to alternative carers of their choice. The vast majority of the children make excellent progress socially, emotionally, educationally and in their health and well-being. Young parents are supported to demonstrate improved parenting capacity, or when appropriate to make positive alternative parenting decisions for their child. The vast majority of transitions are planned, and are celebrated as positive life events for the child. When adoption is agreed as appropriate, it is well planned and sensitively managed. This gives the adoption the best possible chance of success.

The children receive excellent, highly individualised care and support which meets their particular needs. They are growing in confidence, independence and maturity, which contributes to their increased self-esteem. Social workers refer to extremely committed and competent carers who make a great difference in the children's lives. Their comments include:

- 'The therapeutic support from the carer has been excellent, and she has come on leaps and bounds. They are really helping her have a sense of identity and what her past means to her present.'
- 'An excellent placement, they have supported her in everything. They made it obvious that whatever she did they would sort it out. She really settled and integrated into the family. I just feel they care about her so much.'
- 'Absolutely life changing for 'X' [Name of child]. I couldn't have asked for more. 'X' got to the carers, and everything changed. 'X' is more confident, resilient, mature and happy.'

Foster carers speak warmly and proudly of their foster child's achievements. One said, 'We are so proud of her, she's come so far and gone through so much.' The children experience positive parenting and develop exceptionally strong bonds with their foster families. Some describe gaining a new extended family through the fostering experience. One child said, 'I don't feel like a foster child but one of a large family.' A young parent who chose the carer to be their birth partner said, 'It's nice to see someone is going out of their way for me. She is standing by me and being a loving mother figure for me.'

The children feel safe, wanted and nurtured. The children know that their carers will help them deal with any issues which are worrying them, such as future housing and support needs. When asked about living in a fostering household, the children say:

- 'It's a nice house, and they're really nice people.'

- 'They respect me, look after me and care for me.'
- 'I just like that it's normal relaxed fun and happy.'

The children receive helpful welcome packs which contain information about the carers and the agency. The manager is reviewing how to further develop the children's guides to make them more accessible and available in different formats. The engagement with the children is inspirational. For example, the children are encouraged to post electronic instant messages to staff or the manager of their thoughts, or to complete a diary of their day. The children receive an acorn emoji for every entry and redeem these in exchange for store vouchers of their choice. The manager reviews these entries and ensures that any concerns are swiftly addressed. The well-used system is open to all children. It shows the importance placed on the inclusivity of support to all of the children linked to the agency, irrespective of whether they foster or are fostered. It reinforces to all of the children the value that the agency places on hearing their opinions. Some of the entries give a beautiful insight into the fostering experience from the child's viewpoint.

The children receive good support to maintain optimum health, and can access therapeutic services when needed. The agency uses current research to underpin its therapeutic approach, such as the 'Play, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy' model of attachment. The agency provides good-quality guidance and regularly runs well-attended workshops and activities for children and carers regarding key issues facing the children. Recent workshops have included raising awareness sessions in child sexual exploitation, radicalisation, drugs and alcohol, and keeping safe online. Carers challenge racist or homophobic language, and they engage in positive discussion and activity, helping the children to have a wider view of the world.

The children reflect on how they have matured and become more skilled in managing their behaviour. This reflection helps them to develop positive relationships and engage more fruitfully in education. A significant number are exceeding expectations in all aspects of their lives, including their education. All of the children are in education. Carers support the children on a day-to-day level, such as helping them read after school and supporting World Book Day or themed dress-up days, as well as celebrating milestones such as the school prom. The carers help the older children to gain suitable further education or employment. The carers encourage children to have enrichment experiences which build memorable moments and increase their confidence and resilience. These include sports and drama clubs, army cadets and family holidays. The children say they have fun, and they respond positively to the encouraging attitude of their foster carers.

The carers help older children to prepare for independent living. They are also supported to take age-appropriate risks such as taking driving lessons and managing their healthcare appointments. They are able to remain in placement in staying put arrangements which help to ensure a smoother transition into adult life. Some continue to live with their carers after the staying put arrangements end, having become an integral member of the family. This stability and commitment from the carers continue to help the children succeed in their adult lives. For example, one young adult who remains with their previous carers was recently selected by Michel

and Albert Roux to cater at the local races.

The agency only approves a new carer if the agency has absolute confidence they fully understand the ethos of the agency. New carers are welcomed, prepared and assessed effectively. The involvement of some of the children in the 'choosing to foster' training reinforces the centrality of the child at the core of everything about the agency. Some carers do not have a landline or household mobile phone. In this case, the carers and supervising social workers have not given full consideration to how children can best maintain telephone contact with friends and family, balancing appropriate privacy and safeguards. Carers work positively in partnership with involved family members, promoting a real sense of stability and belonging. For example, one child spoke of their delight at their carers holding a big summer birthday barbeque attended by both their birth and their foster families. One family member commented, 'The carers and agency are fantastic.'

Without exception, all of the feedback from children about their carers is highly complimentary. When asked what could be better, one child's comment summed up the feedback from the children: 'Nothing, it's brilliant, 1000/10.'

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

Effective help and protection is at the core of all practice within the agency. The manager and staff know each of the children and their individual risks. Good-quality risk assessments guide carers in how to keep children safe, help them take age-appropriate risks and develop an understanding of how to protect themselves. For example, one child has developed a skill in welding. However, the household safe care policies do not reflect current household arrangements in two instances, including brothers and sisters of the same gender sharing bedrooms. Although not formally recorded, in both cases the arrangements were appropriate and had no negative effect on the children.

The children say they feel safe and they are well protected. One social worker said, 'Risk is really reducing. He knows the carers will back him a hundred per cent but will also talk to him about the risks he is placing himself at.' Agency staff routinely meet with the children in placement, and the organisation's confidential messaging service provides a facility for children to submit messages directly to the agency manager if they are unhappy. These arrangements provide a range of opportunities for any child to raise concerns should they feel the need. The children are helped to identify emotional abuse as well as physical abuse, which is helping them understand and aspire to safe and respectful relationships. For some, this helps them improve their personal safety, for both themselves and, in the case of parent and child placements, their child.

The agency uses current research to inform training and practice guidance. Consequently, staff and carers are aware of the wider safeguarding concerns, such as child exploitation and radicalisation. They understand that one of their most important responsibilities is to keep children safe. The agency runs workshops and provides guides for children and carers on issues such as being internet smart, using

social media applications, drug awareness and exploitation. Carers also support children to gain greater awareness by using safeguarding videos and specific television clips which facilitate opportunities for home-based discussion. The carers act swiftly and appropriately when they have any concerns regarding safeguarding, and they involve partner agencies when appropriate.

When children go missing, supervising social workers and foster carers understand and implement local protocols effectively. However, levels of offending and missing from care are low despite the high risks that some children present when first placed. One placing social said the carers 'have been really amazing. They've worked really hard and turn things around. It's a really big thing to have achieved this positive improvement as when she went out it was very hard for her to understand personal safety.' At the point of placement, this child had very high risks concerning child sexual exploitation and going missing, but as a result of the support provided these risks have been almost eradicated.

The manager has effective systems in place to monitor significant events and safeguarding issues. She is not hesitant about challenging partner agencies to promote effective responses which better protect the children. Any issues of a safeguarding nature are swiftly and appropriately managed. The agency investigates any standards of care complaints through independent investigation. This ensures a thorough investigation of any concerns with no potential for existing relationships with carers to be compromised.

There have been no incidents of physical restraint and the consistent boundaries applied contribute to a feeling of well-being and security for children. The carers establish very positive therapeutic relationships with the children. One child said, 'It's not like other placements. 'X' [the carer] is more understanding, she listens to me. I can talk to her about anything. She fights my corner, and it feels that she really does care.' The carers are successful in helping children to understand the reasons for their behaviour, and to reflect on the impact of their behaviour on themselves and others. One child said he does not get as angry anymore. The carers talk to him about issues, and he is starting to find other ways to express his emotions.

One child, reflecting on their progress, said, 'Prior to placement I was up to all sorts, drugs, missing from care, you name it. I've changed a hell of a lot since I've been with them [the carers]. I now have good friends and a good guy.'

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The appropriately qualified and experienced registered manager has been instrumental in the development of the fostering service. She provides enthusiastic, visible and effective leadership. She has a clear knowledge of the regulations. The agency has a good history of complying with regulations and standards. The manager is passionate about her role and vision for the service. She purposefully communicates and models her aspirations to deliver a high-quality and highly child-focused service. One carer said that the manager 'absolutely fights for the children'. The constant and central focus of the agency is the quality of care and support delivered to all of the children. The children recognise that they are personally

valued by the manager and agency staff. Equality and diversity are threaded through the service, ensuring that the individual needs of the children, carers and staff are exceptionally well met.

The agency delivers high-quality care and support to the children, which makes a real difference in their lives. The agency is fully meeting the aims and objectives set out in the statement of purpose. The children's guide is a useful document which outlines the general services available. However, the guide is not currently available in alternative formats that would make it easier for younger children or those with poor literacy skills to understand.

Carers understand their role and are well supported through effective, regular and focused supervision from the agency social workers. All carers complete the training and development standards within their first year of approval. There is no documented personal development plan for each carer. However, in practice, this has had no negative effect on the competence of the carers. The agency provides a variety of useful and relevant training which equips carers well to meet the needs of children. Hard to reach second carers receive tailored training which is delivered in their home. This enables them to have a robust awareness of areas such as safeguarding, first aid and preventing radicalisation. This means carers remain up to date with changes in statutory guidance and best practice.

The manager said, 'We recognise that good carers are gold dust.' This approach underpins the excellent support the carers and their children receive. The carers refer to an outstanding agency which provides exceptional support from the start. They feel respected and central to the professional decision-making process. Carers feel that agency staff know the whole fostering family extremely well and provide 'excellent' support' to the entire household, including the children who foster. Carers say:

- 'The support is fabulous, we've had police turning up at all hours, and the agency 100%, 24 seven, have always been there for us.'
- 'It's an excellent agency, 10 out of 10. There's nothing I would change, if I need them I know, they'll be there.'
- 'It's excellent. I feel extremely well supported and part of a fostering family. It always feels like an equal partnership.'
- 'It's a small personal family-orientated agency which makes you feel very at ease and comfortable.'

The agency provides a positive working environment for the staff, where their opinions are valued and they contribute to service development. A staff member said, 'I'm proud to be given a chance to work here,' and 'I love working here, this has been my favourite job.' The fostering staff are well qualified and knowledgeable, and this is recognised by carers and placing authorities. They have small caseloads, which allows them to offer high levels of support and provide a variety of workshops and activities for carers and children.

The agency is held in high regard by partner agencies, having developed very effective working relationships with local authorities, families and partner agencies. All partner professionals comment positively on the stability of placements and the

quality of care provided, both to individual children and across the agency as a whole. Their comments include:

- 'The carers have been really amazing. They've worked really hard, and there's been a complete turnaround.'
- 'I'm really proud of the progress 'X' [the child] is making.'
- 'I couldn't have asked for better care; even when things are really rocky they've always stood by her. The agency have done everything they possibly can to support her.'

The fostering staff ensure placing authorities undertake their statutory duties. They actively chase outstanding local authority documentation. The staff do not hesitate to act, passionately advocating on children's behalf when they believe the placing authority is not acting in the best interests of the child. One child said, 'It's nice to know there's someone who will fight my corner. I've never had that before.'

Monitoring systems in the agency are effective. The agency regularly seeks the views of carers and professionals. Individual outcomes for children are comprehensively monitored by the agency through internal case reviewing systems and supervising social worker visits, as well as the statutory review process.

The children are involved in the recruitment and training of carers and the development of policies and guides. Children's views concerning their carers and the agency are regularly sought through formal and informal means. As a result, the children feel respected, and the manager has a good sense of the strengths of the agency and is able to develop clear innovative plans for further development. However, although the correct statutory process was followed, one temporary exemption to the usual fostering limit was not returned to the panel, and there was no formal documented review of the arrangement by the manager. This potentially limits the ability to thoroughly review both risks and benefits of the fostering arrangement and strengths of the carers in a timely manner.

The manager has taken suitable action to address the recommendations made at the previous inspection, and as a result the quality of care and support has improved. The manager has a sincere desire to provide an exceptional service. She is committed to implementing a meticulous management approach, ensuring all fostering activity is consistent with regulations, standards and best practice. There are no breaches of regulation identified at this inspection. While a small number of recommendations have been set, these do not undermine the excellent support provided to the carers and the consistently very positive experiences of the children.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the

independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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: SC457688

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