

Little Acorns Fostering

Little Acorns Fostering Limited

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 for local children. The agency provides emergency, short-term, bridging, respite, long-term, and parent and child placements.

The agency has 13 fostering households and 23 children live with foster carers.

The manager registered with Ofsted in February 2013.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 14 to 18 June 2021

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 7 August 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children receive care from foster carers which helps them make good progress in all areas of their development. All children attend education and make good progress from their starting points. Foster carers advocate for children at education meetings and help to inform the children's education plans. As a result, children are provided with the right level of support to assist their learning.

Children's health needs are identified at the point of referral. This ensures that the foster carers have the knowledge and the confidence to meet children's health needs. Children are supported to lead healthy, active lifestyles. For two children, this has resulted in significant improvements to their physical health, which in turn has helped improve their self-esteem.

There are examples of children making excellent progress with their independence skills. Foster carers have worked with placing social workers to enable children to increase their independence in line with their age and ability. As a result, children enjoy the freedom of walking to school on their own and the experience of staying at home alone.

Children are helped to build and maintain relationships with their families. Foster carers provide practical and emotional support to help the children to enjoy time with their families. This includes inviting families to celebrations when possible. The agency provides parent and child placements. Foster carers receive training in how to safely manage these specialist placements. Foster carers work flexibly and adapt to changing plans. This means that parents placed alongside their children receive good-quality help and support.

The agency ensures careful planning from the point of matching a child to potential foster carers. Agency staff are tenacious in obtaining all the information that they need about children to help them find the right carers. As a result, many children enjoy stable, long-lasting relationships which provide them with a sense of belonging. Children talk about feeling part of a 'normal' family. One child's social worker said that the foster carers were 'an example of what a foster family should be'.

Some children remain with their foster carers after they reach 18 years. Some children maintain contact with the agency into adulthood and seek support which is provided by the manager. This is testament to the agency's long-term commitment to the children that it cares for.

The agency found creative ways of maintaining relationships with children during the lockdown restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This included the manager visiting children dressed as the Easter bunny and as one of Santa's elves.

The agency works with professionals and family networks when planning children's moves. This ensures that children are welcomed sensitively into their new homes. This also provides the children with positive endings when they move on. When children move out in unplanned ways, the agency provides a high level of support to foster carers to offer the children a positive ending.

The agency and foster carers have effective working relationships with placing social workers. This partnership working helps to progress children's plans and assists decision-making for children.

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

Children have individual safe-care plans which identify their risks and help foster carers implement safer caring practices. These help everyone in the household to remain safe.

Children's behaviour is managed well with guidance from supervising social workers and support from a proactive out-of-hours service. The agency does not currently have any children who go missing from their foster placements. When this has occurred in the past, the foster carers and the agency have responded quickly to ensure that children return home. When the agency has concerns about children being at risk of exploitation, agency staff share these concerns with the local authority and take part in relevant planning meetings for the child.

Supervising social workers undertake unannounced visits that have continued during the lockdown restrictions. When concerns are raised about a household, unannounced visits take place promptly. Additionally, face-to-face meetings with carers provide an increased safety measure.

Children are supported to take age-appropriate risks. As a result, children are able to make mistakes while they have the support around them to help them learn and move on from them.

Foster carers have formed good relationships with children's teachers. This helps address any concerns quickly and ensures that foster carers are aware of when children need additional emotional support.

Potential foster carers are observed with children as part of assessment of their suitability. This practice helps improve the quality of the assessment of an applicant's capacity to engage with and care for children.

The agency has a safeguarding policy that clearly outlines the procedure for escalating child protection concerns to the relevant professionals. However, on two occasions, despite initial response to safeguarding concerns, the registered manager has failed to report the concerns to the designated officer (DO) in a timely way. This could have placed the children at increased risk.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency is led by a dedicated and experienced manager. The manager has high expectations of the staff. She maintains a high level of scrutiny of the staff's practice and effective oversight of the agency.

Supervising social workers manage small caseloads. This means that foster carers receive a high level of support. Staff have the relevant experience and support the foster carers well. This guidance and support enhance the good-quality care provided to the children.

Foster carers are unanimously positive about the support they receive from the agency. This includes support for foster carers' birth children. Foster carers who spoke to the inspectors were equally positive about the manager and the ethos she has created at the agency. The manager steps in to provide direct support to fostering households when this is needed. This is well received by foster carers, who feel that the manager knows them and the children they care for well.

The agency has had some staff turnover which has resulted in the manager and senior practitioner taking on additional tasks. This has not impacted on the foster carers, who have felt that they have received consistent support. The agency is currently recruiting for a third social worker post.

The agency encourages children's involvement in decision-making. The agency will appropriately challenge local authorities to ensure that decision-making is in children's best interests. The manager acts on feedback from the children. Following feedback from the children, the respite-break policy has been changed to focus on the experience for the children.

Foster carers have accessed online training during the COVID-19 pandemic when face-to-face training was not possible. This has been supplemented with some directed learning during the foster carers' supervision meetings. All foster carers have an individual personal development plan. This helps ensure that foster carers have the knowledge and skills they need to meet the children's individual needs.

The manager makes the panel aware of allegations against foster carers and provides them with an investigation report. On one occasion, the panel was not presented with the approval criteria for the foster carer's review and did not formally consider ongoing suitability. The panel chair was unclear about their role in respect of reviewing the ongoing suitability and terms of approval of foster carers against whom there has been an allegation. Furthermore, the panel recommendations within the minutes fail to show that the panel has considered the suitability of ongoing approval following reviews. This means that the independent quality assurance function of the panel is compromised.

The manager has taken action to meet all the recommendations from the previous inspection.

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 procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for—</p> <p>the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider. Regulation 12 (3)(b))</p> <p>In particular, the agency must ensure that allegations against people who work with children or members of the fostering household are reported by the fostering service to the DO.</p>	30 June 2021
<p>The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation—</p> <p>a review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers is necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year—</p> <p>at the conclusion of the review, the fostering service provider must prepare a written report, setting out whether—</p> <p>the foster parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent’s household continues to be suitable; and</p> <p>the terms of the foster parent’s approval continue to be appropriate. (Regulation 28 (1) (2) (4)(a)(b))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that panel members have full and accurate information to enable them to make a decision about the ongoing suitability of foster carers following an allegation of abuse.</p>	30 July 2021

Recommendations

- The panel chair should ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for the panel's recommendation. In particular, panel minutes should record the panel's considerations and rationale for the reapproval of foster carers following an allegation. (National Minimum Standards 14.7)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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

Registered provider: Little Acorns Fostering Limited

Registered provider address: Mill House, The Green, Chedburgh, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP29 4UE

Responsible individual: Leonard Gelernter

Registered manager: Cheryl Jillions

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Inspectors

Paula Edwards, Social Care Inspector
Angela Weston, Social Care Inspector

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