

Oak Fostering Ltd

Oak Fostering Limited

3 Doolittle Yard, Ampthill, Bedfordshire MK45 2NW

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This bespoke independent fostering agency offers unique placement opportunities for children who are likely to benefit from a therapeutic approach to parenting. This agency is closely aligned with two children's residential homes.

At the time of this inspection, the agency has four approved fostering households and two children placed.

Inspection dates: 10 to 14 December 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	outstanding
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: N/A

Overall judgement at last inspection: N/A

Enforcement action since last inspection: N/A

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children gain a sense of belonging. They thrive and flourish.
- Children's self-confidence and self-esteem improve.
- Children's willingness to try new things improves.
- Children's confidence in developing independence skills improves.
- Children retain and build on other significant relationships.
- Children have the opportunity to stay put.
- Written information about the children expertly captures their progress.
- Written information about foster carers captures strengths and vulnerabilities well.
- The registered manager and agency decision-maker make child-centred decisions.
- The service is growing appropriately cautiously and incrementally.
- The panel chair is particularly experienced and knowledgeable and offers robust professional scrutiny.
- Carers benefit from a range of additional help that includes access to a therapist and outreach support.
- The registered manager and agency decision-maker are progressive in their thinking, ambitious and dedicated to ensuring that every child receives excellent services.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The agency should demonstrate that it has sent its child protection procedures to the local authority.
- The agency foster panel is not sufficiently balanced, for example, in gender and diversity.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that the central list of panel members is sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and the carers that the service caters for. (Fostering services: national minimum standards 14.8)
In particular, ensure that membership of the panel is sufficiently balanced in gender and diversity.
- The fostering service provider's child protection procedures are submitted for consideration and comment to the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) and to the designated officer for child protection. The procedures are consistent with the local policies and procedures that are agreed with the LSCB relevant to the geographical area where the foster carer lives. Any conflicts between locally agreed procedures and those of other placing authorities are discussed and resolved as far as possible. (Fostering services: national minimum standards 22.4)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

This is the agency's first inspection.

Registered in 2016, this unique and creative service has proceeded cautiously. This is because the provider has begun by finding forever homes for individual children who have previously lived in services within the wider organisation. This ambition, along with excellent leadership and meticulous pre-placement planning, ensures that children thrive and flourish.

Child-centred transitional planning ensures attention to detail and results in smooth moves for children. The current children are in a unique position because for some years leading up to placement they have benefited from positive relationships with their current foster carers. This arrangement sets the scene because the agency takes an appropriately in-depth approach to assessing the suitability of prospective carers before making any links with children.

Children benefit from the help and support of a therapist. This support encourages the children to process their emotions, which improves their emotional well-being. Carers read with children and help them to learn. Children's attendance at school continues to be excellent at 95%. Levels of engagement in education continue to improve. Children who were not expected to succeed sit exams and achieve positive grades. This helps to ensure that children reach their academic potential.

Children have a lot of fun. They are involved in out-of-school clubs and activities. The children maintain positive relationships with previous carers and they benefit from regular contact with their family and those who are significant to them. Children are welcomed by carers' extended families.

Children receive significant help, guidance and support to develop and hone their independence skills. They are encouraged to get the bus to school and they receive encouragement to maintain and develop friendships. Children can stay put after they leave care. This provides continued stability into adulthood.

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

Children are well looked after. They said that they receive excellent help.

Foster carers know the children well. This knowledge helps the foster carers to anticipate risk and take effective action. For example, when children make poor judgements when using social media and social networking they receive instant help. This protects children from harm and prevents everyday risks from escalating to significant incidents. The agency works exceptionally well with other agencies to ensure that additional support is available to work on specific issues should this be necessary.

There have been no complaints or allegations against carers. Nonetheless, the provider did not evidence that they have submitted their child protection procedures for consideration and comment to the local authority. This minor procedural shortfall has had no impact on children.

Well-written safer-care plans and regular foster carer supervision ensure that supervising social workers have a good overview of children's behavioural profiles and that carers receive good and consistent support.

Well-written initial assessments provide a good balance of detail about and analysis of each applicant's motivation and suitability to foster. The medical adviser provides helpful information to help assessing workers consider prospective carers' strengths and vulnerabilities. Because only a small number of panels have taken place, the foster panel is still establishing. The panel chair brings significant relevant experience and has a sound understanding of the fostering process and an ability to chair complex meetings. The panel benefits from the contribution of individuals who have experience in education and providing foster care. Overall, membership of the panel ensures a robust level of professional scrutiny and makes clear recommendations to the agency decision-maker. However, the membership of the panel is not gender balanced. It lacks diversity and does not include representation from people who have experienced foster care. This limits perspective. The agency is aware of this area for improvement and is making plans to redress the balance, which means that there is minimal impact on children.

The arrangements for foster carers' annual reviews are in development. The use of independent reviewing social workers provides an additional layer of safeguarding.

Foster carers do not use restrictive physical intervention. The agency provides good pre-approval and post-approval training for carers and their families. Carers complete the required training standards. The agency expects that all foster carers parent children sensitively, taking account of individual children's emotional well-being. In addition, the agency offers extra opportunities to help carers to understand behaviour, including the opportunity to spend time in a residential home. This helps foster carers to have a greater understanding of the emotional impact of being a child looked after.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The appropriately qualified registered manager is one of the directors of this agency. She nurtures the incremental growth of this service. To do this, she works competently with the agency decision-maker and other professionals. Together, they consistently prioritise the needs of children.

Carer support groups are beginning to take shape. Feedback from placing local authorities about the opportunities for the children is outstanding. A social worker said, 'My child was ecstatic when they were told that we had found them a foster home. This is one of the best moves I have ever been involved in over the years.'

Decisions to evolve this service, including the carer recruitment process, are

thoughtful, well considered and firmly rooted in a desire to provide high-quality services for every child.

Progressive and solution-focused thinking ensures that, once in placement, children and their carers continue to access a plethora of help, including outreach support services. This practice is worthy of further dissemination because it ensures that children who have complex emotional and behavioural needs have ongoing support from more than one trusted source. This improves placement stability.

The service has recruited one supervising social worker. Reflective supervision with the registered manager ensures an objective appraisal of carers' strengths and areas for ongoing development. This reduces the likelihood of complacency.

This agency strives to ensure that vulnerable children have happy childhoods and can grow up in a loving family environment. Highly individualised children's files expertly capture children's progress. Written work clearly shows that the staff in this service know and understand the behaviour and character of the children. Routine internal quality assurance processes ensure that all written work is of a high standard and readily available should children or foster carers wish to access information written about them now or in the future.

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: 1241664

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Registered provider address: Argent House, 5 Goldington Road, Bedford,
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Inspector

Rosie Davie: social care inspector



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