

Fostering Solutions – Oundle

Acorn Care & Education

Foster Solutions, Wharf House, Station Road, Oundle, Peterborough PE8 4DE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Fostering Solutions (Oundle) is part of Fostering Solutions, a privately owned, independent fostering agency with offices in England, Scotland and Wales. The supervising social workers, who represent the majority of the workforce, are home based. The agency provides a service to 73 children by supporting and monitoring 54 approved fostering households.

Inspection dates: 30 October to 3 November 2017

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 **requires improvement to be good**

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

Date of last inspection: N/A

Overall judgement at last inspection: This is the first inspection

Enforcement action since last inspection: None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The children have good relationships with their carers.
- The carers help the children to make good progress in all areas of their lives.
- The carers value the support that they receive from the agency.
- Placement matching is considered and completed in partnership with the foster carers, and any other children in placement.
- Skilled family support workers provide individualised support for foster carers and the children in placement.
- The agency staff are experienced, knowledgeable, and skilled. They receive reflective supervision to support them to do their jobs well.
- The children have their views listened to, and are actively involved in developing the service.
- The management responds swiftly and appropriately to allegations of concerns about carers. Internal investigations are in-depth.
- Many of the children have stable and long-lasting placements with their carers.
- The carers keep records and memorabilia which will help the children to understand their childhood in the future.
- Effective monitoring of the service leads to improvement.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The agency needs to appoint a manager.
- All carers need to complete the training, support and development standards within the required timescale.
- The panel minutes need to clearly record and identify any further checks or outstanding matters from assessments and reviews.
- Assessment reports need to include the details of the attempts that the assessors have made to locate former partners.

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
The registered provider must appoint an individual to manage the fostering agency. (Regulation 6(1))	15/12/2017

Recommendations

- Ensure 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. The reports are accurate, up to date and include evidence-based information that distinguishes between fact, opinion and third party information. (National Minimum Standards 13.7)
- Ensure the panel chair ensures written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. (National Minimum Standards 14.7)
- Ensure foster carers are able to evidence that the training, support and development standards have been attained within 12 months of approval. (National Minimum Standards 20.3)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

This service was registered in October 2016 as an additional registered office that was already providing a more localised service for foster carers, under a separate registration within the same organisation. Some carers have transferred from the other registration and some new carers have been recruited.

The children build good relationships with their carers because they feel valued, are treated with respect and dignity, and are part of the fostering family. A child reported, 'I like living here because everyone is kind and helpful, and they don't just think about themselves. They think about others.' Another child reported about their carers, 'They are nice and good at their job.' The carers listen, spend quality time with children, and keep them safe. Many of the children stay in long-term, stable placements that meet their individual needs well. Therefore, the children develop a sense of belonging, and their confidence and self-esteem improves.

The children make good progress because of the commitment of their carers and the well-organised, multi-disciplinary service and support that their carers receive. The children's achievements are celebrated through verbal praise, recognition as 'star of the month', and in the agency newsletter. These accomplishments include competing in gymnastic competitions, progressing in swimming lessons, and increasing communication skills. The children, in turn, recognise their own achievements and progress that they make which improves their self-esteem.

All the children placed with the agency are in education. This engagement is because the carers support the children in their education; provide a calm environment for children to complete homework; provide transport to school; arrange additional tuition where required and support extra curriculum activities. Some of the children complete GCSEs and achieve positive results. Others receive results that enable them to go to college on their preferred course. For some children, who, prior to living with their carer, may not have been engaging in education, they are now attending school, making friends and reaching their attainment level. As a result, all of the children make good progress in their educational attendance and achievement.

The carers and agency support the children to ensure that their health needs are met. The carers register the children with routine health services, such as the dentist, optician and doctors. Some foster carers work in close partnership with the children's families to ensure that the children attend specialist and specific healthcare appointments. Some of the carers have made substantial adjustments to their home to meet the children's individual needs. The agency provides and sources additional training for those carers looking after children who have additional and complex health needs. The agency has an independent clinical psychologist who supports the carers and the supervising social workers to meet the children's emotional needs more effectively. This service works in partnership with the carers to access services that the children require, develop strategies, and inform of additional external agencies that may benefit the child. Therefore, children's health

improves.

The carers encourage the children to be involved in both family and community based activities, such as family gatherings, holidays (including camping and going abroad), drumming lessons, choirs, gymnastics, faith-based activities, swimming, football, learning to ride bikes and trips to the beach. These activities help the children to feel part of the family, enjoy themselves and improve their social skills. In addition, the agency's family support workers organise activity days designed to enable groups of children, including birth children, to come together, have fun and have their views listened to. A recent well-attended event included an aspirations board, and looking at what children would like to achieve in the future. Other events include developing skills, such as training from the fire and rescue service, arts and crafts and quad biking. These provide the children with opportunities to access a wide range of activities and gain positive experiences, all of which broaden their horizons and enhance their interests and talents.

Before a child moves into the carer's home, the agency sends information to the child about their prospective carer. Where possible, the supervising social worker will be with the carer to welcome the child. This helps the social worker to explain their role and the expectations of both the child and carer. The agency provides an informative children's guide about what the child can expect from the agency, pocket money and additional information, such as how to make a complaint. An additional document details information about the supervising social worker and what their own personal employment journey has been. Through these processes, and with the help given by attentive carers, children feel welcomed into the carers' home.

The carers feel very well supported by the agency and their supervising social workers. An established out-of-hours duty system is effective, providing continued professional and efficient support that the carers receive during the day. The carers are motivated, passionate and flexible in their care of the children. The carers are able to give such high-quality care because they are respected as part of the team around the child. The agency supports the carers to have their views heard and this positively influences the children's experiences and progress. The carers describe the agency as:

- 'If I need any support, then the agency is fantastic. I always get the support that is needed.'
- 'The agency is on the ball and it knows the children in my family.'
- 'I have nothing but praise for our supervising social worker. She will always get back to me. Would not change a thing.'

The agency seeks the children's views through discussions with the supervising social worker and the children are supported to complete surveys. Children are encouraged to give their views as part of the annual foster care reviews. The agency has a booklet for younger children to use as a tool to help them to understand what is happening and why they are in foster care. All carers use placement books and memory boxes to help preserve important information, events and memories for the children.

The agency supports an active 'Youth council', which comprises a group of children assisted by participation workers. The youth council discusses how the service could improve and be more inspirational. For example, the group is developing an aspirational statement. There are other areas included, such as discussing what would make it easier for children to help to move and settle in with carers. This level of engagement enables the children to improve the service and the care that they and their peers receive.

The agency publishes a regular newsletter that is circulated to all carers and helps to keep them informed of events and information. The carers speak highly of their support groups. These are held monthly and alternate between venues in the region to support and encourage attendance. The agency has provided a range of events for these groups. These include guest speakers to highlight emerging themes in carers' practice.

The children receive help to maintain contact with their birth family. This support helps the children to maintain their identity and relationships with important people in their lives. Some carers have helped to supervise these sessions and feed back to their supervising social workers any concerns that they may have. This helps to plan for and amend any care plans or risk assessments designed to keep the children safe at these events.

The carers support and encourage the children to learn skills that they will need for their future, including practical skills such as washing their clothes, travelling on public transport, opening and maintaining bank accounts, budgeting and social skills. Some children are learning to drive. These skills mean that they develop confidence in these areas before any planned transitional move into the community.

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

The children say that they feel safe. They spoke confidently about the care provided to them by their carers. One child said, 'I feel very much part of this family.' Another commented, 'My carer is like a second mum.' All of the children spoken to describe their lead carer as the person that they would go to if they had a concern or worry. The children receive support to take risks appropriate to their age as well as their stage of development. One carer said, 'The child placed with us will ask for advice about going out into the community. Our supervising social worker helps us to discuss how well the child is managing this.'

The children know how to make a complaint. Issues are taken seriously and dealt with sensitively by the agency. The provider spends time talking through the concerns with the children and identifies how these issues can be resolved. This approach helps the children to learn to resolve problems positively and to know that their views matter. The carers know how to raise a concern to senior managers. The agency provides clear advice and guidance on the process for reporting any behaviours, from any adult, that carers become aware of which cause concern.

Supervising social workers' visits provide a forum for the carers to discuss behavioural strategies and any concerns that the carers may have. There is support from the clinical psychologist to provide expert views on situations that the carers may be experiencing. Those requiring specialist services are helped to receive these

services. The agency's family support workers can swiftly offer support to carers in crisis. Supervising social workers work in partnership with carers to ensure that this multi-agency approach improves the outcomes for the children.

Very few children go missing; however, when they do, swift and effective action is taken to provide additional support to the child and carer. As a result, children do not continue to go missing. The carers spoken to understood the processes that they would use to report a child missing and the importance of working in partnership with the police and other agencies to ensure that children are found and returned safely and quickly. Carers are provided with a detailed information sheet with facts about why children may run away, for example, what the pull factors might be for some children and what carers should do if a child does go missing. Training has been provided for carers to help them to understand the risks in the community and to increase their knowledge of issues relating to sexual exploitation and radicalisation.

The agency uses a matching process. There is a recorded analysis for why particular carers have been chosen to look after specific children. An effective system ensures that only those carers assessed as suitable to meet the individual child's needs are involved in discussions regarding potential placements. One carer reported, 'We talk together with the supporting social workers, who pass on everything. We do not feel pressure to take on a child.' Another carer reported that the agency, 'Rings us with referrals and you get a chance to think about it. The staff accept your judgement about placements.' This process ensures that the carers and their children feel listened to, their views matter and that the children are only placed with carers who can meet their individual needs. If children are placed in an emergency, the supervising social workers work hard to gather additional information when this is not available at the point of referral. The agency audits the response from placing authorities to record their attempts in order to obtain the most up-to-date information.

Risk assessments are well written. They help the carers to understand the potential issues and impact of any known, or potentially harmful, behaviours. This assists the carer to identify approaches that may help to minimise the issues for non-related children in the household, and to ensure that the safety of the carers and children is not compromised.

Supervising social workers complete the required annual unannounced visits to carer households. During these visits, children's bedrooms are inspected. Additional unannounced visits are undertaken by a different worker. The workers take time to get to know the children placed with their carers, timing their visits for when the children are at home. Consequently, they build a relationship with the children.

Discussions with staff show a strong approach to carer recruitment and retention. Background checks ensure that only appropriate adults become foster carers. Some assessments have not evidenced the efforts that have been made to locate former partners of prospective foster carers. This weakens the agency's ability to make a fully informed decision about the suitability of the carers at point of approval.

A panel meets regularly to make recommendations about approval. The adviser to panel is experienced and understands the issues for foster carers and the processes

that the agency needs to consider. Consequently, there is suitable, professional advice provided. The central list consists of a broad range of individuals who understand the role that foster carers provide for children. The panel minutes are generally good, although they could improve with regard to clarity about any matters which require a follow-up question from the panel, for example if health and safety checks had been completed, or when some further checks were requested. While there is minimal impact, there is potential that these matters could be overlooked.

Some children are part of a participation group. They have been asked to look, in particular, at the use of the internet and social media. This has led to the development of a poster with safety tips and advice. This poster, which has been designed by the children, has been given to all children in fostering households. It is also in the office and is available for other offices to use. This further encourages the children's sense of achievement.

All allegations are referred to the designated officer for the locality and shared with appropriate agencies. All carers under investigation can access support externally. Where internal investigations have been undertaken, these have been conducted by a person independent to the office, to ensure that an independent overview is given. Investigations are conducted to a high standard, and identify recommendations of reducing the risk of a recurrence. This in-depth system promotes the safety and welfare of the children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

Due to exceptional circumstances regarding the previous registered manager, the agency does not have a manager in position. The agency has appointed a manager, who is planned to start imminently. During this period where there has been no manager, the organisation has ensured that the staff, carers and children have received support from a highly experienced, qualified, and knowledgeable senior manager within the organisation. The staff report that the manager is accessible and very supportive. One staff member said, 'She is excellent. She provides clear and direct advice.' As a result, there has been minimal impact on the service, and the staff report that they feel very well supported in their job.

The management supports the supervising social worker to ensure that the carers treat the children with dignity and respect. The management encourages the carers to understand the individual care needs of each child. Information about these needs is contained in care plans which carers can access through the agency's database. The senior supervising social worker reviews these plans to ensure that they contain up-to-date facts and details. Consequently, the carers are alert to changes to care plans and can act accordingly to ensure that these needs are met. The children have access to information about being fostered through children's guides, which are available in two versions, depending on the children's age and reading ability.

The manager ensures that all of the staff receive monthly supervisions, which reflect on practice, children's experiences, and focus on personal development. The staff

receive training, such as safeguarding, 'caring for the traumatised child', internet awareness, female genital mutilation and child sexual exploitation. Monthly staff meetings are meaningful. Discussions focus on relevant research and reports to consider improvements to practice, champion roles in the team, and any significant concerns. This creates an environment where the staff feel valued, motivated and passionate about their role in the safety and welfare of children and young people. In addition, this practice provides a consistent and stable staff team for the carers. In turn, supervising social workers provide good-quality, reflective supervision for carers. The carers access an equally wide range of training. They spoke about being able to access specific training of interest, such as foetal alcohol syndrome. However, while the majority of the carers have completed the training, support and development standards, not all have achieved this within the required timescales. The agency is aware of this shortfall and is actively supporting the carers to complete this.

The agency has good, professional working relationships with key stakeholders. Feedback from placing authorities is positive. One placing social workers said, 'The supervising social worker is brilliant. She is always in communication with me.' Another said, I have no concerns. They are very efficient and support the foster carer well.' Where challenge is required, there is a clear structure in the agency regarding individual roles and responsibility. The good working relationships with placing authorities ensure that concerns are swiftly addressed, for example with regard to requests for paperwork. This system ensures that the carers have all the information that they require to meet the children's individual needs.

The agency has effective monitoring systems in place. This enables the management to monitor the children's progress, trends and patterns. The monitoring also identifies any areas for improvement. Management ensures that three-monthly reports are available for senior managers. This monitoring keeps the agency focused on aiming for high aspirations for the children that it cares for.

The senior management ensures that all significant events are referred to the appropriate and required agencies. This process enables external agencies, including Ofsted, to monitor the incidents and the agency's response to them.

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 the 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: 1244627

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