

Oak Fostering Limited

12 Dunstable Street, The Limes, Ampthill, Bedfordshire MK45 2GJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency registered in 2017 and is owned by a small private company. This agency is closely aligned with two children's residential homes. The agency provides emergency, respite, short-term and long-term placements with a focus on offering children permanency and the opportunity to experience foster care. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 11 approved fostering households and was providing care to 10 children.

The manager registered with Ofsted on 11 November 2022.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 9 to 13 January 2023

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 **outstanding**

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: 10 December 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children receive outstanding care that helps them to thrive. Foster carers are nurturing and committed to the children they care for. They see children as part of their family. This provides children with a sense of stability and belonging. As a result, children feel happy and settled with their fostering families.

The manager has established an experienced team of supervising social workers and therapists who offer a range of interventions designed to meet the specific needs of each child. Together, the members of the team offer a high level of expertise and support to foster carers to help them to provide therapeutic and attuned care.

Foster carers help children to make excellent progress in all areas of their development. Children's progress is effectively captured in detailed therapeutic care plans that are regularly reviewed by the team around the child. This approach helps to provide consistent and well-planned responses to children's all-round needs.

All children attend a school provision that is right for them. Foster carers make reading and homework tasks enjoyable. Children are making steady progress with their academic learning and managing in a classroom. When needed, the agency staff provide training to education professionals to help them to understand a child's behaviour. The agency helps children to celebrate their achievements, with tokens that the children exchange for rewards of their choice.

Foster carers ensure children attend the clubs and activities that they enjoy. This helps children learn new skills and gain a sense of achievement. Children regularly enjoy holidays with their foster families. These opportunities enrich children's lives.

Foster carers understand the importance of helping children maintain relationships with family and friends. They find ways to involve parents in important moments in children's lives. Children spend time with family and friends, including going on holiday together.

The agency ensures children's needs are met. If gaps in support are identified, the agency acts quickly to make sure children, and their foster carers, get the resources they need to help children reach their full potential. Children access direct therapy with an agency therapist when they need it. This includes planned therapy or individual sessions following difficult experiences.

The agency helps foster carers expand their support networks. This means that when foster carers need a break, children are cared for by adults they already know.

The manager oversees the matching of all children and foster carers. She is creative and careful when considering new referrals. The planning for children's moves is excellent. Children usually spend time with foster carers before moving in. When

children need to move quickly, the manager works effectively with the child's local authority to get important information. When children do not share the same ethnicity or culture as their foster carers, agency staff meet the carers to provide information and advice about how these needs can be met. This helps foster carers provide culturally sensitive care and experiences that help children feel understood and accepted.

The agency is successful in providing children living in residential care with a 'foster family experience'. This commendable scheme gives children the opportunity to experience a family home and allows professionals to prepare thoroughly for children's move to foster care. Two children have been permanently matched with foster carers because of this approach.

Foster carers keep written records about children's experiences. These provide a good overview of a child's experience. Records convey the warmth foster carers feel for the children they are caring for. However, children do not currently read their records. With the agreement of children's social workers, the agency helps children to explore their identity and understand their life stories. Foster carers have created well-written and professionally designed life-story books that children cherish.

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

There have been few safeguarding incidents. Foster carers are equipped with training and guidance that keeps children safe. Consequently, children benefit from living in safe, stable family environments that allow them to play, learn and flourish.

Therapist-led support groups and training allow foster carers to continuously build on their knowledge of therapeutic parenting. Foster carers are invested in understanding their child's behaviour. This means that children receive empathetic responses that help them to feel safe and contained.

Supervising social workers invest time in building trusting relationships with children. When needed, children are offered one-to-one time with another member of the agency staff. This means that children have trusted adults around them who enable them to share any worries. As a result, professionals have been able to engage in meaningful conversations with children about their feelings and this has reduced the risk of self-harming behaviour.

Foster carers advocate for children to have age-appropriate independence. This includes time without adult supervision in the community. Foster carers are vigilant to the risks in their local communities and plan with children how these risks can be reduced and managed. These conversations help children understand the concerns about their safety and provide them with alternative, safer options. This allows children to enjoy the same freedoms and experiences as other children of a similar age in a safe way.

The agency provides a strong response when children go missing from home. They take immediate action to support the foster carers to find and return children safely. The manager attends and leads meetings with the team around the child to carefully consider what the child is experiencing, to address all aspects of going missing from home.

Agency staff are sensitive to foster carers' feelings when incidents such as children going missing from home occur. Foster carers receive high levels of support to manage their own emotions around the incident. This includes time with their supervising social worker and a therapist to reflect on their responses.

Agency staff have excellent working relationships with the team around the child. This helps to bring professionals together quickly to help manage concerns about children's safety. The manager is confident in challenging local authorities when needed, for example, in relation to their responsibility to provide return home interviews.

The assessment of new foster carers is subject to appropriate scrutiny. A therapist enhances the process of assessment by meeting with new applicants to explore their motivation to foster. Fostering panel members have diverse and relevant expertise. They provide helpful challenge and feedback that helps continuous improvement of agency practice. The agency decision-maker is conscientious and seeks advice from external organisations as needed.

The agency has a clear and thorough process for managing concerns about foster carers. Foster carers return to fostering panel following any safeguarding or standard of care concerns. This safeguarding practice provides additional scrutiny of foster carers' ongoing suitability to provide the high quality of care the agency expects.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The manager, who is also the director of the company, has the required qualifications in social work and leadership, combined with significant experience of supporting children in care. She is an inspirational leader and tenacious advocate for children. She is a can-do individual who ensures that children get the help they need to succeed.

The manager knows the foster carers and children well. She has grown the agency slowly to ensure she maintains detailed oversight of all aspects of the service. She remains directly involved in the support given to foster carers and children. This includes attending incidents out of hours to support foster carers when needed.

The manager has embedded practices that deliver the aims stated in the agency's statement of purpose. Foster carers have access to a wide range of training and guidance that helps them to meet the individual needs of the children they are caring for. This includes bespoke learning to gain an in-depth understanding of the thoughts and feelings behind children's behaviour.

Supervising social workers have small caseloads, allowing them to provide a high level of support to foster carers. Foster carers are encouraged to identify the support they would find most helpful. The agency can arrange for them to access a range of interventions from its own resources. The agency provides support groups and training at different times of the day and in different formats to maximise foster carer attendance.

Feedback from children's social workers, schools and commissioners is wholly positive. Professionals recognise the progress children have made and the stability that foster carers offer. Foster carers have been described as 'exemplary' and 'providing care you would hope for any child'. The manager has established excellent relationships with commissioners, who all feel confident in her matching and decision-making.

The manager finds creative ways to help children to share their views. Feedback from children and professionals is used to inform a comprehensive review of the service.

The manager has a detailed understanding of the service's strengths and areas for development. She leads a culture of high expectations and continuous learning. Areas for improvement are addressed quickly. An up-to-date development plan is in place. Due to the manager's commitment and energy, all actions are progressing at pace.

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

Recommendation

- The registered provider should ensure that children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential information, to correct any errors and add personal statements. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.6)

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: 1241664

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Inspector

Paula Edwards, Social Care Inspector

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