

Acorn Fostering Services Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Trisha Gibbs
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Acorn Fostering Agency is an Independent Fostering Agency, registered in July 2004. The Agency premises are situated in the middle of Leicester. At the time of the inspection there were 27 carers on register providing 24 placements. The Agency has recruited carers to reflect Leicester's diverse population.

Summary

This was a full key inspection therefore all key Fostering Services National Minimum Standards were inspected. The Agency provides good support to children and young people to promote their health, positive identity and achievement in education. Carers are provided with good supervision, training and development opportunities. Good systems are in place for the management of the service. The Agency needs to evidence more clearly how risk and safe care in placements is managed. Some areas of record management could be improved. Questionnaires were received from six young people, six carers and three social workers. Verbal feedback was obtained from four social workers, two placements officers and several carers. Their comments about the quality of placements and support were positive and are reflected in the report.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

On the occasion of past inspections the Agency has been required to more clearly account in writing as to how children have been matched to placements. A matching section within the Agency referral form is now completed to indicate why the referred child has been placed with the specific identified carer. The Registered Manager was required at the last inspection visit to evidence, within a monitoring report, the activity of the agency and to present this to the Fostering Panel. The report was also to be made available for inspection. A detailed report has now been undertaken, presented to the Panel and looked at during inspection. At past inspections, concerns have been noted regarding the lack of a stable staff team to support an increasing group of carers. Two permanent experienced social workers have now been recruited and are providing good support to carers. The Agency has developed well since the last inspection and is receiving good feedback from placing authorities.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Carers are aware of the need for children in placement to enjoy a varied and healthy diet and regular physical exercise. Children said in questionnaires that they eat healthy food most of the time and participate in outdoor play and activities. The health needs of children are appropriately identified in their care plans and Looked After Children paperwork. Routine health checks and appointments are carried out and recorded. These are also discussed and monitored within carer supervision. Carers maintain an accident and injury log and if children require medication this is recorded on a medical administration sheet. Some examples were seen of children and young people receiving specialist health support. Consent for medical treatment was seen on file. Some children are provided with a 'Health Passport' by their placing authority. Although the Agency does not provide a separate record for health matters as such, carers capture health information in their monthly summaries under a separate heading. Some carers

identified the need for refresher course in First Aid, having not had any such training since the time of their approval.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Carers visited were aware of the need to provide children with a safe placement in a comfortable family environment. Carer accommodation was of a very good standard and carers were able to talk confidently about safe care and health and safety in the home. Although pre approval and post approval safe care training is provided to carers and very good safe care documents given out, many carers do not have a written safe care plan in place. One set of carers are looking after children who display concerning behaviours as a result of previous abuse. The Agency is providing the carers with good information and support to manage the behaviours. However, the children share a bedroom and there is no risk assessment or safe care plan in place to consider any risks that might need accounting for within this arrangement. Other carers are looking after young people who display very high risk behaviours. Although the carers can describe how they are managing the day to day risks, there is no written plan in place to consider and assess the level of risk, or to detail actions to respond to them. Carers receive good child protection training and said they valued this. They talked about the use of their professional development groups to further discuss child protection. The Agency gives good written consideration to matching children to placement at time of referral. Feedback from placing social workers about Agency matching was positive, although two social workers were concerned that they had not been consulted when a new placement had been made with carers where they already had children placed. This could have impacted on the stability of these placements. The inspector observed good matching in the placements visited and files randomly selected. The Agency has solid recruitment procedures in place. The files of two staff recently recruited staff were looked at and one contained evidence of full recruitment processes being carried out. There were no new application forms and references in that of the other member of staff (who had previously been recruited to work for the Agency in an independent capacity). The Registered Manager said that full recruitment procedures had been adhered to for this new post. The Registered Manager looked for the documents, but they could not be immediately located. The Fostering Panel is appropriately constituted and positively represents Leicester's diverse population. Panel members were observed to work well together in an open honest manner and between them they have considerable experience and knowledge about child care and fostering. The Panel worked through a complex application well and also received several annual reviews for discussion. They demonstrated a very good awareness of the need for children to be in placements where their religious and cultural needs would be appropriately met. A set of Fostering Panel minutes in respect of a recent application, reflected on how Panel members had expressed a number of concerns about the applicant in question. The concerns were well recorded, however, after much discussion and with the exception of one vote, the Panel finally recommended approval. The minutes did not clearly record on what basis the approval was ultimately being recommended by the Panel. Given their initial concerns about the applicant there should have been a clear evidence to endorse the Panel's final recommendation.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The Agency works very well to educate and support carers to promote and celebrate children's identity. The Fostering Panel encourages assessors to fully explore with applicants how they

will respond to children's racial, cultural and religious needs if they become approved to provide placements. A significant number of placements are being provided for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people with Asian foster carers. The Agency has responded positively to the need for these young people to have the opportunity to communicate and settle in their placements. A specialist support worker has been recruited to offer linguistic support in addition to cultural and religious advice to carers and young people. Carers, young people and placing social workers were very positive about this resource. Some carers providing such placements came to the Fostering Panel during the inspection for their annual review. They talked about how they spent time each evening with the young people doing some school work to help them with their English and Maths. Their good work was recognised and commended by Panel members. Some carers visited during the inspection were providing care for small children who had some disabilities and significant emotional needs. The carers were working closely with supervising and placing social workers to provide safe and consistent placements. They were also advocating to improve the children's educational needs. In some situations additional tutoring is made available by the Agency to support identified educational needs. The Agency also occasionally provides additional training and independent professional support to carers. One carer looking after a child with complex disabilities has been offered additional financial support to purchase regular specialist back help, others have been assisted to make minor adjustments to their homes. Carers are aware of the need for them to support children in their education and to record educational meetings and achievements in monthly summaries. The Agency can provide limited additional support for carers where children do not have a school placement, however, carers said that supervising and placing social workers usually work well together to resolve these situations.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Contact is well supported by carers who have a good understanding of the need for most children to have contact with their birth families. Carer training reflects the need for them to positively cooperate with contact arrangements. Carers seen during the inspection described how they supported contact plans and recorded the impact of contact in the children's daily logs. Carers looking after asylum seeking young people were very aware of the impact of the experiences they had encountered and their significant loss of family links. In some cases carers were supporting young people who had lost family members in traumatic circumstances. Records indicate that children are routinely consulted by supervising social workers on the occasion of carer visits and also by their placing social workers. Carers said that they encourage children to make choices on a day to day basis about activities and routines at home. Questionnaires completed by children said that carers and social workers talk to them regularly and that they could tell someone if they were unhappy. Children are routinely consulted and included in their Looked After Children reviews. Carers said that supervising social workers regularly talk to their own children. The Agency arranges Christmas and holiday activities when carers and children can get together on a social basis. A consultation form for children is available for them to complete at the time of carer annual reviews and this provides an opportunity to say what they think about their placements. However, these were not utilised for the annual reviews observed during the inspection. They would have provided important feedback for the review process.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Some good work being is being undertaken by carers with young people to encourage independence. Carers said that they encourage young people to cook, wash, iron and budget. One young person visited makes their bed and cleans their room and is hoping to find a weekend job. Carers confirmed that their payments are prompt and that the Agency is good at providing funding for additional placement needs on occasions. Good information is provided about financial matters and insurance. Carers valued a recent session where a visiting speaker from an organisation called Foster Talk provided information about the tax implications on their role as foster carers.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Agency's Statement Of Purpose has been updated and gives good details about the staff team and recruitment and assessment processes. It does not include details about the numbers of foster carers and children placed, nor a summary of complaints over the last year and the outcomes of these. The Children's Guide for older children is good but the guide for younger children is in need of illustration to make it more accessible and age-appropriate. All documents need to reflect the recent transfer of inspection responsibilities to Ofsted. There is an improvement in staffing levels. Two supervising senior practitioners (social workers) have been employed since the last inspection and both are well qualified and significantly experienced in the field of child care, fostering and training. The supervising social workers support a growing number of placements and present the Skills to Foster training, in addition to other development activity. A Recruitment and Training officer has recently been recruited to consolidate and streamline the recruitment and training function within the Agency and to relieve the social workers to focus on carer and placement support. Good systems are in place to recruit, assess and approve carers. Assessments are mostly carried out by properly recruited independent social workers. The fostering service is supported by competent and sufficient administrative backup. Supervising staff can access professional backup where necessary to respond to individual placement needs. Carers are very well informed and supported. Carer feedback about the agency, both verbal and written is extremely positive. One carer said 'They provide very useful and informative training. We always get help when we need it. The support they give us is without fault'. Carers said that they enjoy a high level of contact with their supervising social worker, including those carers who do not have placements. A very good training and development programme is in place and includes the full Skills to Foster programme. There is a clear expectation that carers will attend for core training. Professional development groups have also been set up to replace support groups. These now provide a support and development element. The Registered Manager is working on the implementation of a carer recruitment and development scheme; a performance based structure that will give recognition to carers as they progress through their fostering career. It is hoped that this initiative will encourage the recruitment and retention of carers. The Agency subscribes to Foster Talk an independent agency that provides full professional support, advice and counselling to foster carers. Some carers said that they had utilised this resource. Carers said that they do receive unannounced visits from supervising social workers. These do not appear to be formalised or evidenced as such. File records and annual reviews do not specifically indicate that unannounced visits are undertaken in a planned way. Very good feedback about placements was provided during the inspection by placing social workers. They commented that the Agency is 'responsive' and 'does what it says it will do'. One placements officer noted that because matching processes were good the placements were more stable. There were also other positive statements about carer competence and good quality placements. Carer efforts to promote children's identity were

particularly commended. Children and carer records on the cases tracked during the inspection were satisfactory and evidenced a good level of contact between the agency and carers. Most key documents relating to children were in place. However, those seen on a randomly selected foster carer file were out of date by several months and records of visits had not been transferred to the main file. Some documents in files were unsigned or not dated. Carers maintain daily logs and monthly progress summaries and recognised the need to do this. They were aware that records should be stored securely in their homes. Those seen were clear and appropriate. Placing social workers said that they do not routinely receive the monthly summaries completed by carers and that they would value written feedback about their placements. There are good systems in place for the overall management of the activity of the service.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
30	ensure that Fostering Panel minutes record reasons for recommending approval of applicants where a number of concerns have been identified about the application. Regulation 25 (2)	31 August 2007
15	ensure that records confirm that full recruitment processes have been carried out and are maintained within staff files. Schedule 1 Regulation 20	31 August 2007
1	include details of National Minimum Standard 1.4 in Statement of Purpose. Regulation 3	31 August 2007
24	Ensure that Agency case records on foster carers and placements are up to date. Regulation 30	31 August 2007

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- provide refresher First Aid training for carers. National Minimum Standard 12.5
- ensure that a written safe care plan is in place for each foster home and that this is reviewed at the time of each new placement. Where high risks are identified within placements a written placement risk assessment should be undertaken to identify what actions will be taken to minimise the risks. National Minimum Standard 9.3
- ensure that a written risk assessment is carried out when children in placement share bedrooms. National Minimum Standard 6.5
- ensure that prior to placing children with foster carers, consultation takes place with placing social workers who have children already in placement with that carer. National Minimum Standard 8.3

- review the Children's Guide for younger children and make this more age-appropriate and include illustration. National Minimum Standard 1.15
- formalise and record annual unannounced visits for confirmation at annual review. National Minimum Standard 22.6
- provide copies of monthly progress summaries about children in placement to their allocated placing social worker. National Minimum Standard 24.1

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.