

# Acorn Fostering Services Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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 33 carers on register providing 30 placements. The Agency has recruited carers to reflect Leicester's diverse population.

### **Summary**

This was a full inspection where all key standards were inspected. The agency recruits carers who provide very good placements to children who have a range of ethnic, religious and cultural needs. Placement stability is good. The fostering team has expanded to positively respond to an increase in carers. The fostering panel is strong and undertakes the panel function well. Foster carer support and training is good and the agency is well prepared to implement the Children's Workforce Development standards. Essential documents are not always being implemented at the time of children being placed. New placement specific safe-care policies and placement agreements are not always completed at time of placement to ensure placement needs are accounted for and children are safe. Students presenting assessments to panel are not being supported according to agency protocol when presenting applications to the panel. There is a lack of clarity about who the current agency decision maker is. Panel membership may not be in line with regulations.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Panel minutes contain improved information about the reasons for a positive recommendation where there have been concerns expressed within the panel meeting. Unannounced visits are now taking place and are being confirmed at the time of carer reviews. There is a checklist for supervising social workers to complete at time of the unannounced visit. The matching of child to placement is better accounted for in most instances at the time of referral. The staff team has increased and delegated roles and responsibilities are now better clarified.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is satisfactory.

Carers promote the health needs of children and young people and encourage healthy eating habits and regular physical exercise. Healthcare needs are appropriately identified in care plans and routine health appointments and checkups are taking place. These are confirmed and fully discussed in carer supervision sessions. Some carers are looking after children with additional healthcare needs. Carers maintain a log for accidents and injuries and complete a record when medication is administered. There is no separate health record or passport in place that can move with the child, for example when they attend for a respite break or leave placement. The carers do not currently receive copies of health care action plans created following statutory health care assessments undertaken by local authority health practitioners. These would provide additional information for carers. Carers said that this information is sometimes passed on by social workers and would be confirmed in children's LAC (Looked After Children) reviews. Some post-approval health related training is available to carers and health information is available

in the carer handbook. Additional specialist professional support can be accessed when a need is identified.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

New staff are appropriately recruited and statutory checks routinely undertaken. Carers generally have a good awareness of safeguarding and child protection issues and are provided with substantial training throughout their fostering experience. Their awareness is enhanced through discussions and presentations by visiting speakers at the regular carer's professional development group. Reference is routinely made to safe-care in supervision sessions. Comprehensive health and safety checklists are in place and are reviewed annually. The agency has recently introduced placement specific safe-care policies in addition to family safe-care policies. These are signed by carers and the children in placement where possible. In one recent placement however, where there were high risk concerns identified at time of referral, a placement safe-care policy had not been drawn up to assess and manage the risks until over two weeks later. This left carers and young person vulnerable at time of placement. In addition to this there were some instances where the initial LAC paperwork had not been provided to the agency when a child had been placed, resulting in no signed placement agreement between the local authority and agency carer. The agency has experienced difficulty in obtaining these essential documents. Carers receive good training, support and information on how to manage behaviours that challenge and about recognising and responding to situations where children might be bullied. The agency gives written consideration to matching children to placement at time of referral. For the most part these contain an appropriate level of detail although one seen was only very brief. There is now a dedicated senior worker who receives referrals and identifies appropriate placement matches. This will strengthen matching processes. Overall placement stability is very good and positively monitored by the agency. Feedback from commissioning officers is positive about the quality of carers and stability of placements provided by the agency. Good systems are in place to record and monitor allegations and complaints, however the two allegations investigated over the last year have not been reported to Ofsted. Arrangements for the fostering panel have been recently changed and some new panel members including a new vice chair have been appointed. Panel members share a very good range of knowledge and experience and continue to reflect Leicester's diverse community well. The panel was observed to work together well and to have a thorough and systematic approach to considering applications. Where appropriate information is not available they defer making a decision. All applications are carefully considered and rated by members against a competency checklist, prior to group discussion. It is expected that all temporary variations of approval are returned to Panel for information, however this had not happened in a case looked at during the inspection. Students on placement routinely undertake an assessment under supervision, however a student observed presenting an application to panel was not accompanied or supported by his practice supervisor. The panel expressed their concern about this oversight, having recently confirmed a protocol to ensure that this did not happen. There were also significant gaps in the assessment caused by the late arrival of an important reference which was not declared, however the panel dealt with this promptly and appropriately. A strong panel protocol and terms of reference document has been drawn up for the operation of the fostering panel. A recent panel training day was utilised to discuss and agree this document. With recent changes to panel membership there has been a lack of clarity about who now has the role of decision maker for the agency. There is currently no confirmation as to who is responsible for considering and signing off panel recommendations and no process for facilitating this. There is also some doubt as to whether

the foster carer representative on the panel is a foster carer for a fostering service provider or an adult placement carer.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

This agency provides very good and appropriate placements to children and young people who have ethnic, cultural and religious needs. A good representative mix of carers has been recruited and resources are made available to support placements where gaps have been identified. The agency continues to target recruitment drives to attract cares from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Unaccompanied young people seeking asylum have settled well and made positive progress in their placements. A linguistic support worker has been appointed to help bridge communication gaps between carers and children and this has had positive outcomes for carers and young people. Other interpreters are utilised on an ad-hoc basis. Carers work hard to support the young people and to integrate them into the community. Some have received specialist training to assist them with this task. Placements for children who have other different or specialist needs are well supported by the agency. Some carers have professional training in for example, teaching or nursing. Carers support children in their educational development well. They recognise the need to encourage completion of homework and regular school attendance. They assist young people who do not speak the language to learn English and to achieve in their school work. The education of children in placement is regularly discussed in carer supervision. Carers are provided with a good additional allowance during summer holidays to enable them to take children out and to enjoy events and activities. Another allowance is provided as a contribution to a summer holiday. A short camping holiday has been arranged for carers and children this summer and carers reported that they enjoyed an excellent Christmas party.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is satisfactory.

Contact arrangements are appropriately supported by the agency. Pre and post-approval training emphasises the importance of contact. Some good examples were seen of carers helping children to maintain contact with family members in situations that were not always straightforward. Carers of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people were supporting them through a range of different experiences with regard to their families. Some were able to talk to their family members while others were experiencing the loss of their family. Children's guides tell them how to complain to the agency but do not include Ofsted contact details. Children and young people are routinely spoken to at the time of carer supervision and annual review by supervising social workers. Carers said that they take into account children's wishes encourage them to make choices on a day-to-day basis. Most children are involved in their LAC reviews. The agency has not undertaken any formal consultation exercises or events to consult with children.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

There is a clear statement of aims and objectives provided in the recently reviewed statement of purpose which provides a good overview of the agency's work. Children's guides are

age-appropriate. The agency has significantly developed the staff team to match an increase in carers. There are enough carers to provide suitable placements. The delegated roles and responsibilities of workers is more clear. There are now dedicated officers to cover the recruitment, assessment and training of carers. Support to carers has been streamlined and supervising social workers cover geographical patches when supervising placements. Supervising social workers are appropriately qualified and experienced in the field of childcare and fostering. They carry manageable case loads and contribute to pre-approval training. After a long period of insufficient administrative cover, appropriate clerical support is now in place. Both supervising social workers and carers are ready to undertake the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) standards training. The agency has purchased an on-line training package to facilitate the training framework for this. A new foster carer's development plan has been drawn up that details very clearly how the achievement of training and development will be linked to an improved fostering allowance system. There is a stated commitment to continuous professional carer development. Carers spoken to were enthusiastic about undertaking the CWDC standards on-line since this enables them to undertake the training at their own convenience without the need to travel long distances. The agency has clear recruitment plans in place and continues to attract new carers. Assessments processes appear to be thorough. The agency have recruited a mix of carers who are able to provide good placements for children. They confirm that they are very well supported by the agency and can seek help at any time of the day or night. They also provide support to each other. The agency subscribes to foster talk, an independent organisation that provides full professional support, advice and counselling to carers. Carers receive support visits and phone calls plus three monthly formal supervision sessions, at which time both carer and placement needs are discussed. Good written information and a carer handbook is provided to carers at time of their approval. Unannounced visits are carried out and confirmed at annual review. A good checklist is now in place for completion at the unannounced visit. Records looked at were satisfactory. The agency is in the process of transferring to an electronic recording system and some documents and records are still maintained in hard copy files. This can make it difficult to locate essential documents. Some LAC forms were identified as missing during the inspection and have been referred to earlier in the report. Carers undertake daily records and monthly progress reports in respect of children in placement. Some of those looked at were good. Records are appropriately stored and secured. Some good systems are being developed to monitor the activity of the service and outcomes for children in placement, however given the considerable developments within the service some important basic information and safeguards could be overlooked.

## 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
9	respond appropriately to disclosures and allegations and report to Ofsted as required under Schedule 8. Regulation 43 (1)	30 June 2008

8	ensure that a Foster Placement Agreement is in place for all children placed with the agency as specified in Schedule 6. Regulation 34 (3)	31 July 2008
30	ensure that no member of the fostering panel shall take part in any decision made by a fostering provider (that is the agency decision maker) under paragraph (3) Regulation 28 (4)	30 June 2008
30	ensure that the Panel comprises of people with the skills and experience as set out in Regulation 24.	29 August 2008
11	inform children in the Children's Guide how to contact Ofsted. Regulation 3 (3) ©	31 July 2008

## Recommendations

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

- provide a written health record for each child placed that is updated during the placement and moves with the child. (NMS 12.4)
- ensure that safe caring guidelines are provided based on a written policy for each home at time of each placement. (NMS 9.3)
- ensure that students carrying out the assessment and approval of foster carers do so under the direct supervision of a qualified social worker who takes responsibility for the assessment and approval and who are accountable for their work. (NMS 15 .6 and 15.8)



## 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.**