

Acorn House (Fostering Services)

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Sarah Oldham
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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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 House Fostering Services Limited is a small fostering service established in 2008. The service recruits, assesses and supports carers to provide foster placements for various authorities within the north west of England. The service provides carers who can care for single placements, mother and baby, sibling groups and children with disabilities. Children can be placed in an emergency, short and long term and for respite.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection of Acorn House Fostering Services. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the agency's compliance with the fostering services national minimum standards and regulations. All the key standards were inspected under the five outcome areas of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic well-being. The effectiveness of the service's organisation was also inspected, as was its work to promote equality and diversity. This is a satisfactory service in most respects with good outcomes in health for children and young people.

In the main, the agency undertakes good assessments of potential carers. Detailed health and safety checks are undertaken and these are updated on an annual basis or sooner if there are any significant changes. However, not all annual reviews of carers are undertaken within timescales. Matching of children with carers is detailed although this has not always included full consideration being given to terms of approval of carers, resulting in the need for variations to be made at short notice.

The agency provides children with good support for their health care needs. It is good at helping them have contact with their families. As the agency is small, it knows the children placed well and manages the service in such a way so it focuses on identifying and meeting their needs. Training for carers is comprehensive and provides carers with the necessary skills to fulfil their role as foster carers. Placements are well monitored and managed and foster carers are well supported and supervised. Children are kept safe in their placements.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection, six recommendations were made. These were in relation to: ensuring that all children have health care plans; advice being made available for carers on the use of non-prescribed medication; ensuring that information provided to children and carers about complaints is detailed; developing the foster carer

handbook; and ensuring assessments of potential carers are robust. The agency has addressed four of these in full and partially addressed the remaining two. All children and young people have health care plans that detail all their health care needs, how these are to be met and who is responsible for this. Carers have received training on first aid and medication and are aware of the procedures to follow regarding non-prescribed medication. This ensures that health care needs of young people are promoted effectively.

The service has further developed the foster carer handbook and this contains relevant information for foster carers. The complaints procedure is contained within the Statement of Purpose and children's guide and children and young people say that they are aware of how to make a complaint if they are unhappy with the care and support that they receive. However, the children's guide is not in a suitable format for all children and young people, particularly for those children who find reading English difficult. Assessments for foster carers have been further developed to contain relevant information about the prospective carers, their skills and abilities. However, some assessments do not contain references from previous partners and lack information about the reason for this. The fostering panel has been informed of the reasons why and this has been discussed at panel meetings.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Each child and young person is supported well in relation to their health and developmental needs. All children and young people are registered with a doctor and other appropriate health care professionals including the dentist and optician. Carers maintain good records of health care appointments and know the arrangements regarding the delegation of responsibility to consent to routine and emergency medical treatment. The health care records are monitored on a regular basis by the supervising social worker. In addition, the agency has policies and procedures in place to ensure that the health care needs of the individual children and young people are promoted. Carers receive training in first aid and the promotion of health care for young people.

Young people say that they feel that their carers look after them well when they are feeling unwell. Carers say that they are given as much information as is possible at the time of the young person's placement. They are provided with the necessary looked after children documentation including details about authorisation for the medication and medical intervention.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has comprehensive recruitment and selection procedures in place to ensure that staff and carers recruited are suitable to work with and safeguard children and young people. Recruitment practices meet the national minimum

standards and Fostering Services Regulations 2002. Carers, prior to being approved, undergo a period of assessment. The assessment is carried out by a qualified social worker who has the necessary skills, knowledge and experience of undertaking comprehensive assessments.

The agency places children with foster carers who are matched with them in order to meet their needs. However, it was identified during the inspection that placements are not always made within foster carers' terms of approval and on occasions there has been a delay in obtaining the variation to current approval status. Guidance for approving and agreeing an exemption from the usual fostering limit is unclear. The agency has put in place new procedures to address this. Placement of sibling groups is considered when arranging placements; this includes whether they share bedrooms. However, matching documentation does not always clearly specify whether the arrangements for privacy and space for young people are appropriate, both in bedroom and communal areas. Procedures are in place for the annual review of carers. However, some annual reviews have not taken place within the required timescale of not more than a year after approval. This has been due to the carers' approval being varied. Although reports for variation of approval have been presented to the fostering panel, the overall review has not been held in accordance with the requirements of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

All foster carers have a safe care policy in place; these are specific for the individual child or young person placed. These are kept under review to ensure that they continue to be appropriate and are amended if there are any changes within the home. Health and safety checks are undertaken as part of the assessment process and are updated on an annual basis. The agency undertakes pet assessments and uses an independent company to undertake dog assessments for foster carers who have dogs. This is to ensure that the dogs are not a risk to children or young people who are placed and that carers are aware of the importance of following any recommendations made. Carers receive training on the promotion of safe care and health and safety as part of the core training programme.

The fostering service has a procedure for responding to any complaints, allegations or significant events. It has developed systems for monitoring any significant events, the action taken, its outcome and for notifying the relevant people.

The fostering panel is chaired by an independent chair; there is also an identified vice chair. Panel membership includes independent members with backgrounds in social care, education and health as well as an agency social worker and the manager within the role of panel advisor. Panel members are recruited in accordance with regulatory guidance. Panel procedures are in place and the panel are aware that the panel can only take place if it is quorate. The panel members have undertaken some training in the role and functions of the panel and have a knowledge and understanding of this area. Further training is planned in the coming year. Prospective carers are made aware of the role and function of the panel and are supported by their supervising social worker at the panel. Panel minutes are clear and detailed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has an equality and diversity policy in place and training is provided to carers as part of the core training programme. Training has also been provided to carers supporting children with complex needs. All carers are undertaking the Children's Workforce Development Council foster care training to further promote equality and diversity.

The agency advertises for foster carers from a range of backgrounds, cultures and ethnic origins and welcomes applicants from all groups. The agency, its carers and children reflect the predominantly white British population of the area but the agency keeps equality and diversity issues in mind. It works effectively to match children with carers appropriate to their needs and gives close consideration to children's specific needs. Children with disabilities and complex needs receive good support from the fostering service.

The agency and carers demonstrate a clear commitment to the educational needs of children and young people. Foster carers have close links with schools and work with them to ensure that children receive the support they need. The agency works with placing authorities to help children access the appropriate schools when they are placed and to ensure that school placements continue to be appropriate. Arrangements are clearly identified in foster placement agreements to ensure that attendance at school is promoted. Carers transport children to and from school where necessary and attend meetings and events to support their fostered children. Support and help with homework is provided by carers. However, the agency has not developed a system to demonstrate the educational attainment of the children and young people or to monitor numbers excluded from school.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency and its foster carers support and promote contact between children and their families wherever this is appropriate. Contact arrangements are identified in foster placement agreements and carers clearly understand the level and type of contact that has been deemed in children's best interests. Foster carers know their own roles in facilitating contact including providing transport, supervision and emotional support for children. Children know their contact arrangements and have their views taken into account when they are reviewed. Carers are aware of the impact on children and young people that contact may have and provide appropriate support to young people upon their return. Foster carers maintain records of the outcomes of contact so that this can be considered when plans for children are developed and monitored.

Foster carers listen to children and young people and take notice of their opinions regarding their day-to-day care. They advocate on children's behalf and support

them to express their views about their own plan of care. The agency supports consultation with young people and ensures that their views are gathered for their reviews and their foster carer reviews. However, the agency has had limited success in arranging children and young people's joint consultation on services received from the agency.

Information is provided to children and young people regarding what to do if they have a complaint. This is detailed within the children's guide. This guide is not in an accessible format for all young people. The agency is aware of this and is currently reviewing this guide to make it more child friendly.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has policies and procedures in place with regards to carers supporting young people to move on to independence. Currently there are no young people in placement preparing for independent living. However, carers support young people with budgeting, cooking and independence skills in accordance with their age and abilities.

The agency has a clear payment structure in place for the payment of the carers' allowance. The allowance and expenses paid to carers enable them to provide good outcomes for the young people. Carers say that allowances are received regularly as identified in their foster carer agreement and handbook.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The agency is inclusive in nature and seeks applicants to be foster carers from different backgrounds, ethnic origins and cultures. The ability of applicants to foster and work with children in a way that recognises and promotes equality and diversity is considered prior to their approval as carers. Equality and diversity issues are addressed during foster carers' preparation training and specific equality and diversity training. The agency takes children's specific needs into account when making placements.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose in place. This outlines the aims and objectives of the agency and is made available to prospective carers, staff, placing social workers and other interested parties. Information within this document meets the national minimum standards and Fostering Services Regulations 2002. There is a children's guide in place that provides information to children and young people. However, this is only in one format and does not take into account the different ages, abilities and understanding of all young people placed with the agency.

The agency is effectively managed and monitored. Regular file audits take place to ensure that recording is of good quality and the manager and the responsible

individual operate a system to monitor and act on any significant incidents. The agency has a budget that enables it to undertake its current level of work. There are currently three supervising social workers, the manager and a part-time administrator. Management and staffing arrangements are currently appropriate for the agency's size and rate of growth and the agency acknowledges that further growth and development of the service will necessitate additional staffing being sourced.

The fostering agency assesses the suitability of applicants who wish to be approved as foster carers and assesses their competence to foster as well as considering their background and experiences of childcare. Most assessments are detailed and evaluative. However, some references from former partners of prospective carers have not been pursued and there is a lack of detail about the reasons for this within the assessment.

Once approved, foster carers are provided with good support and thorough formal supervision. Carers are visited very frequently and there is regular contact between them and the agency on an ongoing basis. This ensures that support is always available to carers. Foster carers are also provided with a handbook that includes information to further promote their practice.

The agency provides its carers with good preparation training as part of their assessment to foster. This is delivered by foster carers who are also social workers. All foster carers are working to complete their training in line with the Children's Workforce Development Council national occupational standards. Carers have completed training in first aid, managing challenging behaviour, equality and diversity, safe care and child protection. There is an ongoing training and development programme in place to ensure that all carers have access to a range of training to develop their skills and to enable them to provide a high standard of care and support to children and young people.

The agency and its carers maintain good records about children and their care. Foster carers' recording is monitored and copies of records are retained at the agency. The service provides information about children for their reviews and maintains records of outcomes of reviews to guide the care provided to children.

Children's records are clearly structured and the agency monitors records to identify any information about children that is required but has not been provided by the placing authority. Where information is not provided the agency contacts the authority concerned to request this information. Carers confirm that they receive copies of relevant information on children and young people placed with them.

Foster carers' files are appropriately structured and ordered with all information easy to find. The manager undertakes file audits to ensure that recording is of a good standard and key case decisions are clearly recorded on files.

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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
8	ensure that the terms of approval are consistent with the proposed placement (Regulation 34 (1)(b))	28/10/2010
24	ensure that reviews for carers shall take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter wherever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. (Regulation 29 (2))	28/10/2010

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the foster home can comfortably accommodate all who live there (NMS 6.2)
- ensure that each child placed has bedroom accommodation arrangements to reflect their assessed need for privacy and space (NMS 6.4)
- ensure that the fostering service has information systems to demonstrate the educational attainment of the children and young people in their foster care service and to demonstrate the numbers excluded from school (NMS 13.6)
- ensure that all assessments of prospective carers are robust and cover all pertinent matters which are required to assess the suitability of carers (NMS 17.7)
- develop a children's guide which is suitable for younger children or those who find reading English difficult. (NMS 1.5)