

# Acorn Fostering Services Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	14/05/2008

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Acorn Fostering is a privately owned, independent fostering agency based in Leicester, which provides placements for young people from a range of local authorities in the surrounding area. The agency undertakes assessment, approval and supervision of foster carers who provide a wide range of placement types for children and young people. At the time of this inspection 56 fostering households are providing placements to 71 young people.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **adequate**.

Managers and social work staff have a strong child focus. They reflect a determination and dedication to providing foster carers with high quality supervision and support, to promote positive placements where young people feel they can make real progress. Foster carers value the support and training they receive and recognise its capacity to develop them as foster carers: 'We have had a variety of placements which have allowed us to develop into better carers with a wide range of experiences and knowledge. We have created some positive outcomes for the young people in our care with the support of all the staff at Acorn.' Placing authorities generally feel that the agency and its carers work well with them and that this helps young people to achieve well: 'Very proactive carers who always liaise re changes. The passing on of information is to a very high standard.'

There are, however, a significant number of areas where agency practice is not compliant with regulatory requirement or with national minimum standards. The agency is unable to appropriately demonstrate wholly effective monitoring because required monitoring reports are not being produced. Its capacity to produce statistical evidence to demonstrate things like educational attendance and achievement is poor. The agency has recognised, for itself, the need to improve its quality assurance practices, for example, in relation to foster carer assessments, but the practices remain insufficiently robust to identify emerging patterns and trends and to prompt timely and effective action to address shortfalls. The indications are

that many of the requirements and recommendations, detailed within this report, would have been identified by the agency had quality assurance monitoring been more robust.

Some policy documents, and some of the information provided to carers and young people, have not been updated to incorporate all required information and to reflect current legislation and Ofsted as the inspectorate. The agency is insufficiently robust in its dealings with placing authorities with regard to the provision of placement paperwork, the provision of education services for young people and arrangements for foster carers to have appropriate delegated authority for decision making. Records do not always clearly reflect the reasons for foster carer approvals. The agency does not adequately demonstrate that appropriate challenges are always made when foster carers fail to operate in accordance with its policies and procedures.

Many young people, however, are in very stable and lasting placements and the retention of comprehensive placement records demonstrates that they are achieving well in all outcome areas. Some young people speak really positively about the progress they have made. The records reflecting decision making around matching lack detail so that it is not clear, when there are gaps in matching, how gaps will be compensated for. Unannounced visits to foster homes are not always made in a timely manner.

Staff are all appropriately qualified, feel that they receive good support from management and say they have very good access to training opportunities to support their personal development. Annual appraisals are, however, not always being completed in a timely manner. Some staff recruitment files are lacking essential information. The level of checks routinely undertaken does provide some safeguards for young people but recruitment procedures are not always fully compliant with regulatory requirements and thus have the potential to expose young people to some element of risk.

## Areas for 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 (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
3 (2011)	ensure that guides for children and young people contain all required information in a format appropriate to their age and understanding (Regulation 3(3)(b) and (c))	30/09/2012
12 (2011)	update the safeguarding policy to reflect the requirement to notify Ofsted of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiry involving a child in placement. Ensure the	30/09/2012

	policy also clarifies arrangements for parents and children to obtain contact information for Ofsted and placing authorities (Regulation 12(3)(c) and (f))	
18 (2011)	update the complaints policy to incorporate details regarding how complaints against the registered person will be managed and to fully clarify who will investigate complaints at each stage of the process. Ensure that written records incorporate details of both investigation and outcome (Regulation 18(2)(c) and 18(4))	30/09/2012
20 (2011)	employ a person to work for the fostering service only if that person is fit to do so and full and satisfactory information is available as specified in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20)	14/08/2012
24 (2011)	ensure that fostering panel minutes reflect the reasons for the panel approval recommendations (Regulation 24(2))	30/09/2012
26 (2011)	ensure that foster carer assessment reports, presented to the fostering panel, always include all of the information and checks required under Schedule 3 (Regulation 26)(4(a))	14/08/2012
35 (2011)	demonstrate, by the completion of a written report, monitoring of the matters set out under Schedule 6. This must incorporate consultation with foster carers, children and their placing authorities. Provide Ofsted with a copy of any review conducted for this purpose and, on request, any local authority (Regulation 35)	30/09/2012
36 (2011)	make notifications to Ofsted in full accordance with Schedule 7. (Regulation 36(1))	14/08/2012

## Recommendations

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

- ensure that young people and foster carers are always informed about the progress of investigation and the outcome of complaints made by or about them (NMS 1.6)
- ensure that carers are aware of and alert to signs or symptoms indicating a child is at risk and respond in accordance with the agency procedures (NMS 4.3)
- ensure that foster carers are aware of, and do not exceed, the measures they can take to prevent a child leaving without permission under current legislation and Government guidance (NMS 5.3)
- ensure that foster carers are given the maximum appropriate flexibility to take decisions relating to young people in their care within the framework of the agreed placement plan and the law governing parental responsibility (NMS 7.3. The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 3.10)
- ensure the agency decision maker lists material taken into account, identifies any

additional information received and fully clarifies the reasons for approval decisions (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 5.40)

- pursue robustly local authority partners to fulfil their duty to promote the educational attendance and achievement of looked after children, specifically in relation to the provision of appropriate school placements (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 3.101)
- ensure all foster homes receive an annual unannounced visit (NMS 10.5)
- ensure that records always demonstrate matching considerations and that any gaps are identified and additional training, support or resource are identified and that foster carers are always provided with full information about the child (NMS 11.2, 15.1)
- support foster carers to produce written information (including, where appropriate, photographic information) to provide children and young people with information about the proposed foster home prior to arrival (NMS 11.3)
- retain records to demonstrate that all people working for the fostering service are interviewed as part of the selection process and that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references (NMS 19.1)
- update the foster carers' handbook to reflect current legislation and Ofsted as the inspection authority and ensure that the information provided on parent and child placements is accurate (NMS 21.10 and The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services Annex B)
- ensure that systems are in place to record and address any support needs of carers' own children (NMS 21.6)
- ensure that written records clearly distinguish between allegations, complaints and serious concerns about the service and that management monitoring ensures all these records are compliant with regulatory requirements (NMS 25.1, 25.3)
- ensure that written supervision records for senior staff are always signed by the supervisor and supervisee and that all staff routinely have their performance appraised annually. Appraisals should take account of the views of young people (NMS 24.5, 25.7)
- prepare a written report every three months, for presentation to the directors, to demonstrate appropriate monitoring of management and outcomes of the service and to reflect its financial state (NMS 25.7)
- institute an effective procedure for monitoring the quality and content of foster carer assessments to ensure that full and accurate information is available to the fostering panel and decision maker to facilitate an objective approval decision. (NMS 25.1, 13.7).

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

When the National Framework Contract for the purchase of placements by local authorities with independent agencies was agreed in 2008, this agency adopted a recording proforma from that package, called the Every Child Matters outcomes tracker, to supplement placement recording. The agency's supervising social workers complete this document, with the child's foster carers at the placement commencement meeting, and review its content prior to every looked after children review. The record is effective in demonstrating each young person's individual progress in terms of health, learning and social development. This continuous assessment of children and young people's progress helps carers to focus well on young people's very specific individual developmental needs. Its simplicity also makes it a good tool for enabling young people to see their own positive progress during placement. The agency is not, however, pulling this information together to enable it to produce an overview, for example, of young people's educational attendance or achievement or access to annual medicals, and so struggles to demonstrate the overall success rate of young people placed with its carers, in these areas.

Young people generally feel positive about their placements, commenting: 'When I first came into care, I didn't want to be there, but they saved my life'; and, 'It's the best thing that ever happened to me.' Some young people have made very good progress, from their starting points, and have grown in confidence as part of a stable and caring family. Foster carers are supporting some young people well to develop the skills to help them to move confidently into adulthood and independence, and there are good examples of carers retaining contact with young people who have moved on, to maintain support. The agency has provided a number of very positive, and culturally appropriate, placements to unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, which have supported them to maintain their cultural identity while also providing positive opportunities for learning the English language, accessing positive health care, acquiring sound education experiences, and moving positively into adulthood. These placements are well supported by good arrangements for carers and young people to access interpreter services. The agency holds an annual celebration event where young people's individual achievements are recognised and rewarded and they can see how proud their carers and agency staff are of them.

Acorn sends out annual questionnaires to get young people's views about their placement before their foster carer annual review. Foster carers and their supervising social workers routinely attend young people's looked after children reviews to support them in being confident to express their views. Acorn's supervising social workers reflect a very child-focused approach, have sound knowledge of all the young people placed with their carers and regularly speak to them when they visit carer households. This enables young people's views to influence the progress of their own placements. The agency recognises that it does not routinely consult with foster carers' own children, and that there are no real consultation opportunities enabling all young people to influence agency practice, and is working to develop these areas. One of the social workers has been given designated responsibility for developing consultation and is working to establish a young people's forum on the website and to establish a young people's consultation group.

Young people are generally happy about arrangements for family contact and about their opportunities to visit friends. However, foster carers are not always confident about what decisions they can make about day-to-day arrangements, and particularly about young people having overnight stays with friends or relatives, without consulting social workers. This has the potential to leave young people embarrassed and upset because they may experience delays and missed opportunities and feel different from their peers and from carers' own children.

The agency produces two guides for children and young people but these are not currently presented in a child-friendly, easily accessible format and there is no information about how to make a complaint, or about the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer, and the telephone number for the Ofsted Children's Rights Director is missing. Foster carers are not routinely preparing information about their households, including photographs, to share with children before arrival at the foster home. Shortfalls in these two documents mean that children and young people are not routinely receiving good information to prepare them for arriving at their foster placement.

## Quality of service

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

The agency has a wide ranging and varied group of foster carers in terms of age, ethnicity and professional status. Many carers have remained with this agency since it was first established, and there is a real dedication to recruiting carers who have the right motivation, and time available, to foster and can provide a nurturing environment for young people. Foster carers speak extremely positively about the support and direction they receive from their allocated supervising social worker and from the agency generally, and they feel very much part of a team promoting positive outcomes for young people, commenting: 'I have been a foster carer for 18 years and have worked with several independent fostering agencies. My experience with Acorn has been the most pleasant of these because Acorn has been very supportive, respectful and professional at all times'; 'All staff have a friendly and understanding attitude towards the role of a foster carer'; and 'We have been with Acorn for over a year now and the whole experience so far has been amazing. The staff are very prompt and efficient in what they do and the whole agency feels like a small family.'

Foster carer support groups, a newsletter and regular carer professional development meetings provide additional consultation, training and support opportunities. Foster carers are generally very positive about the level of training they receive. Foster carer training and development are robustly promoted by the agency through the support and encouragement of supervising social workers, to carers, in accessing and completing relevant training and through linking training and skill requirements to payment progression for carers. Placing social workers speak very positively about the capacity of Acorn's foster carers to meet the individual needs of young people, commenting: 'She has ensured that the child's needs have



been met with professionalism, empathy and kindness and has been a pleasure to work with'; 'They showed significant flexibility in meeting the child's needs'; and 'The embracing nature of the whole family was commendable.'

The agency's fostering panel is robust in exercising its responsibility to monitor the quality of foster carer assessments. The agency generally employs independent assessors to complete these and, to date, has been insufficiently robust and consistent in monitoring the quality of these reports. The panel has identified grammatical and spelling errors, issues with content, and concerns regarding incomplete checks at the point of presentation. The panel has, in fact, deferred a number of applications because of this. The chair feels that the quality of reports has improved, but some are still presented before all checks are complete. The agency is beginning to address this through delegating oversight of independent assessors' work to the supervising social worker with allocated responsibility for carer recruitment. She has now been given responsibility for ensuring that all assessments are fully complete and incorporate all the information the panel requires to inform the decision-making process.

The fostering panel members have a good range of relevant experience and expertise. The panel is fairly clear in its identification of potential areas of concern, and therefore requiring clarification, in applications received. The panel is less robust in identifying the strengths of applications received. The fostering panel minutes do not currently provide clear reasons for panel recommendations, in relation to either approvals or annual reviews, and the record completed by the agency decision maker does not fully clarify the information taken into account in making his final decision regarding carer approval status. One of the agency's directors is currently one of the designated panel vice chairs, and this has the potential to compromise the independence of the fostering panel, particularly when that person is required to operate as chair. The agency has undertaken to review this immediately.

The agency completes carer profiles, detailing the skills, knowledge and experience of its carers, and these are shared with placing authorities to support positive matching to the identified needs of prospective placements. Supervising social workers' sound knowledge of their carers' strengths also supports positive matching. Many young people are in stable, supportive, long-term appropriate placements but there have been placement disruptions where carers have declared themselves unable to manage young people's presenting behaviours. The current matching proforma does not incorporate a section to identify any potential gaps, additional training or resource needs when making a placement, and this does not assist the agency in preventing placement disruptions. Additionally, the agency is not always proactive enough with placing authority partners. The agency has begun to evidence its efforts to obtain placement paperwork, particularly an up-to-date care plan, in a timely manner, so that foster carers are provided with all the information they need to effectively meet young people's individual needs. The fact that many foster carers say placement paperwork is slow to materialise and often insufficient, and that a number of young people placed have no current care plan, indicates that efforts to obtain paperwork must be strengthened. Some young people are without an identified education placement, despite the agency and its carers exerting pressure

on the local authority.

The agency says that the number of referrals for parent and child placements is increasing. Some such placements have already been provided. The agency has produced written guidance for foster carers and parents. Although the guidance is fairly comprehensive, it does not reflect the potential differences in the nature of such placements in terms of the looked after status of parents and children in this type of placement, as clarified in The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services Annex B.

Foster carers receive regular, comprehensive, high quality supervision and regular support contact and visits.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **adequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Young people consulted during the inspection say that they feel safe and well cared for in their placements: 'I didn't feel safe at first, it was all a bit strange, but now I do.' Placing social workers feel that carers prioritise young people's safety: 'The carer organises contact with family and friends, having good awareness of her safety and well-being.' They also comment that they work cooperatively with them in managing behaviour safely: 'They have fully supported the strategies we have in place for helping him to manage his sexualised behaviour.' Carers and staff receive safeguarding training to equip them with the knowledge to manage any disclosures or child protection concerns confidently. The agency's safeguarding policy has not been updated to incorporate all the information required under the regulations. There has been one instance where carers have failed to report a historic, potential child protection disclosure in a timely manner, and, in delaying reporting this, have not acted in accordance with the agency's procedural guidance.

Agency supervising social workers conduct an annual health and safety assessment of all fostering households to ensure that the environment is safe for young people to live in. All foster carers prepare a comprehensive, household safe caring policy as part of their assessment, which is supplemented with robust, individualised additions each time a new child is placed. This is signed by the carer, the young person and the placing social worker.

The agency has clear policies and procedures should young people go missing from their placements, and has obtained, and shared with carers, missing from home protocols of the local authorities who place the young people. Foster carers fully understand their responsibilities if a young person goes missing. Where young people go missing from placement, this is generally at the beginning of placements when young people are unsettled and often wanting desperately to return to their family home. There has been an instance where carers have exceeded the measures permissible in preventing a young person leaving the house without permission. While it is clear that this action was prompted by safety concerns, again it does not accord with the agency's guidance on permissible forms of behaviour management,

which are very clear and wholly appropriate.

There are good examples of where the agency has made wholly appropriate contact with the Local Authority Designated Officer for safeguarding, when child protection concerns have arisen. There are also good examples of the agency pursuing the deregistration of carers where their practice has been appropriate. In one such instance, the agency was supported in its decision, and commended by the Independent Review Mechanism on 'the very well-documented evidence of poor practice'.

All social work staff working for the agency are appropriately qualified and are registered with the General Social Care Council. Social work staff demonstrate a very child-centred approach in their work with foster carers and a genuine focus on the safety and welfare of children in placement. This is clearly evidenced in carer supervision records. Outcome tracker records enable them to monitor closely how well foster carers promote positive outcomes for young people placed. Social workers are not always recording unsuccessful attempts to undertake unannounced visits. As a result records indicate that these visits are not always made within the required timescale.

There have been some shortfalls in the recruitment of some staff. Many of the social workers have commenced employment subsequent to social work training and the completion of student placements at the agency. The agency is not always able to demonstrate that an appropriate interview process has been followed, because records of the interview are not retained, or that the requirements for references have been fully complied with. A placement reference from the manager of this agency is not an independent reference. Where internal promotions have taken place, there is insufficient written demonstration of proper procedures being followed. The agency is diligent in ensuring that Criminal Records Bureau checks are in place before employment commences, and in regularly renewing these checks, but is less diligent in pursuing further checks where a person has lived outside the UK. Checks are always made to confirm the individual's right to work in the UK. Staff files do not evidence that telephone checks are routinely made with referees, nor do personnel records always contain a recent photograph. The level of checks undertaken does provide safeguards for young people but recruitment procedures are not compliant with regulatory requirements and thus have the potential to expose young people to some element of risk.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **adequate**.

Since the previous inspection the agency has appointed an operational manager who has designated responsibility for oversight of day-to-day practice of supervising social work staff and foster carers. The Registered Manager still retains oversight of service delivery and takes responsibility for service development and liaison with partner agencies. Although, in discussion, managers demonstrate a good overview of service

operation, and data sheets are compiled to demonstrate this, the lack of formal, and legally required reports makes it difficult for them to fully evidence robust quality assurance monitoring systems. Individual placement records, particularly the outcomes trackers, provide good information to demonstrate that young people generally make very positive progress in all areas during their placements. However, the lack of capacity to pull this information together makes it impossible for the agency to provide an overview of things like young people's take up of annual medicals or their educational attendance and achievement.

The agency has grown considerably since the last inspection, and there are plans for further future expansion, potentially into other geographical areas. The office premises have been vastly improved to provide a good range of training and meeting rooms. A new database recording system has been adopted this year. The database currently has positive and negative elements. While its capacity appears good, some staff and carers are struggling with access, and training is being delivered to address this. Currently lack of familiarity is prompting some inconsistencies in where information is being recorded, making it sometimes difficult to access quickly.

This year the agency has created two new posts. One social worker now operates full time as the designated foster carer recruitment officer. This is a positive step designed to focus carer recruitment to match areas of greatest need, in line with placement referrals, and also to support the development of greater consistency in the completion of foster carer assessments. One social worker has half-time responsibility for policy and development, with a specific remit to develop strategies for better consultation with young people. The creation of these posts has increased the caseloads of other staff, but these remain manageable, and the manager confirms that, as further carer recruitment is undertaken, more staff will be recruited. Staff retention is good and the agency promotes staff development well.

Requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection have been largely addressed, although there remains an issue with the agency's management of allegations and complaints. The agency's complaints procedure does not incorporate all the information required. Written records relating to allegations, serious concerns and complaints are insufficiently detailed. In two cases, incidents have been wrongly categorised, meaning that, although issues raised have been fully addressed, investigations have not always followed the correct procedure. Where young people have made complaints about their care to their placing authority, who in turn have made a complaint to the agency, there are occasions where professionals have not worked together well enough to ensure that the young person is promptly notified of the outcome of their complaint.

A number of agency policy, procedural and guidance documents do not incorporate reference to current legislation, do not detail Ofsted as the inspectorate and do not contain all the information required by the regulations and national minimum standards. Notifications to Ofsted are not always being made appropriately. There are many instances where unnecessary notifications are made when young people are missing from placement and one occasion when Ofsted has not been notified of an allegation against carers.

Staff speak extremely positively of the management support they receive, saying that both the Registered Manager and the operations manager have an open-door policy and are always available for guidance and advice. All staff receive regular supervision, but some records are not signed.

## **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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for independent fostering agencies.