

Acorn House (Fostering Services)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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 and North East of England and the Midlands. The service provides carers who can care for single placements, mothers and their babies, sibling groups and children with disabilities. Children can be placed in a placement in an emergency and for care under short term, long term or respite arrangements. At the time of the inspection service had 24 carers providing care to 23 children and 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 **good**.

Children and young people who are fostered achieve good outcomes. They are healthy and benefit from good levels of support to optimise their health care needs. Education is promoted and where young people are not in full-time education foster carers are aware of their role in further supporting them to access educational facilities.

Foster carers say that they are supported well to promote the stability of placements. Where there have been unplanned endings, the agency has attempted to support and sustain placements but acted in the best interest of the young person. Placement breakdowns are clearly explored and measures put in place to reduce the risk of this happening again. Children and young people spoken to or those who responded to surveys said that they feel safe within their placements and have good relationships with their carers which they value highly.

Managers and staff have a good understanding of the aims and objectives of the service. They are proactive in supporting the welfare of the young people. Where there are areas of concern identified, these are acted upon swiftly to ensure continuity of care is provided.

Foster carers receive good levels of support from their supervising social workers. They say that they are accessible and that the out of hours service is excellent. Supervision is held on a regular basis and this enables foster carers to discuss their practice and any issues that they may have. Supervising social workers review and read all carers' diary logs and this further provides a comprehensive understanding of the young people and their needs. Regular training is available with a range of core and additional training available. This is provided through training groups, support groups and online training. Foster carers have undertaken the Children's Workforce Development Standards (CWDC) in a timely manner and all new carers are registered to undertake these as soon as they have a child placed. Training is reviewed as part of the overall foster carer annual review.

The agency has a clear development plan in place including a recruitment strategy. This ensures that the agency recruits carers to meet the specific needs of young people. The matching criterion has been updated and this ensures that effective matching is undertaken to minimise the risk of unplanned placement endings. However, some previous decisions regarding matching have not been as robust and this has resulted in a small number of placement breakdowns, especially in relation to sibling group placements.

As a result of this inspection, two recommendations have been made. These are in relation to ensuring that foster homes provide adequate space for all who are placed there and that there is a clear record of the agreement with placing authorities where bedroom sharing is agreed for children over the age of three.

Areas for improvement

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 10.1)
- ensure that in the foster home, each child over the age of three should have their own bedroom. If this is not possible, the sharing of a bedroom is agreed by each child's responsible authority and each child has their own area within the bedroom. The decision making process and outcome of the assessment are recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed. (NMS 10.6)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children and young people say that they have good relationships with their carers. They say that they feel safe, well cared for and are actively encouraged to achieve good outcomes. One young person said 'I really love living here and have settled in

really well. My carers encourage and support me with my education as well as being able to take part in lots of activities; I feel part of the family.'

Children and young people are encouraged and supported to discuss their wishes and views and contribute to their foster carer's annual review. The agency has arranged some activity days to enable young people to meet as a group and to provide an opportunity to discuss their views of the agency and the support they receive. The fostering agency has also provided the opportunity for children and young people to meet on a regular basis so they are influential in how the agency runs and how it develops. However, the children and young people have not wished to take part in this on a formal basis. The development of the agency website has included a direct area for young people to access to raise any concerns or areas for discussion directly with the agency. These measures ensure that the opportunity to be involved in the on-going development of the agency is available to young people.

The agency has had some unplanned endings to placements and has responded to these by further developing its matching format to provide greater detail of how the match was considered and agreed. This has reduced the number of unplanned endings to placements therefore providing greater stability for children and young people. Supervising social workers have a good understanding of the strengths and experience of the foster carers and this further supports the matching process. Recruitment strategies include finding carers to provide a range of placements, including placements for siblings, older children and solo placements. The agency therefore can provide a range of placements to meet the needs of children and young people referred to the service.

Children and young people are supported with their health care needs. Foster carers have a good understanding of health care promotion and ensure that all young people are registered with health care professionals including doctors, dentists and opticians. They maintain records of health care appointments and include these in the weekly and monthly reports. This enables supervising social workers to be aware of any changes in health care. The agency is currently developing health care passports for all young people to enable them to have a record of their health care needs when they move on.

Quality of service

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

The fostering agency has a clear recruitment strategy in place that demonstrates the agency's commitment to recruit carers from a diverse range of backgrounds to meet the needs of children and young people. This includes carers who have the skills and abilities to provide care for children and young people with complex needs, sibling groups, mother and baby placements and single placements. Some foster carers who have joined the agency have a long history in providing foster care and the agency is also recruiting foster carers who have not fostered previously but who demonstrate a good understanding of the role. The agency has carers in the North East, North West and the Midlands. To ensure that carers are effectively supported within their role,

supervising social workers are present in these areas to provide on-going supervision, support groups and training.

Information and preparation training for prospective foster carers is held within the agency's North West office and provides a clear and detailed overview of the fostering task. Skills to Foster training is undertaken by supervising social workers, independent social workers and with the involvement of some of the foster carers. This enables potential foster carers to have a holistic overview of fostering.

Assessments undertaken are presented to the fostering panel; the panel is constituted from a central list of panel members for the agency. The independent panel chair is a qualified social worker with experience and knowledge of fostering. The members have the necessary skills, experience and understanding of the fostering task and provide independent scrutiny and make recommendations to the agency's decision maker. When information is missing from assessments appropriate deferrals are made. Panel minutes are detailed and provide a clear overview of discussions held and the recommendations made. All panel members have access to the fostering agency's training and development programme as well as specific panel training. They receive annual appraisals and these measures ensure that their skills, knowledge and performance as panel members are effectively monitored and supported.

Training for carers is now planned on an annual basis and carers receive these dates at the commencement of the year. The training is provided in a variety of formats including group training, on-line training and through individual supervision. Carers say that having the list of training dates in advance enables them to plan the training that they feel will be beneficial to them as well as planning to attend mandatory training. Training provided includes first aid, safeguarding children and young people and the policies and procedures, including those relating to missing from home and anti-bullying. Training is monitored and reported on at each foster's carer annual review and links in with the personal development plans for foster carers.

Supervision provides carers with effective support. Sessions are recorded and carers receive a copy of their supervision. In addition, supervising social workers undertake unannounced visits on a regular basis and a record of the outcome of these visits is maintained. The agency has recently updated the format for these visits to ensure that there is a comprehensive record demonstrating the level of support provided to children and young people and whether they were seen at the time of the visit. This enables the agency to monitor the placement and the welfare of the young people. All foster carers complete detailed logs and email these through to the agency on a secure site. Supervising social workers view the logs and this provides further oversight and areas for discussion with the foster carers during supervision. The logs provide an overview of all areas of care including young people's health and education outcomes.

Upon the placement of a young person, the agency provides as much information to carers as possible. However, there is sometimes a delay in the paperwork being received from placing authorities. When this is the case, the agency takes

appropriate steps to obtain this. At placement meetings, the agency completes delegated authority documentation with placing social workers. This provides clear information to enable foster carers to be aware of the level of agreement they can make in relation to day-to-day decisions and means they can do this in a timely manner.

Placing social workers who responded to surveys or who spoke with the inspector during the inspection stated that care and support that young people in placement received was of a good standard. One social worker said, 'I think that the placement of the young person is very positive.'

Safeguarding children and young people

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

All foster carers receive comprehensive safeguarding and child protection training; this enables them to have an understanding of the importance of promoting the safety and well-being of young people. Training is updated on a regular basis to ensure carers' knowledge and practice remains current. The carers have access to safeguarding procedures for the agency in the foster carers' handbook and through access to all policies and procedures electronically. These have all been updated to reflect current information and the electronic site provides further links to a range of additional information and good practice examples. Health and safety risk assessments of carers' households are reviewed and updated every year. These measures ensure that foster carers have a good understanding of how to promote the safety and well-being of children and young people. All the children and young people who contributed to this inspection reported that their safety is actively promoted by their carers and that they feel safe.

Foster carers follow procedures in the event of a young person being missing from home and records are maintained. The missing from home policy and procedure also provide direct links to the placing authority's procedures. Where there has been an increase in a young person going missing from home, the agency is proactive in working with other professional bodies to reduce this risk.

All fostering households have a generic safe care policy in place and specific safe care policies for individual young people. These policies are reviewed on a regular basis and updated as required. Individual risk assessments are in place for young people and provide a good level of information to ensure that risks are effectively identified and managed.

Foster carers are trained in safe care practice All foster carers have undertaken training in managing challenging behaviour, including the use of physical restraint in exceptional circumstances to keep young people and carers safe. This training is approved and accredited with the British Institute for Learning Disabilities. Reports on any incident of physical intervention are recorded and monitored by the fostering service.

Unannounced visits to foster homes are undertaken in addition to the supervision visits. These enable supervising social workers to have the opportunity to observe the fostering family and young people in placement as well as provide support to foster carers. However, the quality of recording on unannounced visits is variable. To address this, the agency has recently updated the unannounced visit format to ensure clear and comprehensive information is consistently recorded.

Some placements made by placing authority social workers have been within households where sibling groups share bedrooms. This is agreed verbally by placing authority social workers. However, the agency does not review this arrangement on a regular basis to ensure that sharing bedrooms continues to be appropriate to meet the growing and developmental needs of young people.

There are clear procedures in place in the event of any allegation being made against a foster carer. Allegations are handled sensitively and carers are offered appropriate support through external links. These measures help to ensure that the welfare of children and young people remains paramount at all times.

The recruitment and selection of staff and carers working for the agency is robust which ensures that they are safe and suitable individuals to work with and care for children and young people.

Leadership and management

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

Since the last inspection, the fostering service has had a change of management. For a period of eighteen months there was no Registered Manager in post although a manager had been recruited. This has now been addressed and the manager has been registered with Ofsted. The manager holds appropriate qualifications and has a background of working within and managing fostering services. This has enabled him to have a good understanding of the strengths and on-going areas for further development within the service. All policies and procedures have been updated and both staff and carers have undertaken training with regards to these. This ensures that all people working for the agency have a good understanding of the regulations and the requirements of a fostering service.

Further development of the fostering agency website has meant there is an area for carers to access to find out information about the service and the regulations. There are also links to additional websites that aim to promote the welfare and care of children and young people. The children and young people also have access to a designated area of the website to enable them to contact the service, share their views and provide information about their carers and for their own statutory reviews. Consultation events have also taken place, although not all young people wish to be involved with these.

The Statement of Purpose is clear and accessible. It is reviewed on an annual basis and details the aims and objectives of the service. This document is made available

to all foster carers, placing social workers and other interested parties. Information about the complaints procedure is provided in the Statement of Purpose and within the children's guides. These guides are in age appropriate formats and also on a comprehensive CD format. The agency also has the facility to ensure that the children's guide can be produced in other languages and in a pictorial format. This ensures that all young people have a clear understanding of the service, what to expect and about how to raise any concerns or complaints. There have been very few complaints made and those that have been made have been responded to within a short time frame and managed effectively.

Consultation with carers has enabled the development of the Foster Care Charter and has promoted positive links for carers. The foster carers' handbook is available in either hard copy or on the carers' internet site and provides a range of information for carers. Foster carers' reviews are held within agreed timescales and are undertaken by the supervising social worker. All reviews are presented to the panel. Children and young people contribute to the reviews and the agency requests all placing social workers contribute their observation and thoughts about the placement. However, not all placing social workers make their views known in a timely manner. The agency is proactive in following this up with placing social workers and reminding them of the importance their views have to annual foster carers' reviews. Reports received from placing authority commissioners as part of this inspection process confirmed that the agency works very well in providing care and support to young people. One placing authority said, 'the service has really developed over the last twelve months and this is positive for the children and young people we place.'

Supervising social workers are suitably qualified and experienced workers. They receive regular supervision and annual appraisals as well as undertaking regular training and development opportunities. They say that they feel exceptionally well supported within their role and that the service has continued to develop and grow in a very positive way.

The agency has addressed the requirements and the vast majority of the recommendations made at the previous inspection under the previous fostering service regulations and national minimum standards. It continues to develop and improve its services to promote positive outcomes for children and young people.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.