

Acorn Fostering Services Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

| | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Unique reference number | SC060131 |
| Inspection date | 20/06/2014 |
| Inspector | David Morgan / Sharon Treadwell |
| Type of inspection | Full |
| Provision subtype | |

| | |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Setting address | 80 Burleys Way, LEICESTER, LE1 3BD |
|------------------------|------------------------------------|

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Telephone number | 0116 251 3550 |
| Email | info@acornfostering.com |
| Registered person | Acorn Fostering Services Limited |
| Registered manager | Anupam Srivastava |
| Responsible individual | Shadab Ahmad |
| Date of last inspection | 08/08/2012 |

© Crown copyright 2014

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

Acorn Fostering is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Leicester. It provides placements for 69 children and young people from a number 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. In the last year a further ten households have been approved taking the overall number of carers to 105.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

At the last inspection in August 2012 the agency was operating at an adequate standard and a substantial number of requirements and recommendations were made; this has been repeated this time and the service requires improvement. The service has a history of judgements at this level. Since the last inspection significant progress has been made on the findings of the inspection and other matters. However, this has been compromised, particularly over the last seven months or so, by the resignation of a large proportion of the social work team, albeit for different reasons. The support of carers has been successfully maintained but improvement of the service has not occurred. In particular, there is inconsistency of practice brought about by insufficiently robust monitoring and supervision.

On the other hand, such inconsistencies also encompass much good practice and the outcomes for children and young people, for example, are good. Consultation with children and young people on an individual level is satisfactory but is not yet embedded in agency-wide quality assurance and improvement. Carers and children and young people are positive about the service: their relationships with each other are good and children and young people make progress. Personalised care is provided that addresses individual needs, including those arising from cultural or religious needs.

The quality of care requires improvement. Although some practices are of a high standard, they are not consistently applied throughout the service. There are also significant gaps in the support and training provided to carers, which have a potential impact on children and young people. The safety of children and young people is sound. However, greater consistency is necessary in the implementation of risk assessments. Shortfalls in the leadership and management of the service are key and requirements are made to achieve effective monitoring in line with regulations and national minimum standards, and staff supervision.

The directors acknowledge the shortfalls in the service and are making significant efforts to resolve them. This includes recently recruiting an experienced person to take the service forward. Four requirements and nine recommendations are made this time to assist in bringing the service to a good standard. Some issues are carried forward from last time because they have been only partially addressed.

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 |
|--------------|---|------------|
| 11 (2011) | ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is promoted at all times. This is with regard to ensuring that risk assessments and safe care plans are in place and up-to-date for all children (Regulation 11(a)) | 28/07/2014 |
| 17 (2011) | provide foster parents with such training as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. This is with regard to ensuring that all carers complete the core training courses indicated in the national minimum standards (Regulation 17(1)) | 29/09/2014 |
| 21 (2011) | ensure that all persons employed receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal (Regulation 21(4)(a)) | 25/08/2014 |
| 35 (2011) | ensure there is a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals; for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency, and, for | 28/07/2014 |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster carers, and their placing authorities (Regulation 35(1) and (3)) | |
|--|--|--|

Recommendations

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

- review each panel member's performance annually against agreed performance objectives (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.15)
- ensure there is a written development plan, reviewed annually, for the future of the service (NMS 18.2)
- ensure that each foster carer has a personal development plan setting out how they will be supported to undertake training and development (NMS 20.5)
- ensure support and training is made available to foster carers to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for. This is with regard to addressing shortfalls identified during strategy meetings (NMS 20.8)
- ensure that self-help groups for foster carers are encouraged and supported (NMS 21.4)
- ensure that foster carer breaks (respite) are planned to take account of the needs of any children placed (NMS 21.5)
- ensure that consideration is given to any help or support needed by the sons and daughters of foster carers (NMS 21.6)
- ensure there are effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This is with regard to any monitoring being evaluative (NMS 25.1)
- ensure the service implements a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the fostering service's files. This is with regard to the database recording being sufficiently effective for all its users. (NMS 26.1)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Outcomes for children and young people are good. The experience of individuals is that their personal needs are given a high priority, including those arising from their cultural backgrounds. Carers and children and young people confirm that this is a particular strength of the service. One carer said, 'The agency is especially good at supporting carers where children have specific cultural or ethnicity needs. There is a real good range of knowledge and expertise there.' New admissions receive improved information about their prospective carers (foster carer profiles), which helps them make the move in a more informed way. They learn in advance about the carers and their households, which helps them feel welcome and improves their

engagement in the process. Children and young people's care plans are obtained by carers more promptly than before, which means the care they receive is better informed. This is critical to how well they settle. One young person said, 'I am pleased with how they have helped us all to get back on track and start leading a normal life again.'

Children and young people receive a positive initial impression of the service because the accommodation is of a good standard and the documents they receive are professionally prepared. They also meet the supervising social workers upon arrival so that any questions or difficulties are addressed immediately. One important outcome of this process is that children and young people know how to complain and have a variety of ways to do this. One route is via the supervising social workers, whom they get to know well. This contributes to them usually feeling safe with their carers.

Positive outcomes and progress are clear in many different ways. Children and young people are helped to integrate into their communities and in some cases into Britain. As a result, their self-confidence increases and they are able to become more independent. Successful transitions occur into adult settings or some young people cease being fostered but remain in their carer's homes. One young person said, 'She feels like my mum and she treats me like a son. I'll never leave her completely'. There is a good level of permanency amongst the children and young people who were tracked as part of the inspection. However, the overall picture is not sufficiently clear (see Leadership and Management below).

Strong relationships with carers mean that children and young people feel emotionally secure enough to address their previous difficulties, often with specialist help from therapists. They receive help with their emotional and psychological health. Self-harming and drug misuse decline. Children and young people also reflect on their experiences, integrate appropriately, and improve their social skills. One said, 'Before, I lived with an alcoholic and a druggie, now I'm normal.' There is also a high degree of engagement in education with almost all children and young people attending an appropriate place. One young person demonstrated the renewed ambition of many by saying, 'I missed years seven and eight completely but now I go every day and am going to do well.' Most achieve substantial academic success given their starting points either with or without the additional support that is available. Attendance levels are good and the examination results of some are exceptional by any standard.

Children and young people enjoy normal family lives and carers feel able to arrange overnight stays, for example, without asking for permission. They benefit from wide-ranging social and recreational opportunities and their family contact is arranged in accordance with agreements.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The recruitment of carers follows a thorough procedure and ensures that carers reflect the wide social diversity in the communities in which the agency operates. Effectiveness in this area has a direct connection with the good outcomes for children and young people. The recruitment role has been strengthened further recently. As a result, children and young people receive positive role modelling from adults they can relate to.

Additional specialist support is provided to support placements and avoid breakdowns, wherever possible. The quality of assessments has improved substantially since the last inspection and panel are receiving a consistent standard of reports. Carers are positive about all the training they receive, including that which occurs pre-approval. The vast majority of carers complete their induction development standards within a year; this is significant progress and work is underway to train the remainder. However, the overall training plan does not comprehensively address legal requirements. This means, for example, that not all carers have received full training on managing difficult behaviour, first aid or administering medication. Also, development plans for all carers are not in place to ensure that gaps are filled and improvements made. As a result, the skills of carers in certain areas are not sufficiently well developed.

Most carers receive supervision plus other visits on a regular basis and steps are underway to increase the frequency. The standard of supervision in some cases is excellent, including much direct support and helpful direction with which to improve skills. Effective steps have been taken to ensure that the level of visits to carers has been maintained during the recent staffing turnover. To achieve this the remaining supervising social workers have displayed particularly high levels of dedication, which is valued greatly by carers. However, the supportive relationships between carers and supervising social workers have been significantly disrupted in the past seven months. In some cases this has led to a lack of attention to shortfalls that have been identified in strategy meetings; this also reflects poorly on the quality of supervision of social workers.

Suitable arrangements are in place to ensure that children and young people are only matched with carers who are most likely to provide good care; recent improvements have strengthened this system further. Carers have a full role in decisions about matching. The additional support that is available to carers includes respite care. However, this is not always clearly linked to the needs of children and young people and is perceived mainly as a contractual benefit by some carers. Also, there is inadequate attention paid to arranging support groups for carers and meeting the needs of their sons and daughters.

Panel is operated effectively and benefits from members from a diverse range of social and professional backgrounds; it undertakes clear and rigorous analyses of the work that is presented to it. There is strong communication between the panel chair and the manager and panel contributes effectively to specific improvements in the service.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Staff and carers demonstrate a clear understanding of safeguarding procedures and understand the impact of abuse on children and young people. When necessary to protect children and young people, the service takes rigorous action, including the de-registration of carers. When safeguarding issues arise, there is now close and timely communication with relevant agencies, which is an improvement since the last inspection.

Children and young people know how to complain and any risks they are exposed to are discussed with them on an individual basis. Any hazards are assessed so that children and young people are helped to have new experiences. Satisfactory written risk assessments and safe care policies are in place in the vast majority of cases. However, there is some inconsistency in their compilation and quality. This means that in some cases, the service is unable to clearly show what steps it has advised the carers to take to minimize the risks arising from certain behaviours. This only creates a potential risk because in practice carers are addressing safeguarding issues appropriately.

Those individuals who put themselves at risk of sexual exploitation receive coordinated support from relevant agencies. Carers proactively seek to minimise the risks when children or young people are absent, for example by actively searching for them and obtaining support from the police. The protection of children and young people has been improved substantially by appropriate attention being paid to the recruitment of staff and carers, which is now at a good standard.

Individual children and young people who are at risk receive the care they need from suitably reflective practice by carers and supervising social workers. However, the overall evaluation of patterns and trends emerging from safeguarding issues, such as missing from home episodes or school and placement breakdowns, is not robust on a service-wide level despite some focussed work. This means that the development of the service is not sufficiently informed by the data that is available.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The directors of the service, including the registered manager, remain ambitious for change. However, improvement to achieve a good standard is not consistently implemented throughout the service. The registered manager is suitably qualified and experienced but progress has been hindered partially by the loss of senior personnel in recent months. In particular, there are significant shortfalls in the monitoring of the service as a whole by the manager, despite improvements since the last inspection, which pre-date the staffing difficulties. Also, although there is now a range of procedures to gather data and monitor the progress of children and young people, certain data is not monitored as required, such as medication. Also, the quality of the monitoring is at a low level overall and shows a lack of effective

evaluation of data. Therefore, improvement is piecemeal. On the other hand, a new manager has recently been appointed who has a clear vision for the improvement of the service.

Partnerships with other agencies are satisfactory. However, the procedures to use the views of carers, children and young people, and other stakeholders are under-developed. The views of carers and staff have led to certain improvements in the service. The database, for example, has been amended several times to improve its ease of use. However, this remains a source of frustration amongst both staff and carers.

Unlike other areas of monitoring, the trends and patterns emerging from the recruitment of carers are clearly evaluated. This effectively informs new recruitment plans, especially regarding the geographical spread of carers. Effective work is also demonstrated by the steps taken to address most of the matters arising from the last inspection. The last inspection made eight requirements and sixteen recommendations. All the requirements have been addressed appropriately although further work is required to monitor the service. This has resulted in a marked improvement, for example, in the written information given to carers about a variety of issues, which are reflected in a new handbook. This allows carers to easily obtain clear guidance. In addition, there have been several improvements to the monitoring of the service, although this still requires improvement. The vast majority of recommendations have also been addressed. This has resulted, for example, in a much higher quality of assessment reports for panel, which has improved the service to prospective carers and is a more efficient use of resources. Children and young people now receive a written response to any concerns they raise, which gives them confidence to express their views. Work has started on training carers to deal with negative behaviour. However, further attention is required to this area. Children and young people also benefit from improvements to the system of matching them with carers. They now get more detailed information about households before they arrive. This increases the opportunities for them to be involved in meaningful selection of placements. The lack of progress with some recommendations is addressed in other parts of this report.

As in other areas, the supervision of staff (including senior staff) and appraisal of panel members lack consistency. Although senior personnel understand the need for regular, detailed and recorded supervision meetings to occur, this has not always occurred. This has contributed to inconsistencies in practices and the recent staff turnover. Staff appraisals have recently started to benefit from the views of children and young people but this is also unconsolidated.

The vision of the directors for the service is described in several documents. However, these are not realistic in terms of objectives or timescales. Planning has led to the achievement of certain short-term targets but a clear development plan is not in place.

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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.