

Acorn Care (NE) Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC463071
Inspection date	21/01/2015
Inspector	Stephen Smith
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Date of last inspection	25/11/2013

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Acorn (NE) Ltd fostering service is a privately operated independent fostering agency. It offers long term, task centred and short term placements to young people with a range of needs. This was the first inspection of the agency and, at the time of this inspection, the agency had eight approved foster carers and had one young person in placement. The staffing of the agency comprises the Responsible Individual, Registered Manager and an administrator.

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.**

This small and relatively new fostering agency provides a quality of service and practice which requires improvement before it can be judged good.

Since it was registered in November 2013 the agency has seen a significant change in staffing and management. The first Responsible Individual and Registered Manager have left the agency and been replaced. The current manager has been in post since November 2014 and has submitted her application for registration to Ofsted.

The quality of the agency's practice has been variable. In terms of the assessment and approval of foster carers, quality of work has ranged from inadequate to good.

One assessment was very poor and did not fully explore the applicant's suitability to foster young people. In this case the agency's decision making and quality assurance processes did not identify the assessment's failing. Other assessments were satisfactory and the most recent one reviewed was good. Foster carers are provided with good support which helps them deliver a good quality of care to young people. This helps to make a difference to young people's lives helping them make progress and achieve positive outcomes.

Staff recruitment has not been done well enough in every case. Although members of the central list and some sessional staff were thoroughly checked on appointment, one sessional worker and the Responsible Individual were not. This means that, in these cases, the agency had not fully checked their suitability to work with children. Checks on the new manager, who was the most recently appointed staff member, were thorough.

As stated, the agency has undergone a change in Responsible Individual and Registered Manager which represents a complete change in the agency's entire professional staff team. The new manager and Responsible Individual have undertaken a thorough review of all the agency's previous practice and implemented an effective monitoring and quality assurance process. Positively, they have identified and taken steps to address all the matters identified in the inspection. The effectiveness of this work to address previous practice weaknesses and the manager's openness about this work are noteworthy. As such they give a good indication of the agency's good capacity to improve.

The agency's current good leadership and management has begun to address previous inadequacies although there has not been sufficient time to fully evidence the effectiveness of this work. Consequently, this inspection judges that the agency's quality of service and its arrangements for safeguarding young people require further improvement before they can be judged good.

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
20 (2011)	ensure that all people appointed to work for the purposes of the agency are fit to do so. Specifically, that prior to appointment full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20(1) and (3) of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)	27/02/2015

Recommendations

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

- ensure assessments of prospective foster carers are sufficiently thorough and robust and that reports set out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision maker need in order to make an objective approval decision (NMS 13.7)
- ensure that the fostering panel and agency decision maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations and decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care. Specifically, that panel and the agency decision are rigorous and robust in their consideration of the suitability of applicants to foster (NMS 14)
- inform panel members in writing of their performance objectives, which should include participation in induction and training, and safeguarding the confidentiality of the records and information submitted to the panel. (Statutory Guidance: Volume 4 para 5.14)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people fostered by the agency make good progress and achieve positive outcomes. They are provided with good information about their carers before they are placed. Placements are made in a planned manner which helps promote a good continuity of care, sensitive to children's current situation and promotes placement stability. One young person said, when asked whether they felt at home with their foster carers, 'It is home to me'.

Young people are helped to understand the local authority's plan for them as far as is possible and to have a say about the plan. They are helped to understand their background and life experiences. Young people are well cared for and fully involved in the family life and activities of their foster carers. They are helped to develop secure attachments to their foster carers and to understand their relationships with their own parents.

Young people have access to a range of activities to increase their skills, self-confidence and self-esteem. As young people's self-esteem and self-confidence grow they are supported and encouraged to develop positive friendships which further help transform their lives.

Young people's health improves during their time in foster care. They have access to all primary health provision they require and the agency works proactively with placing authorities to provide any specialist therapeutic support young people may need. For example the agency is making its own arrangements, after discussions

with the local authority, to provide psychological input for a young person.

Young people have access to educational opportunities appropriate to their age and situation and their success in their education improves significantly while they are placed with their carers. One young person said their educational achievement 'makes me feel good' and their social worker said they 'can't believe' the progress they are making.

Young people benefit from good support for contact with their family members which helps them develop emotionally. The development of the skills they will need for their future independence are well promoted.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

In the 13 months the agency has been operating it has recruited, assessed and approved a number of foster carers.

The quality of assessments and approvals have been mixed. While most have been satisfactory, one was poor and another more recent assessment was good. In the case of the weak assessment, the process of allocation to the assessing social worker was questionable. Additionally, a check undertaken during the assessment process that contained significant information about the carer's potential suitability was not followed through or its impact discussed in the assessment report. This failure highlighted additional monitoring weaknesses as the matter was not identified or addressed by the quality assuring manager, the fostering panel or the agency decision maker. Consequently the suitability of the approved carer was not fully assured. Other assessments examined were more thorough but lacked a consistent evaluative assessment of how matters identified would impact on the applicants' ability foster young people. It is significant to note that these assessments pre-date the tenure of the current manager and Responsible Individual who is also the agency decision maker. The current management team had identified these issues prior to the inspection and had taken action in response to ensure the suitability of the agency's carers and to improve the rigour of the assessment and approval process. Although these improvements are yet to 'bed in' fully the effects of this work can already be seen as the last assessment undertaken was thorough, careful and comprehensive.

The agency's fostering panel is constituted of members with range of appropriate backgrounds and skills and the agency has plans to develop this spread of skills and background further. Recommendations are made promptly and the reasons for these cited. As stated above, panel is not always as rigorous in its consideration of cases presented to it as it should be. Consequently, the agency cannot be fully assured that its deliberations and recommendations are fully robust. Panel members have not undertaken a written agreement with the agency regarding their roles, responsibilities and behaviour on panel or their duty to maintain the confidentiality of all information that they have access to. More recent decisions made are robust and

appropriately evidenced. Positively, the agency's new management team have already identified these weaknesses with panel and work is taking place to address them. Although there is limited evidence yet that this is fully resolved the few decisions made by the new agency decision maker were of better quality, and the records clearer, than previously noted. Decisions are made promptly and applicants are informed of the outcome in a timely manner.

Approved foster carers receive good supervision and support. Agency workers maintain close involvement with young people in placement and work closely with foster carers and placing authorities. This helps ensure that foster families provide young people with good care. A local authority social worker said, 'I spoke to my senior management about the excellent abilities of (carer names), who deserve a medal for what they are doing.' Foster carers' opinions are valued and they are supported to be a full part of the professional team around the young person. His helps ensure that the local authority's plan for the child is appropriate and implemented in the day-to-day care provided. The agency has engaged the input of a psychologist on a one-day per week basis to work with foster carers and young people.

Delegated consent arrangements for foster carers, although not managed well previously, are given a priority in the agency and the new manager is working proactively to ensure that clear arrangements are in place.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The agency's practice has not been good enough to fully assure the safety of young people. Over its year of operation the assessment and approval of foster carers and the recruitment of staff has not been sufficiently thorough in every case.

As stated earlier, assessments have not always been rigorous enough and the approval and decision making process was in some cases weakened by a lack or robustness by panel and the decision maker. However, it is positive to note that the new management team had identified these issues and begun to address them prior to the inspection. The effective monitoring of previous practice and the rigour with which the most recent assessment was carried out demonstrate the agency's commitment to improve.

Staff recruitment processes have not checked out all staff members well enough. Processes for verifying identity, seeking references and ensuring Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks were undertaken prior to appointment were not followed in every case. Although some staff experienced thorough recruitment checks as did members of the agency's central list, not all were thorough enough. For example, the new Responsible Individual was appointed with few checks being undertaken and one sessional social worker being employed to undertake foster carer assessments for a number of months prior to their DBS check being received. The agency acknowledges this and has already taken action to ensure that checks

are carried out and that the process is robust in the future. In the case of the last person appointed by the agency, the new manager, the agency had undertaken all the required checks and gained all the required information.

The agency ensures that foster carers are provided with comprehensive information about young people when they are placed and good working relationships with placing authorities ensure that information is updated and the level of risk is kept under review. Foster carers understand the risks faced by the young people they foster and take the necessary action to protect young people as well as to allow them to take appropriate age related risks.

Young people are given clear information about how they can make a complaint or express any concerns they may have. Agency workers spend time establishing relationships with fostered young people in order to seek their views and to help them learn to keep themselves safe.

No young person has gone missing from their foster placement since the agency was registered.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency's statement of purpose is up to date and describes the agency's operation. It is provided to interested parties as well as being available on the agency's website which is currently being redesigned. The agency provides young people with information about how to complain within the children's guide to fostering. The children's guide itself is presented in formats suitable for younger and older young people and is of a style which is attractive, comprehensive and helpful for young people.

The agency has recently appointed a new Responsible Individual and manager after experiencing a change in its entire management team during the autumn of 2014. The manager has submitted her application for registration to Ofsted. The manager and Responsible Individual have developed good working relationships with placing authorities and social workers. This helps ensure that young people receive the services and support they need.

The agency provides its foster carers with high levels of support and supervision. This means that the agency can monitor its carers' work with young people to ensure it delivers positive outcomes for them. The manager's processes for monitoring the work of the agency has been recently revised and provides a thorough and detailed quality assurance process which takes into account young people's progress and outcomes.

The inspection has identified management and monitoring weaknesses in the agency. As stated earlier the agency's assessment and approval practice has been mixed, with some poor practice taking place. Additionally, staff recruitment

processes, a clear management function, have not been sufficiently robust. However, it is positive and significant to note that the new management team had already identified the matters identified during this inspection and taken steps to address these. The last assessment and approval undertaken was thorough and robust and the last staff member appointed, the manager, was subject to a rigorous assessment process. This demonstrates the agency's new managerial competence and, although this progress is not yet fully embedded, there are clear indications of a significant improvement in quality of care and safeguarding matters. The agency provides reports on a monthly basis to its directors and an annual review takes place. This reporting and its content exceeds the minimum requirement. There has been a notable improvement in the quality of communication between the agency's operational management and the directors.

This robust monitoring and the openness with which the manager and Responsible Individual have addressed issues and improved work with the directors demonstrates a robust management approach. This shows a good capacity to improve the work of the agency.

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.