

Acorn Fostering Services Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspection date	16 May 2016
Inspector	Tracy Murty
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Setting address	80 Burleys Way, Leicester LE1 3BD
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Telephone number	0116 251 3550
Email	info@acornfostering.com
Registered person	Acorn Fostering Services Limited
Registered manager	Mr Anupam Srivastava
Responsible individual	Mr Shadab Ahmad
Date of last inspection	20 June 2014

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Acorn Fostering is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Leicester. The agency undertakes assessment, approval and supervision of foster carers who provide a wide range of placement types for children and young people, including short-term, long-term, bridging, unaccompanied minors, parent and child and emergency.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 88 approved foster carers providing placements to 54 children and young people.

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 agency requires improvement to be good. It is currently not good because there is a large number of shortfalls in its operation. The assessment and approval processes for foster carer applicants are not thorough enough. Management oversight of such processes is not sufficiently robust, clear or consistent. The fostering service has a development plan in place, but this has not been reviewed on an annual basis. This further undermines the manager's ability to identify and resolve shortfalls. The manager has not taken sufficient action to meet all of the requirements and recommendations from the last inspection two years ago.

The fostering panel has failed to identify and challenge issues during the assessment and approval process of new foster carers. The agency decision maker has also failed to consistently consider and record any identified shortfalls or areas of concerns from

the assessment process. Such shortfalls raise concerns as to the ability of the agency and its managers to undertake good quality assessments or to ensure that children and young people receive safe and appropriate care consistently.

Recording of and responses to concerns and complaints raised by children and young people has not been consistent. Not all concerns or complaints have been formally recorded by the agency managers, and feedback is not provided to those young people who have lodged a formal complaint. The agency is not recording all relevant concerns or responding to them. This does not reflect an agency which listens and responds to the expressed views of children and young people. It has also failed to ensure that children and young people have clear information about the complaints procedures, or who to contact. Children and young people may, therefore, not feel able to raise concerns about the care that they receive.

The agency has been through a very turbulent period in relation to the retention of suitably qualified staff. Some foster carers have had several changes of supervising social worker since the last inspection. Student social workers on placement at the agency have undertaken tasks which they do not have the skills or experience to do, including assessments and supervision of approved foster carers.

The agency has a number of strengths. Children and young people have made progress and their outcomes are good. Placement stability is generally good, with children and young people forming very positive attachments to their carers. Foster carers report feeling very well supported by all agency staff and managers. A wide range of training and development opportunities further supports carers and agency staff to enhance and develop their skills. Recording systems within the agency have improved. Agency staff and managers now have much clearer access to a wide range of data and information on how outcomes improve for children and young people.

Areas of improvement

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person must comply with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure that the children's guide includes a summary of the complaints procedure and the address and contact details for Ofsted (Regulation 3 (3)(b)(c)).	29 July 2016
Ensure that in relation to the employment of staff, full and satisfactory information is available in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20(3)).	29 July 2016
Ensure that there are a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to the need to safeguard and	29 July 2016

promote the health and welfare of children placed with foster parents (Regulation 19(b)).	
Ensure that written notice is given to Ofsted without delay if a person other than the registered person carries on or manages the fostering agency (Regulation 39(1)(a)).	29 July 2016
Ensure that the fostering panel makes a written record of its proceedings and the reasons for its recommendations (Regulation 24(2)).	29 July 2016
Ensure that no business is conducted by the fostering panel unless there are the required number of members present (Regulation 24(1)(i)(ii)(iii)).	29 July 2016
Ensure that the fostering panel oversees the conduct of assessments carried out by the fostering service provider (Regulation 25(4)(b)).	29 July 2016
Ensure that the fostering service provider keeps under review and, where appropriate, revises the statement of purpose and children's guide and notifies Ofsted of any such revision within 28 days (Regulation 4(a)(b)).	29 July 2016
Ensure that all persons employed by the fostering service provider receive appropriate supervision (Regulation 21(4)(a)).	29 July 2016
Ensure that a system is maintained for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency (Regulation 35(1)(a)(b)).	29 July 2016

Recommendations

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

- Ensure that children and young people receive prompt feedback on any concerns or complaints raised and are kept informed of progress (NMS 1.6).
- Ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members, and record the reasons for the panel's recommendation (NMS 14.7).
- Ensure that in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision maker considers 'Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM (2009)' (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, paragraph 5.40).
- Review each panel member's performance annually against agreed performance objectives (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, paragraph 5.15).
- Ensure that there is a written development plan, reviewed annually, for the future of the service (NMS 18.2).

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- Ensure that there are effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service (NMS 25.1).
 - Ensure that where unqualified staff carry out social work functions they do so under direct supervision of experienced social workers, who are accountable for their work (NMS 23.7).
 - Ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year (NMS 21.8).
 - Ensure that any staff involved in assessing the suitability of persons to be foster carers are social workers, have experience of foster care and family placement work and are trained in assessment. Social work students and social workers who do not have the relevant experience, only carry out assessments under the supervision of an appropriately experienced social worker, who takes responsibility for the assessment (NMS 23.6).
 - Keep on the foster carer's record a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegation made, details of how the allegation was followed up and resolved, and details of any action taken and decisions reached, and make this available to the individual (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, paragraph 3.78).

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people make good progress from their starting points, due to the committed care and support provided to them by carers. The agency has made several very successful sibling placements since the last inspection, with placement stability being good. Emergency placements are made following careful consideration by the agency's placement officer of the needs of the child and the ability of the carer to meet those needs. A number of children and young people are subject to special guardianship orders, including one sibling group. This promotes real stability and reflects the commitment of the agency to supporting long-term placements. The agency is also in the process of developing a database of information on the skills of each carer and the identified needs of children and young people being referred. This should lead to improved matching and placement stability. For planned placements, children and young people have been supported to visit and meet their new carers before they move in. This helps to alleviate any initial concerns or anxieties they may have.

Foster carers spoken with during this inspection demonstrated a commendable commitment to improving the outcomes for those children and young people placed with them. They fully understand the backgrounds of the children and young people and work closely with agency staff and others to ensure that any key missing information is obtained. They consider the impact of contact with family members on children and young people and have been proactive in working with placing authorities to make any necessary changes. One foster carer said: 'I could see that contact was difficult during term-time and asked the local authority to change it. This is working much better and enables my young person to focus on their education and then look forward to contact in the holidays.' This is one of many examples heard during this inspection of how carers work closely and sensitively to ensure that those children and young people placed with them feel emotionally secure and able to make progress.

Children and young people engage well in education and make good progress from their starting points. Attendance and engagement had been a significant concern for many prior to their current placements. There are many examples of children and young people now having full attendance, achieving well and having goals and aspirations for their futures. The agency has good systems in place to record and track the educational attendance and attainment of each child or young person placed. This includes a scoring system to reflect their starting points and where they have progressed to. Such detailed monitoring information provides agency staff and carers with a clear sense of how the care they provide is improving progress and outcomes. Similar systems also monitor and track the health needs of all children and young people. This reflects the commitment of agency staff and carers to respond to the physical and emotional needs of children and young people placed, at all times.

Children and young people enjoy a wide range of fun and stimulating activities. They take part in after-school events and clubs, fully supported by their carers. This not

only promotes and improves their sense of belonging, but also their physical health. For many children and young people, they have been able to travel abroad on holiday with their carers. This is often the first time that they have done such things and they take great pride in sharing their experiences. One young person, when asked what they liked about their foster carers, said: 'I love the food we have here and the holidays. I have been to loads of places with them and we always have an amazing time.'

Contact for children and young people with their birth families and significant others is promoted and supported very well by carers and agency staff. There is clear and positive evidence of carers fully supporting agreed contact arrangements. They provide both practical and emotional support to children and young people before, during and after contact meetings. Carers also challenge placing authorities where they have concerns about the impact of contact on those children and young people placed with them and demonstrate real tenacity in advocating for children and young people in their care.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

A number of regulatory shortfalls have been identified in relation to the fostering panel and decision-making processes. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of quality assurance systems, as well as the agency's understanding of regulations and guidance. The agency has failed to ensure that recent disclosure and barring checks have been completed for one applicant. It has also failed to ensure that recent medical reports and information have been sought or considered for the same applicant. References for some applicants have not been actively sought or obtained. Fostering panel members failed to highlight these shortfalls and did not challenge assessing social workers or the supervising manager. Records from the fostering panel meetings do not provide a clear sense of how any issues or concerns raised were resolved, prior to panel members recommending approval of applicants. The agency decision maker also failed on more than one occasion to consider fully all information before making the decision to approve applicants. This does not reflect an agency with safe and robust assessment and approval processes. It is of concern that these shortfalls have not been identified at any stage by either the assessing social worker, their manager, the panel chair or the agency decision maker. This does not promote thorough assessments or effective decision-making.

Further shortfalls in quality assurance are demonstrated by the agency's failure to ensure that the fostering panel is quorate and by the use of employees of the agency as independent panel members. For example, one panel meeting did not have an independent social work member present, but recommended the continued approval of a foster carer. The panel currently consists of two qualified social workers who work for the agency. Another panel member is currently a student on placement and is also a foster carer for another organisation. This does not provide the fostering panel with sufficient independent members, who have the skills and independence

required. There have also been occasions where student social workers have completed assessments and presented them to panel as the assessing social worker. They have not had training in assessment work and there is insufficient evidence that responsibility for those assessments has been taken by appropriately experienced social workers. This again demonstrates a lack of adherence to relevant regulations and guidance and undermines the effectiveness of the fostering panel and its work.

Annual appraisals have now taken place for all fostering panel members and the panel chair. Training has been provided to both panel members and the panel chair to enhance their skills and understanding of their roles. The appraisal for the panel chair has not considered agreed performance objectives and does not reflect the work of the panel and any areas of concern or development for the coming year. Given the shortfalls identified in relation to the panel's scrutiny of assessment reports and missing information, annual appraisals need to clearly reflect the work of the panel, its members, its chair and to have clear objectives set. The agency decision maker has attended some panels to observe their performance, which is positive. It is of concern, though, that the decision maker has failed to identify key shortfalls in the assessment of applicants and panel members and the chair's lack of response to those shortfalls. The agency decision maker has failed to challenge the recommendations of the panel or to identify obvious concerns on a number of occasions. Records of decisions made by the agency decision maker are not sufficiently detailed and do not evidence well how their decisions have been made.

The stated shortfalls also raise concerns about the wider monitoring and oversight of the functions of the agency by the registered manager. They reflect a lack of effective systems in place to monitor and control the activities of the agency. Quality assurance systems and processes have not highlighted those concerns raised during this inspection. This seriously calls into question the robustness of quality assurance, decision-making systems and understanding of the legislative processes.

The agency recruits a wide range of foster carers who are able to meet the diverse needs of children and young people placed with them. They receive regular supervision and support from agency staff and a wide range of relevant training opportunities throughout the year. Due to the high turnover of staff since the last inspection, some carers are currently being supported and supervised by student social workers within the agency. Recruitment of qualified and experienced social work staff has taken place, but there has been a period of several months where students have supervised carers and continue to do so. Such practice, by inexperienced and unqualified staff, does not reflect regulatory guidance for carers to be allocated an appropriately qualified social worker from the agency. This further demonstrates the agency not adhering to regulatory processes and potentially placing children and young people at risk. Carers spoken with during this inspection reported feeling well supported by all agency staff and managers. There has been no apparent adverse impact on children or young people as a result of this shortfall to date.

Foster carers met with during this inspection reported high levels of satisfaction in the support provided to both them and their own children. They report feeling fully included by managers and staff in all aspects of how the agency is run. They attend

regular support group meetings and feel empowered to raise any issues or concerns they may have with the agency staff and managers. Events and social activities throughout the year provide carers, those children and young people placed with them and birth children with an opportunity to socialise and have fun, which is very well received. Carers report feeling very well supported through the out-of-hours arrangements by the agency. One carer said: 'I love working for Acorn and would do it for nothing if they didn't pay me. I would not want to work for any other fostering agency.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Children and young people receive an age-appropriate guide at the start of their placements, which provides them with information about the agency and services provided. This does not provide them with clear details of the agency's complaints procedure and does not contain information on how to contact Ofsted. The agency has failed to keep young people informed of the progress of any formal complaints they have raised with the agency. It has also failed to ensure that all concerns or complaints raised by children or young people have been formally recorded or responded to. This does not reflect an agency which takes the wishes, views and feelings of those children and young people placed seriously, and could undermine children and young people feeling able to raise concerns.

The agency has clear systems in place to record, monitor and track all relevant documentation relating to children and young people. Agency administrative staff ensure that information is requested from placing authorities and chased following placements being made. The system is clear and includes escalation to senior managers and independent reviewing officers in local authorities. Such systems lead to clear and up-to-date documentation being held on file for every child and young person. Agency staff diligently record their efforts to secure missing information and this is reflected on case records for each child placed.

For those young people at risk of harm through sexual exploitation or missing from care incidents, there is positive evidence of agency staff working very closely and proactively with involved agencies. For some young people, there has been a reduction in the number of incidents of them going missing from care or placing themselves at risk. Carers display a detailed awareness and understanding of the specific needs and issues for those children and young people placed with them. They adhere to risk assessments and communicate well with agency staff and placing authorities. Feedback from placing social workers and independent reviewing officers during this inspection was largely positive about the support provided by carers and their communication with agencies.

Improvements have been made in relation to unannounced visits to carers since the last inspection in 2014. A significant number of carers did not receive an unannounced visit in 2014. This reduced in 2015, but there were still a number of

carers who did not receive a visit, and no clear plans are in place to ensure that all carers receive at least one unannounced visit this year. This further reflects the lack of clear and robust quality assurance systems and management oversight.

The recruitment, assessment and supervision of foster carers is not currently robust or sufficiently focused on potential safeguarding issues. For example, one applicant did not have an up-to-date disclosure and barring check carried out prior to being approved. Personal and work references for applicants have not routinely been requested or received by the agency. Medical reports and health information have not been requested or updated for one applicant. This does not provide for a thorough assessment or vetting process and does not comply with statutory requirements.

Recruitment checks for agency social work staff have also not been robust or thorough. Gaps in the employment history have not been identified or scrutinised for one member of staff. Checks on car insurance and driving licence expiry dates have also not been sufficiently checked or verified as being in place. Such shortfalls have the potential for unsuitable people to work with vulnerable children and young people. There have been no adverse impacts noted as a result of these shortfalls to date, and agency managers took immediate action to clarify and resolve several issues during this inspection. It is of concern, however, that such omissions were not identified by agency managers or that systems in place did not identify such issues at the assessment or recruitment stages.

Allegations against foster carers have been reported to the local authority and designated officer in a timely manner. Notifications have been sent to Ofsted and placing authorities as per regulatory requirements. The agency has failed to ensure that foster carer's records clearly show what action they have taken following an allegation being made in one case. Records do not evidence how concerns raised by a young person were considered or responded to. There is no clear management oversight of the processes followed, decision-making or consideration of the carers being brought back to the fostering panel for an early review of their approval. This does not promote a clear or consistent approach to how allegations are responded to by the agency, or of the learning from such incidents. It also links with previously identified shortfalls in relation to the reporting and consideration of complaints made by children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Leadership and management require improvement because there has been ineffective monitoring, managerial oversight and quality assurance of several aspects of how the agency operates. This has led to a number of shortfalls in practice which could have an adverse impact on the experiences of vulnerable children and young people, if they are not addressed by managers. Management arrangements are not clear in the agency, as while there is a registered manager in post, the day-to-day management is provided by another manager. Ofsted have not been formally notified

of this arrangement, leading to the regulatory body not having a clear understanding of the management arrangements for some time or being able to monitor this.

Detailed management reports are produced each month, with monthly management meetings being held and quarterly meetings held with directors of the company. The monitoring of complaints, allegations, assessments and recruitment is not sufficiently robust though, and does not reflect how improvements to the quality of foster care provided by the agency have, or will be, made. This is further compounded by the fact that the development plan for the agency, which was formulated in 2014, has not been reviewed or updated annually. It is apparent that work is being done in relation to the development of the agency, but this is not reflected clearly in the development plan. Several regulatory shortfalls made at this inspection have been repeated from the last inspection. This does not reflect an agency which has learned or is learning from previous shortfalls, but has not led to a negative impact on the welfare of children and young people.

There is insufficient evidence of managers considering concerns or complaints raised by children and young people to inform improvements to the care provided to them. The agency is not consistent or clear as to when it records concerns and complaints and has not responded to several issues raised by children and young people. The recorded number of complaints to the agency is very low for this year, with only one being recorded from a young person. From evidence seen during this inspection, this does not reflect an accurate account of the concerns raised, and this undermines the agency's ability to make continual improvements.

The agency has a detailed statement of purpose in place, setting out the aims and objectives, services and facilities to be provided. This has been updated and placed on the fostering service's website but has not been sent to Ofsted since 2014. This undermines the ability of the regulatory body to have oversight of how the agency is operating, and does not provide children and young people with guidance as to how to make a complaint. Information provided to foster carers in their handbook does not include the most recent statement of purpose. The children's guides do not provide a summary of the complaints procedure or details of how they can contact Ofsted.

The registered manager has the skills, qualifications and experience necessary to perform his role, and has worked for the agency for a number of years. The agency also employs a full-time fostering manager. This person is responsible for supervising all qualified social work staff and for the day-to-day running of the agency. Ofsted have not been formally notified of the fact that this person is managing the agency. The responsible individual and a director of the agency also have a great deal of direct involvement with all aspects of how the agency is managed and run. Stakeholders, carers and agencies spoken with during this inspection generally praised the managers of the agency for their good communication skills and support. A number of placing authorities and independent reviewing officers expressed their concern at the high staff turnover and the impact of this for carers. Managers accept that staff retention has been an issue since the last inspection and have taken action to recruit more suitably experienced social work staff to the agency.

Agency staff, student social workers and carers spoken with during this inspection were all very positive about their roles and of the support and training they receive. They acknowledge that staff retention has been an issue, but present as feeling that the agency is moving in the right direction now. New staff report a thorough induction programme being in place and access to a wide range of training to meet their needs. The use of a number of student social workers in the agency to supervise and carry out assessments is of concern. Plans are in place to hand over the supervision of carers to qualified and experienced staff in the near future, but the use of students for these tasks is not appropriate or in line with regulatory requirements. Not all agency staff have received regular supervision since the last inspection. Managers have set plans for supervision for each year, but a number of staff have not received the agreed quota of monthly supervision meetings. This has been attributable in large part to the demands on existing staff of some staff leaving and having to attend other meetings, or responding to more urgent matters. This further undermines the ability of the manager to provide robust oversight and scrutiny of assessments and how the agency is performing.

The agency has recently appointed a recruitment officer. This person will focus on the recruitment of new carers and also in overseeing the assessment processes for applicants. Managers have identified targets for recruiting new carers in certain areas of the country, but such targets have not been fully incorporated into the agency development plan or been reviewed regularly. Given the previously stated shortfalls in relation to the assessment processes and the lack of robust scrutiny, it is imperative that there are clear and accountable systems in place for oversight of assessments and panel processes.

Consultation is sought from children, young people, carers and others to inform annual reviews of carers and appraisals of staff. There is a need for managers to ensure that feedback is clearly and systematically considered and used to inform how services are provided and improved. This is particularly relevant in relation to any concerns or issues raised by children and young people.

Four requirements and nine recommendations were made at the last inspection. Risk assessments and safe care plans are now in place and updated by agency staff. Foster carers receive training in line with national minimum standards, which includes first aid, administering medication and managing difficult behaviour. Carers have a personal development plan in place, which sets out how they will be supported to undertake training and development. A detailed and comprehensive training programme is in place now for carers, with agency staff also undertaking the same core training as carers. Regular support groups for carers take place and there is a clearer focus on supporting the needs of carers' own children. Respite breaks are available to carers, and a clear system is in place to request this. Requests for respite by carers are not excessive, with a number preferring to use extended family members to support them at times of need. This provides consistency of care for those children and young people placed. The agency has now devised and implemented a record-keeping policy for the agency. It has made significant progress in relation to improving and implementing the use of its electronic database system. Agency staff and carers all commented on the significant improvements in relation to how they record information on children and young people since the last inspection.

Two requirements and three recommendations made at the last inspection have not been met and have been re-set following this inspection. These relate to annual appraisals of panel members and its chair, annual reviews of the agency development plan, management monitoring systems and oversight and supervision of staff. Although a number of shortfalls have been identified at this inspection, there are also a number of strengths which have been detailed throughout this report, which coupled with the agency's commitment, demonstrate a capacity to improve. Regulatory breaches do not present as having had a negative impact on the welfare of children and young people, as their overall experiences and outcomes are generally good.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 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.