

Acorn Care (NE) Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Stephen Smith
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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. At the time of this inspection, the agency had eight approved fostering households and had five young people in placement, with introduction visits for another three children being planned or taking place. The staffing of the agency comprises the responsible individual, registered manager, a full-time supervising social worker 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: **Good**

This fostering agency helps to promote positive outcomes for the children and young people who live with the agency's foster carers. The agency supports children with a variety of complex needs and makes great efforts to support long-term, stable placements in families that are well suited to their needs. Children are fully integrated into their fostering families. They are provided with very good support

from the agency's social worker and manager, and the psychologist who works with the agency to support children and their foster families. This helps to ensure that foster placements are of a therapeutic nature and helps children to make good progress. Children are also helped to develop positive attachments and begin to deal with previous trauma they may have experienced.

The agency has very positive relationships with placing agencies, and communication is effective. It is innovative in helping to plan placements for children with very complex needs and agrees creative arrangements to support children and their foster families. This practice has a focus on safeguarding children both physically and emotionally. It works well with other agencies, and the safety and well-being of children and young people are priorities for the agency.

The assessment and preparation of prospective foster carers are significantly improved since the last inspection and are now generally good. Prospective carers receive excellent and highly valued training in attachment and therapeutic parenting styles before and after their approval. This helps them to understand and care for children with difficult histories.

Decision making in the agency is less robust. The agency's decision maker's consideration of cases and consequent decisions are not supported well enough by the agency's panel. The panel does not follow appropriate procedures well enough and is often unclear in its thinking, recommendations and reasons.

Ongoing support, supervision and management of foster carers are good. The agency's staff work closely with foster carers and children in their placements, providing high levels of support, both within and outside working hours. The training that the agency provides to its carers is of good quality. The involvement of a psychologist in the provision of training enhances its quality and relevance to the needs of children placed with the agency's carers. This input also provides an additional level of support to carers, allowing them to meet the needs of children with complex needs and backgrounds.

Foster carers feel valued and a key part of the team around the child. This is supported and promoted by the agency's proactive work with placing authorities. Foster carers feel supported by the social work team and benefit from the open and honest relationship they have with the agency, which provides support and positive challenge to them as appropriate. This helps to address any practice issues while allowing positive relationships to remain undamaged. However, the processes for undertaking the annual reviews of foster carers are not as effective as they should be, which weakens the robustness of these reviews.

The agency's managers are committed to developing and improving the service and the quality it delivers. Monitoring is proactive and frequent and the manager shows a thorough understanding of the agency, its situation and its development plans. Periodic monitoring does not seek the views of children, foster carers and local authorities, and so does not gain a rounded enough view of the agency's practice. The manager and responsible individual started to address some of the issues identified during the inspection before it had ended. This demonstrates the agency's capacity and willingness to develop further.

Three requirements have been made as a result of this inspection. These relate to processes for reviewing the approval of foster carers and the agency's internal monitoring and review of its service. Additionally, four recommendations were made regarding the quality and processes of the agency's panel, training for panel members and the availability of the agency's statement of purpose.

Areas of 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 (NMS). The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
28: Reviews and terminations of approval Ensure that when undertaking reviews of foster carers, the fostering service provider seeks and takes into account the views of any placing authority which has, within the preceding year, placed a child with the foster parent. (Regulation 28(3)(b)(iii))	01/10/2016
28: Reviews and terminations of approval Ensure that the fostering service provider, on the occasion of the foster carer's first review under this regulation, refer their report to the fostering panel for consideration. (Regulation 28(5))	01/10/2016
35: Review of quality of care	01/10/2016

Ensure that the system for monitoring matters set out in Schedule 6 provides for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents and their placing authority. (Regulation 35(3))	
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Recommendations

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

14: Fostering panels and decision-maker

Ensure that the fostering panel makes timely, quality and appropriate recommendations in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care. Specifically, ensure that the panel's discussion and questioning are sufficiently focused and thorough and that the correct procedures are followed. (NMS 14)

14: Fostering panels and decision-maker

Ensure that the minutes of panel meetings record the reasons for its recommendation. (NMS 14.7)

23: Development and qualifications of staff

Ensure that each person on the central list has access to appropriate training and skills development and is kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation and guidance. Specifically, ensure that panel members undertake sufficient training to support them in their role. (NMS 23.11)

16: Statement of purpose and children's guide

Ensure that the statement of purpose is available to the responsible authority and any parent or person with parental responsibility. Specifically, ensure that it is available on the public part of the agency's website. (NMS 16.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency is relatively new and is not part of any regional contract with placing local authorities. This means that it is often approached for a placement when the authority has not been able to find a suitable placement elsewhere. The agency demonstrates a clear focus on children's need for a stable family life and their ability to make progress. It recognises that children needing foster families will often have traumatic backgrounds. Consequently, the agency takes great care when placing children with foster carers and provides high levels of support on an ongoing basis. Children and young people usually move into their foster families in a planned way. This helps them to get to know their carers and to prepare for the move, and reduces their anxiety.

Placements are made and support is provided using input from the agency's psychologist. Foster carers are provided with very good training in attachment and therapeutic parenting techniques. The commitment of foster carers to young people with very complex needs is notable and this leads to young people experiencing stable, nurturing placements. As an example of the agency's carefully considered practice, a new placement is imminent which will include high levels of regular therapeutic support, monitoring and supervision by the agency and the placing authority. This will allow a young person to be placed in foster care in a situation in which the alternative may have been secure accommodation. Another example of creative and innovative work to promote positive outcomes for a young person was a carefully planned and agreed placement of a young person into foster care from residential care just before the young person's 18th birthday. This has enabled the young person to take advantage of the 'Staying Put' initiative and to continue to receive close support within a family setting for a number of additional years.

Children and young people feel part of their foster families. They are involved in the usual family activities and events. They also enjoy holidays abroad, both with their foster carers and on school trips. Young people's individual interests and talents are also actively encouraged.

The agency seeks the views of children and young people on an individual rather than group basis because the agency is small and children's ages and locations differ. The agency's manager and supervising social worker visit children in their foster placements very regularly. This means that they know them well and have good relationships with them. This gives children and young people opportunities to

express their views and influence the care provided for them. Young people are asked for their views as part of their foster carers' annual review process.

Foster carers promote meaningful contact between children and their family members wherever this is deemed appropriate. Foster carers understand their role and the importance of working positively with families in the children's best interests.

All the children and young people fostered through the agency attend school regularly and are making progress. Foster carers appreciate the importance of education, and so work closely with schools to provide a consistent approach to the child and support their learning.

All children are registered with primary health practitioners and receive any specialist input they need. The agency is proactive in ensuring that the necessary authority to consent to treatment and other matters is correctly delegated to carers. This means that children receive the healthcare they need. The additional support, training and advice provided by the agency's psychologist help to ensure that children's emotional health is identified, acknowledged and promoted.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Since the last inspection, the agency has made significant efforts to ensure that it provides placements with foster carers who are able to meet the needs of children and young people who need foster families. This has led to some carers being de-registered and new carers approved. The agency has worked hard to recruit appropriate carers, with the majority of these moving to the agency from other fostering agencies. The agency has a good understanding of the needs of children and young people who require foster placements. Recruitment activity is based on this understanding, which means that occupancy levels are high. Of the eight fostering families at the time of the inspection, five had placements and new placements were planned for the remaining three families.

The preparation, training and assessment of foster carers have improved significantly since the last inspection and are now generally good and continuing to improve. The agency handles enquiries, initial visits and the assessment process in a timely and well-managed way, with effective management monitoring throughout the process. Systems for undertaking key suitability checks are efficient.

Decision making in the agency is less well developed. The agency's panel is not clear in its processes or practice. It regularly poses questions to applicants that are outside its remit, does not give key matters in assessments sufficient consideration and is vague and unclear in the reasons it cites for its recommendation. For example, the panel decided to defer an application because of a lack of sufficient information, but then proceeded to question the applicant at length, which she found 'traumatic'. In another case, some problems within a previous agency were not explored well enough, and in another, a discussion about significant matters was not reflected in the reasons for the panel's recommendation. Arrangements to provide the panel with advice have also not been effective enough, although the manager had already identified this and had taken steps to address the issue. Panel members have not undertaken enough training in their role, a factor that is likely to contribute to the weakness of the panel's practice.

The agency's decision maker is thorough. She gives detailed consideration to all cases requiring an agency decision, using all the available information. Her decisions are clear and well reasoned. To some extent, this counters the panel's weaker practice, but her decisions are hampered by the lack of clear information about the panel's reasoning.

The agency is small and has only been operating for around two years. Consequently, not many carers have reached the point of their first review. The management of a high-quality review process is not fully embedded into the agency's practice. This means that reviews are not as objective, robust or considered and evaluated as they should be. For example, the agency does not seek the views of any placing authority that has placed a child with the carer within the last 12 months. Additionally, the agency failed to take the first review of one fostering family to its panel for consideration as is required by regulation. This family had moved to the agency from a previous fostering service and the manager explained that she had misunderstood the requirement as the family had been approved for a number of years with a previous agency. This underdeveloped review process means that carers' continued suitability to foster is not considered as rigorously as it should be.

Foster carers receive very good levels of support from the agency, both within and outside office hours. This is provided on a regular basis through frequent and well-recorded supervision, but also very promptly as needed. For example, one carer described receiving excellent support and advice from the psychologist to manage aspects of a fostered child's behaviour. Another carer said that the agency always 'has your back'.

The agency provides its carers with good training both before and after their

approval. All but the newest carers have completed their 'Training, support and development standards for foster carers' workbooks, and a good training programme includes training in safeguarding, first aid, child sexual exploitation and self-harm. The agency provides an excellent 12-week training course in nurturing and attachment, led by its psychologist, to all its carers. This is provided before applicants are approved and then at regular intervals post-approval. A number of carers have done this training several times. One carer said that she 'got something different out of it each time as the child grew and changed.' This provides foster carers with an excellent basis for their parenting of children with highly complex needs.

The agency and its carers work very effectively with local authority social workers and placing authorities. Communication is good, and clear information sharing helps to support prompt decision making regarding children's care. Foster carers consider themselves a full part of the team around the child and the agency promotes this strongly.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency and its carers help to keep children safe. Children have good relationships with their foster carers and feel safe with them. Young people are visited regularly by the agency's supervising social worker and manager. They have access to information about how to express any concerns they might have. This means that they are able to share any worries or problems they may have.

Young people are placed with foster carers who are well matched to their needs. Matching is careful, and creative work is done with placing authorities to build in additional packages of support for children and their carers. Very good placement support is provided to help ensure that young people remain safe and have their well-being promoted.

Young people's risk assessments and individualised, safe caring policies are updated regularly. The agency provides foster carers with very regular supervision which monitors the safety of, and progress made by, young people. The agency provides good information to placing authorities about how children are progressing in their placements and works positively with authorities to ensure that children's needs are met.

Foster carers are trained in safeguarding both before and after approval. The agency has provided carers with training about sexual exploitation of young people and self-

harm and how to manage this. The agency delivers a 12-week course in attachment and therapeutic parenting styles to its foster carers both before and after they are approved. This helps foster carers to understand the challenges that young people may face and present with, and how to manage these in a safe way. This helps young people to deal with any previous trauma they may have experienced. The agency has clear child-protection procedures in place and works in an open and transparent manner with relevant authorities to ensure that children are protected.

On occasion, young people leave their foster placements without authority. Where this occurs, it is well managed and monitored by the agency. It works positively and collaboratively with local authorities, keeping them well informed of the situation and working with them to try and reduce the behaviour and keep the child safe.

Recruitment processes for foster carers and staff members are robust and thorough. Thorough suitability and background checks are undertaken and good evaluation of applicants' attitudes and aptitudes takes place.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency works well with placing authorities to ensure that the care delivered meets young people's needs. It communicates effectively with them to share key information and to address any difficulties that young people face. The agency takes a proactive role in planning joint working arrangements to help it provide foster care to young people who may not be able to live in this type of setting otherwise. For example, it has worked creatively with local authorities to plan a foster placement for a young person who needs very high levels of support, and made innovative use of a 'Staying Put' placement for another young person. The agency provides an appropriate and positive challenge to local authorities where this is necessary to ensure that young people receive the support they need.

The agency's statement of purpose is available for foster carers on the agency's website but not on the public-facing part of the site. This prevents local authorities, birth families and other stakeholders from accessing key information about the agency.

The agency's good monitoring of, and excellent support for, placements ensure that young people receive good care. The agency tracks young people's progress and works with carers and placing authorities to provide additional input where necessary. As the agency has grown since the last inspection, it has recruited a supervising social worker. This, and the input available to the agency from a psychologist, enable high levels of support to be provided to children, young people and their foster carers.

Social work staffing levels are appropriate for the size of the agency, and staff supervision and appraisal systems are effective. The agency has efficient administrative systems which help to underpin the quality of its practice.

The agency is well managed at a strategic and operational level. The manager undertakes a formal monitoring process of the agency's practice, performance and situation on a monthly basis. The outcomes of this are presented to the board of directors each month. This is a significantly improved level of senior managerial oversight than existed at the time of the agency's last inspection. Currently, this monitoring includes the periodic monitoring required by regulations, the reports of which are to be provided to Ofsted. However, the monthly monitoring that is undertaken does not include consultation with foster carers, fostered children and their local authorities. This means that monitoring is not sufficiently objective as it does not take into account external and independent views of the service.

The agency has an appropriate business development plan in place; its strategic aims are appropriate and in line with this plan. Regular monthly monitoring demonstrates

the agency's continued financial viability.

The agency has addressed the requirements made at the last inspection. It has also given attention to all the recommendations, although some issues surrounding the agency's panel mean that not all of these have been fully addressed.

The agency makes appropriate notifications to Ofsted and ensures that appropriate action is taken in response to any significant events that take place.

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.