

# Acorn Fostering Services Limited

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80 Burleys Way, Leicester LE1 3BD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

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.

The registered manager has been registered since 2017.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 35 approved foster carers providing placements for 42 children and young people.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

### Inspection dates: 18 to 22 October 2021

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people,</b> taking into account	<b>requires improvement to be good</b>
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

**Date of last inspection:** 27 November 2017

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good**

Children are supported to develop positive relationships with their foster carers. Carers receive training to help them to understand how children's previous experiences may affect their needs and behaviours. Supervising social workers ensure that carers have the relevant information to sensitively respond to children's needs.

At present, managers do not always ensure that there are evidence-based matching processes for children at the point of referral. This includes when children move internally within the fostering agency.

While many children have settled placements, a small number of children have had experiences that were less positive. Some children have found it difficult to settle and have moved placements. For those children, there has been little evaluation of why placements have ended. This lack of reflection and evaluation does not support matching processes going forward. It does not help to identify what support a child might need to settle in their next home.

One child has not had access to life-story work, even though this is an identified need that is seen as vital in his care plan. Staff are not always proactive in escalating concerns to the placing local authority when there are delays in allocating essential resources to meet a child's needs.

Leaders and managers do not ensure that all staff are proactive in advocating for children's wishes, feelings and welfare. They do not ensure that advocacy is evidenced in records.

Where possible, carers support children to remain at the same school and not change schools when they move to a different carer. This is good practice as it limits disruption to children's education, and promotes relationships and friendships. Carers promote good routines, healthy diets and lifestyles. Improved routines support the children who have previously experienced barriers to education to make progress in education and training. Carers also respond to opportunities to develop children's hobbies and interests, for example through after-school activities. This helps children to develop their self-esteem and confidence.

Children know how to make a complaint if they are unhappy, and there have been a small number of complaints from children. However, some of the information held in complaints records should have been referred to the designated officer for consideration, as there was an allegation of harm.

All complaints received by the agency are responded to by managers. Complaint responses are not always tailored to each child's age and level of understanding. Responses would be improved through the use of child-friendly, accessible language.

Supervising social workers can call on an experienced support worker from the team to work with children who have additional needs and/or who are unsettled in their placements. This is a useful resource which has made a difference to maintaining some fostering arrangements. Children, foster carers and social workers provided very positive feedback about this resource.

Foster carers and supervising social workers work effectively with placing social workers and families to promote safe contact arrangements for children, where it is agreed in their care plans. As a result, children are able to maintain important relationships with siblings and extended family.

Foster carers are positive about the support they receive from the agency's out-of-hours service. One carer said, 'I can always talk to a member of the team, to seek advice when I need it.'

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good**

Most children experience stable placements and have positive relationships with their carers. Children said that they feel safe and protected. Carers seek behaviour management advice and are positive about training that supports them to respond to children's needs and enhance their safety.

However, there has been some variability in the plans and responses around keeping some of the children safe. This has included some instances in which children have gone missing, but have not had an independent return home interview with the placing local authority. This means that carers and social workers do not always know the reason for the child going missing, and therefore cannot confidently support the child to prevent this from happening again. Managers have not challenged the relevant placing authorities when return home interviews have not taken place.

For one child, there is a significant risk of exploitation. The child's safe caring plan has not been updated, despite a recent increase in risk due to a change in contact arrangements for the child. This does not support the carer to safeguard the child effectively.

Since the last inspection, there have been two occasions when carers have resigned from the agency. Events leading up to those resignations included concerns about whether carers had prioritised the needs of the children, and concerns about the quality of care provided by the carers.

In both cases, an understanding of children's lived experiences would have been enhanced by the use of a chronology of incidents and significant events, and by an independent review of the agency's responses to all known concerns.

Managers do not always ensure that expectations with regard to maintaining records, such as incident reports and chronologies, are clear to carers and supervising social workers. There is a lack of effective oversight of those records.

The quality of supervision of carers is variable. This includes the quality of supervision records. For some carers, there were detailed records that evidenced support and advice, but for others, there were brief records, and supervision did not take place regularly. One carer, about whom there was a safeguarding concern, had no supervision recorded for some time following the concern being raised. Effective monitoring of the quality of care in placements helps to keep children safe. The agency is not clear and consistent with regard to the expectation that carers read and sign supervision records.

Assessments of prospective carers, including safeguarding checks, are carried out robustly. There is good management oversight of the safe recruitment of staff. Good arrangements are in place for the monitoring of safe home environments for children, and unannounced visits to carers take place at the correct intervals.

Managers and staff have good working relationships with the local police and the local designated officers.

Some staff require up-to-date training regarding the risks of criminal and sexual exploitation of children. All staff and carers should receive refresher training on what happens when children make allegations against the adults who work with them, and what makes adults suitable/unsuitable to work with and look after children.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good**

There is an experienced registered manager in post, who is supported by an experienced deputy manager and a responsible individual.

The panel chair and the agency decision maker (the responsible individual) are experienced and are up to date with research, practice and legislation. The assessment of carers, review of carers and panel processes generally function well. The chair and panel members are committed to training and development.

Reports to the panel and panel records do not always contain clear information on de-registrations that result from resignations, and de-registrations that occur following a recommendation from the panel and/or a decision from the agency decision maker. Annual reviews of carers do not always include clear factual information regarding planned and unplanned endings of placements, and an evaluation of the impact that these have on the children.

This inspection found that there have been two occasions on which carers resigned and the panel should have been given the opportunity to make an independent assessment of the events leading to the carers' decisions. Had managers undertaken

lessons-learned exercises in these cases, changes might have been made to improve understanding of the quality of care in placements and the outcomes for children. In both cases, there was little evidence of professional curiosity or robust oversight by staff and managers.

The staff team, management team and foster carers are diverse and representative of the children in their care and their communities. Carers like the agency in terms of its size, and the support they receive from the stable team of supervising social workers.

Commissioners and social workers are very positive about the care children receive, and they are positive about communication with carers and staff. One member of staff from a commissioning team said, 'The agency is reliable. Managers respond promptly to problem solve where there are requests that are urgent and/or include complex needs.'

A review of the supervision of staff found the quality and regularity of supervision are variable. In many cases, records were too brief to evidence that supervision was purposeful and added value to practice. There was little focus on the quality of children's lived experiences or evidence of effective challenge. Managers do not yet ensure that monitoring of the quality of care includes quality assurance of the supervision of staff and supervision of foster carers.

Monitoring information and data gathered by managers require more evaluation and analysis to inform an accurate understanding of progress and outcomes for children.

# What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

## Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times; and</p> <p>before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child's—</p> <p>wishes and feelings (having regard to the child's age and understanding); and</p> <p>religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. (Regulation 11 (a)(b)(i)(ii))</p> <p>This relates to ensuring that there are evidence-based matching processes for children at the point of referral. This includes when children move internally within the fostering agency.</p> <p>Leaders and managers must ensure that all staff are proactive in advocating for children's wishes, feelings and welfare, and that this is evidenced in records.</p>	30 November 2021
<p>The fostering service provider must—</p> <p>ensure that all persons employed by them receive appropriate training, supervision, and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))</p> <p>This relates to employees receiving regular, good-quality supervision.</p> <p>Leaders and managers should ensure that all staff and managers have up-to-date safeguarding training, including</p>	30 November 2021

training in respect of allegations against adults who work with children.	
<p>The fostering panel must also—</p> <p>give advice and make recommendations on such other matters or cases as the fostering service provider may refer to it. (Regulation 25 (4)(c))</p> <p>This relates to using the panel more effectively to review concerns raised about a foster carer's continued suitability to foster, and/or to review unplanned placement endings. This relates to using the panel more effectively when there are concerns raised about a foster carer's continued suitability to foster and/or to review unplanned placement endings.</p>	30 November 2021
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals; and</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>The registered manager should ensure that monitoring systems are effective and up to date. This includes the review of the quality of care, the safety of children and the support and supervision being provided for foster carers and social work staff.</p>	30 November 2021

## Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the 'Social care common inspection framework'. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.



## **Independent fostering agency details**

**Unique reference number:** SC060131

**Registered provider:** Acorn Fostering Services Limited

**Registered provider address:** ASRA Conference Centre, 80 Burleys Way,  
Leicester, Leicestershire LE1 3BD

**Responsible individual:** Shadab Ahmad

**Registered manager:** Lionel Boyce

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## **Inspectors**

Cathey Moriarty, Social Care Inspector  
Andi Lilley-Tams, Social Care Inspector

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