

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 the assessment, approval and supervision of foster carers who provide a wide range of placements to children and young people, including short-term, long-term, parent and child and emergency placements. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 28 approved fostering households providing placements for 35 children and young people.

The registered manager has been registered since 2017.

Inspection dates: 20 to 24 February 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be good
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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	inadequate
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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: 18 October 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

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

Children placed with this agency do, on the whole, make progress from their individual starting points. However, the omissions identified in the arrangements for the help and protection of children and the shortfalls in the leadership and management of the fostering agency mean that the agency has not yet achieved the standard required to be judged good.

Prospective foster carers feel welcomed from their first contact with the fostering agency. A recruitment officer ensures that applicants understand the assessment process and have a consistent point of contact throughout the process. Despite this, the fostering agency has not approved any new foster carers since the last inspection.

Foster carers are positive about their experience of the fostering agency. A number of foster carers have been with the agency for many years and have a sense of family and belonging. Foster carers feel well supported by their supervising social workers. They are confident that if they need support, it is readily available from someone who knows them well.

Many of the children have lived with their foster carers for some time and are settled as part of the foster carer's family. Children told inspectors about day trips, holidays abroad and birthday celebrations. This acceptance promotes children's self-esteem and emotional well-being. Children have opportunities to remain living with their foster carers beyond the age of 18 where appropriate. For some children, this becomes an enduring relationship, enabling them to go on to further education, confident in the knowledge that they have a home to come back to.

Managers have made changes to the arrangements for matching children and foster carers since the last inspection. This includes when children move within the agency. However, these arrangements are not consistently applied. In addition, the matching arrangements do not consider children's individual health needs. As a result, it is not always clear why foster carers are considered able to meet children's needs or how gaps will be addressed.

Supervising social workers do not always consider how foster carers are meeting children's needs as set out in the child's care or placement plans. For example, one child had specific needs in relation to their health. These had not been identified by the supervising social workers despite being clearly stated in the child's plans. As a result, there were omissions in what the foster carers understood they needed to provide for the child.

Supervising social workers have made improvements in how they advocate for children where there are delays in the provision of services. This means that there is regular follow up with children's social workers to address delays. However, when

there is a continued lack of progress, there is an absence of further escalation to achieve a resolution. In one case, this has resulted in the disruption of a child's placement due to a lack of educational provision for a number of months.

Staff arrange activities and events for foster carers and children. This includes celebration events and awards. Acknowledgements, such as marking birthdays with cards, are valued by carers and children alike.

Supervising social workers take time to get to know the children living with foster carers. This helps them to understand the child's views about their care. To date, the agency has not been successful in widening children's participation, and this results in missed opportunities to listen to children. For example, plans to review the documents used to gather children's feedback as part of foster carers' annual reviews do not include children's involvement.

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

The agency has taken some action to address shortfalls identified at the last inspection. For example, all supervising social workers now receive regular safeguarding training. However, managers have not expanded this to other areas of the fostering agency. For example, the registered manager does not know whether panel members have received safeguarding training. In addition, the responsible individual has not received training about the management of safeguarding or allegations, despite holding a role within the complaints and allegations processes for the agency.

Foster carers receive training to enable them to respond to new and emerging risks facing the children that they care for. Access to online training materials means that this can be put in place quickly if required. In some cases, the agency relies on external services to respond to presenting risks. For example, the agency does not provide training for foster carers about self-harm. Instead, child and adolescent health services are asked to provide training to individual foster carers if a need arises. This means that responses in these situations are reactive rather than proactive.

Supervising social workers and foster carers work together to devise risk assessments and safe care plans. However, these do not always take account of all known risks for children. For example, despite a child requiring supervision by two adults when out in the community, the child's safe care plan did not reflect this. Risk assessments are not consistently updated in response to new and emerging risks. In addition, risk assessments and safe care plans are not always clear about the strategies that foster carers should use to address risk. This leaves foster carers without key information and guidance to help them to keep children safe.

When new risks emerge, supervising social workers and managers do not always demonstrate the expected level of professional curiosity in response. For example, when a concerning situation arose in a foster carer's home, no one from the

fostering agency visited the home to assess the situation for 10 days. This delay meant that staff and managers did not have an accurate, up-to-date view of the potential risks posed to the children or the foster carer to inform their decision-making.

Managers ensure that investigations into concerns or allegations against foster carers are presented to the fostering panel. However, these investigations lack independence beyond the foster carer's supervisory relationship and focus on the foster carer's narrative. In addition, investigations are undertaken in isolation and do not take account of previous concerns or allegations. This insular practice results in an overly positive view of foster carers and places foster carers rather than children at the heart of the investigation process.

Despite these shortfalls, some children show decreased patterns of risk while living with foster carers. There are few incidents of children going missing, and when this does happen, foster carers are quick to report this, ensuring the child's safe return.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

Leaders and managers have systems in place to monitor the fostering service. However, these are ineffective and do not ensure strong governance. As a result, there are significant omissions in the overall leadership and management of this fostering agency. Leaders and managers were not aware of many of the shortfalls identified during this inspection.

Although the management team has made changes to the recording of staff supervision, these meetings are heavily reliant on self-reporting by supervising social workers as opposed to a process of review and audit. This is a key factor in the failure of leaders and managers to identify and respond to the shortfalls highlighted by this inspection. Managers have now started to implement a process of audit, but this is slow, and the impact is not yet known.

The registered manager is not always aware of significant events that occur. For example, he was not aware of a recent situation that had required a foster carer to physically intervene to safeguard a child. As a result, this incident had not been followed up to ensure the safety and well-being of the child and the foster carer concerned.

The registered manager has failed to notify Ofsted of significant incidents on five occasions since the last inspection. In addition, he has failed to consult with the designated officer in response to an allegation by a child against a foster carer. These omissions restrict the opportunity for outside scrutiny of agency practice.

Management oversight of placement decision-making is inadequate and does not prioritise the needs of foster carers and children. Managers have allowed placements with foster carers outside of their terms of approval on two occasions. These placements were for extended periods, and the omissions were only identified during the inspection. In addition, managers have agreed to parent and child placements

and the placement of a child with complex health needs without ensuring that foster carers or supervising social workers have the essential knowledge or training required to enable them to safely care for these children.

The fostering agency has reduced in size since the last inspection. Despite this, there is no recruitment strategy in place to provide a clear plan about how leaders and managers plan to develop the service.

The fostering panel is going through a period of transition. The panel chair has recently left, and the agency is recruiting a new panel chair and members for the central list. The management of the fostering panel is poor. Along with the omissions in safeguarding training, leaders and managers have not ensured that panel members have had the opportunity of joint training with the agency. These omissions significantly reduce the potential for the panel to make decisions that are based on current practice and that retain safeguarding as their focus. During the inspection, it was identified that papers for an upcoming panel meeting had not been shared with either panel members or the foster carers concerned until three days before the panel met. This severely restricts the opportunity for foster carers to consider and respond to reports and for panel members to prepare sufficiently for this critical meeting.

Staff receive an annual appraisal of performance from their line manager. However, these reviews do not identify clear objectives or development plans for the coming year. This severely limits opportunities for staff to identify their individual learning needs and to improve their practice.

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 religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. (Regulation 11 (a)(b)(i)(ii))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that matching processes to consider the foster carer's capacity to care for children include consideration of the children's health needs.</p> <p>In particular, ensure that matching processes are used consistently, including when children move internally within the fostering agency.</p> <p>In particular, ensure that all staff are proactive in advocating for children's wishes, feelings and welfare and that this is sufficiently escalated when there are delays in progressing children's care plans.</p> <p>In particular, ensure that children's risk assessments and safe care plans identify all known risks, are regularly updated and include clear strategies to help foster carers manage risk and safeguard children.</p> <p>In particular, ensure that investigations relating to allegations against foster carers and standards of care matters provide a sufficient level of independent scrutiny beyond the ongoing supervisory relationships for the foster carers.</p>	28 April 2023

<p>This requirement was made, in part, at the last inspection and is restated.</p>	
<p>The fostering service provider must promote the health and development of children placed with foster parents.</p> <p>In particular the fostering service provider must ensure that each child—</p> <p>is provided with such individual support, aids and equipment which the child may require as a result of any particular health needs or disability the child may have. (Regulation 15 (1) (2)(c))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that foster carers are aware of and supported to meet children’s individual health needs as detailed in their placement and care plans.</p>	<p>28 April 2023</p>
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that foster carers receive training to enable them to provide specialist care, for example to parents and their children or to children with disabilities.</p>	<p>28 April 2023</p>
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them—</p> <p>receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal, and (Regulation 21 (4)(a))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that panel members are provided with safeguarding training that is suitable to their role.</p> <p>In particular, ensure that the responsible individual undertakes regular update training relevant to his roles within the agency.</p>	<p>28 April 2023</p>
<p>The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. (Regulation 28 (1))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that foster carers have the necessary approval to enable them to care for the children placed with them.</p>	<p>28 April 2023</p>

<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>In particular, ensure that the registered manager has effective, up-to-date monitoring systems in place to support his oversight of the quality and activity of the fostering service.</p> <p>This requirement was made at the last inspection and is restated.</p>	<p>28 April 2023</p>
<p>If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36 (1))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that events are notified to Ofsted as required under this regulation.</p>	<p>28 April 2023</p>

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that all necessary information is provided to panel members at least five working days in advance of the panel meeting to enable full and proper consideration. (Fostering services: national minimum standards, page 30, paragraph 14.3)
- The registered person should ensure that each person on the central list is given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the agency's fostering staff. (Fostering services: national minimum standards, page 47, paragraph 23.10)
- The registered person should ensure that they operate sound employment practices and offer good support for all staff and volunteers. In particular, ensure that annual appraisals include clear performance objectives and identify individual learning and development needs for each staff and panel member, relevant to their role. (Fostering services: national minimum standards, page 49, paragraph 24.1)

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

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Inspectors

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