

Quality
Equality
Safety
In Care

Acorn Fostering Services

Statement of Purpose

Updated: April 2017





STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Lead responsibility:	Operations Director
Approved by:	Senior Management Team
Last Reviewed:	April 2017
Next Review due:	April 2018 (unless required earlier)
Legal framework:	Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (Regs 3 & 4) National Minimum Standards 16.1, 16.2 Care Standards ACT 2000

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

1. INTRODUCTION

The Statement of Purpose for Acorn Fostering Services (AFS) has been developed in accordance with the legislation and statutory regulations that govern the management of fostering services, these include:

- The Fostering Service Regulations (2011)
- The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (2011)
- The Care Standards Act 2000

The statement aims to provide information about AFS, its aims and objectives, our standard of care, facilities and services that we offer and information about our management structure.

This Statement of Purpose is provided to Ofsted (our regulatory body). An up to date copy of the Statement is published on our website. This Statement of Purpose is also provided to and made available to employees, workers, foster carers, prospective carers, local authorities, children and young people in placement, their parents and to the general public via the Acorn website www.acornfostering.com or in hard copy when requested.

This document is reviewed at least annually by the Senior Management Team and submitted on review to Ofsted.

Acorn Fostering Services also has a Children's Guides which provide specific information for children placed with its foster carers in an age-appropriate format. A copy of the Children's guide is provided to the foster carers, children in placement when the placement starts and to Ofsted. The Children's guides are reviewed and revised where appropriate. The Children's guides are also provided to the Ofsted and published on our website.

2. OUR AIMS & OBJECTIVES

AFS strives to deliver high standards of quality care for the children placed with our foster carers. We recognise the financial constraints faced by local authorities and endeavour to offer value for money to the local authorities using our services whilst not compromising the quality of the care being delivered.

AFS' main aim is to develop services in order that children and young people can develop and grow within the five key outcomes areas of "Every Child Matters":

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution
- Achieve economic wellbeing

Our aim is to provide a range of placements for children and young people including both short term and permanent with a view to:

- (i) Providing short breaks of care for children/young people from their families/carers;
- (ii) Rehabilitate children/young people back to their families;
- (iii) Preparing children/young people for moving on to a permanent placement when they cannot return home safely;
- (iv) Providing a substitute family for children/young people for the duration of their childhood with the same foster carer;
- (v) Provide an assessment of the child/young person's placement needs.
- (vi) Provide staying put arrangements

We aim to provide a high-quality service for looked after children and young people of all ages whose needs have been assessed by the responsible Local Authority as being best met by placement within a foster care setting.

We also aim to provide Quality, Stability, and Safety for looked after children and young people placed with our foster families. We believe this is the basis for achieving positive outcomes for young people, building their confidence and capacity to meet the challenges of adult life. Stability and progress within placements is achieved through an expanding range of child-centred services, including specialist support to support carers and children with deafness and other physical disabilities as well as offering specialist parent and child placements.

The objective of the agency is to alleviate the needs of children who are or may be temporarily or permanently separated from their families and to promote a high level of care, encouragement, safety and security for children without families or parents able to care for them, by the provision of care and substitute families able to meet their needs.

In relation to placements Acorn Fostering Services aims:-

- To ensure children and young people are only placed with carers who have been recruited, assessed, approved and reviewed in accordance with statutory regulation and national standards and guidance
- To ensure we have a robust placement matching process in place which considers specific needs of the child and matches them carefully with the skills, experience and circumstances of our foster carers.
- To provide children in our placements with a positive, safe and nurturing experience of substitute parental care.
- To meet the individual child's particular needs and promote their best interests, in accordance with their care plan
- To develop the child's sense of identity and self-worth
- To promote the child's health and wellbeing, including their physical, mental and emotional welfare

- To protect the child from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and deprivation
- To value diversity and promote equality, by recognising the importance of a child's ethnic origin, religion, cultural and linguistic background; and to consider fully a child's gender, sexuality and any disability they may have
- To promote educational achievement and attainment;
- To work constructively with local authorities and education authorities in order to make meaningful partnerships in the best interests of children.
- To minimise discontinuities in the lives of vulnerable children and young people including the premature ending or disruption of placements
- To have 24 hour support for carers, children/young people
- To recruit foster carers who have the potential to develop their fostering knowledge and skills to the highest standards,
- To provide carers with the support, supervision and ongoing training necessary to our foster carers with a view to equipping them to provide a high standard of care and to address the physical, emotional, educational and health needs of the children and young people placed with them.
- To offer foster carers a robust package of professional support and financial remuneration, in order to protect the choice of placements for children.
- To bring together carers who will support, educate and inform each other and who will work in partnership with all relevant professionals, agencies and families involved in the child's life
- To continually develop and improve our services and not to compromise on standards. To this aim we seek internal and external evaluation including outcome of inspections (i.e. by the Ofsted and local authorities etc.) and take feedback from foster carers, children in placement, sons and daughters of our foster carers, local authorities social workers, IROs and other professionals involved in the care of the children placed with us on the child's care. We will use their feedback and inspection outcomes to review, develop and improve our services.

3a. OUR INSPECTING BODY OFSTED

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

Tel: 0300 123 1231

www.ofsted.gov.uk

3b. THE STATUS AND CONSTITUTION OF THE AGENCY

Acorn Fostering Services Ltd is a private limited company registered with Companies house, registration no: 04940971.

The company is approved and regulated by the Ofsted. Registration no: SC060131.

Board of Directors

Shadab Ahmad:

Responsible Individual, Director, and Agency Decision Maker

Anupam Srivastava

Director, IT and Finance

Kshama Srivastava

Director, HR, Policy and Training

4. OUR COMMITMENT TO EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

AFS recognises the diverse society and communities in which we all live and work. We embrace diversity and promote equality of opportunity. We aim to recruit people from all backgrounds to reflect the demographics of the regions we cover. Our Equal Opportunities Policy applies to staff, foster carers and young people. We are committed to creating a culture in which equality of opportunity, and diversity are promoted actively and in which unlawful discrimination is not tolerated. We aim to ensure that all adult, young people and children involved with the agency, whether as employees, providers of a service, foster carers, panel members, local authorities, employees or members of the public, are treated equally, fairly and justly

We want all children and young people in our placements, our foster carers and employees to feel valued and to be treated equally and fairly. Our aim is to ensure our values are embedded in our day to day working practices with all our stakeholders. The agency considers the needs of all young people referred in the areas of race, gender, culture, religion, sexuality, ability and geographic origin, and will endeavour to promote each young person's sense of identity through appropriately matched placements, and direct work in relation to a young person's cultural background. There is a commitment to challenging individuals or groups who discriminate against any of our young people in anyway and diversity is celebrated through daily living experiences and educational programmes.

5. THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE AGENCY

SENIOR MANGMENT TEAM

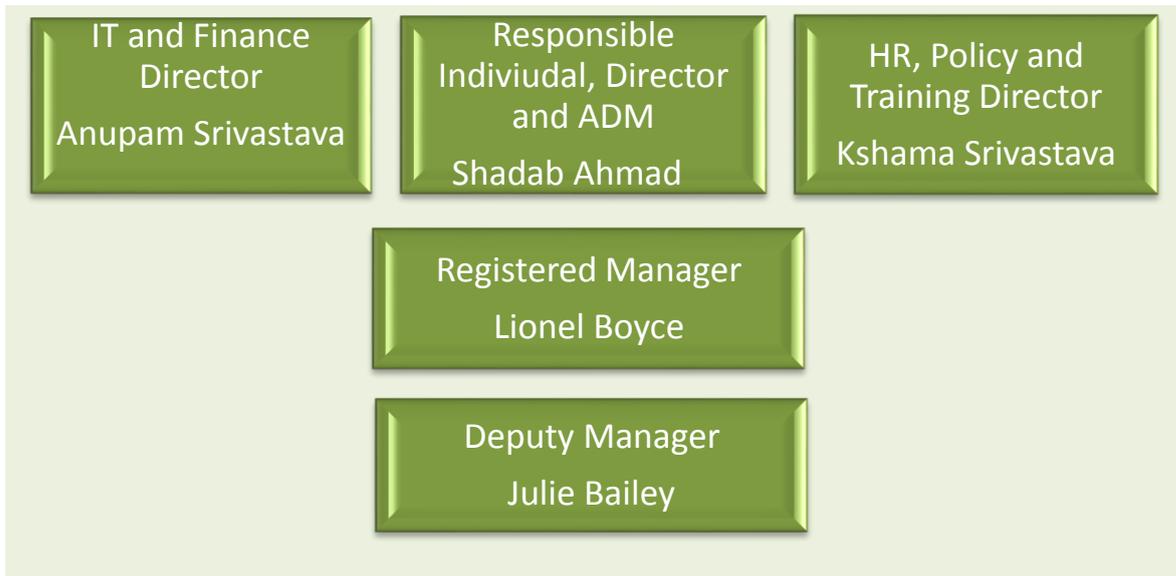
Acorn Fostering Services' senior management team have a wealth of experience and expertise in the field of fostering and social care. All the Directors hold management qualifications. Two of the Directors are qualified social workers registered with HCPC.

The Registered Manager is a qualified social worker, registered with HCPC, has a management qualification with substantial experience in the field of child care and

fostering. The Registered Manager is responsible for the overall operation of the agency and the development of services to foster carers, children and young people.

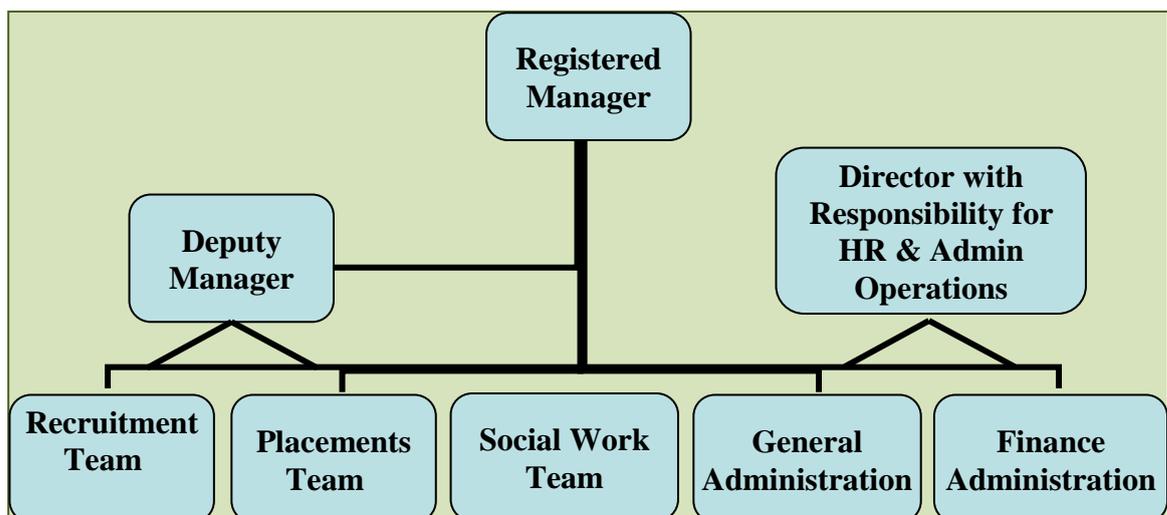
The Deputy Manager is an experienced qualified social worker, registered with HCPC and has substantial experience of working in the field of fostering.

The Senior Management team meet on a regular basis and are responsible for all strategic and operational aspects of the agency. The Senior Management team reviews the developments within the agency to look at the progress against its business plan. The business plan is reviewed on an annual basis.



OPERATIONAL TEAM

All members of the Operations team work closely together to ensure services provided by the agency are run efficiently and effectively. The team meets together on a monthly basis to discuss matters arising, ensure excellent communication and the sharing of ideas to continually develop the services that we provide.



The Social Work Team

Supervising Social Workers are all qualified; HCPC registered and experienced having worked in a wide variety of statutory social work settings. The majority of the team have further post qualifying qualifications. They are responsible for supervising carer households, through monthly supervisions, regularly attending meetings, and spending time with children and young people in placement as appropriate and making recommendations for the annual foster carer review. They also facilitate Foster Carer Support groups on a six weekly rotation.

All permanent members of staff have training development plans specific to their area of expertise, receive monthly supervision and annual appraisals.

All our staff are recruited and checks carried out in line with our safer recruitment policy and in accordance with requirements of the Fostering Services Regulation 35 (1), The National Care Standards Act 2000 (National Minimum Fostering Standards).

The Administration team

Our administration team comprises of the following:

- Placement Administrator
- Finance Officer and
- General Administrator

All our administration staff are highly committed and experienced individuals in their field of work.

Independent Social Workers:

The agency has a bank of Independent Social Workers which includes a number of qualified and experienced Social worker who are registered with HCPC. They have experience as practicing social workers in children and families' teams, dealing with children in need, looked after as well as those who are on the child protection register. These social workers are engaged in carrying out Form F Assessments on prospective Foster Carers on a free-lance basis for the agency. We also engage independent qualified social workers to carrying out specific support to foster carers and children, including independence training packages, attending meetings, carryout return to placement interviews and to providing support to children in their educational achievements and supporting young people in specific areas.

Independent Support Workers:

We have a pool of independent support workers who we engage to work with children/young people and foster carers where specific needs arise. Our Support Workers are experienced in working with children in a range of settings including youth and education. Our Support Workers are also engaged to provide specific support to foster carers and children, including independence, supporting young people with activities, contact with birth families, transportation, supporting children in their educational achievements etc

Interpreters:

The agency engages Interpreters to provide specialist linguistic support to both children and the agency's foster carers, who have children who do not speak or understand English sufficiently to enable them to meet children's needs in general and specifically cultural, linguistic and religious needs.

Therapists:

We also use the services of a number of highly qualified therapists, as and when required.

6. COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

In accordance with the Fostering Services Regulations 2011 and National Minimum Standards Acorn Fostering Services has developed a written procedure for managing any complaints made by or about foster carers, looked after children or Acorn Fostering Services Staff.

This procedure is available to all employees, foster carers and children who are placed with us.

Additionally, our children's guides and the feedback form which we send to the children in order to receive feedback also contain information on how children can raise concerns and complaint if they are not happy with any aspect of the care they receive or services we provide. All children are provided with a copy of the children's guide appropriate to their age when the placement starts.

7. OUR STANDARDS OF CARE

Acorn Fostering Services, through its carers and staff, is keen to progressively maintain and improve its' standards. It is committed to implementing Fostering Services National Minimum Standards and Regulations 2011. In prioritising areas of service development, Acorn Fostering Services is guided by advice from its consultants, stakeholders and the Ofsted inspection process; always holding fast to the principle of acting in the best interests of children placed with its foster carers. The agency also seeks the views of foster carers, foster children, sons and daughters of foster carers, local authority social workers and IROs to ensure service improvements and development address any matters arising and make a positive difference to the lives of children.

Our job description for foster carers is based on the Fostering Network Code of Practice and is reviewed in line with the national standards, rising expectations regarding the professional role of foster carers and the increasing specialised nature of fostering and its changing environment. We identify and recruit foster carers who agree to comply and work in line with the UN Convention on the rights of the child and current UK childcare legislation and within the Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services.

All staff and foster carers working with Acorn Fostering Services are expected to support and actively contribute to the following aims:

- Promote a child's return to his/her own family whenever this is in their best interest and in line with the individual child/young person's care plan.

- Give absolute priority to the individual needs of the child in determining whether or not a placement with Acorn Fostering Services is appropriate.
- Value diversity by aiming to recruit and retain a wide range of carers to meet every child's needs.
- Develop a service, which has respect for and recognises the importance of the ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language of children, young people, their families and foster carers.
- Ensure that due consideration is given to the gender, sexuality and disability of young people prior to any placement being made with Acorn Fostering Services.
- Value continuity in the lives of children and young people; supporting and encouraging carers to enable looked after children to maintain their identity, pursue their education, maintain and develop family contacts and friendships, as set out in care plans.
- Promote effective partnerships between all key parties to ensure that all planning and work is in the best interests of the child who is fostered.
- Attach a high level of importance upon professional development, to enable carers and employees in their various roles to best meet the needs of each foster child. Acorn Fostering Services will aim to promote continuity and consistency in training, support and provision of information for its foster carers, social workers and other key staff to meet each individual's professional development aims.
- Value and respect foster carers as important members of the professional fostering team, recognising their valued input in the increasingly complex task of fostering.
- Treat and assess each child as an individual, providing an overall package to Local Authorities, which includes therapeutic input, home tuition, mentoring, life skills, confidence building and social activities to children whenever appropriate.

8. GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

Our foster carers are regarded as valuable co-professionals within the wider fostering team. Based on research findings, we consider effective support to carers crucial to our agency's performance.

Acorn Fostering Services endorses the view expressed in the Children Act 1989 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that children are generally best looked after within the family with both parents playing a full part in their upbringing. However, due to difficult family circumstances this is not always possible. For over 50,000 children and young people living in foster care in the UK, fostering can be an important source of temporary care that relieves the

stress on birth families and promotes family unity. Whenever it is considered to be in the child's best interests, Acorn Fostering Services will work positively with all other agencies and the placing Local Authority to return the child to her/his own parent/family.

In cases where some form of longer-term foster care has been agreed upon as in the best interests of the child or young person, Acorn Fostering Services will work in partnership with birth families in a non-judgemental, respectful way. Training programmes for our foster carers will also emphasise the importance of working in partnership with birth families and how to promote contact for the child.

At all times Acorn Fostering Services will positively embrace each individual child's heritage. Our value base is that all people, children and adults alike, are individuals who are to be respected and treated as equals, whatever their circumstances or difficulties.

We recognise that it is important for children to know as much as possible about their background and family. Foster carers are expected to be able to share this with the child as she/he grows and develops.

Our paramount concern is for the welfare of every child placed with our carers. Acorn Fostering Services is aware of the poor statistical outcomes for looked after children. Therefore, efforts are made by foster carers and our agency to ensure that issues of social inclusion are addressed, and that children will be supported to achieve positive outcomes in education and post school programmes. They will also be supported to form positive relationships with their peers and adults.

Additionally, foster children can expect the following to be given due attention:

- Live in a foster home, which is safe, healthy, nurturing and enabling,
- That contact between each child and their families and friends will be encouraged as set out in the care plan and agreement.
- Healthcare which meets his/her needs and age appropriate information to facilitate informed participation in decision making around his/her health needs.
- Support to achieve positive outcomes in education/alternative education and post school programmes.
- That her/his views, wishes, feelings will be actively sought and considered by all Acorn Fostering Services personnel.
- That she/he will be informed of their right to make a complaint and representation on the quality of care they receive, what procedures they should follow (i.e. the how to complain leaflet) and what support (including name of advocacy organisation) they can access to pursue their complaints or representation.

- That she/he will be cared for by foster carers who will respect and recognise and address her/his needs in terms of beliefs, culture, religion, language, sexuality and disabilities.
- During the transitional period of leaving care she/he can expect to be helped to develop the necessary skills, competence and knowledge necessary for adult life through a planned 16+ provision.
- That relevant agencies and adults will work in partnership to reach decisions and provide services geared to her/his best interests (in the short, medium and long term).

One of the central life tasks for many foster children is to integrate their past with their present so that they can move into the future with a positive understanding of who they are, and why they were unable to remain with their family. For this to be achieved, Acorn Fostering Services focuses on recruiting foster families who:

- Share attitudes that are open and flexible, rather than holding closed and rigid ones.
- Can face sadness and loss and are not embarrassed or threatened to talk about the feelings involved.
- Can put the needs of children first and do not feel undermined by important past relationships in the child's life.
- Are able to look honestly at themselves and acknowledge their strengths and limitations.
- Do not expect to do the fostering tasks in isolation but are able to ask, use and welcome help as and when needed.

Foster carers will be expected and supported to work positively towards a plan for rehabilitation and also to undertake life story work where appropriate. In the case of carers preparing children for permanency or adoption they will be expected to work sensitively with natural parents, assist foster children to move on positively and work appropriately with all professionals involved.

Acorn Fostering Services sees its relationship with Local Authorities as a partnership to achieve the best possible outcome in relation to each set of circumstances. We therefore endeavour to operate a transparent service to contracting Local Authorities based on the principles of best value and open dialogue. We aim for an open door policy whereby Local Authorities can feel free to inspect our organisation at any time within the context of existing service agreements. We also fully support the aims of inspection through Ofsted.

9. SERVICES AND FACILITIES WE PROVIDE

The agency carries out assessments of individuals and families to perform the task of foster carers for children to be placed in their care. The agency presents potential foster carers' Form Fs to an Independent Fostering Panel for recommendations. The agency trains, supports and guides carers who are duly approved by its Agency Decision Maker and is responsible for paying out fostering allowances.

The Agency's foster care is a part of the service for children and young people who are not able to live with their families and whose needs can best be met by being placed in a family setting. The agency aims to provide a range of placements for children and young people, both short and long term placement with a view to:

- a) Creating space in relationships and providing short breaks of care for children/young people from their families/carers
- b) Rehabilitating children/young people back to their families
- c) Preparing children/young people for moving on to a permanent placement where they cannot return home safely.
- d) Providing a substitute family for children/young people for the duration of their childhood with the foster carer being the primary care.
- e) Providing an assessment of the child/young person's placement needs.

In accordance of Fostering Services Regulations, the agency ensures that children/young person placed with its foster carers are protected from any harm and their overall needs such as contact, health, education, cultural, employment etc are met.

PLACEMENTS PROVIDED

Acorn Fostering Services provides foster family placements to support children and young people in care through the transition to adulthood. AFS works closely with a Local Authorities to understand their specific needs relating to foster placements in particular areas. As an agency we endeavour to recruit carers from a range of backgrounds who are able to provide high quality foster placements for children in care.

The types of placement we normally provide are:

Emergency: Emergency foster carers are prepared to take a child into their home at any time of the night or day and have them stay for a few days. This type of fostering is unplanned and used at short notice, for example, if a lone parent is taken into hospital and there is no one to care for their child. Many of our carers can provide unplanned emergency placements for individual children and sibling groups

Respite and short-break: Respite and short break placements are provided to give parents a break or offer additional support if they do not have their own support network. In addition, respite is also offered to our own foster carers and is available in order to support placement demands and needs.

Bridging Placements: These form part of an intermediate term plan for the child and can last for up to two years. Acorn Fostering Services foster carers undertaking bridging placements will be expected to be competent to work with children in preparation for adoption, hold the child whilst waiting court decisions and work at plans for independence. Bridging placements may also involve working towards rehabilitation with the family. We endeavour to inform our carers that bridging placements can be very stressful and unsettling for children, and we therefore expect carers to demonstrate special understanding.

Short term: All our carers are approved to provide short-term placements. This can mean anything from an overnight stay to a period of several months. Short-term foster carers provide a temporary place to stay until the child can return home to their own family or a longer-term fostering placement or adoption arrangement can be made.

Long term: Sometimes children will not be able to go back to live with their own families for a number of years, if at all. Long-term fostering allows children and young people to stay in a family where they can feel secure, often while maintaining contact with their birth family. We have a number of carers who are approved to provide long term placements

Permanent: These placements are where adoption is not an option, and the foster carer will care for a child/young person up to and into adult independence.

Parent and Child Placements: We are able to provide foster care placements where parents receive support and guidance to help develop parenting skills. Foster carers can also assist Local Authorities with their assessments by providing information relating to parenting capacity/capabilities. If requested, and by arrangement with the placing Local Authority, a formal assessment of parenting ability can be undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced social workers of the agency or our independent social workers in conjunction with the our foster carer. Comprehensive written assessment reports, for use in child protection conferences, planning meetings, statutory reviews or court proceedings, can be prepared.

Solo Placements: We have foster carers who are able to provide solo placements. this is where the placing authority requires the child to be the only child or youngest/oldest child in placement, this would need to be specified at the referral stage to enable the placement to be matched with vacancies accordingly.

Sibling Placements: Many of our foster carers are able to care for large sibling groups which ensures children remain with their brothers and sisters.

Unaccompanied Asylum seeking Children and Young People: A number of our foster carers have experience of caring for children who arrive in the UK without a family.

Staying put arrangement: We encourage our foster carers to consider a staying put arrangement. The young person must be a former looked after child but is no longer a looked after child. They are a young adult and a care leaver. They are entitled to support as a care leaver and will be allocated a Personal Advisor. The

foster carer is no longer acting in the capacity of foster carer for that young adult. They are their 'former foster carer'. The foster placement becomes a 'staying put arrangement' and is not governed by Fostering Services Regulations. The 'former foster carer' offering a staying put arrangement may at the same time be offering foster placements to children who are looked after. Such placements will continue to be subject to provisions of the Fostering Services Regulations.

Disability

Acorn Fostering Services has been developing its service to be able to undertake placements for children and young people who may have a range of complex needs or disabilities.

OTHER SERVICES OFFERED BY ACORN FOSTERING SERVICES

Therapeutic Services

Acorn Fostering Services recognises that each child is an individual whose needs are unique. We also believe that to best meet these individual needs it is important to access a variety of services. With this in mind, we will contract out relevant specialist services for specific children when they are needed in agreement with the Local Authority. We have established links with psychotherapists, counsellors, mentors and other appropriate adults who have been DBS checked and vetted.

Education

Acorn Fostering Services is committed to enabling children to attend mainstream school and/or local special needs units. When children are statemented, foster carers will be encouraged to promote positive liaison with schools.

Foster carers will be encouraged to promote positive liaison with schools at all times. However, if a child is excluded from school or cannot attend for whatever reason, in liaison with the placing authority Acorn Fostering Services will source educational support. Taking into account the capacity of each child, the normal protocol would be to consult with the school regarding setting up an Out of School support package which could include individual tutoring and a range of broad and balanced curriculum of activities, to occupy the child/young person during school hours and meet the requirements of his/her individual education plan.

Advice, support and events

Acorn Fostering Services has a policy that all children from primary age upwards have access to a source of independent advice and support as needed. During the main school holidays there are events, which are organised for both the looked after and birth children of foster carers.

10. THE PROCESS OF RECRUITMENT, ASSESSMENT AND APPROVAL OF FOSTER CARERS

KEY POINTS

- 10.1 The process for assessing a person's suitability to foster is to be carried out in two stages. Normally stage 1 will be carried out before commencing stage 2. In some circumstances, however, these can be carried out concurrently. Where this is the case the information required for stage 1 must be sought as soon as possible, and the decision about whether an applicant has successfully completed stage 1 must be made within 10 working days of all the information required in that stage being received.
- 10.2 If in stage 1 it is determined that an applicant is not suitable to foster, the applicant has no right to make representations to the agency or seek a review of this decision by the independent review mechanism (IRM). But if in stage 2, following a brief or full report, it is determined that an applicant is not suitable to foster, the applicant will be informed in writing that they may (within 28 calendar days) make representations to the agency or seek a review of this determination by the IRM.
- 10.3 The agency when assessing a person's suitability to foster can access the person's previous fostering or adoption records to inform the assessment (subject to relevant consents). On the other hand when sharing information about individuals applying to foster or adopt, it is important that this is done in a way that protects their personal information.
- 10.4 If an applicant has been a foster carer in the previous 12 months, and a written reference from their previous fostering service is obtained, there is no requirement to also interview personal referees. The agency however reserves the right to do so if they feel it is required before a decision can be made.
- 10.5 A decision to change a foster carer's terms of approval can be implemented immediately if the foster carer provides written agreement to the change and there is a written statement by the agency concerning the foster family's support needs.
- 10.6 No one has a right to be a foster carer - fostering decisions must focus on the interests of the child.

PROCESS FOR ASSESSMENT AND APPROVAL OF FOSTER CARERS

- 10.7 Each foster carer is subjected to and will be required to participate in a comprehensive assessment of their ability to carry out the fostering task and must be formally approved by the agency before a child or young person is placed in their care.
- 10.8 AFS complies with the requirements laid out by The Children Act 1989 and the Fostering Services Regulations 2011 and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013. In line with the regulations, AFS follows a two staged process for assessment of foster carers

STAGE 1 OF THE ASSESSMENT

- 10.9 When a person applies to the agency to become a foster carer, the agency will assess their suitability to foster.
- 10.10 In some circumstances, if the agency is not currently recruiting foster carers, or if the applicant's "offer" is not compatible with the agency's current recruitment objectives (e.g. the applicant wishes to foster babies but the service is currently only recruiting foster carers for teenagers), the agency may decide not to proceed to an assessment.
- 10.11 Where the above circumstances do not apply, when a person applies to foster, the agency would assess their suitability in accordance with regulation 26 of the Fostering Services Regulation 2011.
- 10.12 To ensure that prospective applicant/s are fully aware of the realities, the demands of fostering and to ensure they make an informed decision about applying to be a foster carer, the agency offers a two day preparatory training: Skills to Foster (STF). This is mandatory requirement for all applicants to attend as part of the assessment process.
- 10.13 In line with Regulation 26(1A) the agency will obtain the information specified in Part 1 of Schedule 3 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011 which includes:
- the applicant's full name, address and date of birth;
 - details of the applicant's health, supported by a medical report;
 - particulars of children in the applicant's family (whether or not they are members of the household) and any other children in the household;
 - particulars of the household's accommodation;
 - the outcome of any request or application made by the applicant, or any member of the applicant's household, to foster or adopt children or for registration as an early or later years provider under Part 3 of the Childcare Act 2006, including particulars of any previous approval or refusal of approval;
 - the name and address of any fostering service that the applicant

- has been an approved foster carer for in the preceding 12 months;
- names and addresses of two persons who will provide personal references for the applicant;
- in relation to the applicant and each member of their household aged 18 or over, an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Certificate;
- details of any current and any previous marriage, civil partnership or similar relationship
- consult the local authority in whose area the applicant lives, if this is different to the fostering service; and
- interview at least two personal referees and prepare written reports of the interviews; or, if the person has been an approved foster carer for another fostering service in the preceding twelve months, request a written reference from that fostering service.

10.14 If an applicant has been a foster carer in the previous 12 months, and a written reference from their previous fostering service is obtained, there is no requirement to also interview personal referees. However, the agency can seek verbal and/or written references from personal referees, in addition to the fostering service's reference, if they choose to do so. If the previous fostering service does not provide a reference, for whatever reason, interviews with two personal referees must be conducted.

10.15 Where an applicant has been approved previously, or is currently approved, as a foster carer or prospective adopter, regulation 26(1A) gives AFS (as the agency undertaking assessment) the power to request access to records about the applicant held by the fostering service or adoption agency which granted the approval (provided that the applicant consents). That service/agency must provide access within 15 working days of a request being received (regulation 32(6) of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations and regulation 42(1) of the Adoption Agency Regulations). Guidance about how information should be shared is set out below. Records compiled by another fostering service, or an adoption agency, can be used to inform the new assessment of the applicant's suitability to foster. For instance, if previous partners have been interviewed in the past to verify facts, and the current assessing social worker is satisfied with the records in respect of these interviews, it should not be necessary to repeat the interviews if no further information is required. The assessing social worker should, however, satisfy themselves as to the quality and continuing relevance of the information before using it to inform the current assessment.

10.16 Once an applicant has contacted the AFS, the agency will seek the information required by regulation 26(1A) as soon as possible.

10.17 At any point during stage 1 of the assessment process, if the agency's decision maker decides that the applicant is not suitable to foster, they will write to the applicant informing them of this decision and give full reasons for it (The Fostering Services Regulation 26(1B) and (1C))

10.18 At the latest, the decision about whether or not the applicant has successfully completed stage 1 must be reached, and the applicant should be informed, within 10 working days of all the stage 1 information being received (The Fostering Services Regulation 26(1A)).

10.19 If, within this timeframe, it is decided not to continue with an assessment because of information collected as part of stage 1, the applicant must be informed that they can complain via the agency's complaints process if they are unhappy with the way in which their case has been handled. The complaints process should address whether or not the applicant's case has been handled in a reasonable way, rather than the question of the applicant's suitability to foster.

10.20 Stage 1 of the assessment process is intended to provide the agency decision maker with basic information about the applicant to enable clearly unsuitable applicants to be sifted out without unnecessary bureaucracy or expenditure of time and resource by the agency or the applicant.

10.21 More detailed information is collected in stage 2 of the assessment.

STAGE 2 OF THE ASSESSMENT

10.22 If it is decided to undertake stage 2 of the assessment, in accordance with the regulation 26(2) the agency will obtain the information about the applicant set out in Part 2 of Schedule 3 of the regulations:

- details of personality;
- persuasion;
- racial origin, cultural and linguistic background and capacity to care for a child from any particular racial origin or cultural or religious background;
- past and present employment or occupation, standard of living, leisure activity and interests;
- previous experience (if any) of caring for their own and other children;
- skills, competence and potential relevant to their capacity to care effectively for a child placed with them.

10.23 This information will be taken into account in considering the suitability of the applicant to become a foster carer, and the suitability of their household, and will be included in a written report to the fostering panel along with recommendations regarding any terms of approval.

10.24 In line with the Regulation 26(3), if, before the assessment is complete, information comes to light indicating that the applicant is unlikely to be suitable to foster, a 'brief report' will be compiled setting out details of the assessment done and the reasons for considering the applicant unsuitable. The applicant will be:

- notified that the brief report is to be sent to the panel;
- provided with a copy of the brief report; and
- given 10 working days from the date of the notification to send

their observations to the Agency.

- 10.25 The brief report will then be presented to the fostering panel for consideration, along with any observations submitted by the applicant and any other relevant information.
- 10.26 The Agency's decision maker's determination about whether to terminate the assessment following a brief report will take account of the recommendations of the fostering panel.
- 10.27 A stage 2 assessment that has been started must be completed, unless:
- the assessment is terminated following a brief report;
 - the applicant withdraws from the process;
 - the applicant is deemed unsuitable as a result of stage 1 of the assessment (where stages 1 and 2 have been carried out in parallel); or
 - It becomes apparent that the applicant or an adult member of their household has been convicted of, or cautioned for, a specified offence (defined in regulation 26(6)).
- 10.28 As outlined under Key Points, Stage 2 assessment information can be obtained, and the assessment carried out, in parallel with stage 1 of the assessment. However, if the decision maker determines that an applicant is unsuitable to foster more than 10 working days after the information required by regulation 26(1A) has been received, or as a result of information required by regulation 26(2), then the provider must follow the stage 2 procedure and the determination must take account of a fostering panel recommendation informed by either a brief report or a full assessment report.
- 10.29 The Regulations only allow for the approval of individuals as suitable to foster. However, where two people will be sharing the care of a looked after child, whether they be a couple or any other partnership, the assessment of their suitability should be done jointly.
- 10.30 Where a single foster carer takes a partner who will be sharing the care of any foster children, they must discuss this with their supervising social worker so that agreement can be reached about any implications for their approval to foster and so the partner's suitability to foster can be assessed within an appropriate timescale.

APPROVAL OF FOSTER CARER

- 10.31 Upon completion of stage 2, a written report covering both stages 1 and 2 of the assessment will be compiled, with recommendations about the applicant's suitability to foster and any terms of approval.
- 10.32 The applicant will be notified that the full assessment report is to be sent to the panel, provided with a copy of the report and given 10 working days

from the date of the notification to send their observations to the Agency.

- 10.33 The full assessment report must then be presented to the fostering panel for consideration along with any observations submitted by the applicant and any other relevant information.
- 10.34 A full assessment should be undertaken within a timescale which allows the fostering panel to make a recommendation on approval within eight months of the applicant applying to be assessed.
- 10.35 The Agency decision maker must take the panel recommendation into account when making a decision on the applicant's application to foster.
- 10.36 Subject to the next paragraph, nobody may be approved as a foster carer if they have been cautioned for, or convicted of, a specified offence, unless they were under the age of 18 at the time of the offence. Regulation 26(6) explains what is meant by a specified offence¹.
- 10.37 In considering an application by an individual (or a member of their household) who is employed by the agency or the wider organisation, care must be taken to avoid a conflict of interest.
- 10.38 Where the Agency Decision Maker decides, by taking account of any recommendation from the fostering panel, to approve the applicants as foster carers then this must be notified in writing as per the agency's policy and procedures for notification of the decision.
- 10.39 Upon approval, foster carers should be issued with an agreed form of identification by the agency to enable their role as a foster carer to be verified.
- 10.40 Once a foster carer has been approved by a fostering service, they cannot be approved by another service until their original approval has been terminated.

Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)

- 10.41 Where, however, following a completed stage 2 assessments or brief report, the agency considers that an applicant is unsuitable to be a foster carer, or where they consider that a foster carer's terms of approval should be changed, particular requirements apply:
- The applicant must be given a written determination - a notice that the decision maker proposes not to approve them as a foster carer or to amend their terms of approval, together with the reasons for this and, where the fostering panel made a recommendation, a copy of this. This is defined as a 'qualifying determination' by section 4 of the Independent Review of Determinations (Adoption and Fostering) Regulations 2009.
 - The applicant must be advised that they may, within 28 days of the

date of the notice, either submit written representations to the decision maker or apply to the Secretary of State for a review of the determination by the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM).

- The option to seek a review by the IRM does not apply if the applicant is considered unsuitable in accordance with regulation 26(7), where the foster carer or any member of their household age 18 or over has been convicted or cautioned in respect of a specified offence.
- If, within 28 days, no representations are received and no application is made to the IRM, the decision maker is free to decide whether or not to approve the applicant as a foster carer (following a full assessment), continue the assessment (following a brief report) or amend their terms of approval.
- If representations are received, the matter must be referred back to the fostering panel and a decision then made taking account of the panel's further recommendations. If the application is referred to the IRM, the fostering service must, within 10 working days of notification of this, supply the IRM with the documentation submitted to the fostering panel and any relevant information received subsequently, along with copies of the notices of determination (regulation 29).
- The decision maker must take account of the recommendation of the IRM, as well as that of the original fostering panel, in reaching a decision about approval.
- A determination to change a foster carer's terms of approval is not a qualifying determination if, following a review of the carer's approval under regulation 28:
 - the fostering service provides the foster carer with a written statement setting out whether they consider the foster carer's household, including any children placed there, to have additional support needs as a result of the change, if so what these support needs are and how they will be met, and
 - the foster carer provides their written agreement to the change. Foster carers must not be pressured to accept changes to their terms of approval.

11. REVIEWS AND TERMINATIONS OF APPROVAL OF FOSTER CARERS

- 11.1 Approval of all foster carers must be reviewed, and a decision about suitability made, within a year of approval, and thereafter whenever it is felt necessary, but at intervals of no more than twelve months.
- 11.2 The review must consider whether the foster carer and their household continue to be suitable. The agency must make whatever enquiries it considers necessary to inform this judgement, which may include checks in relation to any new members of the household. Specifically, it must take into account the views of the foster carer, any child placed and

the responsible authority for any child who has been in placement during the previous year. In practice, the latter will mean obtaining the views of the social worker for any child in placement since the last review (regulation 28).

- 11.3 A written report of the review must be prepared, and in the case of the first review this must be presented to the fostering panel for a recommendation. If it is decided, taking account of any recommendation from the fostering panel if applicable, that the foster carer and their household continue to be suitable, then the foster carer must be notified in writing.
- 11.4 Before making a decision that a foster carer or their household is no longer suitable, the decision maker must issue a qualifying determination and the procedure outlined in para 10.41 above must be followed.
- 11.5 If a foster carer's approval is terminated, the foster carer must be notified in writing and a copy of the notice must be sent to the responsible authority for any child placed by another local authority and to the relevant local authority if the foster carer lives outside the area of the agency.

Change of Approval

- 11.6 The same procedure applies where the agency considers that a foster carer's terms of approval should be amended, unless, as set out in para 10.5 and 10.41 last bullet point, there is written agreement to the change from the foster carer and a written statement from the agency stating whether there are any support needs resulting from the change, and if so what they are and how they will be met.

Resignations

- 11.7 A foster carer may at any point give written notice that they wish to resign from the role, in which case their approval is automatically terminated 28 days after receipt of the notice by the agency (regulation 28(13)).
- 11.8 The decision-maker does not have the power to decline a resignation as any resignation takes effect automatically after 28 days, but this need not prevent the agency from forming a view about the person's future suitability to be a foster carer.
- 11.9 AFS may wish to advise a foster carer who indicates that they are considering giving written notice of their resignation that once this is given, it automatically takes effect after 28 days regardless of whether the foster carer withdraws their notice. Should a foster carer who has resigned want to foster again, their suitability would need to be reassessed in line with the 2011 Regulations.
- 11.10 Once a foster carer has resigned the agency has no responsibility to confirm resignation through panel, although it may be helpful to notify the panel to inform its monitoring role.

12. THE DECISION MAKER

- 12.1 The agency has a Director who is the decision maker (ADM). The ADM receives the panel's recommendations and makes decisions as required.
- 12.2 More than one decision maker may be appointed, but they may not delegate their authority to another person. Standard 23 of the Fostering Services: Minimum Standards (2011) sets out the qualifications, knowledge and experience required of the decision maker.
- 12.3 Regulation 27 requires that the decision maker must take account of the fostering panel's recommendation and any recommendation by the IRM before deciding whether or not to approve a person as a foster carer, and on what terms. Their decision must be made within seven working days of receipt of the panel's recommendation via the minutes (Standard 14 of the Fostering Services: Minimum Standards (2011)).
- 12.4 The decision maker is also responsible for deciding whether a person and their household remain suitable to foster, and whether the terms of approval remain suitable, following each review of the foster carer's approval. The decision should be based on the written report of the review; it must take account of any recommendation by the fostering panel (which must be provided on the occasion of the first review and may be provided for subsequent reviews) and any recommendation of the IRM.
- 12.5 In reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision maker should consider *Hofstetter v LB Barnet* and IRM [2009] EWCA 328 (Admin), in which the court set out guidance for the way in which an adoption agency decision maker should approach a case, whether it is a decision based on the agency panel's recommendation or the independent review panel's recommendation. This applies equally to fostering decision makers. The court said that it would be good discipline and appropriate for the decision maker to:
 - i. list the material taken into account in reaching the decision;
 - ii. identify key arguments;
 - iii. consider whether they agree with the process and approach of the relevant panel(s) and are satisfied as to its fairness and that the panel(s) has properly addressed the arguments;
 - iv. consider whether any additional information now available to them that was not before the panel has an impact on its reasons or recommendation;
 - v. identify the reasons given for the relevant recommendation that they do or do not wish to adopt; and state (a) the adopted reasons by cross reference or otherwise and (b) any further reasons for their decision.

- 12.6 Once a foster carer is approved, they must be notified in writing of this fact and of any terms of the approval.
- 12.7 Terms may specify a maximum number of placements which may be made at any one time or an age range for children fostered. Terms may also include factors such as short term or long term placements, short break care, or inclusion in a particular fostering scheme. Foster carers must also enter into a foster care agreement, covering the matters set out in Schedule 5 to the Regulations (regulation 2 and standard 14).
- 12.8 **Acorn Fostering Services has the following decision maker/s:**
Application to foster
Shadab Ahmad – Director and Responsible Individual
- Foster Care Reviews
Shadab Ahmad – Director, Responsible Individual

13. OUR FOSTERING PANEL

The Fostering Panel plays a key role in the improvement of standards within the agency with the aim of conducting its function bearing in mind that the welfare and safeguard of the children in care is paramount.

In line with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, AFS keeps a central list of persons suitable to sit on fostering panels. Our fostering panel meetings are generally held on a monthly basis in Leicester. The Panel is chaired by an independent chair. We have persons on our central list who come from a wide range of backgrounds and have a variety of experience in different fields relevant to child care including care leavers, foster carers, qualified social workers, qualified child mental health nursing professional, psychologist, educationist, and management to name a few. Our panels are diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and professional background. Each panel has access to specialist legal and medical advice as required.

14. TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR THE FOSTER CARERS

Post Approval Training:

It is recognised that fostering has become increasingly demanding and complex. The AFS is committed to providing quality and comprehensive training that is accessible and relevant to all our foster carers. Investing in People is one of our strongest values and we view our training programmes for carers as an important element of our support to them.

- AFS offers a comprehensive post approval training programme to its foster carers. In addition to the mandatory training, training needs for foster carer are identified throughout the year and arrangement are made for additional trainings that may seem necessary.
- The agency requires its foster carers to complete TSD standards Workbook in collecting evidence for various Standards within first year of their approval. In this direction, the agency ensures that the foster carers receive help and support from their respective supervising social workers.

Support:

Foster carers spend a good deal of their time either alone with the foster child or with their own family and the foster child. It is therefore vitally important that the carers are provided with a wide range of support to assist in the caring process. Foster Carers must be valued by all staff with whom they come into contact.

- All AFS's approved foster carers are allocated a qualified and experienced social worker, who will perform the following main tasks:
 - To supervise and support the foster carer and their family in providing a positive and safe family experience for children and young people looked after by Local Authority. It is acknowledged that fostering can be stressful and it brings about changes within the foster carer's own family home. It is important that fostering does not place undue pressure on foster carers and that their own family relationships do not begin to suffer.
 - To ensure that the statutory requirements are met. These requirements are designed to ensure that the care provided in the foster home is safe and appropriate.
 - Arrange the annual review of the foster carer's approval.
 - To monitor the progress of a child in the placement.
 - To provide on-going advice, training and information on child care matters and guidance on working with the Local Authority, parents, and other professionals involved.

- **Office Duty Support:**

AFS runs a duty cover rota which is serviced by a qualified social worker. This means that where required foster carers of children can contact the duty officer during office hours in case of an emergency or where their allocated supervising social worker is unavailable. They will be able to contact the on call Duty Social Worker on **0116 251 3550**.

- **Out of Hours Support:**

AFS provides 24/7 support to its foster carers and children/young people. The agency provides an "out of hours" support to all of its foster carers. They will be able to contact the on call Duty Social Worker on **0116 251 3550**.

- **Foster Carer's Support Group:**

AFS has provisions for foster carer's support group meetings which are facilitated by a qualified and experienced social worker and are run in partnership with foster carers. These support groups are designed to offer carers an opportunity to share experiences and learn from each other. These support groups provide excellent opportunities for offering and gaining peer support, friendship, empathy and mutual recognition. The support group will also provide valuable help in the development of the agency's policies and quality of services.

➤ **FOSTER TALK Membership:**

In addition to the support provided by the agency: All our foster carers at ACORN Fostering Services are provided with membership of FOSTER TALK and enjoy a comprehensive package of support including access to legal advice helpline, legal expenses insurance cover, advice on accountancy matters, independent financial advice specific to foster carers, including mortgages, income protection, pensions etc, advice on education relating to looked after child, counselling, access to on-line carer forum to list a few.



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