

Acorn Fostering Services Limited

Acorn Fostering Services Limited
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.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 65 approved foster carers providing placements to 53 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 27 November to 1 December 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 16 May 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: Requires improvement

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- From their starting points, children and young people make very positive progress in all areas of their lives. Placement stability is good and provides them with new opportunities and experiences.
- Foster carers demonstrate a detailed awareness and understanding of the known histories of children and young people placed with them. They strive to ensure that each child feels part of their carer family and has positive contact with their own birth family and friends.
- Agency staff routinely go above and beyond their roles to support their carers and those children and young people placed with them. They offer very flexible and responsive support, which is highly valued by carers, children and young people and placing authorities.
- Agency staff and managers have made considerable progress in relation to the identified shortfalls from the last inspection. They have fully considered all areas of concern and made a number of changes and improvements to how the agency is run. All of the shortfalls from the last inspection have been fully met and no shortfalls have been identified from this inspection.
- Agency staff and carers consistently report high levels of satisfaction in their roles and with the support, supervision and training they receive. They all report feeling 'part of a family' and placing the child at the centre of all they do.
- The agency has a robust and experienced fostering panel in place. The chairperson is very skilled and brings a wealth of relevant experience to the role. Panel membership is diverse and experienced. Records clearly reflect how recommendations are made. The agency decision-maker also demonstrates detailed consideration of all documentation in forming their decisions.
- Children and young people feel safe and are kept safe by competent and skilled foster carers. Management monitoring and oversight of all relevant areas of the services provided is robust and provides additional scrutiny.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children and young people make good progress from their starting points in all areas of their lives. They are well matched with carers who show commendable skill and commitment to ensuring that their needs are met. Matching is good and reflects the skill of the placement officers within the agency. As one commissioning officer said: 'This agency is very good at working with us to find the best possible placements for children. The staff know their carers well and we have been very satisfied with the outcomes for our children.'

Children and young people consistently report having very positive relationships with their carers. They feel listened to and respected. They also have very positive relationships with the agency social workers. There is a real 'team around the child' approach evident. This provides not only carers but also children and young people with practical and emotional support at all times. Agency staff support children and young people placed at times of crisis. This leads to increased placement stability and children and young people feeling secure and valued.

The educational needs of children and young people are very well met. Carers work closely and proactively with education providers to ensure that each child and young person has suitable educational provision in place. This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. Carers know the local provisions and resources and access them fully. They advocate for children and young people in their care and celebrate their successes. The agency recently held an annual event. This celebrated the achievements of placed children and young people. They received certificates and trophies. Young people leave formal education and go on to further education or training. Their life chances are improved through the consistency of care and support provided to them by carers and agency staff.

Children and young people receive all necessary support and services in relation to meeting their health needs. Carers ensure that they have access to services in a timely manner. Agency staff further support this. Carers receive training which provides them with the skills necessary to meet specific emotional needs. They apply their learning to how they care and support children and young people. They regularly consider the progress made by each child in relation to their health needs and record this well on case files. This enables children and young people themselves to see how well they have progressed.

The agency has recently introduced an independence skills pack for use by carers with relevant young people. This further enables carers to prepare young people for their eventual move to adult life. Carers display a real commitment to ensuring that young people feel well prepared for their move to independence. One young person has learned how to use public transport unaided. This enables them to now make their own way to visit family members. Parent and child placements provide high levels of support and guidance for young parents. As one parent-to-be said: 'I am

learning how to cook, budget and look after myself and my baby. The carer is really helping me a lot. I would score my carers 10/10.'

Agency staff seek the views of children and young people regularly. Their feedback is acted on by staff. A recent event involved local police meeting with young people to discuss and consider sexual exploitation. This reflects how well the agency considers the relevant issues and the needs of children and young people looked after. Further events are being planned for guest speakers to come along and meet with children and young people based on their feedback.

The agency also promotes and encourages staying-put placements. There are currently six such arrangements, with consideration being given to two more. Some of those arrangements include young adults who came to this country as unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. This again reflects positive placement stability and carers viewing the children and young people placed with them as part of their own families. It provides real security and a sense of belonging and being valued.

Prospective carers chose this agency for its prompt and welcoming approach. They report liking the ethos of the agency and feeling well supported throughout the assessment process. A dedicated recruitment officer carefully considers all potential applicants and has robust screening processes in place. The agency is committed to ensuring that prospective carers progress to assessment and approval only if they have the necessary skills and ability to provide high-quality care to children and young people. A recently approved carer stated: 'It was totally the right decision to come to this agency. The staff are amazing at every level and I feel part of a family. I feel valued and am treated as a professional.'

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

The dedicated placement officers complete risk assessments for all children and young people being considered for a placement. They consider information provided by the placing authority and use this to provide a baseline risk assessment. This is then routinely updated and reviewed by carers and agency staff. This provides carers with clear information on the actual or potential risks posed by children and young people placed with them. Agency staff also diligently chase placing authorities for any missing information and have clear escalation processes in place to secure information.

Carers support children and young people well in relation to any missing-from-care incidents. There have been very few such situations, but carers understand the need to follow agreed protocols to ensure the safe return of children and young people. They also show real skill in identifying and responding to concerns around bullying, radicalisation and self-harm. They receive direct and online training to support their understanding and competencies in these areas. As one carer said: 'I have access to good quality training – direct and online – which really helps me to support the young person placed with me. I can also ask for more specific or bespoke training if needed.'

Children and young people know how to make a complaint. They receive very prompt responses from the registered manager. This includes very detailed outcome letters, which clearly set out the actions taken to resolve their concerns. They also have access to a comprehensive children's guide. This sets out details of agencies and organisations they can contact for support and has full details of the agency's complaints procedures. Agency staff undertake at least one unannounced visit each year to carers. They ensure that time is spent alone with placed children and young people during these visits. They also meet with carers' own birth children. As one birth child said: 'The supervising social worker always takes the time to talk with me and seek my views. I feel very involved and included and can share my views openly.'

Carers understand the agency's behaviour management policy. They undertake mandatory training on de-escalation and breakaway techniques. They support children and young people to understand their own triggers and how to resolve any emotional distress they may be experiencing. One carer reflected on how a child placed with her is now able to recognise the signs of when they may get angry and lose control. She said: 'They now see the signs and can take time out and have strategies which are more effective and safe.' For some children and young people, developing such positive and safe coping strategies is a significant achievement.

Recruitment and monitoring of all agency staff has greatly improved. Clear and robust systems now ensure that all new staff and carers checks are done and that satisfactory information is obtained and recorded. This prevents unsuitable staff or carers from being recruited to work in this agency. The agency places a strong focus on ensuring that prospective and approved carers receive good preparation and training on safeguarding and child protection issues. It now employs the services of an independent therapist. This person assists with training to carers. Carers report high levels of satisfaction at this development. They feel that training is now more focused and relevant. It provides them with the skills and confidence to understand and respond to abuse and neglect issues of those children and young people placed with them.

Where allegations have been made about carers, these have been responded to in a very timely and professional manner by managers. Carers report feeling very well supported throughout the investigation process. They understand the process and role of the designated officer. Agency staff work closely with placing authorities and other involved agencies to resolve any concerns, with a strong focus on the safety of children and young people being evident. Carer personnel records now clearly reflect all actions taken and decisions reached. Carers also receive outcome letters from the registered manager at the end of the investigative process. Early review meetings take place to consider any allegations made against carers and to consider their continued approval. This is very positive and reflects an agency intent on ensuring the safety of children and young people looked after.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager came into post earlier this year. He has extensive experience of working in fostering services and teams. There is now a much clearer

management structure within the agency. Staff and carers all speak highly of the manager and the support and management oversight he provides.

The agency is now fully staffed with suitably qualified and experienced staff. Caseloads for supervising social workers are manageable and enable them to offer high levels of support to both carers and children and young people placed. Staff feel highly valued and report significant improvements being made to the recording systems used within the agency. They now receive regular and high-quality supervision from the registered manager each month. They have access to a wide range of training and development opportunities. This includes attending training with approved carers. This is highly valued by both staff and carers. There is a real 'family feel' to the agency. A commissioning officer for a local authority said: 'There is always a lovely feel when I visit. The staff are all so welcoming and committed to their work.'

The use of students within the agency is now much clearer. Students receive direct and close supervision during placements by a qualified social worker in the agency. They undertake assessments only under the direct supervision of qualified and experienced staff. Recording systems now clearly reflect the co-working role of students on placement.

Significant changes have been made to the fostering panel since the last inspection. There is now a new chairperson and several new panel members. The chairperson has a wealth of relevant experience and skills. She and panel members provide robust oversight and scrutiny of assessments undertaken. There are very clear and stringent quality assurance mechanisms in place now. Written minutes from panel meetings have been changed. They now clearly reflect the discussions and consideration of all cases brought to panel. They include clear and detailed accounts of how panel members reach their recommendations.

The recording by the agency decision-maker has been improved. Records now clearly reflect how they reach their decision, including all documents considered. This provides a much clearer account of the decision-making process. Dedicated administrative support ensures that each panel meeting has the required number of members present. Panel members have all received appraisals of their performance. They have also attended training with agency staff.

The agency now has a written development plan in place. This is reviewed and considered by the registered and senior managers on a regular basis. It sets out the aims and objectives for the future of the service. The statement of purpose has been amended and a copy provided to Ofsted. The registered manager has good systems in place to monitor the activities of the service. He has introduced reflective supervision sessions for agency staff. Recording of complaints and allegations now includes a section on 'learning points'. This reflects a manager with real skills and competencies. Staff, carers and children and young people looked after feel fully involved in how the agency operates.

Consultation events take place regularly with carers to consider how improvements can be made. One carer stated: 'I have been involved recently in a group to consider

how we record and sort out allowances for our children. I really felt valued and listened to. Changes have been made from that meeting, which is great.' A child in a long-term placement commented: 'They are really nice and provide us with everything. There is nothing I don't like about living with them. They have helped me with a lot with things. I feel safe and know that my carers worry about me and they give me rules to follow.'

Ten requirements and 10 recommendations were made as a result of the previous inspection. They have all been fully met at the time of this inspection. No shortfalls have been identified as a result of this inspection. The journey of staff, managers and carers within this agency over the past 18 months has been very positive. They have fully considered and acted on previous issues. Feedback from external agencies and professionals is consistently positive about this agency and its staff and carers. Children and young people make positive and sustained improvements in all areas of their lives.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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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Inspector

Tracy Murty, social care inspector



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