

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

This independent fostering agency is privately owned and is based in Leicester. The agency undertakes the assessment, approval and supervision of foster carers who provide a wide range of placements for children and young people, including short-term, long-term, parent and child and emergency placements. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 24 approved fostering households providing placements for 30 children and young people.

There is no registered manager. A new manager has recently been appointed and has applied to register with Ofsted.

Inspection dates: 29 April to 3 May 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	Inadequate
---	-------------------

How well children and young people are helped and protected	Inadequate
---	------------

The effectiveness of leaders and managers	Inadequate
---	------------

There are serious and/or widespread failures that mean children and young people are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded and/or the care and experiences of children and young people are poor and they are not making progress.

Date of last inspection: 20 February 2023

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: inadequate

The overall judgment is inadequate due to serious, widespread and systemic failures which have led to some children suffering harm or being at risk of harm.

Children's lived experiences are variable. For some children, they experience stability, and they are happy with the care that foster carers provide. Overall, foster carers are committed to improving children's outcomes and supporting them to make progress. However, when foster carers struggle to meet children's safety and well-being needs, the response from the agency has been poor. This is because the support offered has been passive, there is a lack of tenacity and evidence-based practice. Not all practice has been sensitive to children's experiences.

The monitoring of children's health needs by the agency is poor. It is not assessed whether children can safely administer their own medication. Advice is conflicting from supervising social workers as to what the medication processes are. The agency is unable to assess whether children have taken their medication or not. This is necessary to keep children safe.

Some children claim disability benefits. However, senior leaders do not have a clear overview of who these children are. There is not yet a policy which outlines what the process is for supporting foster carers to meet children's financial needs.

Children's progress in education is variable. Most children attend school and are making progress. Personal education plans are recorded on children's files. However, for children without an education provision, management systems do not yet identify how long children have been out of education. This is necessary so that the agency can keep children's progress under review and take action as required. Similarly, when children are not in education, there is no plan to explain how they will maintain a good routine during the time they should be at school.

Although supervising social workers visit foster carers regularly, there is very little observation, reflection or critical evaluation of children's needs, wishes or feelings. Most written information relies on self-report by foster carers. Unannounced visits to fostering families and child consultation are of poor quality. The quality of children's bedrooms is not adequately reflected on. Supervising social workers lack creativity when trying to build meaningful relationships with children.

There has been one example where a child received disproportionate consequences without clear rationale or overview. This is not child-centred practice.

Foster carers are enthusiastic about fostering and work hard to recruit new foster carers to the agency. Although recruitment has been slow, new assessments are underway. The quality of these assessments is good.

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

The agency does not consistently ensure that children are safe. There are widespread significant shortfalls in safeguarding practice throughout the agency. Risk is increased because management tools have been ineffective in keeping children safe. Overall, staff have shown a significant lack of professional curiosity and critical reflection. This has left children at risk of harm.

Children's health and safety needs are poorly reflected in their individual safe care plans. Where children struggle with issues such as soiling or enuresis, the recordings and reflection of such conditions are poor. Supervising social workers are not offering practical guidance to foster carers to ensure that children's health needs can be met. Similarly, there is no evidence of supervising social workers ensuring that children with such health conditions are sleeping in safe and hygienic bedrooms, with clean clothes. For example, one child was neglected in their home environment. Although the foster carer was reporting a significant decline in the child's well-being, there was a lack of advocacy by the agency in ensuring that this child was safe. There was no learning review of this situation, which means that there is a high risk of repetition.

Parent and child foster placements have been poorly monitored and maintained by the agency. Although foster carers have parent and child training, supervising social workers do not. Risk assessments and safe care plans have been poor and at times absent. There was no observation of parenting capacity. Supervision arrangements were not described and there was no mention of safe sleeping or surveillance. It was not apparent from paperwork where each child slept. Similarly, it was unclear whether supervising social workers had met parents or children. This lack of rigour and poor practice negatively impacted on care planning and left children at risk of harm.

Safeguarding processes have not always been followed to keep children safe. There was an example of the agency assigning itself recommendations following a standards of care review. These recommendations were not implemented or evaluated.

The agency did not follow its own required process in carrying out a fostering assessment after a household member become a full-time member of the fostering family. There was an incident of a Disclosure and Barring Service risk assessment not being updated despite the circumstances having significantly changed.

Safety protocols are not rigorously adhered to following an allegation or serious concern. Staff do not fully understand child protection processes. There have been two occasions where staff practice has undermined the roles of wider professionals. This lack of rigour puts children at risk of harm.

Ofsted has not been notified of all serious safeguarding incidents. This undermines the regulator's ability to keep children safe.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

A manager has been appointed by the agency. This person is new to role and has only been in post for five weeks. The manager demonstrates commitment to the agency and has applied to register with Ofsted. Since being in the role, the manager has made some positive changes and has accepted the shortfalls identified in this inspection.

At the last full inspection, leadership and management of the agency was judged to be inadequate. Despite this, the responsible individual did not hold the previous manager to account for their practice. Evidence-based tools were not used by the responsible individual to assess the quality of the service effectively. Although review of quality of care reports have been completed, they do not adequately identify and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the service.

Senior leaders have not assessed or evaluated the skills, experience and learning needs of staff. For one supervising social worker, it was identified that they would benefit from going through the assessed and supported year in employment. However, this did not happen because the previous manager failed to action this. Staff are undertaking training; however, the effectiveness of training is not assessed or evaluated. The learning and development of staff have not been monitored or prioritised by senior leaders. This has contributed to significant shortfalls in their practice.

The quality of foster carer recordings and children's information is poor. Recordings lack analysis and evaluation. Recordings are largely based on self-reported information provided by the foster carers. The poor quality of recordings makes it difficult to assess children's progress. Some language used by staff is not child-centred. At times, it can appear institutionalised and insensitive towards children's feelings.

Several foster carer agreements are not recorded on the database, which is a significant shortfall. The fostering panel is diverse and suitably experienced. There has been a quarterly meeting between the agency decision-maker, manager and the panel since the last inspection. All professionals found this to be a valuable experience.

Overall, the feedback from external agencies and foster carers is positive. Foster carers are loyal to the agency with some having been with the agency for many years. Foster carers describe the agency as 'feeling like a family'. They value staff always being available if ever they need any help.

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, The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
*The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to— the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b))	13 June 2024
*The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times, and before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child's— 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)) This requirement was made at the last two inspections and is now set as a compliance notice.	13 June 2024
The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that—	13 June 2024

no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable. (Regulation 13 (2)(b)) In particular, ensure that consequences are proportionate and child-centred.	
The fostering service provider must promote the health and development of children placed with foster parents. In particular the fostering service provider must ensure that each child— 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)(b)(c)(d)) In particular, ensure that foster carers are aware of, and are supported to meet, children's individual health needs. Where children's health needs are not being met, the agency must advocate on a child's behalf. Policy guidance for children in receipt of disability benefits must be devised and implemented. This requirement is restated from the last inspection.	13 June 2024
The fostering service provider must promote the educational achievement of children placed with foster parents. In particular the fostering service provider must— promote the regular school attendance and participation in school activities of children of compulsory school age placed with foster parents. (Regulation 16 (1) (2)(b))	13 June 2024
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))	13 June 2024
The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them— receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4)(a)) This requirement is restated from the last inspection.	13 June 2024

The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. (Regulation 28 (1)) In particular, ensure that foster carers have a written fostering agreement on file. This requirement is restated from the last inspection.	13 June 2024
The registered person must maintain a system for— monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals; improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b)) 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. This requirement has been restated twice previously.	13 June 2024

*These requirements are subject to a compliance notice.

Information about this inspection

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

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC060131

Registered provider: Acorn Fostering Services Limited

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

Responsible individual: Shadab Ahmad

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 0116 251 3550

Email address: info@acornfostering.com

Inspectors

Andi Lilley-Tams, Regulatory Inspection Manager
Emma Dacres, Social Care Regulatory Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2024