

Acorn House (Fostering Services)

Acorn House (Fostering Services) Limited
Unit 436 Chambers Business Centre, Chapel Road, Chadderton, Oldham OL8 4QQ
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is privately owned. It was registered in July 2008. At the time of the inspection, 25 approved fostering households were providing foster placements for 25 children and young people.

The agency provides the following types of foster placements:

- Emergency
- Short term
- Long term
- Respite
- Parent and child

Inspection dates: 4 to 7 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: 17 May 2013

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: Not applicable

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children and young people are having good experiences with their foster families. They are living in safe, healthy, and nurturing environments.
- Foster carers are highly motivated to make a difference to each child or young person's life. As a result, children and young people make good progress across all aspects of their lives.
- Many children and young people have a sense of permanence. The agency supports a range of permanence options. In particular, many young people have been able to remain with their foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements.
- Foster carers spoken to during the inspection say that they feel valued and part of a team around the child. They have regular supervision and support visits from an appropriately qualified social worker, whom they hold in high regard.
- A wide range of training is offered to foster carers. This ensures that foster carers have the skills they need to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care.
- Foster carers and staff identify, understand and manage risks. This means that children and young people's safety is given optimum priority.
- The preparation and assessment of foster carers are timely, and assessments are generally of a high quality. The agency's fostering panel and agency decision maker's quality assurance processes are effective in identifying any shortfalls in assessments.
- Children and young people benefit from visible leadership and management. The registered manager is passionate about delivering good quality placements to children and young people.
- All staff are ambitious for children and young people. The manager is committed to the ongoing development of the service.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The quality of pre-placement information needs to be improved. Specifically, managers should improve the quality of the pre-admission risk assessment and matching process. This will ensure that the agency continues to make suitably matched placements.
- Foster carer forums or support groups do not take place on a regular basis. This is partly due to previous poor attendance. However, carers spoken with during the inspection confirm that they would like the opportunity to meet with other

foster carers on a regular basis.

- Monitoring systems should be improved to ensure consistency of practice and the accuracy of records maintained, and to make better use of electronic systems to help evaluate the impact the service is having on the lives of children and young people.
- Procedures are in place to ensure that relevant professionals and agencies are informed of significant events. However, this system is not robust. On occasions the manager has not notified HMCI, within the required timescales, of information pertaining to the protection of children.

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

Recommendations

- Prior to placement for each child, the foster carers are provided with all the information held by the fostering service that they need in order to carry out their role effectively. The information is provided in a clear, comprehensive written form, and includes the support that will be available to the foster carers. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 15.2)
- Peer support, foster care associations and/or self-help groups for foster carers are encouraged and supported. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 21.4)
- The manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 25.2)
- The registered person has a system in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of a significant event in accordance with regulation 36. The system includes what to do where a notifiable event arises at the weekend. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 29.1)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children and young people thrive in their foster placements because of the nurturing care they receive. The majority of children and young people enjoy settled long-term placements resulting in strong attachments and a sense of belonging. Some young people have remained with the same carers beyond their 18th birthday under 'staying put' arrangements. Without question, the quality of relationships that children and young people have with their foster carers helps them to feel safe and secure and, as a result, grow in confidence and self-esteem.

Children and young people lead happy, fulfilling and stable lives. Their experiences, progress and outcomes are positive, particularly in relation to education. The majority of children and young people achieve over and above what was expected of them, academically and socially. Young people are supported to proceed onto higher education or skills-based further education courses. This ensures that young people are able to fulfil their potential and have the opportunity to enter the workplace with nationally recognised qualifications.

Children and young people develop really good relationships with their foster carers, and this helps them grow and feel very much part of their foster family. Comments from children and young people include:

- 'I like everything about my foster carer. She treats me like I treat her, which is nicely, and we always have fun. She has given me opportunities and I like it here.'
- 'Things I like about living with my foster carers are that I am never lonely. I always have other children to play with and we do lots of things together.'
- 'My foster carers have helped me by supporting me in school, and wherever I feel down I can talk to them. I am happy living with my foster carers.'

Children and young people develop a strong sense of identity, and experience positive personal achievements which build self-esteem. They are active participants in clubs such as dance and drama groups and youth clubs. They also have a wide range of hobbies and interests which they pursue with their foster families, and on their own. One young person said: 'I like swimming, acting, dancing, walking, and watching music videos. Also, my friends are always welcome to come round the house. Which I like.' This further demonstrates that children and young people are provided with the same opportunities as their peers. This enhances their childhood experiences and provides a foundation for stability and a real sense of belonging.

Carers support children and young people to receive universal and specialist health care which promotes their health and well-being. Foster carers ensure that children and young people are active, eat well and attend all medical appointments. Foster carers are trained to administer first aid and medication. The agency provides all children and young people with health passports. This ensures that all health

information, such as illnesses, immunisations and appointments, are clearly recorded. As a result, young people will have a clear knowledge of their health history when they leave care.

Children and young people benefit from regular contact with family and friends. Foster carers have good communication with birth families. This ensures that children and young people develop and sustain relationships with those who are important to them.

Children and young people have a strong voice in the agency, which influences its practice positively. Supervising social workers and support workers know children and young people well. They spend time with children and young people doing direct work, and they also encourage participation through structured events. There is positive evidence of how well the agency engages children and young people to elicit their wishes and feelings. This provides meaningful input to how the agency operates.

In the main, children and young people benefit from planned transitions to their foster placements. The agency staff and managers have clear processes in place to consider the needs of all referred children and young people, and which carers they would best be placed with. That said, matching documents do not sufficiently evaluate the potential impact a new child or young person may have on existing household members. The registered manager has acknowledged that the effectiveness of the agency's matching process needs to improve. During the inspection, the agency started to identify ways of improving the template to ensure that the document is more detailed in identifying risk.

When foster carers, children or young people need to take a break, child-centred respite is provided. However, the system in relation to information sharing between carers is not robust, and to some degree is informal. On at least one occasion, the agency did not ensure that risk assessments and safe-caring documentation was shared appropriately between carers. This is not good practice, and has the potential to impact children and young people's safety.

Foster carers are approved to take emergency, short-term or long-term placements. A small number of placement disruptions have occurred. In the main, this only occurs when allegations against carers raise concerns about children or young people's safety. When that has occurred, the agency has worked in partnership with the placing authority and provided additional resources to ensure the best outcome. In most cases, this has helped children and young people move on positively.

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

The agency places the welfare and well-being of children and young people at the very heart of its practice. There are strong arrangements in place to ensure that children and young people are safeguarded. These include rigorous systems for checking the suitability of foster carers and staff, and effective training, support and supervision of foster carers.

Relationships between carers, children and young people are extremely positive. Carers build strong bonds with children and young people, and are clear about their boundaries and expectations. As a result, children and young people develop trusting relationships with their carers and feel comfortable talking about things that worry them. They know that their foster carers will listen to them, and take action to protect them.

The agency support worker consults with children and young people on a regular basis. He also plays a crucial role in involving children and young people in discussions and project work around personal safety, managing anger and emotional resilience. This has proved effective in supporting most children and young people to reduce, or in some cases stop, harmful and high-risk behaviours.

Missing-from-home episodes are extremely rare, as most children and young people are settled in their placements and are making better choices in relation to their personal safety. On the rare occasions when children or young people have either been missing or had an unauthorised absence from their placement, it has been dealt with promptly and in line with agreed protocols.

Safe-caring documents and risk assessments are sufficiently detailed and provide foster carers with guidance on how to manage potential risks. Safeguarding and safe care are mandatory training for all foster carers. This ensures that carers are well informed and able to respond to safeguarding concerns.

Foster carers also understand the impact of abuse and neglect on children and young people's behaviour. Training on attachment, managing behaviour, exploitation and radicalisation ensures that carers are well equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to respond appropriately.

Good systems are in place to ensure that foster carers provide safe and comfortable homes for children and young people to live in. Foster carer reviews are carried out annually, and unannounced visits take place twice a year. These mechanisms provide an appropriate degree of both challenge and support, to ensure that carers are working safely in the best interest of the children and young people in their care.

The agency provides good support to carers while any allegations against them are being investigated. Safeguarding professionals report that information sharing is effective and timely. However, the details of some significant events are not always shared with Ofsted in a timely manner. This hinders the regulator from effectively carrying out its safeguarding responsibilities to ensure that children and young people are protected from harm. More positively, all concerns about carers are reviewed by the agency's panel to reconsider the carers' continuing approval. This is good practice, and provides effective protection to children and young people.

Foster carers, panel members and agency staff are recruited safely and in accordance with regulation. This helps to ensure that only safe and suitable people work with, and have access to, children and young people.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager of the service has a professional social work qualification and has many years of experience in social work and management. The manager, and the staff team, ensures that children and young people are definitely at the heart of the agency.

Sufficient staffing means that supervising social workers have manageable caseloads. Supervising social workers and support staff are qualified and have the relevant skills, knowledge and experience to deliver an effective service. The staff team is well supported by regular supervision, training and annual appraisals. Appraisals take into account the views of foster carers and, where practical, the views of children and young people. This provides a more holistic review of professional practice, and helps the manager to identify development needs within the team.

Partnership working with external professionals remains consistently constructive and positive, with a clear aim to promote children and young people's progression and well-being. The agency seeks regular consultation with foster carers, children and young people, and it is evident from this consultation that the service continues to be highly valued.

Foster carers receive regular supportive supervision. Foster carers are encouraged to have the time to reflect on their own practice and well-being. Foster carers spoken with during the inspection speak positively about the support they receive from their supervising social worker and managers. Comments from foster carers include:

- 'I have an excellent supervising social worker. She advises me when necessary and is very supportive. The whole agency is very supportive.'
- 'The agency are fantastic in all areas.'
- 'A small caring agency that values its foster carers. [Agency name] staff are always happy and willing to give support and help.'
- 'We love being part of [agency name]. We love the training and have made great friends with the other foster carers.'

This clearly demonstrates that foster carers value the support they receive from the agency. Effective support also enables foster families to cope with the everyday demands of fostering.

The preparation and assessment of prospective foster carers is child centred and thorough. Foster carers report that they feel they were well prepared for the fostering task, and that the preparation training informed them about the realities of fostering as well as the positives.

The chair of the fostering panel is experienced and knowledgeable. His experience adds a degree of robustness to the process. The central list of panel members has individuals with a wealth of experiences and skills. However, the agency is mindful that the fostering panel would benefit from a more balanced gender mix. Nevertheless, the current process provides rigorous oversight of fostering

assessments.

The agency offers good pre-approval training to foster carers. The focus is on continual professional development to ensure that foster carers can meet the complex needs of children and young people. All foster carers complete their training, support and development (TSD) standards in a timely manner. This is an improvement on the previous years when only 81% had completed their TSD workbooks. Currently, no carers are overdue.

The agency has attempted to re-establish foster care support groups on a number of occasions. However, this has had varying success, and to some extent momentum has faded. The agency acknowledges that poor attendance at some groups is a concern, as foster carers simply choose not to attend. The agency acknowledges that developing innovative and creative ideas may increase attendance at support groups in the future.

Leaders and managers maintain some good quality assurance systems. For example, the outcome measuring tools enable the manager to understand and track the progress of children and young people. Furthermore, the registered manager has strengthened some aspects of monitoring. These include a new system for tracking the administration of medication and responses to missing-from-home episodes.

However, other aspects of monitoring need to improve. Although performance management systems are in place, these have not consistently been used to good effect. For example, on at least one occasion there was a considerable delay in addressing significant shortfalls in staff practice. As a result, it is not easy for the registered manager to evaluate staff's performance and the quality of their work. The agency has since acknowledged this shortfall and is committed to strengthening this area of practice.

The agency continues to use a service development plan to drive forward further improvements. The statement of purpose for the agency has recently been updated, and a copy provided to Ofsted. The children's guide is regularly reviewed to ensure that it is child friendly and contains all necessary information.

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

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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: SC377311

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