

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 independent fostering agency is privately owned and was registered by Ofsted in July 2008. The main function of the agency is to undertake the recruitment, assessment and training of foster carers and to provide care and support to children. The agency provides the following types of fostering placements:

- Emergency
- Short term
- Long term
- Respite placements

Young people who reach the age of 18 can remain living with their foster parents into adulthood.

The agency currently has 22 approved fostering households and 31 children in placement.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 13 to 17 September 2021

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 **requires improvement to be good**

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

Date of last inspection: 4 December 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children placed with this agency make good progress in all areas of their lives. They receive a level of care which meets their individual social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. Children develop strong and meaningful relationships with their foster carers, and this enables them to form and maintain good attachments and to develop a positive view of themselves.

Children rarely experience unplanned placement endings. When children do move on, it is usually part of a planned move. A number of children who were initially placed on a short-term basis have settled well and remain with their foster carers, some under highly successful 'staying put' arrangements. Specific training is provided to foster carers to support them to be fully prepared to help young people to acquire a range of knowledge and skills. This, in turn, helps children to move successfully into independent or semi-independent living.

A number of sibling groups are placed with the agency's foster carers, and many of these are long-term, stable placements in which children feel cherished and develop a sense of belonging to a positive family.

Children's needs in relation to their identity are met well. Children are appropriately matched with foster carers who can understand and meet these needs.

Children's attendance at school is good. Staff and foster carers have high aspirations for children. This results in children developing a high level of motivation, and their aspirations for their own future significantly increase. One child who previously refused to attend school is now fully engaged in education, with the full support of his foster carers, and is enjoying a football programme and making excellent progress.

Children's health is monitored by the agency, and children have regular health checks. Foster carers ensure that children, including those with complex health needs, have access to additional services in order to promote the best possible health outcomes.

The agency ensures that children have the opportunity to express their views, wishes and feelings in a variety of ways. Children are empowered by staff and foster carers to contribute to foster carers' annual reviews and to their own looked after reviews.

Staff and foster carers understand that children placed with them may have experienced traumatic and chaotic lifestyles and, as a result, they often experience difficulties in establishing routines and adhering to behavioural boundaries. Foster carers understand that children's behaviour is a means of communication. The agency ensures that foster carers receive support and training in relation to developing effective boundaries and behaviour management strategies.

During periods of national restrictions, the agency has creatively engaged children and supported foster carers. Staff have arranged virtual quizzes, bingo, coffee mornings and support groups. Foster carers' supervision has taken place utilising IT technology, with 'doorstep' visits taking place as appropriate.

Children reported that they feel happy and settled with their foster carers.

One child told inspectors that she thinks the agency is a 'wonderful fostering agency which feels like her extended family'.

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

Children report that they feel safe and protected from harm and were able to identify trusted adults whom they can talk to about any concerns, including about their foster carers. Children who have experienced severe trauma and multiple placement changes in the past now enjoy secure attachments to their foster carers. This helps children to not only feel safe, but to develop self-efficacy.

Foster carers understand the needs of the children and provide them with individualised care. The agency has a low number of children who experience high-risk behaviours. Where these behaviours do occur, foster carers respond effectively.

Foster carers are trained in all aspects of safeguarding, including the risks of sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, self-harm and extremism. This ensures that they are equipped with the tools to recognise risk and respond appropriately. One foster carer spoke highly about the training he received and was able to demonstrate how he had been able to translate this learning into practice when a child placed with him was missing from home.

The incidence of complaints and allegations is low, but where these do occur they are managed well.

Supervising social workers generally work well with other professionals, which further strengthens safeguarding practices within the agency. One independent reviewing officer commented on the 'excellent communication between the agency and other professionals, which has ensured a consistency of approach to ensuring that the child is safe in all areas of his life.'

Health and safety checks are completed in line with regulatory requirements and include additional checks when foster carers take children on holiday.

Safer recruitment practices adopted by the agency ensure that staff and foster carers who provide services to children are fit and appropriate to do so.

Children are matched carefully with foster carers. However, the same processes are not routinely followed when matching children with foster carers for respite

purposes. The rationale for the decision-making in relation to respite arrangements is not always clear.

Written records do not always reflect levels of risk. Risk management plans outline clearly the actions to be taken by the foster carer following any concerning incident, but do not always clearly outline the strategies to be used in preventing or reducing the risk of significant harm. Foster carers themselves have, however, been able to demonstrate a good understanding of these strategies and adopt these as appropriate.

Foster carers are provided with training in relation to the use of restraint and control. There has been one incident of the use of restraint since the last inspection. The recording of this incident did not detail the processes used. This results in the lack of opportunity for the carer and agency to review and reflect on this incident, or examine the appropriateness of the response and the impact on the child.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

There were four recommendations at the last inspection.

The first recommendation relates to the need to ensure that foster carers are provided with comprehensive information about each child placed with them. This recommendation has been addressed. The agency has introduced an internal tool for gathering information and an analysis of the needs of each child and the skills required to meet these needs.

The second recommendation relates to peer support for foster carers. This recommendation has been addressed. The agency has introduced a buddying system for foster carers, and has arranged regular support groups, albeit virtually during the period of the pandemic. Foster carers have reported that they feel connected to the agency and have welcomed the introduction of additional means of support.

A recommendation was made in relation to the notification to Ofsted of significant events. This recommendation has been addressed, with Ofsted now being informed of all such events within the required timescale.

The further recommendation was made in relation to monitoring of all records by the registered person. This recommendation has not been addressed. The lack of monitoring of the quality of service provision has resulted in a lack of management oversight of the outcomes for children and the impact which the service has on children's lives. A requirement has been given at this inspection in relation to this continuing shortfall.

There are significant shortfalls in relation to record-keeping within the agency which were not identified by managers prior to this inspection. Staff and foster carer supervision records do not demonstrate in-depth discussion, reflection or

professional curiosity. Evidence of decision-making and management oversight is lacking. The understanding of risks to children is unclear and the lack of strategies to mitigate such risks is not evidenced. However, foster carers spoken to by inspectors were able to demonstrate a good understanding of the risks to children and how to manage these.

The fostering panel consists of suitably skilled and experienced panel members who are appraised annually. Panel minutes do not clearly reflect the reasons for the recommendations made, and the agency decision-maker does not provide clear reasoning for the decisions taken. This leaves the agency open to challenge. When challenges have been raised, opportunities for learning have been missed.

Foster carers' annual review reports do not always rely on new experiences and information, which raises some concern about the robustness of the annual review process.

There have been significant changes in staffing since the last inspection. A new manager has been appointed who has the appropriate skills and experience. These changes have been managed well within the agency, with foster carers reporting that they continue to feel well informed and supported.

Carers are appreciative of support provided by the agency. They describe in glowing terms the quality of the relationships they have with the staff. Supervising social workers provide regular formal supervision and provide foster carers with a summary of their discussion.

Leaders and managers are approachable. They are passionate about the work of the agency at both a strategic and operational level. The engagement of staff and foster carers is integral to care planning and service delivery, and staff and foster carers report that they feel highly valued and part of a team.

The responsible individual maintains up-to-date, detailed financial reports, verified by accountants, which demonstrate the ongoing financial viability of the agency.

A comprehensive statement of purpose can be located on the agency's website. This clearly describes the service and how this is offered. The recruitment of carers is in line with the statement of purpose, and the agency maintains a small group of fostering households to sustain the community ethos.

A well-thought-out children's guide provides detailed and appropriate information to children about the agency, and a lovely children's welcome pack is provided to all children as they move to live with the agency's foster carers.

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
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>To meet this regulation, the registered person must ensure that recordings accurately reflect all aspects of the work undertaken by the agency in securing and promoting the welfare of children.</p>	30 November 2021
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them—</p> <p>receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal.. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))</p>	30 November 2021
<p>When undertaking a review, the fostering service provider must—</p> <p>make such enquiries and obtain such information as they consider necessary in order to review whether the foster parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent’s household continues to be suitable. (Regulation 28 (3)(a))</p> <p>To meet this regulation, the registered person must ensure that enquiries made relate specifically to the period under review.</p>	30 November 2021
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and</p>	30 November 2021

<p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>To meet this regulation, the registered person must ensure that there are robust administrative systems, and that these provide comprehensive information in a streamlined manner in order that the registered person can effectively monitor the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, including taking the necessary action to address any shortfalls identified.</p>	
<p>The panel must keep written minutes of its business, including the reasons for recommendations made. It is important that these are full and accurate so that the fostering service is clear about matters discussed and the reasoning behind recommendations, as they will form the basis of decision making by the fostering service. (Children Act 1989, Vol 4, Guidance and Regulations Section 5.25)</p>	30 November 2021
<p>The Agency Decision Maker must ensure that in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision maker should consider Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM [2009]. (Children Act 1989, Volume 4, Guidance and Regulations, Section 5.40)</p>	30 November 2021

Recommendations

- The registered person should implement a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 4.5)
- The fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 15.1)
- The registered person should ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. ('Fostering Service: National Minimum Standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance

and develop their competencies and skills. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 21.8)

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: SC377311

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Inspectors

Jacqueline Georghiou, Social Care Inspector

Caroline Bertram, Social Care Inspector

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