

Acorn House (Fostering Services)

Acorn House (Fostering Services) Limited

Hollinwood Business Centre, Albert Street, Oldham OL8 3QL

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency registered with Ofsted in July 2008 and is privately owned. It provides a range of emergency, short-term, respite and long-term foster placements for children who are unable to live with their birth families.

At the time of this inspection, the agency was providing foster care for 20 children living in 18 fostering households.

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since 2021.

Inspection dates: 16 to 19 September 2024

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: 13 September 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The agency and its carers place the well-being of individual children at the centre of their practice. Children's day-to-day needs are met well by well-supported foster carers.

Children receive welcome packs before coming to live with foster carers. When possible, children are given the opportunity to visit the foster home or meet the foster carers online beforehand. This helps to ease any issues before they move into a fostering home. One child was really pleased to be able to choose their bedroom before moving in with their foster carers.

Time is taken to carefully match children and foster carers. Matching documents are clear, and there are child-centred transition plans based on children's individual needs. Children's cultural and religious needs are taken into consideration before matching.

Children are encouraged to pursue their interests in their foster homes, and supervising social workers monitor this in foster carers' supervision sessions. When children do not have pre-defined interests, foster carers are encouraged to explore them and give children opportunities to engage with them. In addition, the agency offers many different activities to bring foster carers and children together.

Children attend school or other suitable educational provision. This is key in the agency's matching process. Children are also encouraged and supported to gain and maintain age-appropriate part-time employment or voluntary roles. This helps to ensure that children are in a routine and prepares them for their future.

The agency has a high number of young adults living with their carers under 'staying put' arrangements. The continuity of care helps them to build lasting relationships and receive ongoing support, which is crucial for their confidence and independence. Additionally, 'staying put' arrangements have allowed children to move on to university and engage in further education while maintaining a secure base with their carers.

Children's engagement in the agency is evident, and there are regular focus groups where children can influence how the agency operates. For example, children have been reviewing documents to ensure that their voice is heard throughout their records. Children also have a specific area on the agency website where they can log on and participate in forums. They are also sent a newsletter that encourages them to get involved in regular competitions.

The agency has ensured that all foster carers are trained in their therapeutic model. This enables foster carers to approach their care of children with traumatic backgrounds in a more thoughtful manner and therefore improve the experience of the children in their care.

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

Children experience a sense of safety and protection. Foster carers demonstrate a good understanding of each child's specific vulnerabilities and collaborate effectively with professionals to implement risk-reduction strategies.

Children can identify trusted adults they would approach with any complaints and worries and are confident that their concerns would be addressed. They are supported to take risks that are appropriate to their age and understanding. Supervising social workers and foster carers work hard with children to ensure that they develop the skills they need for independence.

The agency has a cohort of foster carers that have experience of children with specialist needs, such as unaccompanied children. They provide support to other fostering households, and their expertise is shared with other foster carers to improve children's experiences. Feedback from social workers is extremely positive. One social worker stated that '[name of carers] are amazing carers and the support from the agency and support worker is excellent'.

Children receive help to manage their behaviour and feelings safely. Foster carers respond with clear boundaries about what is safe and acceptable and seek to understand the triggers for behaviour. Supervising social workers provide support to the whole fostering household and their support network to ensure that boundaries are consistent. As a result, children have not needed to be held to keep themselves or others safe.

Any risks associated with children are well known to the agency and the foster carers. Risk management plans address known risks for each child, and there are clear strategies that lay out the action foster carers and staff should take to address any risk. Guidance on managing risks is incorporated into the safer care plans.

Children rarely go missing from their foster homes. On occasions when they do, they are met with support from their foster carers on their return. Foster carers act swiftly to locate the children and report any missing incidents to the appropriate professionals. Managers ensure that all incidents are thoroughly recorded and closely monitored. However, Risk management plans are not always updated when children go missing from their foster home which means the plans do not contain the information that would reduce future risk.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Since the last inspection, the agency has implemented a new IT system. This has made record-keeping simpler, streamlined the administration of the agency and increased management oversight. The office manager is integral to the efficient operation of the agency and the good oversight of the IT systems which ensures that the agency has all the information required.

Foster care reviews are conducted in a timely manner, ensuring that the needs and progress of both children and foster carers are regularly assessed. These reviews are thorough and adhere to statutory timescales, allowing any concerns or changes in circumstances to be addressed promptly. The process ensures that care plans are updated, support needs are identified and appropriate actions are taken to maintain the stability and quality of placements. This timely approach contributes to the ongoing welfare and safety of children in foster care.

The agency's fostering panel operates efficiently, ensuring that all assessments, approvals and reviews are considered within appropriate timescales. Panel members provide well-informed recommendations, ensuring that decisions are made in the best interests of the children.

The agency decision-maker consistently makes timely decisions within the agency, ensuring that applications and reviews are processed efficiently. This allows for swift progression through the approval process, contributing to the agency's overall effectiveness and placing children with suitable foster carers. The decision-making supports the agency's compliance with regulatory time frames, while maintaining a high standard of scrutiny and safeguarding in decisions.

Supervision is well structured and supportive, contributing to the professional development of staff. The supervision of supervising social workers is effective and provides helpful guidance and oversight. Carers report that the support they receive from supervising social workers is excellent and workers are always available for support and guidance at any time.

Safer recruitment practices are established when onboarding staff, panel members and carers. Prospective foster carers are subject to thorough assessments and detailed scrutiny by the fostering panel. This ensures that only those that are safe to work with children do so.

The manager and responsible individual recognise the challenges that come from being a small, family operated agency. They understand the risks of closed cultures and ensure that supervising social workers can raise their own ideas and influence the working of the agency. Staff feel that they are valued and all part of the wider team safeguarding children.

Case records reflect children's lives and the work that is carried out with them. They are clear and detail achievements and clearly relate to the plans for their futures. There has more recently been an effort to gain the care plans and other statutory documents from the local authority; however, the agency's own escalation process is not consistently followed. This does not ensure that children are receiving care that is consistent with their plans.

Relationships between supervising social workers, foster carers and children are strong. Foster carers receive effective supervision, and their personal development is seen as important to provide them with all the skills they need to provide good care to children.

Quality of care reports consider all relevant data and are timely. They include actions to drive the improvement of the service.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.5)

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

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