

SC069336

# Assurance visit

## Information about this children's home

The home is owned and run by a charitable organisation. It provides care and accommodation for up to 67 children who have autism spectrum disorder and associated conditions, in a number of houses. There is an Ofsted-registered school within the extensive grounds where the home is set.

The manager was registered with Ofsted in April 2011.

**Visit dates:** 2 to 3 December 2020

**Previous inspection date:** 25 June 2019

**Previous inspection judgement:** Good

## Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Findings from the visit

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

## **The care of children**

Dedicated staff have worked hard during the COVID-19 pandemic to meet the needs of children. Despite considerable challenges, staff have remained focused on the relationships they have with children and have used appropriate methods, including social stories, to enable children to understand the necessary changes that have been put in place. This has been more effective when staff members have an established, ongoing relationship with particular children. One staff member said, 'The most important thing is that you build that relationship and trust, then you can give them the best care ever.'

While staffing levels have mostly been achieved at the levels identified in care plans throughout the pandemic, some children have been cared for by staff they do not know so well. A continued need to use agency staff has caused anxiety and disruption for some children, and added pressures on existing staff. However, staff commented that some agency staff are highly experienced and have worked in the home for several years.

Children have been supported to stay in touch with their family when visits to the home were suspended. Using video calls, for example, has been a challenge for some children, but for others this has increased the frequency with which they hear from their family members and loved ones.

The arrangements for meeting children's educational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic are creative, with care and education staff working together more closely, particularly when education is being delivered in the children's home. This has enabled a holistic approach, with professionals learning from each other and supporting children to make progress with their educational, social and emotional needs.

Children said they have found some aspects of change to their routine, due to the restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic, challenging. Using communication tools, one boy told an inspector that he missed swimming, for example. Activities that have been put in place instead have been stimulating for children and they are beginning to get used to new ways to learn, be entertained and have social interactions.

## **The safety of children**

Children's actions and demeanour show that they feel safe in their home. They confidently approach staff, but also relax in communal spaces. Staff recognise children's risks and vulnerabilities, and they take the right actions to keep them safe. Staff are confident in the processes that they need to follow should they be worried for a child's welfare. Responses to child protection and safeguarding concerns are swift. Records highlight the prompt action and detailed communication with partner agencies. There have been several concerns which are linked to poor staff conduct, and leaders have worked with the designated officer to review cultures within the

staff team. Detailed recording of unexplained marks or bruising is effectively collated to identify any trends or patterns to injuries. The managers have not consistently ensured that all matters of concern are notified to Ofsted as per regulation.

Staff mostly understand what children are communicating through their behaviours, in times of calm and crisis. Changes in staff have resulted in an escalation of some children's behaviours. Staff and parents raised concerns that changes in staff have a negative impact on some children's behaviour. A social worker also commented that they 'see a clear pattern of escalating behaviours when this boy is paired with a staff member he does not know'.

Physical interventions are used to safely support some children's escalating behaviours. Records vary in detail and reflection. Not all contain the detail required to evidence the need for the measure. In addition, debriefs for both children and staff lack detail. Records do not consistently evidence senior staff oversight of the patterns and nature of serious incidents. However, it is evident that a great deal of information is shared with the child's multi-disciplinary team, including considering how to support children in crisis.

The physical environment in the main has improved, and the homes are more welcoming, reflecting children's choice and personalities. A dedicated maintenance team ensures that the homes and grounds are safe. Staff have supported children to cope with the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), with some children choosing to use it, too. The expectations on visitors adhering to the use of PPE are clear.

## **Leaders and managers**

Staff have felt well supported by senior leaders throughout the pandemic. They have understood what is expected of them despite the numerous changes and new protocols that have been put in place. Staff report that communication has been good and that they feel valued. Parents and social workers reported that communication with leaders was good and they felt informed about what was changing and why. During the pandemic, when there needed to be a change to the level of staff supporting individual children, due to sickness absence or self-isolation, a risk assessment process is used. This process is not recorded, which is a missed opportunity to evidence the rationale for decision-making.

Recruiting a full staff team remains a challenge for the home. The vacancy rate has fallen to 11.5% from 21.5% at the previous inspection. With staff that are unavailable due to long-term sickness and maternity leave, this rises to 13.5%. Since April 2020, 13.5% of staff have left. The children's home continues to use a high number of agency staff. In October 2020, agency staff use on shifts was 11.5%. This is in line with the vacancy rate. When agency staff are selected to work, there is no clear decision-making around how managers have considered the agency staff's skills, qualifications and if any induction is necessary before they commence work.

There has been a high amount of staff sickness since April 2020, due to self-isolation, and in recent weeks staff sickness has been high due to other non COVID-19 conditions. This has meant that there has been a reliance on agency staff completing a high number of shifts, and a high number of staff completing overtime, which some staff say has led to exhaustion and illness.

Supervision has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and staff told inspectors that they felt able to speak to their managers and receive support. However, the level of supervision and support can vary, including among newer staff members, and the onus can be on the staff member to reach out for support. Staff told inspectors that these differences have not yet had an impact on how supported they feel. Agency staff do not have any supervision arrangements in place; this does not enable any concerns to be raised from either the agency staff or management. The agency staff have, at times, been working a high number of shifts with little support. There are no agreements in place around agency staff completing the level 3 qualification.

The organisation has prioritised training for contracted staff over the pandemic. This has been risk assessed to ensure that staff receive the necessary training required. The rate of staff completing the level 3 qualification has increased, however the data only reflects the full-time permanent staff. Staff who work under 16 hours a week are not required by the home to undertake the diploma. This is not in line with regulations. Of the 93 agency staff used, only four have completed a suitable level 3 qualification. This does not allow for a workforce who is skilled to be working with vulnerable children.

One requirement and one recommendation in relation to staffing and training are repeated from the full inspection. This is due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic impacting on the manager's ability to fully and consistently meet them. However, staff training to level 3 and supervision have been identified as shortfalls at the last two full inspections. The need to provide supervision consistently to all staff is now a regulatory requirement.

## What does the children's home 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, Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015 and the 'Guide to the children's homes regulations including the quality standards'. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>For the purposes of paragraph (3)(b), an individual who works in the home in a care role has the appropriate qualification if, by the relevant date, the individual has attained the Level 3 Diploma for Residential Childcare (England) ("the Level 3 Diploma"); or a qualification which the registered person considers to be equivalent to the Level 3 Diploma. The relevant date is in the case of an individual who starts working in a care role in a home after 1st April 2014, the date which falls 2 years after the date on which the individual started working in a care role in a home. (Regulation 32 (4)(a)(b) (5)(a))</p> <p>This also relates to part-time and agency staff.</p>	16 January 2021
<p>The registered person must ensure that within 24 hours of the use of a measure of control, discipline or restraint in relation to a child in the home, a record is made which includes details of the child's behaviour leading to the use of the measure;</p> <p>a description of the measure and its duration;</p> <p>details of any methods used or steps taken to avoid the need to use the measure;</p> <p>the effectiveness and any consequences of the use of the measure; and a description of any injury to the child or any other person, and any medical treatment administered, as a result of the measure;</p> <p>within 48 hours of the use of the measure, the registered person, or a person who is authorised by the registered person to do so ("the authorised person") has spoken to the user about the measure; and has signed the record to confirm it is accurate; and</p> <p>within 5 days of the use of the measure, the registered person or the authorised person adds to the record confirmation that they have spoken to the child about the measure.</p> <p>(Regulation 35 (3)(a)(ii)(iv)(v)(vii)(viii) (b)(i)(ii) (c))</p>	16 January 2021

<p>The registered person must notify HMCI and each other relevant person without delay if an incident requiring police involvement occurs in relation to a child which the registered person considers to be serious;</p> <p>there is an allegation of abuse against the home or a person working there;</p> <p>a child protection enquiry involving a child is instigated; or concludes (in which case, the notification must include the outcome of the child protection enquiry); or there is any other incident relating to a child which the registered person considers to be serious.</p> <p>(Regulation 40 (4)(b)(c)(d)(i)(ii)(e))</p>	16 January 2021
<p>The registered person must ensure that all employees—</p> <p>receive practice-related supervision by a person with appropriate experience. (Regulation 33 (4)(b))</p>	16 January 2021

## Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that any external agency staff should meet the requirements in regulation 32(4) regarding mandatory qualifications and the registered person should consider their skills, qualifications and any induction necessary before they commence work in the home. ('Guide to the children's homes regulations including the quality standards', page 54, paragraph 10.16)
- The registered person should plan staffing levels to ensure that they meet the needs of children and can respond flexibly to unexpected events or opportunities. In particular, that risk assessments for changes in staffing levels of individual children are recorded. ('Guide to the children's homes regulations including the quality standards', page 54, paragraph 10.15)

## Children's home details

**Unique reference number:** SC069336

**Registered provider:** Prior's Court Foundation

**Responsible individual:** Michael Robinson

**Registered manager:** Sarah Butcher

## Inspectors

Jennie Christopher, Social Care Inspector (lead)

Emeline Evans, Social Care Inspector

Mark Newington, Social Care Inspector

Alexander Dignan, Social Care Inspector

Amanda Maxwell, Social Care Inspector

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