

# Acorn Care (NE) Ltd

Acorn Care (NE) Ltd

33 Kellaw Road, Yarm Road Business Park, Darlington, County Durham DL1 4YA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

Acorn Care (NE) Ltd is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Darlington. The agency undertakes the assessment, approval and supervision of foster carers who provide a wide range of placements to children and young people. This includes short-term and long-term foster placements.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 14 approved fostering households providing placements for 22 children and young people, including two 'staying put' arrangements.

There is no registered manager. An interim manager started in post in December 2022.

### Inspection dates: 9 to 12 May 2023

**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 widespread failures that mean children are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded, and the care and experiences of children are poor.

**Date of last inspection:** 5 August 2019

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate**

The significant shortfalls identified during this inspection due to ineffective leadership and management arrangements have contributed to the inadequate judgement. Ofsted has also issued three compliance notices to the provider.

Not all of the children are cared for by foster carers who have received the relevant support, training and information to care for children safely and effectively.

Furthermore, when referrals are made to the agency, there is insufficient consideration of how the proposed foster carers will meet the children's needs. This does not provide assurances that all the foster carers have the appropriate skills and experience to care for children.

Leaders and managers have failed to ensure that there are reliable and effective monitoring systems. Consequently, it is not clear how children's progress and outcomes are measured. The current system is not accurate and does not provide any context for understanding how the children are making progress.

Most children enjoy stability in their foster homes. The current foster carers express genuine affection for the children in their care. The children are settled and are treated like family. This helps children feel that they belong. Older children may continue to live with foster carers when they reach 18 years old and into adulthood if this is appropriate.

Children attend school regularly and are supported with their education. Some children receive specialist support. This helps those that need it to overcome any barriers to their learning, and assists them to make progress. One child has made good progress with their education and is now accessing further education.

Children's engagement in their health appointments supports their needs. Foster carers support children to see their family and friends, which helps children to stay connected with the important people in their lives.

Children are engaging in leisure interests that they enjoy. Foster families have been brought together through the activities that have been facilitated by the agency. The manager is developing systems to ensure that children's wishes and feelings inform service developments. This is currently in its infancy and has not been evaluated.

Information for children is provided to help them to understand how they will be cared for. Children are provided with information in their first language when needed, which includes details about how to make a complaint.

Foster carers and professionals speak in positive terms about the agency. However, partnership working is not consistently effective.

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

The absence of clear guidance about allegations and poor safeguarding practices have exposed some children to the risk of harm. Children are not safeguarded effectively. This includes one child who was confirmed by a local authority designated officer to have suffered emotional harm. This is because the management of allegations against foster carers is poor.

There is no clear guidance available for staff or foster carers when children make allegations. This resulted in repeated allegations made against a foster carer before they were finally de-registered. There has been no formal review to help the agency staff learn lessons from this experience. This is despite the former registered manager giving assurances to the fostering panel that this would happen. The failure to learn lessons from serious safeguarding concerns and to implement improvement measures does not help the managers to identify and address poor practices effectively. This places children at ongoing risk of harm.

Leaders and managers do not have an accurate understanding of the numbers of allegations that have been made against foster carers. Furthermore, the agency staff fail to notify Ofsted about all allegations against foster carers. This prevents the regulator from ensuring that allegations are properly investigated and that safeguarding practices are followed.

Agency staff do not always treat allegations with professionalism and impartiality. There are several examples of unprofessional behaviour, including the comments made by the former registered manager about a young person. This fails to place children at the centre of the investigation process.

The risk management and safe care strategies do not consistently provide an accurate reflection of the children's risks. The plans do not always identify the strategies to support the foster carers to mitigate the risks. Children who are specifically at risk of sexual exploitation are not protected by the risk management plans. Managers informed the inspectors that there were no child sexual exploitation risks; however, evidence to the contrary was found. The written risk assessment for one child was found on another child's records. These shortfalls expose children to the risk of harm.

Some missing-from-home protocol documents are blank and essential information is missing. This provides insufficient guidance for foster carers and limited protection for children if they go missing from home.

The support to foster carers to help children to manage their emotions and behaviours is developing through the positive collaboration with a clinical psychologist. This is helping foster carers to develop skills to support and comfort

children when they are distressed or upset. This helps to reduce the need for police intervention.

However, foster carers are not provided with training or guidance about the use of physical intervention to manage behavioural challenges and to help keep children safe. Some children have been held by foster carers who have not had the relevant training.

The true extent of the use of physical intervention is not known. This is because the incidents have not always been recorded or discussed with foster carers during supervisory visits. Consequently, leaders and managers are unable to determine if the physical interventions are safe and proportionate.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate**

Leaders and managers have failed to maintain effective management oversight of the agency's operation. There has been some instability in the agency. A new manager has been recruited in recent months. The existing supervising social worker has given notice to leave and a new appointment has been made to fill the vacancy.

The interim manager is working with the responsible individual which is helping to address some of the shortfalls. This includes leaders and managers identifying that a negative culture has developed within the agency. This has raised concerns about some practices and unprofessional behaviour within the agency. However, the management audits still lack scrutiny and failed to identify all the shortfalls found during this inspection.

Poor management oversight has failed to recognise that not all foster carers have been given delegated authority in a timely manner. A child missed a hospital appointment due to the lack of consent. This does not help foster carers to promote children's welfare. Furthermore, the lack of a formal escalation policy to obtain children's care planning documents, including education and health documents, has resulted in unacceptable delays for children.

The social worker's supervisory visits are not purposeful and they do not hold foster carers accountable for their role and responsibilities. The records of these visits fail to demonstrate that foster carers are meeting the children's needs. The social worker does not consider the children's wishes and feelings. The records show that supervisory visits lack professional curiosity and challenge, specifically in relation to safeguarding concerns and the foster carer's training requirements. Foster carers are not offered support and help to develop their skills. Concerns about foster carers' practice are not addressed with them and recorded. This does not safeguard children effectively.

Similarly, the supervision of agency staff is not consistently reflective. The meetings lack professional challenge, particularly in relation to safeguarding concerns. The two-way discussions and reflections on staff's practice are not routinely included in the supervision records. An annual appraisal for one supervising social worker has

not taken place due to the breakdown of the relationship between them and the manager.

The manager has not evaluated the impact of significant incidents to ensure that children are safe. This would also inform service improvements. Furthermore, the manager fails to notify Ofsted of these incidents. This has prevented independent scrutiny and oversight of the safeguarding practice by the leaders and managers in response to the incidents. No children's guide has been sent to Ofsted in line with the regulations.

The requirement made at the last inspection has been met. Of the three recommendations made, two have been met. The recommendation about the risk assessments has not been met and it is included in the compliance notice.

Prospective foster carers are welcomed by the agency. The quality of the assessments provides sufficient information to help the fostering panel make sound recommendations to the agency decision-maker. The fostering panel is operated effectively. Minutes of the panel meeting clearly demonstrate why panel members make the recommendations about prospective foster carers to the new agency decision-maker, who is the former registered manager of the agency.

Several foster carers have left the agency. The leaders and managers have no formal system to recruit new foster carers to the agency to help meet sufficiency for children needing foster homes.

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

## Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>* The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and</p> <p>sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for—</p> <p>notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider, to the Chief Inspector,</p> <p>written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response,</p> <p>consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b) (3)(c)(d)(e))</p>	16 July 2023
<p>* 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.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that foster parents are familiar with, and act in accordance with the policies established in accordance with regulations 12(1) and 13(1) and (3).</p> <p>The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the</p>	16 July 2023

<p>foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17 (1) (2) (3))</p>	
<p>* The registered person must maintain a system for—  improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(b))</p>	<p>16 July 2023</p>
<p>The fostering service provider must provide a copy of the children's guide to the Chief Inspector, to each foster parent approved by the fostering service provider, and to each child placed by them (subject to the child's age and understanding). (Regulation 4)</p> <p>This specifically relates to ensuring that the registered fostering service provider provides a copy of the children's guide to Ofsted.</p>	<p>16 July 2023</p>

\* These requirements are subject to a compliance notice.

## Recommendation

- The fostering service provider should ensure that all staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually. Where they are working with children, this appraisal should take into account any views of children the service is providing for. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 24.6)

## 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:** SC463071

**Registered provider:** Acorn Care (NE) Ltd

**Registered provider address:** 33 Kellaw Road, Yarm Road Industrial Estate,  
Darlington, County Durham DL1 4YA

**Responsible individual:** Julie-Ann Foxton

**Registered manager:** Post vacant

**Telephone number:** 01325 466525

**Email address:** julieann@acorncare.org.uk

## **Inspectors**

Jacqueline Malcolm, Social Care Inspector  
Julia Hagan, Social Care 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 children looked after, 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](mailto: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](http://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](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

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](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

© Crown copyright 2023