

Acorn Care (NE) Ltd

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

Monitoring visit

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, and 'staying put' arrangements.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 15 approved fostering households providing placements for 23 children and young people.

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

This monitoring visit was conducted following a full inspection that took place from 9 May 2023 to 12 May 2023. The agency was judged as 'inadequate' at that inspection. Four requirements were made, three of which were compliance notices. One recommendation was made.

A monitoring visit was conducted on 21 July 2023. Two of the compliance notices were met, and one was restated. The recommendation was also restated.

Inspection date: 12 October 2023

Date of previous inspection: 21 July 2023

This monitoring visit

Leaders and managers continue to improve their oversight of the agency's operation. The manager is working with the responsible individual, which is helping to address the shortfalls. A new agency decision maker, senior supervising social worker and supervising social worker are now in post. They are supported well by the agency's senior administrator.

No children have become newly cared for by the agency since the last monitoring visit. However, the manager has implemented a revised monitoring system to ensure that foster carers receive the necessary information required to meet a child's needs, including delegated authority. When this information is not provided by a child's placing local authority in a timely manner, the manager effectively uses the agency's escalation process to request this.

Staff said that they are well supported, respected and valued. They describe the manager as approachable and feel able to contribute to the ongoing changes being made to the agency. The manager holds regular and reflective supervision sessions with the agency's supervising social workers. However, informal discussions are not consistently documented.

Furthermore, children's records do not always demonstrate that the manager and staff have reflective discussions about children. This prevents the manager from evidencing safe decision-making. Discussions about one child were seen to be noted on the foster carer's records, preventing the child from accessing all the information the agency holds about them.

Foster carers said that they have noticed that the agency has increased their expectations of them, in line with statutory requirements. One foster carer acknowledged that their supervising social worker has supported them to make positive adjustments to their practice. This includes access to training, support and consultation with the in-house psychologist. Those foster carers who spoke to the inspector said that they feel the current approach is positive.

The agency recognises the importance of professional development. It provides the necessary training that foster carers require to care for vulnerable children. This includes a 10-12 week nurturing and attachment programme, which is facilitated by a qualified and experienced psychologist. However, foster carers still do not consistently take responsibility for accessing refresher and mandatory training. This prevents the manager from being assured that all foster carers have the most current knowledge and skills to provide safe and effective care to children.

The manager has implemented a tracking system to ensure that all foster carers receive their annual appraisals. This provides the manager with the opportunity to review whether foster carers continue to have the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfil their role. Reviews are brought forward when foster carers fall short of the high standards expected of them.

The manager has implemented an improved system to monitor the progress of children. However, this falls short of reviewing all aspects of a child's life, such as their health and education. This prevents the manager from identifying if children's

health and education needs are adequately met and from taking action to address any shortfalls.

Foster carers' notes fail to consistently reflect the steps they have taken when an incident occurs, such as contacting the out-of-hours supervising social worker. This prevents the manager from being satisfied that foster carers consistently follow the agency's procedures in a timely manner. Furthermore, the language that some foster carers use when describing children could be considered as stigmatising. This is unhelpful to those children who wish to access their records.

The leadership and management team has failed to ensure that copies of the two most recent inspection reports have been made available to their foster carers, foster children, children's parents or carers and the authorities of existing foster children. This prevents these individuals from being assured that the agency is taking the necessary steps to help keep children safe.

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 with the given timescales.

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. In particular, the manager should ensure that the children's progress is monitored and reviewed. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.1)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers maintain an ongoing training and development portfolio that demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them by the fostering service. In particular, foster carers should be held accountable by the agency when they fail to complete the agency's mandatory training. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.4)
- The registered person should ensure that copies of inspection reports by Ofsted are made available to all members of staff, their foster carers, children fostered by the service and their parents or carers. On request, these reports should also be provided to the responsible or placing authorities of existing foster children or those considering placing a child through the service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.6)
- The registered person should have and implement a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the fostering service's files, on the child's files and on case files relating to foster carers. Foster carers should ensure that records detail the actions taken when an incident involving a child in their care occurs. Foster carers should consider the use of caring language when making notes about a child. The manager should ensure that all professional discussions that are held about a child are recorded on the child's files and that all professional discussions that are held about a foster carer are recorded on the foster carer's file. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.1)

Information about this inspection

The purpose of this visit was to monitor the action taken and the progress made by the independent fostering agency since its last Ofsted inspection.

This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC463071

Registered provider: Acorn Care (NE) Limited

Registered provider address: 33 Kellaw Road, Yarm Road Business Park,
Darlington, County Durham DL1 4YA

Responsible individual: Julie-Ann Foxton

Registered manager: Vacant

Inspector

Julia Hagan, Social Care Inspector

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