

Acorn Care (NE) Ltd

Acorn Care (NE) Limited

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 15 approved fostering households providing placements for 20 children and young people, including two 'staying put' arrangements.

The manager registered with Ofsted on 20 October 2023.

Inspection dates: 20 to 23 February 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be good
---	--

How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
---	---------------------------------

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

The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 9 May 2023

Overall judgement at last inspection: Inadequate

Enforcement action since last inspection: As a result of the shortfalls identified during the previous full inspection on 9 May 2023, and a judgement of inadequate, a decision was made to issue three compliance notices under regulations 12, 17 and 35. One requirement and one recommendation were also issued.

A monitoring visit was conducted on 21 July 2023 to review the action taken by the provider in response to the compliance notices. Two of the compliance notices were met, and one was restated. The recommendation was also restated.

A further monitoring visit was carried out on 12 October 2023. The compliance notices were met, and four recommendations were made.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

Most children enjoy stability in their foster homes. Older children may continue to live with foster carers when they reach 18 years old and into adulthood, including those with complex needs. The agency has successfully advocated this for one child, which has prevented them from being separated from their sibling. This helps to give children a sense of belonging.

However, the manager does not have an effective process for considering referrals made to the agency. The manager does not fully consider whether the proposed foster carer can adequately meet the child's needs. This has resulted in one child having to move on from the care of their foster carer after a relatively short amount of time. This causes unnecessary disruption to a child's life.

Children receive individualised care and support. Children generally speak fondly about their foster carers. Foster carers support children to attend school regularly and older children are supported to access training and further education. Children are equally well supported to attend all routine medical appointments. Some foster carers liaise well with medical professionals for those children who have specialised needs, although the provider does not offer specialist training to these foster carers to help support them.

However, important information contained within children's education and health care plans is not consistently made available to the foster carers. The manager also continues to fail to effectively monitor children's progress in areas such as health and education, and it is therefore unclear how outcomes are measured. This is further compounded by a lack of an education policy. This prevents the manager from being assured that children are being supported to fulfil their potential.

Children are supported to spend time with those who are important to them. However, important information such as the frequency and duration of these arrangements is often conflicting. This prevents the manager from being satisfied that the arrangements in place are safe and appropriate to the child's needs.

The agency benefits well from its newly appointed 'hub carers'. These experienced foster carers provide respite to foster children cared for by the agency, activities for the children and support to the foster carers. This provides consistency of care and support to the carers and the children. It helps to relieve some of the pressures that some of the foster carers experience and contributes to stable care.

Foster families are brought together through the activities that the agency regularly facilitates. These are informed by the children's interests. The manager also continues to develop systems to ensure that children's wishes and feelings inform

service developments. This remains in its infancy and has not been evaluated. The manager does not yet have a system in place to ensure the views of those important to the children contribute to the development of the service. This limits the opportunity to improve from external scrutiny.

Foster carers speak positively about the agency. Foster carers have noted improvements in the working relationships with the provider's social workers. They have noted improved training opportunities, more activities for children and an increased level of support. This includes supporting foster carers who are attending court to give evidence in care proceedings and supporting foster carers to attend private appointments. One foster carer said:

'I felt dubious about the new staff and management team. However [name of provider's social worker] is absolutely amazing. I can't get enough support from her.'

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

The agency has a clear process in place which provides guidance about managing allegations and safeguarding practices. However, a failure by the agency to follow its procedures has exposed some children to the risk of harm. Allegations and incidents are not consistently investigated and referred to the necessary professionals. As a result of this, the manager has failed to inform the regulator about notifiable events. This prevents the regulator from being assured the provider is taking the necessary steps to help keep children safe.

Foster carers understand the risks associated with the children that they care for. However, risk assessments do not consistently reflect all known risks for children. They are often confusing, sometimes inaccurate and are not updated regularly and in line with the provider's policy. Some children have no risk assessments. The risk assessments fail to provide clear guidance to foster carers about how to mitigate known risks, or how to support children when they feel emotionally vulnerable. This has led to one foster carer being uncertain about the options available to them to help keep a child safe. This prevents the manager from being assured that foster carers are managing risk and behaviours safely.

Not all foster carers have received training in de-escalation techniques and physical interventions. This results in foster carers managing situations using unrecognised or unapproved techniques. This prevents the manager from being assured that foster carers are implementing a safe and therapeutic approach, which is the ethos of the agency.

Not all foster carers report incidents to the provider. The manager believes this is due to the foster carers' perception that incidents are viewed negatively by the provider. Although the manager has sought to assure foster carers this is not the case, the manager remains concerned that not all incidents are being reported. This

prevents the manager from being assured that children are consistently being helped to stay safe and exposes children to the risk of harm.

A clinical psychologist provides support to foster carers to help them to understand children's emotions and behaviours. This helps foster carers to respond to crisis situations and helps to improve children's safety.

The provider fails to regularly review whether the home environment in which children live is safe and meets their needs, in line with its policy. The provider also fails to review the arrangements for those foster carers who have holiday homes. This prevents the manager from being satisfied that children live and stay in a safe environment. The provider's social workers visit a foster carer's main place of residence unannounced at least once per year.

The manager does not provide clarity about how frequently the provider expects its social workers to see foster children. This has led to confusion and disparity among the team. This prevents the manager from being satisfied that children's views are being sought sufficiently to ensure that children feel safe and happy with their foster carer.

Children are provided with information to help them understand how they will be cared for. This includes details about how to make a complaint.

Safer recruitment procedures are followed for new members of staff and panel members. Foster carers and family members have up-to-date safeguarding checks which helps to ensure that those caring for children are safe.

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

Since the previous full inspection, the agency has appointed a registered manager, and recruited a new senior supervising social worker and a new supervising social worker. This has helped leaders and managers to create a culture of change. The manager has spent much of their time performing the role of a social worker to help to affect some of the changes in culture required. This has been to the detriment of the managerial aspects of the service. One staff member has not completed their induction in the required timescale. This prevents the manager from being satisfied that the staff member has the relevant knowledge to perform their role independently.

Leaders and managers are committed to making the necessary changes that are required to improve the safety of children who are cared for by the provider. This is challenging because the provider's foster carers have not previously been held accountable.

However, despite this, the provider is not yet delivering good help and care for children. The management audits continue to lack scrutiny and have failed to identify the shortfalls found during this inspection.

Furthermore, although there is now a formal escalation policy in place, the manager does not follow this. This means foster carers do not have all the necessary information and documentation they require to care for the children. One foster carer has been requesting a child's passport since June 2023, which has not yet been made available. Without this, the child will be unable to go on a school trip abroad which they want to go on. The manager does not escalate complaints about external professionals' practice. This prevents effective challenge and change.

The agency has a variable approach as to how foster carers are held accountable for their role and responsibilities. Although there has been an improvement, and some hard-to-reach foster carers are now meeting the expectations required of them, this is not consistent. Some foster carers avoid supervision sessions and fail to attend the training expected of them. Other foster carers who have transferred in from other agencies have failed to provide evidence that they have completed the required legislative training. Although the provider's social workers address these concerns when supervision sessions are held, there is still no accountability for these individuals. This prevents the manager from being assured that the children in the care of these foster carers receive good, safe care.

The supervision of the provider's social workers is much improved. It is regular and reflective. There are clear discussions recorded about the children and the carers. The manager sets expectations for what the social worker is required to achieve in time for the next supervision.

However, the quality of documents and records kept by the provider is poor. The provider's social workers record escalations and requests for information which are sent to foster carers and professionals, but the outcome of these requests is not recorded. This means the manager is unable to track how effective these requests are and whether the required information or action has been provided. Foster carer's logs do not consistently capture important details about a child's life, such as what the family did on Christmas Day. This prevents children from having an accurate account of their time spent in foster care. Some language may be considered stigmatising to a child.

The manager does not implement a 'lessons learned' approach. Although discussions appear to be held about what could be improved upon, these are not documented and there is no formal evaluation. This prevents the opportunity for reflection and implementation of new working practices to improve outcomes.

Prospective foster carers continue to be 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. The minutes of the panel meeting demonstrate why panel members

make recommendations about prospective foster carers to the new agency decision-maker.

Panel members have not had the opportunity to participate in any training and development activities in the past 12 months. This prevents the provider from being assured that panel members have the most up-to-date knowledge required to act as a panel member. The provider has no policy for the recruitment of panel members. This prevents the manager from having a strategy to ensure that panel members are representative of the provider's foster carers and the children they care for.

The provider benefits from the expertise of a psychologist. However, much of the consultation regarding the care of children appears to be reactive as opposed to pro-active. This limits the positive impact that the expert advice may have on the care provided to children.

Although the hub carers are directly involved in recruiting foster carers, 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.

Professionals speak positively about the agency. One professional said:

'There has been a huge shift in the last 12 months. It feels more professional. They are more reflective and embedding their learnings. There is more accountability.'

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 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> <p>In particular, the registered person must ensure that they meet the shortfalls identified that relate to national minimum standards 22.1, 22.6, 22.7 and 22.10.</p> <p>The registered person must pay particular attention to the statutory guidance 'Working together to safeguard children 2023', in particular paragraphs 226 and 277.</p>	1 June 2024
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(b))</p>	1 June 2024

<p>In particular, the registered person must ensure that they meet the shortfalls identified that relate to national minimum standards 25.1, 25.2, 25.3, 26.2 and 26.6.</p>	
<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 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>In particular, the registered person must ensure that they meet the shortfalls identified that relate to national minimum standards 3.8, 4.6, 15.1, 20.3, 20.4, 20.11, 23.3, and 23.10.</p>	<p>1 June 2024</p>
<p>The fostering service provider must promote the educational achievement of children placed with foster parents.</p> <p>In particular the fostering service provider must—</p> <p>implement a procedure for monitoring the educational achievement, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster parents,</p> <p>promote the regular school attendance and participation in school activities of children of compulsory school age placed with foster parents, and</p> <p>provide foster parents with such information and assistance, including equipment, as may be necessary to meet the educational needs of children placed with them. (Regulation 16 (1)(2)(a)(b)(c))</p> <p>In particular, the registered person must ensure that they meet the shortfalls identified that relate to national minimum standards 8.4 and 8.5</p>	<p>1 June 2024</p>

<p>If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table.</p> <p>Any notification made in accordance with this regulation which is given orally must be confirmed in writing. (Regulation 36 (1) (2)). In particular, the registered person must have due regard to NMS 29.</p>	<p>1 June 2024</p>
--	--------------------

Recommendations

- The foster home is inspected annually, without appointment, by the fostering service to make sure that it continues to meet the needs of foster children. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 10.5) In particular, the registered person should ensure that the health and safety risk assessment of the foster carer's home environment is reviewed annually.
- The fostering service has and implements 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. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 26.1)
- The fostering service implements clear written policies and procedures on recruitment to, and maintenance of, the central list of persons considered by them to be suitable to be members of a fostering panel ("the central list") and on constitution of fostering panels. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 14.1)
- The wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 1.7)

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) Limited

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

Responsible individual: Julie-Ann Foxton

Registered manager: John Walker

Telephone number: 01325466525

Email address: FKingston@acorncare.org.uk

Inspectors

Julia Hagan, Social Care Inspector
Cat Makel, 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 looked after children, 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.

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, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>.

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
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2024