

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 16 approved fostering households providing placements for 15 children and young people. The manager registered with Ofsted on 20 October 2023.

Inspectors were aware during this inspection that a concern raised by children is under investigation by the appropriate authorities. While Ofsted does not have the power to investigate incidents of this kind, actions taken by the provider in response to the incident were considered alongside other evidence available at the time of the inspection to inform inspectors' judgements.

Inspection dates: 10 to 13 March 2025 and 28 to 30 April 2025

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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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: 20 February 2024

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

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

Although some children enjoy stability, have positive experiences and make good progress while living with their foster carers, others do not. This inconsistency contributes to the judgement of requires improvement to be good.

At the time of the inspection, four children are matched to live with their foster carers long term, and for some other children, this care plan is also being considered. Many children experience positive outcomes as a result of living with their foster carers. For example, one child has recently been supported to move on to adoption, other children have returned home to live with family members and two young people, who turned 18 years old, remain with their carers under 'staying put' arrangements.

However, several children have experienced unplanned endings. This has been for different reasons, including foster carers struggling to manage behaviour from children that challenges them. These children do not have a wholly positive experience. Managers and staff do not always work with foster carers to reflect and understand what happened. This does not help individual foster carers and the agency to learn and develop to improve outcomes and experiences for children.

Overall, children are supported to attend routine medical appointments. However, for some children, recommendations raised in health assessments have not been followed up. For example, it is not clear if all children have had the childhood vaccinations that are recommended.

The quality of children's records is variable. They do not always provide a clear, child-friendly account of children's day-to-day experiences, achievements and challenges that children can read or look back on should they wish to in the future.

Children attend nursery and school regularly and are supported with their education. They make good progress, and in some cases, this is exceptional. For example, one child's reading age has improved significantly. The child enjoys being read to by his foster carers each night and has developed a love of reading. Supervising social workers advocate for children well to ensure that children receive the necessary assessments and additional support when required.

Children participate in a range of leisure interests at home and in the community. Some children enjoy baking cakes and playing games with their foster carers, while others join local sports and leisure clubs. Children have enjoyed trips to theme parks and going on holiday. Some children have developed new skills while having fun, such as learning to ride a bike and to swim.

Foster carers enable children to stay in touch with people who are important to them. They help children to see family members and maintain friendships. Some foster carers stay in touch with children after they have moved on. For example, one foster carer invites a child they previously cared for to share Christmas Day with them. This good support helps children to maintain a sense of belonging and understand more about their identity.

The agency is responsive when children or their foster carers need a break. They have a dedicated fostering family who children can stay with or receive individual support from. Children benefit from this consistency.

In recent months, the agency has developed the way in which it seeks views from children about their care. Children have responded well to this and have talked about what is working well for them and any worries they have. The agency and the children's foster carers act on concerns raised through this feedback. Seeking and acting on children's views helps children to feel listened to. In addition, it helps the agency to understand more about what it is like for the children in their care.

Most foster carers are positive about their experience with the fostering agency. Foster carers receive good support from their supervising social worker, who attends meetings with them, advocates for children, visits regularly and provides out-of-hours support when needed.

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

In most cases, when children raise concerns about the care that they receive or make an allegation of harm against their foster carer, the agency liaises well with other professionals to share information and look into what happened. On one occasion, this did not happen. Managers have not shared new information about an incident with the local authority designated officer (LADO) as quickly as they should have done. Managers took this forward during the inspection.

When there are shortfalls in foster carers' practice, this is not always followed up promptly by supervising social workers. This does not enable foster carers to reflect and learn. Furthermore, following an allegation, the agency does not follow due process and undertake a foster carer review. This does not allow for the foster carers' continued suitability to be considered as needed by the agency's decision-maker.

When new staff and panel members are recruited, all safer recruitment information is not sought. This does not help to ensure that only suitable people are employed to work with children and foster carers.

Safer caring plans are generic and are not individual to each child and their foster family. This limits their effectiveness and relevance to promoting safer care for children.

Improvements have been made to ensure that each foster home offers a safe environment to children. Monitoring systems are now implemented to help assure managers that annual health and safety checks are completed as needed.

Children rarely go missing from care. When they do, foster carers respond appropriately. They liaise with professionals and children's family members as needed, try to maintain contact with the child if they can and support the child to return home.

Emerging risks to children's safety and welfare are identified quickly and responded to appropriately. For example, a child's foster carer shared their concerns about a child's safety online promptly and worked with the child's social worker and the child to explain the risks and vulnerabilities. The child is receiving support to help them to understand the risks and stay safe online.

When a child's family member makes a complaint, the manager investigates this quickly. This helps the child's relative to be assured that their complaint is taken seriously, and the necessary steps are taken to address the concern. The agency also supports foster carers well when they feel the need to complain about the practice of a professional they are working with.

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

The registered manager is leaving the organisation shortly. A new manager has been appointed. The agency has acted promptly in this regard.

Management oversight and monitoring of the service requires improvement. Monitoring systems are not wholly effective to help managers fully understand the strengths and needs of the service. This limits the agency's development and improvements to the quality of care provided to children. A new head of service has been appointed who has undertaken an initial review and is developing plans to improve systems in place.

While most foster carers have undertaken training relating to safeguarding, managing behaviour and understanding nurture and attachment, their personal development plans are not clear and are not kept under review. Although several courses delivered by the agency's consultant therapist are offered to foster carers throughout the year, it is not clear who needs to attend and who is due to attend. The agency is in the process of reviewing the training offered to foster carers and how training is delivered.

The quality of information provided to inform foster carers' annual reviews is variable. In addition, not all foster carers have their annual review within timescales. Although the manager completes a report with input from the supervising social worker, contributions from the foster carers, the children and the children's social worker are limited and often absent. This undermines the effectiveness of the review process and does not help the agency to fully understand the quality of care children

receive, how well their foster carers are supported, what is working well and what needs to improve. Although these issues have been raised with the agency, they have yet to act to improve this.

One foster carer assessment has been presented to the panel since the last inspection. It was of sufficient quality to help inform the panel's recommendation. One assessment is in progress.

When fostering panels have been held, they have been quorate. However, panel membership is not diverse and does not reflect a range of skills, knowledge and experience. This limits the opportunity for differing perspectives to be considered. A new panel member is in the process of being recruited, but managers understand the need for further work to be done in this area.

The manager does not appraise panel members, and all panel members do not have the opportunity to attend training annually with staff at the fostering service. This does not help to ensure that they have the most up-to-date information regarding their role, legislation and guidance and that they understand the ethos of the agency.

Staff describe the manager as supportive, eager to listen and someone who provides good advice. Managers have listened to foster carers' feedback about support groups and have looked at different ways of facilitating these to increase engagement, which has brought about some initial success.

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
The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11(a)) In particular, ensure that new information relevant to any safeguarding investigation is shared promptly with the LADO. In addition, ensure that safer caring policies are individual to each child and their foster family.	30 June 2025
The fostering provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including outside of office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17(1)) In particular, ensure that the agency helps foster carers to reflect and learn to improve their practice when needed and, in turn, improve children's experiences. In addition, ensure that all foster carers have a clear personal development plan that sets out what training they need to undertake to support their development and keep this under review.	31 July 2025
The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. A review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. When undertaking a review, the fostering service provider must— make such enquiries and obtain such information as they consider necessary in order to review whether the foster	31 July 2025

parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent's household continues to be suitable, and seek and take into the account the views of— the foster parent, any child placed with the foster parent (subject to the child's age and understanding), and any placing authority which has, within the preceding year, placed a child with the foster parent. (Regulation 28 (1) (2) (3)(a)(b)(i)(ii)(iii)) In particular, ensure that the views of others are sought as part of the foster carer review process and, when a foster carer has been the subject of an allegation, undertake a review of the foster carer's suitability.	
The registered person must maintain a system for— improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(b))	31 July 2025

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service agency, taking into account the nature of the children and carers the service caters for. In particular, the registered person should ensure that panel members are diverse in their knowledge and skills. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards, 14.8')
- The registered person should ensure that children's physical, emotional and social development needs are promoted. In particular, ensure that recommendations raised in children's annual health assessments are followed up and details of children's health appointments and the outcome are clearly recorded. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards 6.1')
- The registered person should ensure that they can demonstrate, including from written records, that they consistently follow good recruitment practices and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance in panel member and staff recruitment. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards, 19.2')
- The registered person should ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards 26.6')

- The registered person should ensure that each person on the central list has access to appropriate training and skills development and is kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation and guidance. In particular, ensure that panel members have the opportunity to attend an annual joint training day with the fostering service staff and that they have an appraisal once a year. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards, 23.11')

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 agency: Acorn Care (NE) Limited

Registered agency 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

Inspectors

Julia Hagan, Social Care Inspector
Jess Elliott, Social Care Inspector
Jackie Line, Social Care Inspector

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