

Acorn Grange Care Home

Enter and View Report

23rd October 2025



Disclaimer: This report relates only to the service viewed at the time of the visit and is only representative of the views of the staff, visitors and residents who met members of the Enter and View team on that date.

Visit information



Service address:

Vicarage Road
West Cornforth
Ferryhill
DL17 9JW



Service provider

Manor Care Home Group



Service manager

Donna Fagan



Date of visit

Thursday 23rd October 2025
9.00 am - 12.00 pm



CQC rating

Rated as good in March 2023, under the previous owner. CQC have not inspected since Manor Care Home Group have taken ownership.



Healthwatch County Durham Enter and View Officer

Claire Sisterson



Authorised representatives

Paul Stokes - Volunteer
Anne Glynn - Volunteer

Introduction

Our role at Healthwatch County Durham is to gather people's views and experiences, especially those that are seldom heard, to give them the opportunity to express how they feel about a service. The aim of an Enter and View visit is to gather views and experiences of residents, relatives and staff of a service and observe the environment to assess the quality of the service.

This was an announced Enter and View visit undertaken by authorised representatives who have the authority to enter health and social care premises, announced or unannounced. The team collate feedback gathered and observations made to compile a report. The report identifies aspects of good practice as well as possible areas for improvement. Healthwatch County Durham is an independent organisation, therefore we do not make judgements or express personal opinions, but rely on feedback received and objective observations of the environment.

The report is sent to the manager for their opportunity to respond before being published on the Healthwatch County Durham website at www.healthwatchcountydurham.co.uk.

Where appropriate, Healthwatch County Durham may arrange a revisit to check the progress of improvements. The report is available to the Care Quality Commission, Healthwatch England and any other relevant organisations.

Acknowledgements

Healthwatch County Durham would like to thank management, staff, residents and relatives, for making us feel welcome and for taking the time to speak to us during the visit.



General Information

Acorn Grange Care Home is a residential care home for older adults with and without dementia. There are 45 bedrooms, at the time of the report 36 were occupied. Acorn Grange consists of two units. Willow unit is set over three floors and is a mixed dementia unit. Oak unit cares for the elderly mentally infirm and advanced dementia across two floors. Acorn Grange has the use of extensive gardens and several communal areas.

The care home employs approximately 38 members of staff, including an activities team, housekeeper and care coordinators.

CQC inspected the property under the previous owners in March 2023 and was rated as good. Acorn Grange hasn't been inspected under the new management - Manor Care Home Group.

Methodology

The Enter and View representatives made an announced visit on Thursday 23rd October 2025. We received feedback from 12 residents, seven of which had assistance from staff members, and four family/friends. Eight staff members also contributed from a variety of roles.

Two weeks prior to the Enter and View visit, we publicised our visit by leaving a display about Healthwatch County Durham and details of our visit. In order to capture as many residents and their families as possible, we left surveys and a 'post box' to be completed and left for our return. We didn't receive any responses in writing.

We spoke extensively with the manager to ensure we could best meet the needs of the residents and enable them to share their experiences. We asked residents about 4 areas of their care; communication, environment, social preferences and the staff and service. We created an easy read version of the survey and also used visual prompts and emoji faces to gain insight into specific areas of the service. The team also recorded their own observations on the environment and staff member interactions. Interviews were conducted one to one, and where necessary, staff assisted with communication. All responses were recorded anonymously.

To retain confidentiality and anonymity of respondents, any identifiable details have been removed from quotes.

Of the residents we spoke with, 11 were female and 5 male. Staff respondents included support workers, care coordinators, activity coordinators and a housekeeper.

Summary

Feedback from residents, families, and staff reflects a care home environment that is warm, welcoming, and built on strong, positive relationships. Communication is consistently highlighted as a key strength across the service. Residents describe staff as friendly, approachable, and easy to talk to, noting that everyday conversations about family, hobbies, and current events help them feel relaxed and connected. Families also express confidence in the team's communication, particularly appreciating the reassurance provided for relatives living with dementia. This open and responsive approach contributes significantly to residents feeling safe, listened to, and "very happy" within the home.

Residents report a good balance between independence and social engagement. Many enjoy time in their rooms with personal hobbies while also valuing group activities, musical sessions, visits from local community groups, and social interaction with staff. Mealtimes are described positively, with food served hot and staff attentive to individual preferences and routines. While overall feedback about daily life is strong, some families raised concerns about staffing levels occasionally impacting routine tasks such as timely drink rounds, indicating that resource pressures can influence aspects of care delivery.

Staff feedback further reflects dedication and strong interpersonal relationships with residents. They emphasise the importance of person-centred communication, especially when supporting individuals with advanced dementia, and describe a collaborative environment where concerns can be shared with management. Despite this, staffing shortages, reliance on agency workers, and pressure to cover additional shifts contribute to staff feeling overstretched at times. Some described feeling undervalued, and a small number of staff on sponsorships expressed concern about their future job security. Others noted that regular supervision and appreciation from families help maintain morale.

The home environment is regarded as warm and homely, though not modern, and staff work hard to ensure comfort and familiarity for residents. Practical limitations such as narrow doorways and ongoing issues with the lift present some challenges for day-to-day routines and accessibility. Communal spaces, a garden, sensory room, and activity areas support meaningful engagement, though staff expressed a desire for even more activity options for residents with more advanced dementia.

Overall, the commitment and compassion of the team shone through strongly, but feedback indicates a clear need for improved staffing consistency and recognition to maintain high-quality, sustainable care.

Findings

Communication...

Communication within the service is described very positively. Residents consistently reported that staff are friendly, open, and easy to talk to. Many said they feel comfortable chatting with staff about everyday topics such as family, football, sport, and news in the paper. This day-to-day communication helps residents feel relaxed, supported, and connected.

Residents also shared that staff are helpful and responsive, and they feel confident in the staff's abilities to resolve issues. Several people mentioned feeling well informed and confident that any updates or changes would be communicated clearly.

Family members highlighted that the staff communicate well and are able to talk with their loved ones, providing reassurance, particularly for relatives of residents with dementia.

Overall, residents expressed that they were "very happy," felt listened to, and valued the approachable nature of staff, which contributes strongly to their sense of wellbeing and feeling at home.

"Good communication, can chat about anything with the staff, they are friendly and open"

"It's really good, it's like a house, I feel well informed"

"They communicate well, they're good, they get things sorted"



Environment...

Overall residents reported being happy with both the home and their own rooms. Acorn Grange was described as warm and cosy and one resident calling it 'homely'. This contributed to a feeling of reassurance and ease within the environment.

Residents are encouraged to personalise their rooms with their own belongings and can choose to bring furniture from home, for instance, one resident has a custom made chair which supports her independence.

Several residents spoke positively about using the garden and enjoyed the freedom to move between the home and outside space.

We were informed of an issue around the lift, which causes problems when it breaks down. Although the home have tried to overcome the issue by installing a stair lift, one resident who relies on the lift to move between floors has a fear of the stairlift. Because this lady requires company and socialisation, this can have an impact on her wellbeing when she can't access communal areas.

Overall Acorn Grange was described as warm, welcoming, clean and comfortable for residents, helping them feel settled and well looked after.

"Made room homely with own furniture and personal things, enjoys the garden"

"I am very happy with the home, nice bedroom it's always clean and tidy"

"They have respect and good care, I would recommend it"



Social Preferences...

Overall, individuals described a variety of activities they enjoy, highlighting both independence and social preferences. Many residents value time in their own rooms, engaging in activities such as watching television, listening to music or reading. At the same time they appreciate opportunities to socialise and interact with staff, other residents and their families; one resident was singing and the staff and other residents came in to listen to her. Residents spoke positively about visits from singers, group activities, trips to the hairdressers and the involvement of local schoolchildren, allowing them to connect to the community. Some spoke about daily routines and the importance of a newspaper or a pint of beer to contribute to a sense of normality and comfort.

Residents spoke positively about the food, stating it was good and served hot with some sharing their favourite foods. Staff appear aware of individual preferences including where residents like to sit at mealtimes and whether they prefer company while eating, which helps support comfort and wellbeing.

Some family members did raise concerns about staffing levels at times, noting that this can impact the care provided. One example given was that hot drinks are usually served around 11am, but on one occasion, when a relative left at 1pm, the drinks had still not been offered. This suggests that staffing pressures may occasionally affect routine aspects of care.

“Feel very well looked after and feel well fed”

“Like the hairdressers, likes to read newspaper chat and watch the television, the food is very good”



Staff and service...

Feedback about the care home highlights a warm, friendly, and supportive environment where staff are consistently present and willing to help. Residents and families describe staff as approachable, attentive, and visibly happy in their roles, contributing to a positive atmosphere across the service. The team is seen as good company, creating a sense of a welcoming community.

The manager is noted for being hands-on and actively involved in day-to-day care, which helps maintain strong communication and reassurance for families. Relatives appreciate that staff are always available to provide updates, answer questions, and offer assistance when needed. One family specifically shared that although they had the option to move their loved one closer to home, they chose to keep them at Acorn Grange because of their confidence in the care provided. Overall, the home is viewed as friendly, responsive, and committed to supporting both residents and families.

"The staff are always about if needed and happy to be here"

"Enjoys all the staff's company and chats"

"It's a big family"

"Staff are lovely, nothing is a bother to them"

"It's a 20 minute drive for us as a family and they asked us if we wanted her moved but we decided to keep her here . The manager is very hands on and knows the residents very well"



Staff feedback

Communication

Staff described communication as an essential and ongoing part of their daily work, particularly when supporting residents living with advanced dementia. They spoke about taking time to sit, chat, reassure, and repeat information when needed, adapting their approach based on each resident's level of understanding. Small adjustments, such as using picture menus for non-verbal residents, help ensure everyone can make choices and feel involved. Staff also highlighted the value of everyday conversations, reminiscing, and learning about residents' hobbies, interests, and personal histories, which helps build trust and deeper connections.

Communication within the team and with management was also seen as strong and supportive. Staff reported that they can easily speak with the manager or deputy manager about concerns, changes in residents' needs, or general issues within the home. When residents struggle to understand information, staff look for alternative ways to explain, often involving families to ensure clarity and continuity.

They noted that there are moments during shifts where they can sit with residents, interact socially, and pick up on any emerging needs. Overall, staff emphasised a flexible, person-centred approach that values listening, patience, and working together to maintain good communication across the home.

“We have to think about how we present things, for example we have pictures of the menu for the nonverbal residents so they can pick things from the menu. It takes a bit more preparation but that's important”

“Staff find other ways to speak to clients if they don't understand what they are being told, for example the families input as the dementia could have progressed”



Environment

The environment at the home is widely described as warm, homely, and comfortable, though staff noted that it is not particularly modern. Despite this, the atmosphere appears welcoming, and staff make efforts to ensure residents feel at ease in their surroundings. Temperatures in the building can become very warm, but staff explained that this is important for residents' comfort and health needs. Additional blankets are available for anyone who feels cold, and fans are used during the summer to help regulate heat more effectively.

Some practical challenges with the building were highlighted, particularly around narrow doorways. Staff reported that these can make it difficult to manoeuvre equipment such as trolleys, suggesting that accessibility could be improved to better support daily routines. Within their personal spaces, residents are encouraged to create a sense of familiarity and belonging by decorating their rooms with furniture, photos, and other meaningful items. Each room includes a toilet and sink, providing privacy and convenience, though showers are not available due to assessed health and safety risks related to slips or falls.

There are several communal areas designed to support social interaction and stimulation, including a garden, sensory room, hairdressing space, and conservatory. Residents are supported and encouraged to spend time outdoors, which staff feel has a positive effect on wellbeing. Staff also expressed a wish for more family involvement and suggested that additional activities would benefit residents with more advanced dementia, ensuring that all individuals have opportunities to engage in meaningful and appropriate experiences.

"The home has a very welcoming environment"

"The doors could have been wider, sometimes struggle to get a trolley [through] the width of the doors"

"Residents are able to bring furniture and personal belongings into the home to make them feel settled and at home"

Social Preferences

Staff at Acorn Grange place strong emphasis on getting to know each resident as an individual, taking time to understand their care plans, personal histories, and what matters most to them. They also work closely with families, particularly when residents have communication difficulties, to gain insight into preferences, routines, and interests. This helps staff build meaningful relationships and ensures that the support offered feels personal, respectful, and familiar.

A varied programme of activities is available, organised by two activity coordinators who aim to accommodate the needs and interests of all residents. Opportunities include music sessions, walks, visiting singers, keep-fit activities, hairdressing on Wednesdays, and the use of a reminiscence machine. Staff demonstrate strong awareness of who

enjoys group activities and who prefers quieter time alone, and they make sure everyone is invited so no one feels excluded. Residents who choose not to join in are gently encouraged but not pressured, helping to maintain a balance between independence and inclusion.

Access to the wider community is supported through the use of a minibus from Cornforth House, although a recent issue with a broken tail light temporarily limited the number of residents who could safely go out. Meal times are flexible and shaped around individuals' needs, residents who sleep in or have had a restless night are supported to eat when they feel ready. Drinks and snacks are available around the clock, helping residents maintain choice and comfort throughout the day.

Each resident has a social activity record, which helps families stay informed about what their relative has been doing and ensures that activities reflect personal preferences. Choice extends to where residents eat, whether in their rooms or communal area and staff consistently accommodate specific needs, including dietary requirements such as gluten-free meals and vegetarian options. Cultural and religious preferences are also respected, with one resident supported to personalise their room with religious items important to their Catholic faith.

“All clients are offered activities but not forced into them”

“I enjoy learning about our residents, in particular what they did when they were younger. We have a resident who worked in a bakery, another was a florist and another met Princess Anne”

“We have themes around times of the year, for example Halloween, we have a reminiscence machine, we have quizzes and music sing songs, we recently went to Seaton Carew, went to the shops, we try and accommodate everyone”

Staff/Service

Feedback from staff highlighted a mixed picture of commitment, pressure, and concern regarding staffing levels and the wider support available within the service. While many staff described the home as a friendly and happy place to work, they also noted that frequent use of agency workers and the need to move staff between units can be unsettling and confusing for residents, particularly those living with dementia who rely heavily on consistency. Several staff reported that ongoing staff shortages create pressure across the team, contributing to feelings of being overstretched and undervalued. Domestic staff often step in to help, with one former carer frequently going above and beyond, which staff felt further indicated that resourcing remains an issue.

Concerns about low wages and job security were also raised, especially regarding two staff members whose sponsorship arrangements end in 2027. Some staff expressed that despite working as hard as possible, they feel they are not always recognised or rewarded for their efforts, and at times feel management expects more than can reasonably be delivered given current staffing levels. Others described feeling pressured to take on additional shifts when colleagues are absent, which can lead to frustration and a sense of being undervalued. However, this was balanced by positive comments from staff who felt appreciated, with one person sharing that a simple thank-you at the end of each shift means a great deal.

Despite these pressures, staff spoke positively about the regular supervisions offered by management, noting that hearing compliments from families helps them feel supported and reassured that their work makes a meaningful difference. Domestic staff, who spend time in residents' rooms each day, were recognised for building strong relationships with residents and contributing to the warm, homely atmosphere of the service. Overall, while staff remain dedicated and take pride in providing good care, they expressed a clear need for additional staffing, improved consistency, and greater recognition to help ensure sustainable, high-quality support for residents.

“I help the carers out a lot and I'll do things for them”

“The wages could be better, we have two staff on sponsorship at the home but that ends in 2027 so that's concerning”

“Personally I think staff should be kept on the same unit instead of being swapped about, which was what has been said in a course I attended- that dementia clients need continuity and people that they recognise to feel safe and secure”

“Most of the time I feel valued but I'm expected to do more due to staff sicknesses, but then I feel undervalued by the management and its just expected of you to do extra shifts!”

“It's a very rewarding job but very hard at times and the pay is not rewarded”

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been formulated based on observations of the environment and feedback gathered from residents, relatives and staff.

1. Improve Staffing Stability

- Reduce movement of staff between units to support continuity for residents, especially those living with dementia.
- Review staffing levels and reduce reliance on agency workers to ensure routines, such as drinks rounds, remain consistent.
- Provide clear support to staff on sponsorships to minimise job-security worries.

2. Strengthen Staff Support and Recognition

- Increase staff recognition through simple appreciation initiatives or structured recognition schemes.
- Provide wellbeing support and ensure staff do not feel pressured into covering additional shifts.

3. Address Environmental Challenges

- Prioritise repair and reliability of the lift to improve accessibility.
- Explore solutions for narrow doorways to support safe movement of equipment.

4. Enhance Activity Provision

- Expand activities tailored for residents with more advanced dementia.
- Ensure regular outings are taking place, seek alternative options for when the minibus requires repairs.

5. Increase Family Involvement

- Create more opportunities for meaningful family engagement and feedback.
- Continue using family insight to support personalised care planning.

Provider response

Regarding the two members of staff currently on 'sponsorship', we were surprised to read that staff had expressed concerns about sponsorship status. We felt it important to reiterate that we fully intend to extend sponsorship for these two employees when the time comes, though this will only be possible in early 2027.

Regarding the feedback forms, I have been informed by managers on site that completed forms were placed in the feedback box as requested. We really appreciate the feedback as it allows us to continuously improve our service.

On staffing levels, we are continually advertising to recruit additional staff. Staff numbers are determined based on resident dependencies, and sadly, due to ongoing challenges in recruitment, there are times when we must use agency staff to ensure the home remains safe. We endeavour to maintain continuity within our units; however, to meet safe staffing levels, staff occasionally must support other units. Using agency staff is regrettably unavoidable at times, but it is always done in the interest of maintaining the highest safety standards. Furthermore, staff members are often offered extra shifts voluntarily. If anyone chooses not to accept additional shifts, they are not pressured – their decision is fully respected. In those cases, agency staff are sourced to cover those gaps to ensure continually safe staffing.

We do value all our employees very much and are fully aware that the nature of this work is highly pressured. Therefore, we are currently considering various options to strengthen staff support and enhance recognition for the hard work they put in every day.

We are pleased to inform you that the lift is now fully operational. Regarding the narrow doorways, we will be exploring solutions to support the safe movement of equipment throughout the home.

Families continue to be invited to residents and relatives' meetings, as well as monthly review meetings concerning their loved ones. Communication with relatives is maintained frequently, and feedback forms on our service are provided. We undertake thorough analysis of this feedback and take recommendations very seriously, acting on them where appropriate.

Please know that we take all the recommendations on board and we are happy to implement the necessary changes to improve our service. We appreciate the contents of the report, and it is heartening to read about some of the truly positive aspects highlighted regarding Acorn Grange. The management team and all staff work incredibly hard, and it is good to see this acknowledged and appreciated. Thank you once again for your report.

Sharna Mackinder (Operations Manager – Manor Care Home Group)

healthwatch

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