

Orchard Care (North East)

Orchard Care (North East) Limited

Suite 1, Alexander House, Whitfield Court, Meadowfield, Durham DH7 8XL

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency is a small, not-for-profit organisation that recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide care to children who have a wide range of needs aged between 0 and 17 years. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 17 approved fostering households who provide care to 21 children.

There has been no registered manager in post since 29 February 2024. The agency is being overseen by the responsible individual and an interim manager. A new manager had been recently employed. She is yet to register with Ofsted.

Inspection dates: 24 to 28 June 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 inadequate

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: 29 November 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

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

The shortfalls in the leadership and management of this agency, and safeguarding practice, have had an impact on the overall experiences and progress of children and young people.

There is a significant lack of stability in the social work workforce. While the managers are making continuous attempts to recruit social work staff, they are not able to retain them for a variety of reasons. This impacts on foster carers and creates instability. Foster carers do, however, feel that they receive consistent support from the support staff who have worked for the agency for several years.

Foster carers have a mixed experience of working with the agency. Some describe feeling well supported and happy, whereas others describe feeling unsafe to speak up when they have concerns. A culture of open communication is not consistently achieved.

The quality of the relationships between foster carers and children is a strength of this agency. Foster carers give children high levels of warmth, nurture, and personalised care. Children develop long-term, trusting relationships and say that they can tell their foster carers if they are worried and that their foster carers listen to them. Children said that they feel safe. One child said that 'They [the foster carers] treat us like true family.'

Many children have lived with their foster families for several years. Some children remain with their foster families when they reach 18 years old under 'staying put' arrangements. Children experience stability and belonging.

Children are making and sustaining progress. All children of school age are in education and have personal education plans. When concerns at school arise, foster carers are champions for their children and work closely with education staff to ensure that children get what they need. One child's social worker described the foster carers as 'really lovely people who will fight for [name of child].' One child spoke about their achievements and aspirations. They said that they have been successful because their foster carer loved them and never gave up.

Children are supported to have meaningful and varied experiences that are broadening their horizons. One child spoke about regular trips abroad with their fostering family. Another spoke about how their foster carer is supporting them to take driving lessons.

All children are registered with local dentists, opticians, and doctors' surgeries. When needed, children also receive specialist health support, including from occupational therapy and the child and adolescent mental health services. One child is diagnosed

with epilepsy and their foster carer liaised with the epilepsy nurse to understand the child's needs. However, the agency did not ensure that a copy of the child's epilepsy plan was provided to the foster carer.

Foster carer assessments are completed by suitably qualified staff. They are detailed and thorough. When concerns are raised about prospective carers' suitability, they are dealt with in a sensitive manner. The assessors remain child-focused when considering the suitability of prospective foster carers.

Fostering panel members provide rigorous scrutiny of new applicants as well as those carers presented to the panel for three-yearly reviews and standards of care concerns. The panel chair is suitably experienced and has a good understanding of safeguarding. The panel members are suitably experienced. The panel chair and the manager work together well.

The children's guide is attractive and engaging for younger children. The agency is yet to develop a guide suitable for older children. In addition, it is not always clear in children's records if they have received a copy of the guide. Furthermore, some children use alternative communication methods. The guide is not readily available in a way that all children can understand.

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

Foster carers have a good understanding of risk to children. They take effective action to reduce risk, including keeping the agency informed and talking to children and helping them learn how to keep themselves safe. However, children's risk assessments are not always reviewed and updated following incidents, including when one child was found with a small pencil sharpener blade in their possession. In addition, there was no evidence that school staff had been notified.

When a child goes missing from home, foster carers are quick to act. They search for the child and inform the police and other relevant professionals. However, children's missing-from-home protocols are not kept up to date with relevant information and photos. This could hinder those looking for the child and delay their return home. In addition, for one child there is no record that they are being offered a chance to speak to an independent person when they return home. This was a recommendation from the last inspection and has been restated.

Foster carers know their children well and act quickly to defuse situations using methods that they know will help the child to feel settled and remain calm. Foster carers are providing consistent responses to children and children know what is expected of them. There has been one occasion when foster carers physically held a child because of their behaviour. The manager has not ensured that the decision made for the child to be visited by their social worker was acted upon. This means that the views of the child were not obtained and there is no management evaluation of what could have been done differently.

While most allegations against foster carers are managed well, on two occasions involving the same child and foster carer, allegations have been wrongly identified as a physical intervention and an incident. The child's social worker was informed and on one occasion the local authority designated officer was consulted. However, the manager has not considered potential patterns in foster carer practice. This does not help to keep children safe.

Furthermore, managers have failed to act when staff practice placed children at risk. One staff member received a speeding fine while driving with a fostered child in their car. An investigation did not take place. The staff member continued to transport children for several months without a risk assessment in place. This was brought to the manager's attention and action was taken during the inspection to ensure children's safety.

When foster carers are not able to meet children's needs and the child must move in an unplanned way, children's wishes and feelings are considered. However, when this happens, particularly with new foster carers, the manager has not undertaken a review of the agency's practice. This is a missed opportunity to better understand and learn. This does not help to reduce the risk of children having unplanned moves in the future.

The manager has not notified Ofsted of three serious incidents involving children. In addition, there have been occasions when notifications have been delayed. This does not help the regulator to understand how the agency is keeping children safe.

Many of the children living in fostering families have additional learning needs or disabilities. Foster carers ensure that children are supported to take risks that are measured and appropriate to the child's understanding. For example, one child has recently started to play out with their foster carers standing by should the child need support. Another child has a job delivering newspapers locally to where they live. Children are experiencing increased freedom and responsibility in a safe way.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

Effective leadership and management arrangements are not in place. Leaders do not ensure that there has been effective oversight of the day-to-day running of the agency, during the time of the previous registered manager and since their departure. Consequently, leaders and managers do not know the strengths and weaknesses of the agency. This means that there have been numerous shortfalls identified and action has not been taken to make the necessary improvements.

When staff raise whistle-blowing concerns about staff practice, although these are investigated, on one occasion written statements were not made, and the investigating manager has not recorded when interviews were undertaken. In addition, the investigating manager has not considered information already known about those involved. The investigation is of poor quality and does not give assurances that the concerns have been properly considered.

Furthermore, a manager's response to concerns raised by a foster carer was poor. This resulted in the foster carer needing to raise a formal complaint when a child's important personal items were lost. This includes a photo album from when the child was a baby. Additionally, the investigating manager has not made full written records of their investigations. The manager has not considered learning that would prevent a similar situation happening.

Not all children's records are written in a way that is helpful. For example, one child was described in their records as putting themselves at risk. This is blaming language and holds the child responsible and does not consider why adults are not keeping them safe. In addition, some records, especially those relating to consideration of matching children to foster carers, are illegible.

Foster carers receive regular supervision, although two fostering families are supervised by unqualified staff who have not had any specific training. In addition, there is a lack of oversight of their practice by someone qualified. This means that the managers cannot be reassured of the quality of the support that foster carers are receiving.

Foster carers take part in their foster carer review that is chaired by an independent and suitably qualified person. Foster carers' strengths and areas for development are considered. However, the decisions about foster carers' continuing suitability to foster are not always made within the expected timescales.

A new manager has recently been appointed. She has relevant skills and experience. She demonstrates that she has a clear vision for the agency and has put plans in place to address some key areas of development. The impact of this is yet to be tested.

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.

| Requirements | Due date |
|---|-----------------|
| <p>The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to—</p> <p>the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence, and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(b))</p> | 15 October 2024 |
| <p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (1)(a))</p> | 15 October 2024 |
| <p>The fostering service provider must not—</p> <p>employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so, or</p> <p>allow a person to whom paragraph (2) applies, to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so.</p> <p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person—</p> <p>has the qualifications, skills, and experience necessary for the work they are to perform. (Regulation 20 (1)(a)(b) (3)(b))</p> | 15 October 2024 |
| <p>The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation.</p> | 15 October 2024 |

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| <p>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. (Regulation 28 (1)(2))</p> | |
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Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will not stigmatise the child when they access their files now or in the future. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards,' 26.2)
- The responsible person should ensure that when children's personal information and possessions, including photo albums, are entrusted to the agency, that these are securely stored and returned to the child as soon as possible. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards,' 26.4)

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: SC065119

Registered provider: Orchard Care (North East) Limited

Registered provider address: Suite 1, Alexander House, Whitfield Court,
Meadowfield, Durham DH7 8XL

Responsible individual: Maria Jones

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 0191 378 4444

Inspectors

Rachel Walker, Social Care Inspector
Cat Makel, Social Care Inspector

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