

Orchard Care (Northeast)

Orchard Care (North East) Limited

Unit 12, City West Business Park, St. Johns Road, Meadowfield Industrial Estate,
Durham DH7 8ER

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 this inspection visit, in addition to the responsible individual and registered manager, the agency has a staff team that comprises a team manager, senior practitioner social worker, social work assistant, one supervising social worker, three senior learning support workers and a support team of several people. It is supported by an administrative and business support team of two people. The agency currently has 19 fostering households, providing placements to 23 children.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF (Social Care Common Inspection Framework) inspections on 12 April 2021.

We carried out an assurance visit on 29 January 2021. The report is published on the Ofsted website.

Inspection dates: 29 November to 3 December 2021

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers good

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 20 February 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Good matching of the children to foster families helps the children to settle and build trusted relationships with their foster carers. This has enabled many children to live with their foster families for several years. A child said:

'I feel really happy living here. My carers help me with absolutely everything. There is nothing I would change. I know that they really do care about me and want the best for me. This is the longest place that I have lived.'

Children's diverse needs are very well understood and considered by the agency. Prior to the children moving in with their foster families, the agency ensures that the foster carers have sufficient information about each child's needs. The agency also ensures that the foster carers receive any specialist training to help them meet the diverse needs of the children. This provides the children with consistent care and support, helping them to flourish.

In addition to providing foster carers with suitable training, the agency provides regular supervising social work visits and supervision. The agency has an effective out-of-hours service that the foster carers can use should they require support or advice outside of the office hours. Good support systems for foster carers help to reduce the number of placement breakdowns. On occasions when children's placements do end abruptly, the agency ensures that those children are well supported and helped to transition to their new placements. Children benefit from the ongoing support that they receive.

Children achieve good health and overall well-being. Children are supported by the agency to access the support services that they require. This includes accessing universal services, as well as any specialist services identified. Children's health outcomes improve because of the support that they receive from the agency.

Education for children is extremely well supported in line with each child's education plan. Individual education plans help the children to reach their learning objectives. Additionally, the agency offers extra tuition to those children who need this to support their learning. Children spoken to say that they are making good progress in their education. Most children achieve either 'secure' grades or 'excel' because of this.

Communication with foster families has continued to be good during the COVID-19 pandemic. The agency has consistently maintained regular contact with the children and their foster families and kept the children central to its practice. As such, the children continue to contribute to the agency's monthly newsletter that is sent out to all the foster families. In addition, the children are involved and make up part of the recruitment panel for new staff. Children are also seen and spoken to as part of the foster carer's annual reviews and during the home visits. Children's participation not

only ensures that children are involved in improving the agency's services, but it also ensures that children are involved in the decisions that affect their lives. This helps to improve their day-to-day experiences for all the children.

The agency runs an 'Awesome' club. This club provides the children with opportunities to show off their creative talents and enjoy a range of activities and outings. For children who access the club, they develop friendships with other children who attend. A foster carer commented:

'They just go above and beyond to support the carers and the children. It is like a big family. Everyone knows each other and [Name] loves the activities. She has made friends with other children. I cannot fault them.'

Children are supported by the agency to spend time with their birth family and friends, regardless of geographical location. Children have clear plans in place to ensure that their family time is promoted in line with their agreed plans. This promotes the children's identity needs as well as their overall well-being.

A number of foster carers attend their monthly support groups. These meetings provide the foster carers with the opportunity to receive regular updates about the agency, as well as offer peer support. Foster carers spoken to say that they enjoy attending the group and that they benefit from the support and information-sharing.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children receive good standards of care that help them to become increasingly safe. Children's risks are identified, understood and managed in line with their safety plans. Safe care policies provide guidance to the foster carers around expectations and managing potential risks to the children. The foster carers receive suitable training to help them to recognise any potential risks that the children may be exposed to, so that they are equipped to deal with these situations and respond appropriately.

The agency has effective systems in place to manage any allegations that may be made against the foster carers and the staff. When allegations have been made, the agency has ensured that the correct referrals and notifications have been made to the relevant organisations, including the designated officer in the local authority and to Ofsted. The agency's appropriate response to managing allegations ensures clear accountability and better protection for children.

The children rarely go missing from home. On the occasions that they do, the foster carers follow the agency's missing-from-care protocol to aid with the safe return of the children. The agency reports all of these incidents to the child's placing local authority and to the police. However, there is one incident when a child was not offered the opportunity to speak with an independent adult on their return home. This oversight limits the children's opportunities to share their experiences with someone independent.

Children receive good support, particularly when they are in crisis. The agency supports the foster carers to manage the children's challenging behaviours effectively through the use of positive behaviour management. The agency does not promote the use of physical intervention. De-escalation techniques are a preferred method of behaviour management. Children benefit from this support and are better helped to regulate their emotions and talk about their worries.

The agency ensures that all the health and safety matters are kept under regular review. Children live in safe homes, because the agency considers health and safety matters as part of the foster carers' home visits and reviews. An independent officer completes the foster carers' annual review and makes recommendations to improve practice. However, there is an inconsistent approach to setting timescales to address any recommendations. This has resulted in one health and safety check not being completed in the timescales set. While this did not have an adverse impact on the children living in the home, this does limit the manager's ability to effectively monitor all of the recommendations raised at the foster carers' reviews.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Effective leadership of the agency has ensured that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency remained responsive and supportive to the staff, foster carers and the children. Regular and increased communication between the agency, foster families and external agencies during this time ensured that the children and their foster families continued to receive good levels of support. This good practice remains in place.

The manager has identified potential shortfalls in the quality of the staff and foster carers' supervisions. She has improved these and has now added an agenda of the topics that must be explored. The manager ensures that the staff and the foster carers have an opportunity to reflect on their practice, consider their learning and development opportunities, and work to improve the children's outcomes. Information that the manager gathers from the staff and foster carers' supervision sessions assists her with her monitoring of the agency's functions, as well as supporting her to quality assure the practice of her staff and the foster carers. The manager's monitoring systems support the continued improvements that the agency makes.

The agency has plans in place to support it with its continued development. It has recently recruited a team manager and supervising social worker. The agency aims to maintain its functions as a small not-for-profit agency. There is a strong value base in the leadership team and across the agency regarding best practice and ensuring that they know their carers individually. Foster carers report that because the agency is small, and that the leaders and the staff know them very well, they choose to stay with the agency. Consequently, most children remain living with their foster families for prolonged periods of times.

The manager recognises that the members of the fostering panel need to be diverse. She is currently considering applications from a mix of people to ensure that

this continues. This ensures that the panel can consider the varied needs of children and foster carers.

The fostering panel is chaired by an experienced professional. The minutes from the panel demonstrate that the quality standards are considered, and that professional accountability is maintained. Panel minutes provide a clear appraisal of the panel's business, which informs the agency decision-makers' deliberations. This practice ensures that the children are cared for by suitable adults that are appropriately assessed, vetted and approved.

The agency has one supervising social worker and several support workers. The agency has experienced some difficulties with the retention of some of its staff, including supervising social workers. The manager recognises this shortfall and has considered ways to improve the retention of staff. There is a newly recruited supervising social worker, and she is in her induction period. Some foster carers have voiced their frustration regarding the multiple changes of staff turnover. Foster carers also report that, despite the turnover of supervising social workers, this has not affected the level of support that they receive from the agency. This is because the agency has a stable core group of support staff.

The agency works well with external agencies. Leaders, staff and the foster carers all advocate well on behalf of the children to ensure that the children can access the support that they require. A professional said:

'The carer for [Name] is absolutely amazing. They are a great advocate for the children. I cannot praise the carer enough. It is amazing how much progress that [Name] is making. I cannot believe that this is the same child. If he were anywhere else, the placement would have broken down.'

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that there is a consistent approach to children speaking to an independent person when returning from missing-from-home incidents. ('Fostering Services: National minimum standards', 5.9)
- The registered person should ensure that there is a consistent approach to addressing recommendations in foster carers' reviews within the given timescales. ('Fostering Services: National minimum standards', 25.2)

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: Unit 12, City West Business Park, St. Johns Road, Meadowfield Industrial Estate, Durham DH7 8ER

Responsible individual: Maria Jones

Registered manager: Sarah Jones

Telephone number: 0191 378 4444

Inspector

Jacqueline Tate, Social Care Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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