

Orchard Care (North East) Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Stephen Graham
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Orchard Care (North East) Ltd is an independent fostering agency based at the Meadowfield Business Park near Durham.

The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide care and accommodation to children and young people with a wide range of needs aged between 0 and 17 years.

At the time of this inspection visit, the staff team at the service were supporting more than 20 fostering households providing placements to over 30 children and young people.

Summary

The purpose of this announced key inspection was to examine all key national minimum standards. The inspection examined outcomes for young people in the areas of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, economic well-being and organisation. Young people placed through Orchard Care benefit from good levels of care.

The service is good at working in partnership with a range of professionals to promote the health care needs and education of fostered children.

The service works in partnership with social workers who wish to place children to ensure that carers get good information about the child they are going to foster.

The service regularly reviews the quality of the work undertaken by foster carers with the children placed with them. The views of social workers and the children they have placed are gathered and assessed as part of this process. Foster carers receive good support from the staff team and are encouraged to undertake regular training to ensure that they continue to have the skills necessary to care for young people successfully.

The service has good administrative systems to facilitate the sharing of necessary information with carers and other professionals. This helps improve joint working and overall outcomes for children and young people.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

To help meet the health care needs of the young people placed with them, carers are provided with training and support in healthy eating, health and hygiene.

To help keep young people safe the service is providing carers with regular training in child protection and behaviour management. Health and safety in the home is regularly reviewed by staff with carers, and pet safety questionnaires and risk assessments are agreed and completed in good detail.

To help ensure that the service is properly organised, procedures have been improved to help ensure that foster carer agreements are completed promptly following the approval of each

new carer. The records of visits to referees of people being assessed as carers are now signed in confirmation by the referee themselves. The records maintained of the care provided to each young person have been improved to better demonstrate the outcomes achieved for them. The Statement of Purpose for the agency has been improved to include more detail of staffing arrangements, the number of carers available and numbers of children placed.

Previous recommendations were made regarding the clear recording of training provided to carers, the recording of unannounced visits to carers and the signatures of placing social workers on the safe care policies agreed with them. These have not been fully implemented and are re-stated in this report.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people placed through the service receive good support to help ensure that their health care needs are met. Carers receive details of the health needs of the children placed with them and help ensure they are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians. Carers are supported by staff to work closely with a variety of specialist medical staff to promote and support good outcomes for the children and young people placed with them. Additional training is provided to carers where necessary to help ensure that health needs can be met. However, training records are not always completed in sufficient detail to fully demonstrate this.

Nearly all of the carers who wrote to us described the support they received from the service in meeting the health care needs of children as either 'good' or 'outstanding'. One carer described how 'training sessions are available and there is always someone on the end of the phone to give advice and support.'

Social workers who have placed children through the service also gave examples of how the service works with its carers, to ensure that children and young people keep themselves healthy. One reported that 'carers I have dealt with seem capable and well informed.'

Those young people spoken with also felt that they receive good support and advice regarding their own health needs from their foster carers. They confirmed that they are encouraged to eat healthily and to participate in a variety of healthy activities, giving examples such as cycling and football. Young people also confirmed that they are registered with local health services and are supported to attend appointments.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

To help keep children safe, suitability checks are undertaken on carers and staff. These are monitored through a central system to make sure that they are kept up to date. However, some of the information required is not recorded in sufficient detail within staff files.

Health and safety checklists are used to help ensure that homes are safe places for children to live. These are routinely updated during visits to the homes of carers by staff from the fostering service. Individual risk assessments are also used to help keep children safe. However, in some examples these were not signed in confirmation of agreement by the placing social worker. Positively, one social worker confirmed by questionnaire how in their experience the service

has 'risk assessments in place'. Another commented generally on the arrangements to keep children safe, stating that: 'Carers and professional staff seem to liaise regularly regarding such issues.'

The service works to ensure that the systems used to match children with carers are as effective as possible. There are agreed procedures and standard documentation in place which are used by staff to gather and share the information needed to properly match children with their carers. The visits made to carers and the children placed with them illustrated the good matching procedures in place. There have been no unplanned endings of placements.

In their questionnaire responses, carers described the good or outstanding work of the staff at the service in ensuring that they can meet the needs of the children and young people placed with them. Carers spoken with also gave a number of good examples of the practical support provided by staff to help maintain placements should any difficulties arise. One carer commented: 'They are there all the time to help if they are needed.'

There are clear procedures in place to help carers and staff to safeguard children and protect them from abuse. Carers are provided with training to help them keep children safe. Managers at the service monitor any protection referrals, incidents and any complaints. The young people spoken with confirmed that they feel safe with their carers and can speak to someone if they are ever unhappy.

The fostering panel ensures that the assessments undertaken on any new foster carers are thorough and that their ability to care safely for children is regularly reviewed. Panel members are also provided with training to help them with their responsibilities.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

There are good arrangements in place at the service to help promote and support diversity and equality for children and young people. Training is provided to foster carers and fostering staff to help them deal generally with any diversity issues. Specific support is provided and access to additional specialist advice is arranged where this is necessary to help meet the needs of the children placed. Children also receive good support from their carers and staff to help them access a variety of activities and clubs in their local community.

The service employs specialist staff to work with carers and placing social workers to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people placed are properly assessed, agreed and supported. The dedicated education staff help to facilitate good links between foster carers and schools and provide direct practical support to young people should any difficulties arise. One carer described how staff 'helped with transport arrangements'. Carers also receive additional training to help them understand and support the educational needs of children in their care. One carer described how 'they provide training on a regular basis and any extra training that we ask for, to enable us to improve our knowledge.'

Children were also very positive about the help they receive with their education. Some were able to describe very positively how staff and carers had worked to bring 'stability' to their individual educational arrangements.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Carers receive good training and are given detailed guidance to help children maintain positive contact with their birth families and friends. Practical arrangements are discussed and agreed in advance and are recorded in detail. Carers maintain a record of any contact as it occurs and share this with support staff and the children's own social worker.

The service has good arrangements in place to ensure that children are regularly consulted with. One foster carer described how 'we sit down regularly with the link worker along with the foster child discussing the progress they have made and what they would like to see.' Those young people spoken with confirmed that they are encouraged to give their views both to their own review meetings and to those of their foster carers. Each young person also confirmed that they felt that their carers, social workers and staff at the agency listen to them and take notice of their opinions.

Carers also describe the service as being good at involving children in decisions about their day-to-day lives and at involving them in how the service is run. One described how 'foster children have access to Orchard Care by phone 7 days per week.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

The arrangements to support young people in developing independence skills were not fully assessed during this visit. However, in their questionnaire responses, foster carers were able to describe the good or outstanding support received to enable them to provide an environment for young people to prosper. The agency plans to provide further training to both staff and carers in leaving care legislation, promoting independence and pathway planning. Policies and procedures are provided to support this in the Foster Carers' Handbook.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service has a Statement of Purpose which is regularly reviewed and provides a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the service. Placing social workers and foster carers can access a copy of the statement on request. Children and young people are also given their own guide to it, which is very well presented.

Management arrangements within the service are generally effective and individual areas of responsibility and delegation are clearly agreed. The current manager is recently appointed and the agency are in the process of seeking the approval of Ofsted for this. Managers monitor the service as a matter of routine. However, not all of the monthly summary reports of this monitoring are in place. The service has experienced administrative staff who provide good support to carers and staff through the administrative systems in place. There are good systems to ensure that initial applications are processed efficiently and that carer reviews are completed to schedule.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Guidance and training for foster carers and staff working at the service helps to ensure this.

The processes to check on and train new carers are effective. The records of assessments undertaken are monitored closely. Training is provided to help ensure that assessments are completed in good detail. Carers give good examples of why they choose to foster for this service. One described how 'I phoned and talked to them and they sounded good. I have found them very good in supporting me.' Another provided the view that 'they are a good fostering service, I personally cannot fault them.'

The social work team at the fostering service undertake regular supervision visits to their carers. A number of very positive responses were received when carers were asked, 'what does the fostering service do to help you look after the children and young people in your care?' One described how 'they offer 24 hour support and advice 7 days a week, support staff are on offer to help wherever needed, and there is an excellent training package.' Another reported how 'the fostering service is there to help when required. They send me on relevant courses to help me understand how the children may feel or what to look for if a problem may arise.' Records of the support visits are maintained within files for reference and help demonstrate that carers are supported effectively.

The annual review meetings for each foster carer are scheduled in advance and are monitored to ensure they take place at the required frequency. The documentation used for reviews demonstrates clearly that necessary checks for carers are monitored and updated as a matter of routine. However, review reports do not clearly indicate whether statutory unannounced visits to carers have been completed by their supervising staff.

Carers are encouraged to participate in regular training to help them meet the needs of children placed with them. Some events are organised to facilitate joint training for carers and staff. The training programme is organised in advance with details of forthcoming events circulated to carers to encourage their participation. Attendance at training is monitored by supervising social workers during their regular supervision visits with carers and also at their annual review meeting.

Case files for children are regularly monitored and are generally well presented and organised. The administrative systems for the service are also well organised. However, some of the information recorded within the register of children placed is not completed in sufficient detail.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
4	ensure that reports are produced demonstrating that the matters set out in Schedule 7 to the regulations have been monitored (Regulation 42.1)	31 July 2010
15	ensure that all information required by Schedule 1 to the regulations is obtained and clearly recorded within staff files. (Regulation 7.2)	31 July 2010

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that children's social workers sign the foster carers' safe care policies in confirmation of their agreement (NMS 9)
- ensure that Ofsted approval is obtained for the current manager at the service (NMS 2)
- ensure that foster carer review reports clearly indicate that an unannounced visit with them has been completed by the service (NMS 21)
- ensure that the training records maintained by the agency accurately reflect the training undertaken by carers (NMS 23)
- ensure that the information recorded within the register of children placed is sufficiently detailed. (NMS 25)