

# Orchard Care (North East)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Responsible individual</b>	Maria Rosa Jones
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	16/04/2010

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Orchard Care (North East) Ltd is an independent fostering agency. It operates on a 'not for profit' basis. The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide care 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 agency had a staff team comprising three supervising social workers and a principal practitioner, a recruitment manager, a support team including three team leaders and twelve support workers and an administrative and business support team. This staff team was supporting around 33 fostering households providing placements to around 40 children and young people.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **inadequate**.

The judgement of inadequate for the overall effectiveness of the agency is made because the leadership and management of the agency has been judged to be inadequate. The agency has operated without a Registered Manager in place for around 22 months. This is contrary to the legislative and regulatory requirements under which the agency operates. While there are some elements of the agency's management which are not as effective as they should be it is positive to note that a clear focus has been retained upon providing a good quality care which keeps young people safe and helps them make progress.

Consequently, judgements for quality of service, the outcomes for and progress of young people and for safeguarding are good. The agency provides suitable, well supported and trained foster carers who are well matched to the needs of the young people placed with them. Decision making in the agency is generally careful and well planned although the process for making approval decisions is not as effective as it should be. However, the agency has ensured that it continues to provide effective management support and control to its foster carers, which ensures that young people receive the support they need.

Support to young people is of a very high quality from the agency's large team of support workers. This helps young people achieve good outcomes which are outstanding in some respects. Notably the support for young people's emotional resilience and education is of a very high level. For example, the agency's focus on ensuring all young people attend school full-time and make progress is excellent. Similarly, its work to help young people to understand and come to terms with their life stories is very positive and has significant success in helping young people move forward and improve their ability to live fulfilling lives.

Shortfalls exist in some elements of the agency's management. The agency lacks a Registered Manager which is a significant breach of regulations. It has also failed to notify Ofsted of some significant events occurring to young people, which limits the regulator's ability to ensure that young people are being sufficiently well protected by the agency's actions. Additionally, arrangements to ensure that carers are exempted from 'the usual fostering limit' where necessary are not effective enough. Foster caring families receive a good standard of training, but the agency is not effective enough in ensuring that this training extends to both of the fostering partners.

## Areas for improvement

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
6 (2011)	appoint an individual to manage the fostering agency (Regulation 6(1) Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)	04/04/2014
36 (2011)	notify the Chief Inspector without delay of every significant event set out in Schedule 7 of the regulations. (Regulation 36(1))	21/03/2014

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that the agency decision is made within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes (NMS 14.9)
- ensure that training is made available to all foster carers, including hard to reach carers. Specifically, that both partners in a foster caring household undertake appropriate amounts of training (NMS 20.8)
- ensure that an exemption is in place from the local authority in which the foster carer lives for every situation in which a foster carer exceeds the usual fostering limit. (Volume 5, Statutory Guidance, para 5.46)

### **Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people fostered by this agency and its carers make good progress from their starting points and are helped to achieve positive outcomes.

They are helped to settle with their new carers and develop good relationships with them by the effective matching and placement process. Young people are able to get to know about and meet their new carers before placement even in very short notice or emergency placements. This helps ensure that young people's needs and feelings are taken into account and that foster carers understand these well enough to care for them well in their first few weeks of placement.

Young people are well cared for by their carers with the support of the agency. The agency works effectively with placing authorities to ensure that young people's plans are clear and contributes well to these. This means that young people feel safe with their carers and understand their plans of care. Relationships between young people and their carers are good. This is further supported by the agency's focus on helping young people to understand their life story. This means that young people's emotional resilience improves significantly, which helps them develop meaningful relationships with their foster carers and others.

Young people benefit from stable placements which meet their needs and the agency works hard to ensure that young people only move on from placements when it is appropriate for them to do so. They are fully included in the foster carer's family life and able to make their own friendships and develop their own interests. One child said, 'I have lots of friends and am more confident.' Where young people move into independence, alternative provision or back to their families, this is done in a planned and well-supported manner. For example, one young person, whose care plan was for a move into residential care because of the degree of challenge presented was, after the provision of high levels of support and life story work provided by the agency, able to return to live with their family.

Young people benefit from very high levels of support from the agency and its foster

carers. This enables them to undertake a wide range of activities and opportunities which help them enjoy their lives and develop their own sense of identity. Young people are helped to understand what has happened to them and to come to terms with this. Their views are sought about their care and they are able to influence the care they receive. They receive good support to remain in contact with their family members where this is appropriate for them.

Young people are well supported to manage their own behaviour. The agency's support team includes staff with expertise in a range of areas which help young people deal with any trauma or distress they have faced and to build positive new attachments. The benefits of this are apparent in the progress made by young people and the relationships they develop. Young people's risk taking behaviour is reduced by the care provided to them. They benefit from the agency's effective partnership working with local authorities, which ensure that young people receive a consistent and supportive approach to any difficulties they have.

Young people receive the health input they need from both primary and specialist health services. Consequently their health improves during the time they are fostered. All young people fostered by the agency attend school on a full-time basis. This is a significant achievement as a large majority were not in full-time education before they were placed with the agency. Where young people have to change school when they are placed with the agency, full-time educational support is provided until a school placement can be arranged. Young people make good educational progress and in some cases excellent progress.. For example, a young person caught up between two and three years missed education in their five years of foster care and is now performing significantly above the age average.

## **Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering agency recruits a range of foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the young people to whom it offers placements. Its assessment and preparation process is thorough. Initial screening and early preparation training is robust in ensuring that people who are not suitable are counselled out or decide not to pursue their application early in the process. Regular preparation training of six one-day sessions takes place throughout the assessment process in addition to the initial two-day 'choosing to foster' training. This ensures that foster carers are well prepared and equipped to care for the young people placed with them.

The fostering panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements. It receives good assessments which have been quality checked before they are presented to the panel. Discussion and deliberation is thorough and clear recommendations are made to the agency decision maker. Panel provides feedback to the agency on the quality of each assessment and is working to improve this process further. Panel membership is diverse and members are provided with good levels of training. The process for agreeing and finalising panel minutes is not as good as it should be. Currently draft minutes are agreed and finalised at the next panel. This means that

the agency decision maker is making approval decisions based on the draft minutes instead of the final minutes as set out in the national minimum standards.

The agency's matching process is thorough and careful. Even in very short-notice or emergency placements, the agency works hard to ensure that young people and carers meet before the placement takes place and that full information is shared. Foster carers are well-supported by the agency to decide whether they are able to meet the needs of the proposed young person and are given positive support to refuse a placement if they feel it would not be appropriate. This, along with the high levels of support provided to young people and their foster carers, helps ensure that placement stability is good and young people do not experience unnecessary moves.

The agency's social workers, support staff and social workers work very effectively together to ensure that young people are well supported. This team approach is effective in helping carers deal with the challenges they face. Consequently, the care provided in matters such as contact with families and work with other professionals is fully based on young people's individual needs. The agency supports its carers to advocate on behalf of the young person they foster and to take a full and active part in decision making.

The agency provides foster carers with high levels of practical and emotional support to help them support children and young people. For example, support workers can help provide transport to schools where this is difficult and intensive one-to-one work with young people is provided if required. In new placements where young people are still settling in, the agency provides additional support. For example, one carer said she had daily support for several hours per day in the first few weeks of a young person's placement. The direct work the agency undertakes with young people is a significant support to them and the stability of the placement. The high levels of support lead to some excellent outcomes for young people. For example, in some cases support workers provide young people with full-time one-to-one support in schools for extended periods with examples of seven months and over two years being cited. This enables young people to make significant progress which would not have been possible for them otherwise. In other cases, very intensive work to help young people understand their life story has significantly improved their emotional resilience and helped them make good progress into adulthood or re-develop relationships with their families.

One carer said that the agency is 'not only committed to their young people but very committed to their foster carers. I have always had the highest regard for their high standard of care.' Another simply described the support as 'fantastic'.

Foster carers are provided with good levels of training. Around three-quarters of the agency's carers have attained their Training, Support and Development Standards which is higher than the national figure for independent agencies. A mandatory training programme of eleven courses is provided to foster carers including training in child protection and behaviour management. There is additional voluntary training provided in general topics or matters specific to individual foster carers and their fostered children. However, although the take up of this training from each fostering

household is very good the, take up from the main carer's partner is not always so good with some 'second carers' doing very little training in the last one to two years.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good.**

Young people feel safe in their foster homes and are protected by the careful foster care assessment process, good matching arrangements and high levels of support provided to them and their carers. Placements are made in the possession of good levels of information about the young person and clear safe care practices are agreed with their placing social workers. Risks are appropriately assessed and addressed. Young people's plans of care are considered on a regular basis both in foster carer supervision and by management with their carer's supervising social worker and support team workers. This ensures that plans remain relevant and reflect changes in the young person's needs or behaviour.

Young people know how to complain and who they can talk to about any concerns they have. They feel confident that they will be supported and listened to and that their concerns will be addressed. Support workers regularly engage with young people to ensure that they know how to keep themselves safe.

The assessment, preparation, supervision and training of foster carers ensures that foster carers understand safeguarding and child protection and that their care is based on safe caring practices. Consequently they are able to recognise and respond to any signs of historic or current abuse. Foster carers have very good relationships with agency staff and good support to work effectively with young people's social workers, schools and other professionals working with them. This helps ensure that young people receive good levels of support which in turn helps ensure their protection. Young people are regularly seen by agency staff without their foster carers and the agency makes unannounced visits to foster carers' homes at least annually. Foster carer supervision processes ensure that any significant events occurring to young people, including any that may place them at risk are identified and addressed. Good information is retained in the agency about these incidents and clear action taken to support young people or identify any concerning patterns or trends. Where allegations are made against foster carers or others, the agency takes appropriate steps to safeguard young people and provide any additional training, support or guidance necessary for the carers.

The incidence of children or young people going missing from their foster homes is infrequent. In cases where this does occur it is monitored effectively and the reasons discussed and addressed with the young person. Agency staff and foster carers know how to respond to situations in which a young person may go missing and work to reduce this behaviour.

Staff and foster carer recruitment processes are thorough and help ensure the suitability of people working with or caring for young people.



## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **inadequate**.

This agency has not had a Registered Manager in place for around 22 months. In this time a manager was appointed but the agency did not apply to register this person who subsequently left after six months. This situation is a breach of legislation and results in the judgement of inadequate for the agency's leadership and management.

However, the agency's management team has worked hard within this period of time to ensure that the delivery of effective management support to foster carers and young people has not been compromised. This has enabled the agency to continue to provide young people with a good quality of service.

The agency's management team work effectively with children's social workers and the wider professional team working around the young person. They provide strong support to foster carers, which helps them to work well within this team and provide good care to their fostered children. Young people are provided with very high levels of support from a large support team with a wide range of skills, qualifications and experience. The agency's management and staff review each young person's progress on a very regular basis to ensure that the correct support is being provided.

The agency's staff team are appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. Staff supervision is effective and ensures that the agency is able to deliver support and supervision to foster carers in a consistent and effective manner. Foster carer's reviews include the views of young people and young people are also involved in other aspects of the agency's operations including the recruitment of new staff.

The agency understands the needs of the young people it places and those for whom local authorities may need future placements. This information is used to inform foster carer recruitment, assessment and approval processes to ensure the agency offers appropriately skilled carers who can meet young people's needs.

The agency's Statement of Purpose is clear and comprehensive. This means that foster carers, professionals and young people's families know what to expect of the agency. Young people receive a children guide with information about how they can be heard and express their views or any concerns.

Management of the agency is generally effective although there are some shortfalls. The agency has addressed the requirements and recommendations made at the previous inspection and has continued to make progress in its development. However, not all notifiable events under Schedule 7 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 have been notified to Ofsted despite the agency's records showing that these notifications had been made. This limits the regulators ability to monitor the agency's operation and to ensure that young people are sufficiently well protected. Additionally, rare situations in which placements are made over 'the usual fostering limit' are not always handled correctly. In a situation in

which such a placement was made, although it was clear that both local authorities concerned were aware of the situation, the agency had failed to obtain an exemption statement for the carers from their host local authority. This means that the agency cannot be sure that the responsible local authority had considered the suitability of the placement and consented to it.

Other elements of the agency's monitoring and management is effective. The agency's operation is formally reviewed every three months to ensure the quality of its practice. This monitoring also ensures the agency's on-going financial viability. The views of children and young people, foster carers and staff are used to guide the future development of the agency.

## 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.