

Orchard Care (North East)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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| Responsible individual | Maria Rosa Jones |
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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. In addition to the manager, at the time of this inspection visit, the agency had a staff team comprising three supervising social workers, a principal practitioner a recruitment manager. The agency also has a support team including three team leaders and eleven support workers. It is supported by an administrative and business support team. This staff team was supporting around 34 fostering households providing placements to around 30 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: **good**.

This is a good fostering service. It provides outstanding levels of support to the children placed with its foster carers and to the foster carers themselves. This means that young people have a good experience and achieve good outcomes as a result of the care provided to them.

The agency's leadership and management have improved since the last inspection. A registered manager is now in post and the agency has a strong focus on improvement and providing a high quality of practice. The quality of service provided

to young people is well monitored and managed. However, some specific aspects of the agency's operation are not well monitored enough and as a result these areas are not yet good enough. For example, the quality of some processes and records such as the reports from foster carers' reviews and the different stages of the approval process are not always of good quality. Additionally, the action taken to acquire full local authority information in respect of each young person placed is not managed well enough to ensure it is effective.

The agency has sufficient staff who are well supervised and have access to appropriate training. Young people and foster carers have a voice within the agency and are able to influence its practice and development. The agency operates a thorough assessment and approval process and once approved, foster carers are provided with good supervision, training and support.

Young people fostered by the agency are helped to make good progress. Their health needs are met well and so their health improves. They are also able to take part in a range of activities which help them to engage with other people, learn skills and develop relationships. Where contact with families is appropriate for young people, they receive good support to help ensure this is a positive experience for them. Young people's educational achievement is monitored and promoted and young people make good progress during their time with their carers.

Young people's positive experience and progress is supported by the outstanding quality of support provided to them and their foster carers. The agency provides young people with extremely high levels of individually focussed support based on a detailed assessment of their need which is regularly reviewed. This support helps maintain placement stability and enables young people to grow emotionally and to make and maintain good relationships.

Arrangements to help ensure young people's safety are good. Foster placements are well supervised and monitored and agency staff spend time getting to know and talking to the young people. Young people feel safe and are able to make progress in their foster placements.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that steps are undertaken to gain full documentation in a timely manner from the local authority in respect of each young person placed (NMS 31)
- ensure that clear records are maintained of the process, dates and detail of the agency decision regarding the approval of foster carers (NMS 14.9)
- ensure that written minutes of panel meetings record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)

- ensure that the reports produced from foster carers' review meetings are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster. (NMS 13.8)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people fostered by the agency have positive experiences and make good progress during their time in foster care.

The agency works effectively with local authorities to ensure that, as far as possible, young people experience planned moves to their new foster carers. Where this is not possible information sharing is good and young people are supported to settle in to their new families. The matching process is careful so as to ensure that the needs of young people can be met well by their prospective carers. Young people receive very high levels of support in their placements. They are helped to make secure attachments to their foster carers. This helps young people to make good progress and helps young people to experience stable family lives. For example, one social worker commented that a young person's behaviour 'was very challenging when she was first placed with her foster carer. However, she is currently very settled and I have observed a very close bond/attachment with her carer'. Young people approaching adulthood are encouraged and enabled to remain with their foster caring families beyond the age of 18 years. Staff from the agency continue to provide support to young people in these situations.

The agency's young person's guide provides good information about being fostered and what to do if young people have concerns or worries. Young people have a say in the way the agency operates. Their views are sought for the reviews of their foster carers and young people are currently involved in the development of a new young person's guide.

Foster carers work well with social workers and birth family members and offer young people good emotional and practical support to maintain contact with people who are important to them wherever this is assessed as appropriate. This means that young people are able to maintain important family ties.

Young people's health improves during their time in foster care. They have access to all primary and any specialist health provision they require. The high levels of support provided to young people by their carers and agency staff helps ensure that young people receive the health support they need. Young people's emotional health is improved by the agency's close work with other specialist agencies.

Young people make good educational progress during their time living with their foster carers. Foster carers and their supervising social workers work with placing authorities and schools to help ensure that young people receive the education they need. The agency's support team work closely with carers, young people and their schools to help young people to achieve. This work is carefully planned and

monitored to ensure it is effective and improves young people's lives.

Young people are fully involved in the family life and activities of their foster carers. Their lives are improved by their access to a range of leisure and recreational activities which help them to develop their skills and to increase their self-confidence and self-esteem. Young people receive excellent support from the agency and its carers, this helps ensure that activities undertaken by young people are purposeful as well as enjoyable.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The processes for recruiting, assessing and preparing foster carers are thorough and careful. The agency recruits prospective carers with the correct attitudes, backgrounds and skills to care for young people in places. Responses to enquiries are timely and initial assessments are thorough with good information about fostering being provided to prospective carers. The assessment, background checks, home study sessions and preparation training of prospective carers are carried out in a timely manner. Assessments are thorough and evidence based and provide clear evaluation of the applicant's suitability to foster. This ensures that applicants presented to panel are suitable, well prepared and have full information about what fostering entails and the challenges they will face.

The agency's panel comprises members with a wide range of appropriate backgrounds and skills. Panel processes are effective with information being made available to panel members in a confidential and timely manner. Panels held are quorate with minutes clearly recording who is present. Panel minutes provide the agency decision maker with a clear and well-judged recommendation although the reasons for this recommendation are not made as clear as they should be. Agency decision making is good in its outcome but the process for recording the date on which decisions were made and the accurate recording of the decision are also not as clear as they should be. These matters are a recording and monitoring matter rather than a weakness in the quality of the service provided and are addressed under the leadership and management section of this report.

The agency provides its foster carers with very good supervision and training. The agency works hard to provide relevant training and development for its foster carers. The majority of carers have attained the Training, Support and Development Standards. The agency has recently revised its training programme to include core training, required by all carers, training which is specifically identified based on carers' needs or those of the young person being cared for and further training which carers may be interested in. This move is appreciated by carers who report that training is geared to their own needs as far as possible. Foster carer supervision is frequent, regular and of a high standard. This helps to ensure that young people are provided with very high levels of support.

The agency works effectively with placing authorities to make good and stable

matches between young people and their new foster carers. Delegated consent arrangements are identified when placements are made and the agency works hard to ensure that carers are aware of and supported to work to these arrangements. This helps ensure that young people receive the care they need.

The support provided to fostered young people and their foster carers is outstanding. The agency provides support to fostered young people and their caring families in a holistic manner. Support plans for young people are developed based on a detailed assessment of the young person's needs and situation. The delivery of this support is fully reviewed at six weekly intervals with interim monitoring taking place on an ongoing basis. The agency has a team of support workers led by people with a special focus on matters such as health, education and behaviour. The agency also has access to therapeutic support and input from a specialist in autism. This means that, when the high levels of support input is provided, it is of specific benefit to young people and the carers. For example one carer said, 'What I like is that support is not just an outing but it has a clear purpose based on the young person's need and situation.' Another said. 'I used to use the support just to get a short break but now the support is more structured and better for the child I benefit more than I used to.' Examples of the support provided include significant levels of support with young people within school, support for young people developing independence skills and support to moderate and improve young people's behaviour.

Agency social workers and support workers spend time with young people in placement. They meet them regularly to ensure their needs are being met, to provide any support needed and to allow them to express their views. The agency supports foster carers to advocate for the young person in placement and to be a full part of the team working with the young person.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency takes care, when proposing potential matches to local authorities, to match young people's needs with the skills and situation of the foster carers. Young people are cared for in a way that allows them to take age appropriate risks but also helps to keep the safe. Safe caring plans and clear risk assessments are developed by the agency and agreed with local authority placing social workers. These plans and assessments underpin the care provided to young people and are reviewed and updated as necessary. The agency listens to young people and monitors their care and their experiences. Visits to foster carers, including some unannounced visits, happen regularly and young people are seen alone. Supervising social workers and support workers know young people well and spend time with them which enables young people to express their views and voice any concerns they may have.

Young people rarely go missing from their carers and the agency works well with its carers to reduce the risk of young people going missing. In situations in which young people do go missing the agency takes the necessary actions. It notifies the correct people, ensures young people are safe on their return and addresses this behaviour

with them through the support provided to them. Work is carried out with young people to address any worries they may have and this is discussed and monitored in foster carers' supervision.

The agency keeps copies of the various local authorities' safeguarding, child protection and missing from home and care procedures and protocols. It works closely with placing authorities and the authorities in which foster carers live to ensure young people are safe. Where safeguarding or child protection concerns do occur the agency responds to these promptly and takes the correct action in line with local authority procedures and plans to ensure that young people are safe. The agency is prepared to challenge local authority's safeguarding practice where necessary in situations where it believes appropriate action is not being taken.

Safeguarding children and young people is given priority throughout the agency's work. The agency provides foster carers with training about the needs of young people who may have been abused or who may be at additional risk of harm both in preparation training and on an ongoing basis. Foster carers' supervision and review process also monitor to young people's safety and wellbeing and work is undertaken to address any concerns identified.

The assessment and approval process for foster carers is carefully done and placements are monitored closely. Recruitment processes for and staff are similarly thorough. These arrangements to ensure the suitability of those people working with young people and help keep young people safe.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The agency's statement of purpose is available on the its website as well as being provided to interested parties. A revised statement of purpose has just been introduced; this describes the agency and its operation accurately.

The agency works well with placing authorities to ensure that the care delivered meets young people's needs and is line with their local authority plan of care. The agency makes efforts to acquire full local authority documentation about children to help underpin the care provided to them. However, these efforts are not always successful and some young people do not have key planning documentation on their files which could negatively affect the care provided to them. Work to acquire this information is not as robust as it should be and the agency lacks a process for escalating this matter to more senior local authority managers.

Social work staffing levels are appropriate for the size of the agency and social workers have access to good levels of training and support. Manageable workloads mean that social workers are able to spend time getting to know the young people. This helps them to seek their views and to ensure that suitable care is being provided to them. Good administrative support arrangements are in place. The agency employs a large and effective support team to work directly with young

people and their carers. This work is of high quality and its delivery is well managed and monitored.

Since the last inspection the agency has appointed a manager who was registered by Ofsted in the summer of 2014. This has improved the leadership and management of the agency. The agency is well managed at a strategic level monitoring is effective. Managers have a good understanding of the agency's strengths and have development plans in place. The direct care provision by supervising social workers and the agency's support team is good. Managers monitor young people's care and the progress they are making closely to ensure that provision continues to meet their needs. Although some aspects of the agency's leadership and management are good there are some failings in details of some of the agency's processes and records which are not yet good enough and monitoring by the agency has not identified and addressed these. This means that the agency's leadership and management requires further improvement to be judged good overall.

Some details of the agency's processes and recording are not carried out with sufficient quality. Although these matters do not have a negative impact on the quality of practice the agency's ability to manage its own work is limited by these weaknesses. Minutes of the agency's fostering panel do not specifically record the reasons for the recommendation made. The reasons can sometimes be inferred from the minutes but the lack of specifically cited reasons means that, where recommendations are made on more complex cases, the agency decision maker does not receive as clear information about panel's opinion as they should. Records of the foster carers' approval process after panel has considered their application are not clearly retained. For example, the wording of the actual decision is not clear enough and the dates on which the decision was made and actual approval took place are often not clear and sometimes inaccurate. Foster carers' reviews are appropriately managed and work leading up to the review meeting gives a clear consideration of the carer's ongoing suitability. However, records of the review meeting itself are not sufficiently detailed or comprehensive. For example, in one situation a proposal to change a carers' terms of approval did not take place after the review meeting but the meeting records contain no reference to any discussion round this matter. More generally, review meeting records do not reflect the quality of work done prior to the review.

Better quality recording and more detailed monitoring would ensure that matters such as these are identified and addressed by the agency.

The agency makes appropriate notifications to Ofsted and ensures that appropriate action is taken in response to any significant events that take place.

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.