

Orchard Care (North East)

Orchard Care (North East) Limited

Unit 12, City West Business Park, St John's Road, Meadowfield Industrial Estate,
Durham DH7 8ER

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide care to children and young people 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 manager, the agency had a staff team comprising a principal social worker, three supervising social workers, a social work assistant and support team of seven people. It is supported by an administrative and business support team of three people. The agency currently has 23 fostering households, providing placements to 29 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 20 to 27 February 2018

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 **requires improvement to be good**

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

Date of last inspection: 10 December 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The processes for assessing, preparing and approving foster carers are thorough and robust. This means that the agency's carers are well prepared to look after children and young people who may have very complex needs.
- There is careful matching during the placement process, together with high levels of support to foster carers and the children they look after. This leads to stable placements for children and young people, helping them to make good progress.
- The agency provides children and young people with very good support for their education. It makes great efforts to support children's attendance and attainment at school and to support their education if they are absent from school.
- The agency and its carers are committed to helping children and young people to understand their life stories. It provides foster carers with good training and effective support and guidance to enable them to take a key role in this work.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The agency does not notify Ofsted of all matters required by regulation. Currently, the agency's threshold for making notifications means that Ofsted is not made aware of matters that should be notified.
- The quality of some recording in a range of the agency's records is not good enough. In some cases, records are not fully complete, unclear or lack appropriate quality.
- The agency's monitoring and quality assurance processes are not fully effective in identifying and addressing deficiencies in recording quality.
- Staff supervision and appraisal processes do not address practice and performance matters as effectively as they should.
- The agency has not ascertained that the educational support that it provides to children is appropriate and does not require registration as a school.

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.

| Requirement | Due date |
|--|------------|
| <p>Ensure that if any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table (Regulation 36(1)).</p> <p>Specifically, that the agency ensures that its threshold for notification is in line with the requirements of the regulation.</p> | 28/03/2018 |

Recommendations

- Ensure that the fostering service is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently. (NMS 25) Specifically, that the registered provider ascertains that the educational support provided to young people does not require registration as a school
- Ensure that records are clear, up to date, stored securely and contribute to an understanding of the child's life. (NMS 26) Specifically, that records of matching arrangements, outcomes for children, allegations against staff and foster carers and the quality of daily records are complete, clear and of consistently high quality.
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service and that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (NMS 25.2)
- Ensure that staff are supported and guided to fulfil their roles and provide a high-quality service to children. (NMS 24) Specifically, that staff supervision and appraisal processes address practice and performance matters effectively.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

This agency works well to support children to live positive lives with their foster carers and to make good progress.

The agency is thorough in its recruitment, assessment and preparation of prospective foster carers. Assessments are robust and preparation training is effective in helping applicants understand their roles and the challenges they bring. One foster carer described their assessment as a 'very thorough process indeed'. Support and training for carers after their approval ensures that they have the necessary skills and aptitudes to care for children and young people who may have complex needs.

The agency works hard to match and place children with foster carers who are suitable to meet their needs. A foster carer said: 'The agency seems to really care about the matching process.' The staff team meets regularly to share information about carers' situations. This helps the staff to understand their support needs and helps inform the matching process when new referrals are considered.

Once placements are made, the agency provides foster carers with high levels of support. The agency's social workers and support workers work effectively with foster carers to help them to care for the children placed with them. This support can take the form of guidance and advice or can include practical support, including arranging for transport, taking children out and direct work with children where this is needed. Consequently, the agency enjoys good levels of placement stability, which helps children to settle and make progress. Children form good relationships with their foster carers. They feel a part of their foster families and have a voice in their own care. One said of their foster carers: 'They are always there to listen to me.' Social work and support staff get to know children well.

The agency's commitment to helping children understand their life stories is particularly noteworthy. It provides its foster carers with training and support to help them work with children to understand and come to terms with their past. This work is supported by individual consultations and group training for carers, as well as by the provision of practical help from the agency's staff. This is a very positive focus which plays a big part in helping children remember and understand their past, accept their situation and begin to move forward with their lives.

The agency provides its carers with a range of training to help them work with children who may have complex needs. Of particular note is the training that helps foster carers care for children in a way that promotes the development of positive attachments and helps children to feel safe and secure in their care. This includes work on resilience, trauma and attachment and is of great benefit to the care provided to children.

The agency's social workers and support workers work well with placing authority

social workers. This helps the agency and its carers to support children's plans. The agency advocates on the child's behalf when there are service shortfalls. This effective joint working and support helps to change the children's lives for the better. For example, the agency worked diligently to locate a school placement for a young person who was without a school place for a significant time following placement with one of the agency's carers from a relatively distant local authority.

This care in matching and good ongoing support means that children are able to make good progress. For example, one young person who had deep-seated fears for his safety now feels more secure and is becoming able to be more independent. Another young person who had not been in school for many months at placement is now attending school full time, enjoying it and doing very well academically.

The agency and its foster carers place a high priority on supporting and promoting children's education. All the children fostered by the agency are in full-time education and it works hard to help them succeed in this environment. The agency employs learning support workers to help children with their education and foster carers work hard to help children succeed. For example, one carer has enrolled her fostered children in a range of additional maths tuition to help them catch up with learning they have missed. Another described the efforts made by her and the agency to support a young person who is experiencing significant difficulties at school.

When children are newly placed with the agency's carers or when children have experienced short exclusions from school, the agency is proactive in ensuring that children do not miss their education. In these situations, the agency brings children into the office on a morning and they are supported by agency staff to undertake schoolwork. This is a positive approach as it helps maintain children's routines around schooling, avoids them viewing school exclusions as a 'reward' and helps them to keep up to date with their schoolwork. Children take part in a wide range of out-of-school activities including school clubs, sports and uniformed organisations.

Children have their health needs met. The agency ensures that children are registered with all primary health services and that any treatment required is provided. The agency supports foster carers to advocate for any specialist services required. It works well with placing authorities to help ensure that children receive any support they need. For example, the agency has arranged for specialist support for two children who have had a significant wait for input from the child and adolescent mental health services.

Children's views are sought by the agency and taken into account in their own care and, increasingly, in the running of the agency. Supervising social workers and support workers meet with children regularly and get to know them and their views. Foster carers help to ensure that children's views are expressed in their own care meetings. The agency makes sure that children's views are sought and considered within foster carers' reviews.

The agency has recently formed the 'Awesome Club', which meets on a Sunday morning and is planning further developments of this nature. This group is helping

children develop positive relationships and learn new skills. Its structure and activities were developed with the input of its members and include an element of raising money for a charity that helps to improve children's self-esteem.

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

The agency makes placements in a safe manner. It works well with placing authorities and foster carers to identify any risks faced by children and plan placements and support strategies to help minimise these.

Foster carers have safe caring plans in place that are individualised and specific about how care will be delivered safely. These link with children's risk assessments, which are updated as necessary. Good support and frequent visits to foster homes provide additional oversight of placements. The frequent contact that support workers have with fostered children provides them with someone to speak to outside the foster home should they have any concerns.

Children rarely go missing from their foster homes and, when this does happen, foster carers and the agency take the correct action to help ensure their safety. The agency ensures that the reasons children may have for leaving their foster home without consent are understood and that action is taken in response to this. Where children are at risk of, or have been subject to, child sexual exploitation, the agency works well with placing authorities to monitor placements and address the risk with carers and children. The agency works well to support children in line with their local authority plan of care.

The agency provides its foster carers with good support and training to help them to understand and respond to children's behaviour, which may be a significant challenge to them. It provides carers with training in matters such as responding to challenging behaviour, attachment and trauma, resilience, life-story work and a range of parenting strategies to help provide a secure footing for children's growth and development. Individual support and guidance are provided to support this training. In addition to this, the agency ensures that foster carers receive the training they need in matters such as safeguarding, child sexual exploitation and internet safety.

The agency undertakes regular visits to foster homes and has clear reporting processes for foster carers in place. The agency monitors the occurrence of any critical incidents, such as children going missing, accidents and illnesses, police being called to foster carers' homes and child protection matters. This allows managers to identify any matters of concern or patterns and trends and to take appropriate action. When allegations are made about foster carers or staff members, the agency takes the correct action, although its recording of these situations and any resulting investigation is not always clear enough to allow ease of oversight.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The leadership and management of the agency are not fully robust in all areas. Some aspects are good but there are shortfalls in the quality assurance of the agency's records, incorrect thresholds for notifying Ofsted of significant events and a lack of robustness in addressing performance and practice matters in staff supervision. This means that further improvement is required before this area can be judged good.

The agency's work with placing local authorities is good. It works effectively with local authorities so that young people receive the correct help and support services. The agency challenges other agencies appropriately in cases in which support is not as it should be.

Decision-making in the agency is effective. The fostering panel is composed of people with a range of relevant skills and backgrounds. It gives close consideration to matters presented to it and makes clear recommendations to the decision-maker. Minutes of panel meetings are detailed and well structured. The decision-maker makes robust, well-evidenced decisions promptly. In one situation, in which the decision-maker decided contrary to the recommendation of the panel, this was well researched and evidence-based and good communication ensured that learning points were identified appropriately. There is a clear system to feed back to the agency about the quality of matters presented to it.

The agency has a clear focus on providing children with high levels of support to help them make progress in their lives. In doing this, it carries out a lot of individual and direct work with children and their carers to support the work done by its foster carers. An example of this work is the proactive support for children's education and the direct work done with them before an educational placement is found or while they are excluded from school. However, the agency is not fully assured that this work is permissible and does not require registration as a school. Until this is resolved, the appropriateness of this support is called into question.

Recording in the agency is not consistently good enough. This is apparent across a range of the agency's records including case recording, staff records and records of allegations and their outcomes. For example, some case recording is incomplete, unclear or of poor quality. Some events, such as children's reviews, are not recorded, some records of visits to foster carers do not fully record the work done and some are so brief they are of little use. The agency has begun to implement a child-focused planning and outcomes monitoring system to help record the progress being made by children. It has also begun to use an outcomes monitoring section of its electronic recording system. However, at the time of the inspection, children's records contained little evidence of their progress and outcomes being achieved for them.

The records of the substance of allegations made against foster carers or staff members are not maintained sufficiently clearly. These records lack a case summary and chronology of the work done so it is difficult, from the record, to understand the nature of the allegation, the action taken and the outcome. This reduces the agency's ability to monitor the situation and its outcome. Additionally, records of the verification of written references for the recruitment of staff are weak and add little

to the robustness of the recruitment process.

Quality assurance systems in the agency are partially effective. Procedures to ensure that foster carer assessments and reviews take place smoothly, effectively and in a timely manner work well. The monitoring of key events for fostered young people, such as their looked-after reviews, medical checks, personal educational planning meetings and so on is effective. The monitoring of the receipt and quality of children's plans and written information about them from local authorities is also effective. In these instances, the agency also has good arrangements to liaise with placing authorities to ensure that full information about children is provided to the agency. However, the monitoring and quality assurance of detailed work, including the agency keeping records of shortfalls, is not effective, which has allowed some recording shortfalls to continue over an extended period of time.

The agency's staff team is suitably skilled and experienced and is committed to providing a good service to children. Staff members are well trained and supported to carry out their roles. They have caseloads that they are able to manage effectively and provide good support to their foster carers and children. Supervision and appraisal processes for staff are in place as required. However, supervision and appraisal systems are not fully effective in addressing identified practice and performance matters.

The agency makes sure that it notifies placing local authorities about all key events happening to their children. It has a process for notifying Ofsted of significant events. However, it does not notify Ofsted of all the matters required by regulation. For example, it has failed to notify Ofsted of serious complaints against foster carers and some children's accidents or illnesses. This lack of notification has resulted from an incorrect interpretation of the regulation rather a failure by the agency to identify these matters. Nevertheless, the failure to notify Ofsted of key events prevents monitoring of the agency's practice sufficiently well.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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

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