

## Orchard Care (North East)

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

# Assurance visit

## Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide care to children and young people aged from birth to 17 who have a wide range of needs. At the time of this visit, the staff team included two senior practitioners, two senior supervising social workers, one supervising social worker, one outcome coordinator, four support team members and two administrative staff. The manager registered with Ofsted in February 2015. The agency currently has 19 fostering households, providing placements to 20 children and young people.

**Visit dates:** 26 to 27 January 2021

**Previous inspection date:** 20 February 2018

**Previous inspection judgement:** Good

## Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Findings from the visit**

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

### **The care of children**

The manager recognises the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on children and foster carers. Therefore, the agency is not using all available placements. The agency chooses to utilise its available resources to sufficiently support foster families during this challenging period.

The agency carefully considers placements to ensure appropriate matching to foster families, which means that there are fewer unplanned endings. This creates stability for children. Children spoken to said that they are happy in their placement and that they 'feel like a family'.

Foster carers feel supported by their supervising social workers. Although face-to-face supervision is not always possible during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, foster carers report that they have received weekly calls and good communication from the agency. There were some gaps in some foster carer's supervisions, which links to staff moving on. The agency recognises that supervision of foster carers is an area for development. Steps are being taken to address this.

Some children have continued to attend school during the restriction periods. Other children have received education at home. The foster carers and the agency have acted as advocates for children, which has helped the children to overcome any potential barriers to their learning and progress. An education professional commented in a review that, '[Name of child] has made fantastic progress. This is because [name] provides her with outstanding care.'

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency has continually reviewed how it provides social events for children. Support workers have provided opportunities for children to go for walks and do other activities outside their home, in line with government guidance. This helps children to cope with feelings of isolation and provides them with opportunities to speak to another adult other than their social worker or foster carer.

The agency and foster carers support children to have time with family and friends where it is safe to do so. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency and foster carers continue to be creative, offering a range of ways that children can keep in contact with people who are important to them. This supports children's emotional well-being and their identity needs.

### **The safety of children**

The fostering panel has continued with its role during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Panel meetings now take place via video link and have remained

quorate throughout this time. The panel processes are thorough and support the approval of new foster carers and review the care offered to children already placed.

When there have been safeguarding concerns, foster carers have informed the agency as required. This has resulted in action to better protect children. The agency has notified Ofsted of any incidents considered serious as outlined in schedule 7 of the fostering regulations. This means that as a regulator, Ofsted has had an opportunity to review the actions taken by the agency to ensure that there is sufficient protection of children.

The agency has good working relationships with external agencies, including health, educational, social care professionals and specialist services. Multi-agency working helps to keep children safe and improves their overall outcomes.

Restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic have limited staff's and foster carers' access to face-to-face learning. However, learning has been available via a virtual learning hub. Training includes sessions such as behaviour management and various safeguarding courses specific to children's needs. A skilled workforce means that children receive better care and protection, as staff and foster carers can identify and respond to risks to help keep children safe. A foster carer commented, 'I cannot fault the agency. We have received a high level of training and support from a friendly team. We believe we made the right choice coming here. They are driven to make a difference to every child in their care to ensure every child is safe.'

### **Leaders and managers**

The manager is appropriately qualified and supported in her role by a senior staff team and several newly recruited staff. They have received an induction and have support from senior members of staff. Recruitment of staff has had its challenges. The manager states that the process of setting up a new staff team has limited the agency's ability to address the shortfalls that were identified at the last inspection. There is no evidence that this has had an adverse effect on children's safety and welfare. However, improvements are necessary to ensure that the agency's monitoring and quality assurance processes are effective. Three recommendations from the last inspection have been reissued.

The manager has not ensured that staff supervision is regular and in line with the agency's own policy. This limits opportunities for staff to reflect on their practice to ensure that practice is safe, consistent and supports foster carers to meet the needs of children in their care.

There is an inconsistent approach to recording information within the agency that the manager has not addressed effectively. For example, some case recordings on the electronic system do not match details in paper documentation. There is limited evidence of children's progress and outcomes documented. Furthermore, some recorded information is judgemental, includes opinion and references poor grammar, which makes it illegible to read in parts. This does not help children to see how they will be supported or help them to recognise their own progress.

Foster carers report that they receive adequate support and information from the agency. They know who to contact in a crisis or out of hours should the need occur. A foster carer commented, 'I can't speak for all foster carers, but from my perspective Orchard Care has gone above and beyond to support me in my first year of fostering. It's been very challenging, but they have made themselves available 24/7.'

## **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, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

### **Recommendations**

- The registered person should ensure that records are clear, up to date, stored securely and contribute to an understanding of the child's life. 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. (National minimum standard 26)
- The registered person should 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. (National minimum standard 25.2)
- The registered person should ensure that staff are supported and guided to fulfil their roles and provide a high-quality service to children. Specifically, that staff supervision and appraisal processes address practice and performance matters effectively. (National minimum standard 24)

## **Independent fostering agency details**

**Unique reference number:** SC065119

**Registered provider:** Orchard Care (North East) Limited

**Responsible individual:** Maria Jones

**Registered manager:** Sarah Jones

## **Inspectors**

Jacqueline Tate, Social Care Inspector

Susan Atkinson-Millmoor, Regulatory Inspection Manager

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