

Orchard Care (North East)

Orchard Care (North East) Limited

Suite 1, Alexander House, St. Johns Road, Meadowfield Industrial Estate, Durham
DH7 8XL

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency is a small, not-for-profit organisation that recruits, assesses, and supports foster carers to provide care to children with a wide range of needs aged between 0 and 17 years.

A range of placements are provided, including short-term, long-term, emergency and respite placements for children with a range of needs, including disabled children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Some children remain under 'staying put' arrangements, providing them with continuity. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 13 approved fostering households providing care to 22 children.

There has been no registered manager in post since 30 September 2025. There is an acting manager in place, who has not yet applied to register with Ofsted. A new responsible individual was appointed in May. He assumed responsibility in July 2025, and Ofsted is completing suitability checks.

Inspection dates: 24 to 27 November 2025

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 24 June 2024

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

The shortfalls found in the leadership and management of the agency have affected children's overall experiences. A significant number of foster carers are transferring to a different agency, which has some impact on children's stability and the support they receive. Despite this, most children's needs are met by foster carers who provide them with the care and security they need to make progress. Children benefit from the trusting relationship they build and maintain with their foster family.

Some children have lived in their foster homes for several years and foster carers know the children well. Children live with their brothers and sisters to enable them to grow up together. This promotes children's identity and enduring relationships between siblings. Additionally, foster carers help children to keep in touch with people who are important to them. This helps children to maintain strong family relationships. Professionals said that this has been important in maintaining placement stability.

Foster carers have a sound understanding of children's health needs. Children make progress in their health, such as improved mobility, speech, and self-care.

Foster carers promote the importance of education and children have good education attendance. Children make progress towards their individual targets and go onto employment, education, or training. Some children have plans to go to university. This increases children's aspirations and life options for their future. When children move in and do not have a school place, there is effective communication between the agency staff, education staff, and the local authority. For some children, there has been a delay in them accessing a specialist provision. Foster carers provide educational opportunities that help children to learn and develop in preparation for their return to school.

The agency promotes staying-put arrangements as natural stages in children's lives. The agency staff advocated on behalf of one young person to stay at their foster home under a shared lives arrangement, when the placing authority did not commit to a staying-put arrangement. The young person said that the agency helped them to 'stay with [their] family' and described feeling supported and listened to. However, one young person said that they do not feel that the agency has supported them to understand staying-put arrangements and relied on their local authority social worker and foster carers.

Wherever possible, children's placements are planned, and the children can meet their foster carers before they move in. Children are given information about their foster home and the children's guide. This helps to prepare children and potentially reduce children's anxiety about moving to a new home.

The agency staff provide individualised support for children and carers. Supervising social workers provide support and supervision in a timely way. Support workers visit foster carers and children to provide advice, guidance, and practical support, which includes taking children to activities. Some foster carers feel the benefit of this support.

The agency staff invited children to contribute to the new children's guide. Some children shared their comments, and this demonstrated to children that their views are important.

The agency plans events for staff, children, and carers to meet up and have fun. This enables carers and children to socialise with each other and build positive relationships. Children have been included in the planning of events by designing posters. However, one child said that they enjoyed attending the 'awesome club' run by the agency and is disappointed that this is no longer offered.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Children have individualised risk management and safer care plans. Plans are updated regularly and give foster carers clear actions on what they should do to help children and reduce risk. However, limitations in monitoring and oversight of significant incidents have resulted in some not being responded to by the agency promptly and, on one occasion, a delay in notifying Ofsted.

When incidents occur in foster carers' homes, leaders and managers do not demonstrate sufficient curiosity. On one occasion, when police attended the foster carer's home, inconsistencies in the recordings were not addressed to fully understand what had happened. Inconsistencies included where children and foster carers were at the time the incident occurred. This means that the details have not been fully explored with the foster carer and children to address any concerns or provide further support.

When children are missing from home, foster carers do not always look for children for their own safety reasons. Foster carers do not always follow the agency's missing-from-home procedure and the child's risk assessment, such as reporting the child missing at the agreed time. In one example, the foster carer contacted the agency before reporting the child missing to the police. This resulted in the supervising social worker contacting the police. This causes a delay in finding children. Additionally, while children have individual missing-from-home plans to help others know what to do should they go missing from home, these plans do not include a recent photograph. This practice does not help to ensure that children return promptly.

Foster carers receive training in therapeutic parenting and de-escalation techniques. Incidents of restraint are rare, and physical intervention is only used as a last resort. When restraint is necessary, the local authority social worker visits the child, and the supervising social workers speak to foster carers. However, records do not fully

reflect discussions to demonstrate and provide reassurances that the hold was proportionate and necessary.

One foster carer raised a complaint about the previous registered manager and consulted with the fostering network for support. The agency provided appropriate mediation between the foster carers and the previous registered manager. However, the foster carers said that they have lost trust and confidence in the manager and leaders because of poor decision-making. This hinders the development of cohesive and collaborative working relationships between foster carers and the agency.

Allegations against foster carers and standard of care concerns are responded to appropriately. Leaders and managers consult with safeguarding professionals and follow procedures. There are good working relationships with the local authority designated officers in more than one local authority.

Health and safety checks of foster carers' homes are thorough and conducted annually, as well as unannounced home visits. This practice helps to ensure that children live in a safe environment that is suitable for their needs.

Recruitment processes for people who work at the agency do not consistently meet regulatory requirements. In one example, the agency did not seek more than one professional reference for a senior supervising social worker, instead relying on character references. As a result, opportunities to fully explore a person's suitability are missed.

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

Since the last inspection, the agency has gone through some significant changes. A registered manager was appointed and has since left. A supervising social worker left, and another supervising social worker started and then left quickly. A new responsible individual has been recruited after the previous individual retired. The recently appointed responsible individual understands the challenges and areas of development for the agency as well as its strengths. However, the agency continues to experience instability in terms of staffing, which does not help to provide consistency for foster carers and children.

The agency operates with two supervising social workers. One supervising social worker is acting as the interim manager. The other works part time and no longer lives in the area. The agency did not communicate clearly with foster carers about the staffing arrangements, which also meant that supervising social workers were unable to do so. This significantly impacted the relationships between supervising social workers and foster carers. Some foster carers have lost trust in the agency and almost half of foster carers are leaving to join a different agency. Additionally, this caused upset between staff members, which does not support cohesive working relationships to benefit children and foster carers.

Assessments of prospective foster carers do not include robust quality assurance processes. Leaders and managers do not provide oversight and scrutiny of assessments while they are being completed. Additionally, inspectors found discrepancies in case notes about who had oversight and quality checks of an assessment. This resulted in the assessment being presented to the panel and subsequently deferred due to some safeguarding areas not being fully addressed.

The panel demonstrates curiosity to ensure that only suitable prospective foster carers are recommended for approval. The minutes from the panel reflect the effectiveness and efficiency of the quality assurance process. The panel identified significant shortfalls in the quality of an assessment presented to the panel. This process helps to ensure that there is sufficient scrutiny to safeguard children.

Despite attempts to increase the diversity of the fostering panel, this has yet to be achieved. The central list is small, which raises challenges in the range of expertise available.

Feedback from foster carers is mixed. Some foster carers feel listened to and less impacted by changes and describe 'getting on with it'. Other foster carers say that they do not feel supported, are disappointed by the high staff turnover and feel the agency has not been honest and transparent. Some foster carers are positive about the support they receive from support workers, which includes direct work with children and helping children to enjoy activities. Other foster carers raised concerns that they had to pay for the activities that support workers take children to and do not feel the benefit of the support.

Feedback from professionals is also mixed. Some professionals provide positive feedback about communication and individual supervising social workers. Other professionals describe working with the agency as 'challenging' and 'difficult'.

Leaders and managers have systems in place to identify that statutory documents have not been received from children's placing authorities. However, this is not effective in ensuring that missing documents are then received. Consequently, leaders and managers cannot be assured that the supervising social workers and foster carers are following children's most up-to-date plans.

The agency has recruited an independent social worker to undertake foster carers' annual reviews. Review reports detail foster carers' experience, learning and areas for development. The views of foster carers, children and other professionals are included in the reports and provide a platform to enable supervising social workers to support and develop foster carers' knowledge.

The responsible individual is aware of the shortfalls and areas for development. He has a thorough action plan to make improvements.

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.

Requirement	Due date
The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to— the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency; and the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency; carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence, and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b))	31 January 2026
The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— The welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))	31 January 2026

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that when a child is absent from the fostering home and their whereabouts are not known (i.e. the child is missing) that foster carers follow the child's plan and the agency's policy. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 5.4 and 5.6)
- The registered provider should ensure that that the central list is sufficiently diverse to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 14.8)
- The registered provider should ensure that there is an effective system in place to seek at least two references, preferably one from a current employer, to assess

the suitability of individuals taking on responsibilities of working in the agency. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 19.3)

- The registered person should ensure that they take action to address any issues of concern that they identify, or which are raised with them. In particular, they should ensure that concerns are escalated to the respective local authority when statutory documents are not made available. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards,' 25.8)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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

Registered provider: Orchard Care (North East) Limited

Registered provider address: Suite 1, Alexander House Whitfield Court,
Meadowfield, Durham DH7 8XL

Responsible individual: Post vacant

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 0191 378 4444

Inspectors

Cat Makel, Social Care Inspector (lead)
Kerry Chater, Social Care Inspector

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