

Northamptonshire Children's Trust Fostering Agency

Northamptonshire Children's Trust Limited

One Angel Square, Angel Street, Northampton, Northamptonshire NN1 1ED

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency was registered on 1 November 2020 under a newly formed trust arrangement. This was the first inspection since registration. The agency offers a range of placements, including short- and long-term, parent and child, connected persons and remand placements.

At the time of this inspection, there were 263 children in mainstream fostering placements and 148 children in connected person placements. The agency had 210 approved mainstream foster carers and 109 approved connected carers.

The registered manager has been registered since November 2020.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 4 to 8 October 2021

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account

requires improvement to be good

How well children and young people are helped and protected

requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

requires improvement to be good

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: not applicable

Overall judgement at last inspection: not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: not applicable

Inspection judgements

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

Many children have settled, stable foster placements. Children say that they have positive, trusting relationships with their foster carers.

The current electronic recording system used by the agency does not enable good-quality tracking. Consequently, it is difficult to assess all children's progress effectively, but there are some children who are making good academic progress.

There are several shortfalls in the way information is recorded. Some basic information is not kept up to date, such as children's addresses. Medical information is not always clear and/or easy to locate. There have been recent efforts to make some documents more child friendly but, overall, there is a lack of meaningful chronological recording. The problems in how information is recorded mean that children do not have an accurate record of their care and may find it difficult to make sense of their time in care when they are older. There is also a risk of children's progress not being fully captured.

There is no system currently in place to demonstrate how foster carers can meet the needs of children at the point of referral. Foster carer training records are poorly maintained, so it is sometimes unclear whether foster carers have the right skill set to meet the needs of children. When children need a foster family in an emergency, foster carers are not always provided with the necessary information about children. Planning meetings, where information would be shared, do not always take place.

Although there is a relatively stable staff team, there is variation in social workers' practice. The recording of information is inconsistent for both children and foster carers. Not all children have core documents in place, such as safety plans, risk assessments or good-quality health records. This is a shortfall because foster carers are not always clear about how they need to care for the child or keep them safe. Although there are policies in place for behaviour management, these are generic policies and are not individualised for children.

Children receive support from a range of professionals and agencies. There is a close and positive working relationship with the virtual school team. The virtual school monitors children and tracks their progress. Additional support is provided to children when relevant. The virtual school also arranges social activities and events for children during the holidays.

Children's health needs are met but, again, the current recording systems used make it difficult to identify children's progress. Annual health assessments are undertaken and children's emotional needs are being considered under a new public health project.

There have been no complaints from children recorded since the agency started in November 2020. Some children have raised concerns, which have been considered but not recorded as complaints. One child appeared confused as to what action had been taken in relation to the concerns they had raised. They were not clearly informed of the actions taken by managers nor the outcome of the investigation.

Overall, foster carers receive the supervision they require, but some foster carers do not have regular supervision. Some supervising social workers record supervision discussions in a different format, rather than using a form that contains a standard agenda. This means that standing agenda items, such as training and recording, can be missed. This also leads to a variation in the quality of supervision for foster carers. Not all foster carer agreements meet requirements and not all foster carers have supervision agreements in place. Overall, foster carers state that they feel supported by their supervising social workers. Some have had the same supervising social worker for many years. This provides consistency in terms of practical and emotional support to foster carers.

Transitions for children are variable in how well planned they are. Some children experience more placement moves than others and for these children their risks, behavioural and emotional needs are not always well understood. Disruption and stability meetings are not always held in a timely way. This means that opportunities to support placements, or to fully understand why placements end, are missed.

Some children are able to stay with their foster carers post-18. Overall, foster carers understand these 'staying-put' arrangements and they are working well.

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

An extensive range of training available to foster carers. However, in instances where foster carers do not have the knowledge to meet the needs of children, training is not always arranged to improve foster carers' skills. For example, where foster carers are caring for children who are very vulnerable to criminal exploitation, training has not always been provided. Similarly, restraint is being used with some children, but foster carers have not had training in physical intervention. Children could be harmed if restrained in a way that is unsafe. Not all children have safer handling plans, even when there is a pattern of restraint needing to be used. Foster carers do not have a training plan which is bespoke to the needs of the child in their care. Some carers who look after children with disabilities have not received appropriate training.

Although children's vulnerabilities and risks are discussed at their placement planning meetings, there is no system in place for these vulnerabilities and risks to be reviewed and children's plans updated. There is a pattern of supervising social workers using their discretion as to whether they feel that a safety plan is needed for a child. This is not consistent practice, and it is heavily reliant on the supervising social worker's ability to recognise and respond to current, and relevant historic, risk. New interventions have been implemented to better safeguard children who

regularly go missing, but this service is in its infancy and joined-up working with foster carers and supervising social workers is not yet well established.

When incidents happen involving children, these are often reported to the child's social worker but not always to the supervising social worker. This impairs multi-agency communication and it has an impact on the supervising social worker's ability to assess and evaluate risk. Incidents are not always followed up in the foster carer's supervision and reflected on. The recording of significant incidents by foster carers is inconsistent.

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

The registered manager has many years' experience of working in fostering services. She has the necessary skills and qualifications for the role. The senior management team understands the progress made since registering as an independent fostering agency last year. They also understand and accept the further improvements that need to be made to ensure good progress and experiences for all children placed with foster carers. The agency benefits from having a number of highly competent staff and managers.

The registered manager has reviewed the quality of care provided by the agency. However, these self-evaluations have not been sent to Ofsted as required. This undermines the regulator's ability to monitor the quality of care provided by the agency.

Records held are not clear, or in line with regulatory requirements. A particular area of concern is how placement endings are recorded. The current system makes it difficult for the agency to maintain accurate records about children's placements.

Foster carer agreements are variable in content. They do not consistently contain the required information in relation to terms of approval, support, training or procedures for review of approval of carers.

Foster carers do not routinely have personal development plans in place. These plans should set out how they will be supported to complete training and promote their professional development. The lack of planning around foster carer training undermines foster carers' ability to provide the necessary care to children placed with them.

Managers have referred relevant events and/or concerns to the designated officer. However, not all relevant allegations against foster carers have been reported to Ofsted. This undermines the regulator's ability to monitor and track the actions taken by the agency to ensure that children are protected from harm. There is no evidence to suggest that children have been harmed because of this shortfall, but there is a risk in not reporting significant safeguarding matters.

The fostering panel presents as competent and robust. Panel members have the necessary knowledge and expertise. They provide robust scrutiny and oversight of the cases presented to the panel. On one occasion, there was a significant delay in the decision of the agency decision-maker being shared with foster carer applicants, either orally or in writing. However, this was an isolated incident.

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 person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. (Regulation 35 (2))	13 December 2021
If a fostering service provider decides to approve X as a foster parent they must— enter into a written agreement with X covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 (the "foster carer agreement"). (Regulation 27 (5)(b))	13 December 2021
The fostering service provider must maintain and keep up to date the records specified in Schedule 2. The records referred to in paragraph (1) must be retained for at least 15 years from the date of the last entry. (Regulation 22 (1) (2)) This relates to ensuring that a record is kept of the date on which a child ceased to be placed and the child's address after leaving the placement.	13 December 2021
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)) This relates to ensuring that notifications of any serious complaints being made about any foster parent are sent to Ofsted.	13 December 2021

The registered person must ensure that a written record is made of any complaint or representation, the action taken in response to it, and the outcome of the investigation. The registered person must ensure that— children are enabled to make a complaint or representation. (Regulation 18 (4) (5)(a))	13 December 2021
The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside of office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))	13 December 2021

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service provider's decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel and, where applicable, the independent review panel, within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 14.9)
- The registered person should ensure that the foster carer or prospective foster carer is informed orally of the decision-maker's decision within two working days and written confirmation is sent to them within five working days. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 14.10)
- The registered person should ensure that each approved foster carer has regular supervision meetings with a suitably qualified social worker. Meetings should have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carer's personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that it appropriate to their development needs and experience. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 20.5)

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: 2615433

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Inspectors

Tracy Murty, Social Care Inspector
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