

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 is the third inspection since registration. The agency offers a range of placements, including short- and long-term, connected persons and remand placements.

At the time of inspection, there were 310 fostering households caring for 388 children.

The manager registered with Ofsted on the 19 January 2024. This manager is suitably experienced.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 January 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 6 February 2023

Overall judgement at last inspection: inadequate

Enforcement action since last inspection:

Compliance notices under regulations 8, 11 and 17 were issued following the last full inspection. All compliance notices were deemed to have been met at a monitoring visit on the 3 July 2024.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The fostering agency is working hard to better understand the quality of children's lived experiences. Care practice is now more meaningful and child centred. Children have their own separate recordings that are, overall, written in a child-friendly way.

Supervising social workers spend time with children on a regular basis. This has helped to improve the overall quality of relationships between children, foster carers and their supervising social workers.

Managers have taken steps to improve arrangements for the matching of children with foster carers. Although still under development, the use of a dedicated family finder within the service helps to ensure that foster carers' needs and strengths are understood and matched with children in need of foster care. When there are gaps in the proposed placement, the fostering service can explore additional support options to help strengthen the plans and ensure that foster carers are equipped to meet children's individual and diverse needs. Managers have been creative in linking across the children's trust to support good outcomes for children. Good relationships between the fostering agency and the voluntary adoption agency mean that children benefit from early permanence in their care.

Overall, children are settled and make good progress. Many children remain with their foster carers for many years and into their adulthood. Since the last inspection, there has been a more proactive response in supporting foster carers in continuing to care for children during periods of instability and challenge.

The fostering agency uses different resources to support placement stability for children. For example, a clinical psychologist regularly offers their expertise to both supervising social workers and foster carers.

Children's health needs are recorded. There is a good example of an unannounced visit being carried out in order to focus on a child's additional needs. Although this is positive, the child's communication needs were still not well recorded.

Caring for children with complex disabilities is recognised as a highly skilled role. There is a wealth of experience within the fostering community. Foster carers who care for children with a disability can access a support group. This is attended well.

For those children who are in receipt of disability benefits, the financial guidance is not yet consistently understood or implemented by staff. This means that children's records do not give children an overview about how much money they have or how this money is being spent on their behalf.

Children's educational needs are met and understood. There are two examples of foster carers being persistent and proactive in ensuring that children get the

educational placements of their choice. The virtual school are positive about how well the fostering agency meets the educational needs of children.

Children regularly participate in extracurricular activities, including going fishing, boxing and watching K pop. One child has achieved a lead role in a play. This is an amazing achievement. Some children have part-time jobs and others aspire for university.

Overall, children's identity needs are well understood. There are some good examples of foster carers learning from children in terms of how they want their foster carers to meet their cultural and holistic needs. Although the fostering agency has a policy which outlines how foster carers should be supported to meet the needs of children with cultural hair needs, this is not yet well understood or implemented by staff.

Children are supported to spend time with their family. This has included children visiting their family abroad. However, children's family plans are not always recorded for children. Similarly, when family plans change, these are not brought up to date. Similarly, although children are supported to build friendships, delegated authority in relation to sleepovers is not consistently being followed.

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

The understanding of risk and safety for foster carers and children is greatly improved.

Plans that support foster carers to understand and manage risk are suitably detailed and, in the main, are responded to well so that any changes in risk or emerging patterns of concern can be picked up.

Collaboration between supervising social workers, children's social workers and foster carers is improving. Supervising social workers are better able to identify what makes children vulnerable and make the necessary referrals to the relevant services. This is leading to a more cohesive response for children.

When significant incidents occur supervising social workers are clear about the immediate action that needs to be taken in response. There is improved engagement between the service and the local authority designated officer (LADO).

Managers have carried out work with supervising social workers and foster carers about the importance of timely reporting of significant incidents. Despite this, there are still situations when there are delays in the service being made aware of concerns.

When plans are put in place because of investigations, these are not consistently monitored, followed up or evaluated for impact.

Specialist workers have provided contextual safeguarding training to supervising social workers. This has ensured that staff are aware of the risks evident in the local communities. There are plans in place for this training to be repeated and extended to foster carers.

Foster carers are provided with a wide range of training in relation to safeguarding, including focused training regarding exploitation, radicalisation, knife crime and child trafficking, just to name a few. Although this is often made available quickly to foster carers in cases where these situations develop, the take-up is not always monitored and therefore the impact is not fully known.

Senior managers have implemented a system to monitor and regularly review children who are at a high level of risk.

Checks are carried out regarding the suitability of staff and foster carers. However, a system challenge last year meant that not all checks for foster carers were updated in line with the agency's policy. Once identified, managers put in place additional resources to address this, and risk assessments were completed to mitigate the delay. This matter is now in hand.

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

The judgement of requires improvement recognises that the members of the current senior leadership team have the capacity to achieve the remaining changes and developments.

Since the last inspection, the fostering agency has experienced some periods of challenge. There has been a need for change to happen at pace so that children's safety and well-being needs are met.

Senior managers are realistic that there is still much to do. However, they recognise that they need to prioritise some areas over others. Decision making has been based on what will have the biggest impact for children and their foster carers. There is a realistic plan from the fostering agency in terms of introducing change at a pace that brings the workforce along with them.

The fostering service continues to improve their understanding of their identity as an independent fostering agency that sits alongside a local authority trust. Improved collaboration is happening between the social work teams. There is a better understanding and appreciation of each other's professional roles. Effective collaboration has been supported through regular communication.

New foster carers have been recruited since the last inspection. The fostering agency recognises that word of mouth is their best method of attracting new foster carers. Foster carers are offered a referral bonus to incentivise this method of recruitment. Social media is used to try and raise interest and generate fostering

enquiries. Foster carers in assessment are offered relevant training which has been personalised to meet the needs of the fostering agency.

Since the last inspection, there have been significant improvements in how well foster carers are supported and supervised. Children are also visited on a regular basis and their views are helping to inform care planning processes. Although there is some variability, overall foster carers and stakeholders are positive about the fostering agency.

In terms of the long-term training offer to foster carers, there is a wide range of courses available. However, the fostering agencies' approach to training is not yet sufficiently targeted or on track to meet the individualistic needs of foster carers and children. Similarly, although there is an expectation that foster carers complete their training support and development standards, it is not clear whether foster carers are on track to complete this mandatory requirement within the necessary timescales.

The recent implementation of a new database that is specific to the fostering service has been well received by staff. Although the transfer process is not without its challenges, staff are positive about what it will offer.

The panel process is managed well by two suitably experienced panel chairs. The panel central list is relatively diverse in its make-up. The panel provides suitable questioning and scrutiny before making recommendations. Practice improvement meetings have started to happen between the panel and the fostering agency. However, these are yet to be embedded. Panel appraisal processes are not yet happening in line with policy.

Although the panel do identify areas for development and practice shortfalls, this advice is provided to the agency directly rather than recorded as part of the panel minutes. The absence of this from the minutes does not demonstrate clear transparency or accountability.

The agency decision maker provides full and balanced records of their decisions. These decisions and recommendations are shared with the panel and the fostering agency. When there are recommendations or requirements for specific work to be completed, there are similar challenges in these not being tracked within the fostering agency to ensure that these are compliant and support learning. There was one situation when the agency decision maker had disagreed with the panel's recommendation and instead asked for further work to be completed. No timescale was set for this, and the decision was made outside of regulatory timescales. This drift has the potential to cause uncertainty and anxiety for carers who remain unclear about their fostering status.

There have been occasions when regulation 25 processes have not been used appropriately. In response to this, the panel adviser is overseeing a tracking system to strengthen this area. This is a new development, and the impact is yet untested.

Systems to support the oversight of exemptions is not yet good. Although the process for consideration of the suitability of the exemption take account of all aspects of the fostering household, there is an omission in the follow up of any change of approval. As a result, any placements exceeding six days become outside of approval. Managers have identified this and have plans to address the shortfall.

The fostering agency does not yet have an updated policy that specifically relates to the use of surveillance within fostering households. There is not yet sufficient follow-up in this area.

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
The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to— (a) the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and (b) 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)) In particular this relates to: Senior leaders should effectively monitor identified actions set. This is to ensure overall compliance with policy, practice and regulation. Opportunities for learning should be sought throughout this process. The fostering agency should ensure that policies relating to children's disability benefits, cultural hair care needs, disclosure and barring service (DBS) protocol, exemptions, surveillance and delegated authority should be implemented and used as part of day-day care practice. Panel member appraisals should happen within timescales. The training and development of foster carers should be regularly reviewed and revisited in terms of timeliness and effectiveness.	1 April 2024

Recommendation

- Foster carers are supported to explain the child's care plan, and any changes to those plans, to the child. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 31.5)

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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