

Slough Children's Services Trust

Slough Children's Services Trust Limited (09487106)

Ground Floor West, St Martin's Place, 51 Bath Road, Slough, Buckinghamshire SL1 3UF

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Slough Children's Service Trust is an independent, not-for-profit company that provides social care and support services to children, young people and families. The fostering service is situated within the trust and offers placements to Slough children. The agency is registered as an independent fostering agency. The agency currently supports 45 fostering households that are providing care for 65 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 April 2019

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

How well children and young people are helped and protected **inadequate**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **inadequate**

There are serious and/or widespread failures that mean children and young people are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded and/or the care and experiences of children and young people are poor and they are not making progress.

Date of last inspection: 18 June 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is inadequate because:

- There has been no registered manager in the service for over 18 months. This has a negative impact on the oversight, stability and management of the service.
- Leaders and managers have failed to sufficiently monitor the service. This has resulted in the repeated failure of the agency to be compliant with The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, resulting in poor experiences for children.
- There has been a lack of progress to address the requirements and recommendations not met at the previous inspections.
- Leaders, managers and staff have not acted swiftly enough to address concerns raised about the care and welfare of children. They have not challenged foster carers to ensure that the needs of children are met.
- Senior leaders and managers have not completed an investigation as requested by the local authority designated officer.
- Staff do not routinely complete thorough matching and assessment processes prior to placing a child with a foster carer. As a result, some children have been placed with carers outside the terms of their approval. Foster carers have not always been prepared for, or informed about, children's needs and risks.
- There has been a lack of review and learning from placement breakdowns.
- Staff recruitment processes are not thorough or robust. Recruitment records do not evidence that the agency has assured itself that staff are suitable.
- Staff are not consistently well managed, they do not receive regular, effective supervision or have thorough performance assessment and management.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- All children are engaged in education, with clear individual support plans that assist them to achieve their potential.
- The scrutiny and quality assurance role of panel is thorough.
- The Agency Decision Making process is effective and quality assures the work of the panel.
- The Mockingbird Programme has been well received by carers, who feel well supported and prepared to meet the needs of those in their care. Children reported that they like belonging to a larger support network.
- Young people in 'Staying Put' arrangements are settled and making progress.

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
<p>*Registered person—general requirements</p> <p>The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to— 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))</p>	10/06/2019
<p>*Independent fostering agencies—duty to secure welfare</p> <p>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, and before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child’s— wishes and feelings (having regard to the child’s age and understanding), and religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. (Regulation (11)(a)(b)(i)(ii))</p>	10/06/2019
<p>*Arrangements for the protection of children</p> <p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which— is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for— written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or</p>	10/06/2019

<p>neglect, and of the action taken in response, consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation (12)(1)(a)(b)(3)(d)(e))</p>	
<p>Staffing of fostering service</p> <p>The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to— the need to safeguard and promote the health and welfare of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation (19)(b))</p>	01/07/2019
<p>Support, training and information for foster parents</p> <p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that foster parents are familiar with, and act in accordance with the policies established in accordance with regulations 12(1) and 13(1) and (3).</p> <p>The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child’s care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation (17)(1)(2)(3))</p>	01/07/2019
<p>*Fitness of workers</p> <p>The fostering service provider must not— employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so.</p> <p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person— is of integrity and good character, has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work they are to perform, is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to</p>	10/06/2019

<p>perform, and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation (20)(1)(a)(3)(a)(b)(c))</p>	
<p>Employment of staff</p> <p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them— receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation(21)(4)(a))</p>	<p>01/07/2019</p>

* These requirements are subject to a compliance notice.

Recommendations

- Implement a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 4.5)
In particular, ensure that safer care plans and risk assessments are effective documents.
- Only suggest foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 15.1)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate

Some children have not been protected from harm or the risk of harm. This has had a significant detrimental impact on some children's experiences, and for others, their ability to make progress. Leaders, managers and staff have not acted to ensure that these children are safe and well cared for. Senior leaders and managers have not always recognised emerging risks and concerns quickly enough. One example includes their failure to follow the advice of the local authority designated officer (LADO).

Staff have failed to demonstrate that, before placing a child, they have sufficiently explored whether the foster carers have the approval, skills and knowledge they require to provide children with the care that they need. Staff do not explore risk or potential gaps in meeting children's needs to ensure that these areas are addressed.

Some of the placement planning arrangements are insufficient and inconsistent in quality and detail. The need to amend or to make changes to the plans of support provided for some children is not always recognised. For some children, this has resulted in poor experiences, such as being placed in a fostering household with inadequate sleeping arrangements. Another child experienced disruption and had to move on quickly after being placed with foster carers without the correct approval status. A further example demonstrates reactive, rather than proactive planning, leading to the excessive duration of a bridging placement.

Foster carers are not always provided with practical guidance, to enable them to effectively care for children. There are examples where the agency's staff have not engaged in the early identification of risk or changes in children's behaviour. Placement planning review meetings and disruption meetings have not been held routinely. Since the last inspection, 11 placement breakdowns have occurred and only three disruption meetings. These are missed opportunities for learning to provide children and foster carers with the support they may need in the next placement.

Relationships between the agency and some foster carers are poor. Some foster carers do not feel well supported or listened to and one foster carer reported being put under pressure to accept referrals. Out- of- hours support for foster carers is a combination of a dedicated support line until 11pm and thereafter, the authority's wider emergency duty system. Foster carers express mixed opinions about this system. Some foster carers described good support from agency staff members and one gave an example where they were dissatisfied with the response received. Another example included a foster carer's decision not to use this system because of their lack of confidence in it.

The 'Mockingbird Programme' has made a positive difference to the children and foster carers involved, by providing an increased level of support to these fostering

households. A second constellation is planned.

All children case tracked during this inspection were positively engaged in education, training or employment.

The three young people in 'staying put' arrangements are making progress and are well supported while they develop essential independence and life skills.

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

The weak safeguarding culture in the agency fails to assure the inspectors that leaders, managers and staff have acted as required, or will act, to protect the welfare and safety of children should concerns arise. This is because leaders and managers have not established, nor implemented, robust and effective systems that ensure that they have a clear understanding of current safeguarding concerns and issues. Leaders and managers do not review, evaluate or monitor risk well enough to enable them to identify and respond sufficiently to safeguarding matters.

Allegations are referred if required, by managers, to the LADO but on one occasion, leaders and managers did not instigate or complete a standards of care investigation when requested to by the LADO. Records do not provide the rationale and reason for the decisions made or evidence a clear audit trail from instigation to outcome.

Leaders, managers and staff have not routinely challenged foster carers' poor practice when this has occurred. One investigation failed to address all the concerns. A further example included a thorough and insightful investigation; however, the findings and recommendations have not been shared with staff and others to enable lessons to be learned or for practice to be reviewed and improved.

During this inspection, the head of quality and safeguarding conducted a learning and development audit in response to a case of concern that was raised by the inspectors. The subsequent report concluded that standards of care were lacking and that there could have been a more robust child-centred approach to address these issues. 11 recommendations were made.

Staff are not clear of their roles and responsibilities in respect of risk management. They do not always assure themselves that foster carers and other professionals have responded to risks as required. There is a lack of proactive early response and professional curiosity to emerging risks. For example, one child's behaviour over time demonstrated his increasing exposure to the risk of criminal exploitation. These signs were not recognised by this child's foster carers or supervising social worker, resulting in his actual involvement in criminal activity. Staff and foster carers do not act early enough to ensure that children are safe and being supported to learn how to manage risk themselves. This shortfall is exacerbated by the absence of relevant and up-to-date training for some of the foster carers in relation to the child living with them. Children's vulnerabilities are therefore increased.

Staff do not evidence how they support foster carers to assess and manage risk. Written risk assessments are either poor quality or in some cases, completely

lacking. Consequently, foster carers lack clarity about the actions they should take to manage and minimise risk. There are no specific plans to direct foster carers in the practical response required when a known risk or behaviour is exhibited. Risk management plans that are available are weak and do not address or explore all known risk factors. Staff have not been swift to update and review plans when a risk has changed. In one case, this put children and foster carers at the potential risk of harm when a child returned to their placement, still in possession of a weapon. Similarly, safe care plans lack individualised strategies and a child-focused approach. For example, a child with complex healthcare needs has no reference to their gastrostomy feed within the safer care plan or risk assessment. Inspectors were unable to locate evidence of relevant training being provided to this child's foster carer. Similar shortfalls were identified at previous inspections.

The agency is currently reviewing its behaviour management ethos and approach. Guidance provided to foster carers lacks clarity and is not explicit about the approach the agency wishes foster carers to use. Many foster carers have good insight about the needs of the children they care for, but there are a small number of examples of foster carers who lack the ability to form relationships with children or understand what a child is communicating through their behaviour.

While episodes of children going missing are rare, staff and foster carers are not sufficiently curious or explorative about the child's reasons for this when it does occur. This is a missed opportunity to make effective use of relationships by talking to children to gain an understanding of the risks that they may be exposed to when this occurs.

Recruitment practice shortfalls identified at the previous two inspections have continued. Gaps and omissions include the failure to verify references, to explore the reasons for leaving previous employment and the failure to explore applicants' health and suitability.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

The fostering agency is neither well led nor managed. There has been no registered manager for over 18 months. This results in instability, inconsistency and ineffective management.

The current interim management arrangements impede systems and processes from becoming embedded. Consequently, monitoring systems are unreliable and the agency is not fully aware of its own strengths and weaknesses.

Leaders and managers are repeatedly failing to demonstrate compliance with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations. Over the course of three consecutive inspections, serious shortfalls are being repeated. Leaders, managers and staff are failing to show that they understand the need for urgency to implement and sustain change. The service plan identifies actions to meet tasks, but this has not been regularly reviewed or updated and so it does not reflect the current circumstances.

The management information system is ineffective and does not provide managers

with the information they need to have effective management oversight. Records lack evidence of decisive decision-making and staff being held to account for their practice.

Inconsistent staff supervision arrangements result in some staff having significant gaps between supervision meetings. One staff member has not had an appraisal for a significant period. Consequently, not all staff receive enough opportunities to review, challenge, reflect on and improve their professional practice. The 'monthly surgeries' method of supporting staff is not embedded nor is it an effective tool. Managers have failed to use such systems to identify and address shortfalls in staff's casework, such as the failure to undertake a required annual unannounced visit to a foster carer.

The agency's electronic recording system is described by its senior leaders as 'not yet effective or fit for the purposes of the agency to ensure compliance with regulations'. Information and details are out of date and inaccurate. In one case, it did not provide essential information to enable a foster carer to seek or gain the required support for a child. Another example incorrectly details a foster carer's approval status, and another foster carer's placement history is incorrect. On occasions, staff increase foster carers' approved numbers without following the required process and procedure.

The shared panel applies a rigorous quality assurance role to new approvals of prospective foster carers. Panel membership is suitably diverse, and panel records clearly evidence the decisions made.

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 discussed with professional staff the effectiveness of the help and care provided. 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: 1183495

Registered provider: Slough Children's Services Trust Limited (09487106)

Registered provider address: Ground Floor West, St Martin's Place, 51 Bath Road, Slough, Buckinghamshire SL1 3UF

Responsible individual: Jackie Pape

Registered manager: Post vacant

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Inspectors

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