

Slough Children's Services Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspectors Helen Lee and James Harmon
Type of inspection Full
Provision subtype Agency performing the function(s) of LAs

Setting address St Martin's Place, 51 Bath Rd, Slough SL1 3UF

Telephone number 01753 690 901

Email

Registered person

Registered manager Colin Bent

Responsible individual Jackie Pape

Date of last inspection N/A

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Slough Children's Services Trust Limited provides a fostering service to meet the needs of looked after children and young people in the Slough area. This includes children in short- and long-term placements and asylum-seeking young people. The service has 34 registered foster carers, currently accommodating 51 children and young people. A number of connected person's foster placements have been assessed and approved to enable extended family or friends to care for those children and young people who are unable to live safely with their birth parent(s).

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The agency requires improvement because the overall management of the fostering service lacks rigour. Many fostering tasks such as monitoring support visits, written fostering agreements, providing foster carers with sufficient training and resolving low-level complaints have not been comprehensively delivered. However, children's outcomes have been improved by highly motivated, child-centred and passionate leaders and managers. The managers share the same ambitious vision for all children

and young people to get the best possible care in safe and nurturing foster homes. Management of recruitment and connected persons assessment is driven and well organised. Partnership relationships are strong and help the agency effectively to grow and diversify. The agency has made a significant investment in an evidenced-based model of delivering foster carer support and maintaining placement stability (The Mockingbird Family Model) and although not yet embedded, shows potential to further enhance services for children. As various staff and carers stated, the service is 'going in the right direction'.

Foster carers and connected persons welcome children and young people into their homes and treat them like their own. Children's health, education, leisure and contact needs are actively promoted and met. Children and young people have excellent opportunities to consult with people from all levels of the agency to express their views and make a real difference to how they are cared for. The service has made a pledge to children and young people based on consultation with them through the Children in Care Council.

Children live in stable placements with foster carers who are committed to them. Foster carers work effectively with social workers and other professionals, such as therapists and the agency's staff in the team around the child. Strong relationships develop between children, young people and their foster carers. The children spoken to said they are happy living with their foster carers and they felt part of the family. One child said, 'Everything is wonderful: my carers are great, I view them as my mum and dad.'

Foster carers recruited by this agency provide caring and nurturing environments that are conducive to meeting the emotional and health care needs of the children living with them. Staff are mainly permanent to the service and are enthusiastic and ambitious to innovate and progress the service. One staff member said, 'The carers are amazing and so committed.' Carers recognise the journey of the service. One said: 'I didn't get any support at the beginning and now it's totally changed. They do the little things which make the difference, such as sending letters to say how proud they are or funny pictures to celebrate my foster child's achievements.'

Children feel safe and protected by foster carers who have their best interests at heart. One young person said of the service, 'It's good, lots of good things, and I'd give it 10 out of 10.' Staff work well in partnership with other agencies to keep children safe. However, a lack of robust safeguarding training means that carers are not always aware of methods of intervention when new concerns arise for children.

Six requirements and four recommendations are raised to improve outcomes for

children. There are breaches of regulations which do have an impact on the safeguarding and welfare of children; however, these are not widespread or serious failures.

Areas of improvement

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets 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
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. (Regulation 17 (1))	10/04/2017
Enter into a written agreement with foster parents which the agency approves covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 (the "foster care agreement"). (Regulation 27 (5) (b))	02/02/2017
Do not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20 (3))	02/02/2017
Maintain a case record for each foster parent approved by the agency which must include the foster care agreement. (Regulation 30 (2) (d))	02/02/2017
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. (Regulation 18 (4))	02/02/2017
Maintain a system for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35)	10/04/2017

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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- Ensure that the registered person takes action to address any issues of concern that they identify or which are raised with them. (NMS 25.8)
- Implement a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. (NMS 4.5) In particular, by ensuring that safe care plans 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. (NMS 15.1) In particular, record the decision-making of the agency.
- Make the children's guide available, where appropriate, through suitable alternative methods of communication, e.g. Makaton, pictures, tape recording or translation into another language. (NMS 16.6)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Good planning prior to placement ensures that foster carers have sufficient information and an opportunity to consider placement requests. Children are given information about their foster carers, how they will be cared for and their new home, which helps them settle and reduces anxieties. Profiles of the foster families are presented in various formats including brightly coloured journals.

Placement breakdowns are rare, with only two in the last year. Placements therefore provide children the opportunity to grow up in a stable environment.

Children are welcomed as part of the family and have opportunities to experience good-quality family life and positive parenting. They develop strong bonds with their foster carers and, as a result, show increased emotional resilience. It is testament to the quality of the relationships that children enjoy that some have chosen to use terms such as 'uncle' or 'brother' when referring to their carers and families.

Children enjoy stable placements in which they are nurtured and flourish. Children individually make good progress in relation to their health, education and well-being. Strong relationships develop between children and their carers, as they feel happy, well supported and valued members of the family.

Children and young people with disabilities are placed with qualified carers who understand their complex needs and provide them with specialised care. Carers are proactive on behalf of the children and seek advice and guidance from professionals, allowing their needs to be met to a high standard.

A particular strength is now the service's effective support of education. The vast majority of children are making positive educational progress from their starting points. For example, some children who were not attending school at all upon placement now have 98% attendance. The vast majority are in outstanding and good provisions. The virtual headteacher's team has led 80% of the required personal education plans in order to ensure that the necessary support is in place for all children. The team also offer helpful drop-in sessions for carers which ensure that they understand all that they may do to help children's education. Children know that when key events happen, such as sports days, parents' evenings and the prom night, there will be someone there to support them.

The ability of the foster carers to establish positive relationships with the significant others in the lives of children has allowed them to maintain family contact. The children have a good sense of their identity and family without feeling conflicted. For example, a young person's negative behaviour decreased due to the carer successfully engaging and establishing a relationship with a parent who had a negative view of the care system and was reluctant to engage with the local authority.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

A clear and targeted recruitment strategy is intended to attract a broad range of foster carers who can specifically meet the current demand for the placement of five- to 15-year-old children. Good partnership relationships with the local churches, customer service consultants, as well as the use of social media and foster carer ambassadors, has attracted interest. The agency is currently on track to meet or exceed its target. Despite the need for more foster carers, the agency exercises due caution in its approval of foster carers, prioritising the safety and welfare of children.

Foster carers state that the agency does not put pressure on them to take placements. Permanency and long-term fostering are promoted and celebrated. Placement matching systems are effective, ensuring that children are only placed where foster carers are able to meet their individual needs. However, without a record of any gaps which are identified and any work needed, such as any additional training, resource or support, this isn't formally agreed. Therefore any learning or evaluation of the decision-making is missed.

The agency is clear regarding its delegated authority policy. This enables the foster carers to form and maintain positive working relationships with parents and other significant adults for the child or young person. Children's inclusion avoids institutional practices because foster carers are clearer about what they can and can't do. Foster carers feel supported and are committed to the agency's belief of what a foster carer should offer. They have a positive view of the agency and feel listened to. One child's social worker said, 'She [the child] feels that her foster carer loves her and cares for her, which makes her happy.'

The vast majority of carers understand their role. However, not all have received a foster care agreement setting this out. For one carer, this omission led to a significant misunderstanding regarding their approval.

All carers feel well supported and have monthly carer support groups and weekly coffee mornings. Nonetheless, on one occasion regular focused supervision had not taken place. The service is unable to monitor when shortfalls in visits for any carers were occurring. This means that in times of stress effective intervention is not able to be offered. Foster carers participate in many social and fun events, such as a yearly award ceremony, which was themed around 007 this year. An effective out-of-hours service gives foster carers confidence that there is always someone available to offer support and guidance.

Training is creatively rolled out for preparing potential carers for the role. Bespoke training is also offered to connected persons. Resourceful opportunities such as yoga and online training licences are also available. The agency has made progress in supporting foster carers to complete their Training, Support and Development Standards. However, a significant number of carers have not undertaken core training or updates sufficiently frequently in important areas, such as child protection, safeguarding, first aid, and self-harm. This means that they may not be up to date with changes in statutory guidance and good practice.

Panel processes are effective and robust, and the panel members have a wide range of skill bases and life experiences to bring to this forum. Panel has a clear focus on parenting capacity and how carers are able to meet children's individual needs. The quality of assessments provided to panel is high. Assessments for connected persons make best use of partnership working. Good-quality administrative systems and minute-taking effectively support the panel's core functions. Agency decision-making processes are effective and proportionate. The attention to detail and timely responses of the agency decision-maker show that she has read and absorbed all of the information and can justify the rationale for her decisions. She is clear on her threshold which is, 'Would I want my child to be with these carers?' The agency panel advisor is also strong and robust and her contribution helps panel run smoothly.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The safeguarding policies and procedures have recently been updated reflecting the agency's commitment to ensuring that children are safeguarded effectively. The policies provide consistent advice and guidance to the entire organisation for dealing

with child protection matters.

Children are encouraged to take age-appropriate risks and to learn how to protect themselves and make positive choices regarding their behaviour. Children talk to their foster carers about their worries and concerns and receive the support that they need. Safer care risk assessments are in place but are only updated yearly at the carers' review. This means that any new safeguarding concerns for children that develop in the interim are not promptly incorporated into the risk management plan.

Children are aware of their rights and understand how they can complain or make representations. One complaint was made in the last year which was fully resolved.

The agency does not have a high number of incidents of children going missing or being at risk to child sexual exploitation. This is attributed to the development of processes for all to follow that are clear, consisting of flow charts and cue cards which inform all involved of the process to follow, along with solid methods of intervention.

The agency has prioritised continued development of their response to missing-from-care incidents and child sexual exploitation by encouraging children to participate in return home interviews so that their voices are heard. Information from the interviews is analysed and fed to the monthly sexual exploitation and missing risk-assessment conference.

The designated officer has no current concerns for the agency in dealing with child protection matters. The working relationship with the police and other agencies, such as health, are very strong as evidenced by the recent research that was commissioned by the Thames Valley Police.

Foster carers are confident that they understand the risks associated with the children and young people in their care; they actively intervene when necessary to help keep young people safe. Some were able to discuss the actions undertaken in an array of safeguarding incidents, despite a lack of safeguarding training provided by the agency. Records reflected that the majority of the carers had not received any recent or updated safeguarding training.

Generally robust recruitment practices protect children from unsuitable people gaining employment in the agency as a staff member. All staff are subject to checks on their suitability. However, for one member, verification of the reasons why they left work with vulnerable adults or young people was missing. The service's policy is to go back over employment from the last five years only, which does not cover the

expectations of the fostering regulations. Panel member audits do not demonstrate this depth of exploration either.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

This is the first inspection of this service. Responsibility for the fostering service transferred from the local authority to the trust in October 2015. Many improvements have been made, and dedication from every member, including the Trust's chief executive officer, has promoted an outward and learning approach to develop the service. Leadership of the agency has been visible, beneficial for children's outcomes but not effective for the development of the fostering task. Regular monitoring of the quality of service is in place but it fails to robustly evaluate the service to ensure that it is improving the quality of the service.

The service is unable to monitor some areas due to a lack of accurate data to establish a baseline, and an example is training. Systems such as foster care reviews and social worker supervisions have not effectively monitored training against the core areas or the child's needs. The focus has been on ensuring that carers attended a minimum of three training courses a year. A member of staff has now been given the task to oversee and manage this better. Other areas include monitoring of matching, support for carers, foster carer agreements being with the service, placement stability and low-level complaints. Because the information is not readily available, it is difficult for the service to capture the journey of the carer or the service. The registered manager recognised that 'now we have a stable staff team we need to get more sophisticated in our monitoring'. The service has a clear delivery plan which is focused on driving forward the service. This includes ensuring improved staffing, consultation with young people and children, increased support opportunities for carers, clearer financial reward and increased sufficiency of the service.

The agency had not viewed one low-level complaint as a formal complaint and had therefore not followed any formal complaint and resolution process which would have included having a written record of it, the actions taken and if the complainant was satisfied. This is a missed opportunity to be transparent and to learn from the issues raised. A requirement is made to address this.

The children's guide provides information to children about what they can expect from living with a foster family as well as information about the agency, including

how to make a complaint. There is currently one paper format. Children's and young people's groups have reviewed the children's guide and have developed animations as an alternative format which will further enhance its accessibility.

The agency appointed foster parent ambassadors to support foster carers through recruitment events. Foster carers have free access to independent information, advice and support, and also external professional expertise, such as legal advice through the Fostering Network. Foster carers are seen as professionals not only by the agency, but also by other professionals working with the child or young person.

Staff complimented leaders and managers on 'their speed of response and decision making', 'their knowledge', 'the creative thinking', 'making time for us, including the CEO' and 'being approachable'. There is now a stable fostering team of skilled, experienced and knowledgeable staff. They are valued and supported.

The agency is financially viable with clear oversight from the Slough Children's Services Trust. Staff supervision takes place monthly. The office premises are fit for purpose with sufficient space for staff, meetings and training rooms. Staff said that they were heard, as they now have some dedicated space. As one staff member said, 'They changed us from hot-desking to a room.' The electronically held information is appropriately secure.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.