

Slough Children First

Slough Children First Limited

Observatory House, 25 Windsor Rd, Slough SL1 2EL

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Slough Children First is an independent, not-for-profit wholly owned company that provides social care and support services to children, young people and families. The fostering service is situated within the company and offers placements to children from Slough. The agency is registered as an independent fostering agency. The agency currently supports 47 fostering households that are providing care for 45 children and young people.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 July 2021

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 8 April 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: inadequate

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The children benefit from positive relationships with their foster carers that are built overtime. The foster carers provide them with consistency. The children are settled and can build trusting relationships through receiving safe and predictable care. The foster carers support the children while they grow and learn. They instil children with skills for life through positive experiences and routines that equip children for their future independence.

Careful consideration is given to matching. The staff can evidence the scrutiny and rigor that is applied when referrals are received. There is good evidence of the child's needs being matched to the foster carer's skill set. The children's needs are explored, and careful plans are made for introductions. The placement stability speaks for itself. It demonstrates that children are well matched and thrive with their foster carers' support.

A young adult spoke positively about his experiences of staying put. He is currently preparing to move to independent accommodation. He had found both the foster carers and the supervising social worker very supportive in enabling him to gain his own accommodation.

Education is promoted. During COVID-19, many children continued to attend education. In one example, when a child is not in education or training, the considerable effort to provide support and guidance is evident. Foster carers go the extra mile to support the children's changing needs. This is supported by bespoke training that ensures the foster carers have the skills and the knowledge required to adapt to the children's changing needs.

The children are making progress. Some children have made progress that has exceeded initial expectations. In one example, a child who was non-verbal was placed with foster carers. The foster carers worked with speech and language specialists and encouraged the child, who can now express themselves. As a result, the child can now communicate effectively and has grown in confidence.

During COVID-19, creative efforts were made to continue participation. The children and the foster carers spoke positively about online dancing and magic events. The staff continued to 'visit' families virtually, seeing both foster carers and children. Face-to-face visits have continued with some meetings in gardens to work within the government guidelines for safe distancing. As a result, the children and the foster carers have felt well supported.

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

The children can all seek support and guidance from their foster carers. They are also familiar with the supervising social workers and find them approachable.

Consequently, the children have familiar adults that they can approach, if they have any worries or concerns.

Both staff and foster carers demonstrate a good knowledge and understanding of the risks to children and how to mitigate against them. Regular safeguarding training means that they are kept up to date with changes in safeguarding practice. The agency's policies and procedures also reflect current safeguarding guidance and legislation.

Any safeguarding concerns are promptly reported. Where appropriate, concerns are shared with safeguarding partners. The local authority designated officer reflected that the information the agency shares is appropriate, timely and relevant. The transparency of information shared helps to keep the children safe.

The risk assessments and safer caring plans for children are comprehensive. They provide the foster carers with clear strategies to follow in the event that risk occurs. Frequent reviews in line with the changes and development of the children ensure that strategies are regularly reviewed and updated.

The foster carers are well supported. When children's new behaviours have arisen, the agency responds with additional bespoke training. Specialist support is also provided for the children. One social worker said, '[Child's name] experienced some difficulties with emotional needs during the pandemic, the supervising social worker was key in supporting the child and the family to work through this.'

The panel has continued virtually during the pandemic. It has remained quorate, and panel members have received relevant training. However, on one occasion, the panel made an unanimous recommendation for approval. The agency decision maker found significant gaps in the assessment that was presented to the panel. There was no evidence of relevant questions being asked or a discussion at the panel. His action in delaying the decision ensured that no imminent risk to children occurred. However, the lack of professional curiosity demonstrated by the panel members is of concern.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Leaders and managers are aspirational and visible, and they have driven the provision forwards. They have set out clear, child-focused goals that have been embraced by the staff and the foster carers. The ethos and objectives set out in the statement of purpose are underpinned by the practice of the staff and the foster carers alike.

The registered manager is leading with high support and high challenge. Her expectations of high-quality and child-focused practice are clear. The staff spoke of feeling well supported and learning new skills. Frequent supervision, with clear goal setting, ensures that staff continue to develop their practice. Annual appraisals further evidence shared objectives with clear timeframes. As a result, the retention of staff is good.

Leaders and managers have a good grasp of the service's strengths and weaknesses. They have adapted their focus from compliance to quality. Managerial monitoring is effective and reveals the shortfalls. However, an example was found where quality had fallen in foster carer logs that had not been successfully addressed within a reasonable timeframe. Although no detrimental impact was evident on the child, this is a missed opportunity to provide the child with accurate records of their time with the foster family.

Leaders and managers value the staff and the foster carers. They have made effective use of virtual meetings to maintain the sense of community during the lockdowns. They recognise the importance of face-to-face visits and have continued these, where reasonably practicable. Future plans include bringing people together again, when it is safe to do so.

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>The functions of the fostering panel in respect of cases referred to it by the fostering service provider are—</p> <p>to consider each application for approval and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a foster parent.</p> <p>(Regulation 25 (1)(a))</p>	29 August 2021

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that people involved in carrying on and managing the fostering service have a good knowledge and experience of law and practice relating to looked after children. Specifically, the logs that foster carers provide should contain clear information about the child's day-to-day life. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 17.1, page 34)

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: 1183495

Registered provider: Slough Children First Limited

Registered provider address: Observatory House, 25 Windsor Rd, Slough SL1 2EL

Responsible individual: Brent Lumley

Registered manager: Saima Arif

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Inspectors

Sarah Olliver, Social Care Inspector
Skye Frain, Social Care Inspector
Amanda Harvey, Social Care Inspector

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