

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

At the time of this inspection, 495 children were being cared for. These families include mainstream foster carers and connected carers.

There is no registered manager.

### Inspection dates: 6 to 10 February 2023

**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:** 4 October 2021

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** requires improvement to be good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate**

At this inspection, concerns were raised about safeguarding practice across the agency. Shortfalls were identified in staff practice and in staff recording.

Senior leaders do not have accurate systems in place to measure the effectiveness of the agency. This ranges from a lack of information about the children cared for by the agency through to how concerns are followed up.

Children's records do not evidence what children are good at or what progress they are making. Supervising social workers do not consistently monitor children's progress through the supervisory process with foster carers. A vast amount of information about children's progress is reported by foster carers, but this information is neither tested nor evaluated. Children are rarely seen with their foster carers, to establish what kind of relationship they have. The agency is focused on carers rather than children. While there are examples of focused work with children, this happens infrequently and is not well developed. For one child, there was no record of the supervising social worker having had a conversation with them in over a year.

There is a lack of consultation with children, and their views are scarcely asked for or recorded. With the exception of the fostering agency sourcing children's feedback for foster carer reviews, children are rarely asked about the quality of the care being provided to them. When children join a fostering family, supervising social workers are not routinely visiting them to find out how they have settled or to check that their bedroom is suitable for them. For example, one child's bedroom was identified as not being of a good standard in March 2022 but was not checked again until August 2022. Another child's bedroom is not routinely seen during supervising social worker visits, despite the foster carer telling the agency about the poor condition of the room and saying that drugs paraphernalia is regularly being brought to the home.

The planning for children moving into and on from foster carers' homes is not consistently good. For example, one foster carer had no record of having received supervision since May 2022. Concerns were noted by the childcare team relating to the home conditions, and it was stated that no child should live in the household until a full risk assessment had been completed. The situation was not risk assessed and two children have subsequently moved in, despite there being no supervision of this foster carer in place at the time of this inspection. There was also no evidence of the children having been visited by the supervising social worker.

When children leave their fostering families, endings are not recorded effectively for children. Foster carers are not routinely asked about their feelings after children leave. It is not clear if these children wish to remain in communication with their foster carers after moving on from their care.

Some children have complex health needs and for these children safe care plans are not detailed enough to help foster carers keep them safe. For example, some children have high levels of medication but there are no plans detailing how the foster carers and children should work together to manage this.

Health concerns, such as seizures, substance misuse and self-harm, are not monitored well by the agency. This is necessary to ensure children's safety, to support foster carers and to monitor children's progress.

The agency does not have good oversight of foster carer training. There is no evidence to confirm that certain foster carers have the right training in place to meet the complex health needs of the children in their care. Furthermore, there is a pattern of children with high-risk health needs not being visited regularly by supervising social workers. For example, when one child had taken an overdose, there was no evidence of this child having been visited by a supervising social worker. When children are seen, records of visits are usually very brief and children are not routinely seen alone.

Overall, the vast majority of children are in full-time education and the service does have an understanding of the children who are not in full-time education. One child has excelled in their education despite adversity and is aspirational for the future. This child's foster carers are excellent advocates.

Despite these shortfalls, some children are making progress, and some children are being supported to live with their foster carers under permanency arrangements. One child said that his foster carer had taught him that 'there is a time to be sad and there is also time to enjoy things'. This foster carer is very committed to the child. The child's needs are well met, and they have been embraced as a member of the family. Overall, there are lots of committed foster carers who want the best for the children in their care. Supervising social workers are also caring, kind and committed to their roles.

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

Children's complaints and concerns are not consistently being recognised, recorded and responded to appropriately. For example, one child raised serious concerns about not feeling safe living alongside the other children in the foster family. These concerns led to the child feeling suicidal and wanting to leave their foster placement. At the time of this inspection, this child had not been spoken with about their concerns and there was no evidence of this complaint having been recognised or responded to. Within this fostering household, several safeguarding concerns were noted in supervision but were not acted on by the fostering agency. Responses to concerns do not yet happen in a timely way and therefore there is a risk of information being lost. One child was supported by their foster carer to write a formal letter of complaint in August 2022, but this child was not responded to until February 2023, during the inspection.

Foster carers are not given clear strategies by supervising social workers regarding what they need to do to keep children safe. For example, one foster carer searches a child's bag and bedroom due to substance misuse concerns, however, this is not noted in the child's plan.

When children are involved in behavioural incidents, these are not routinely discussed in the following supervision with their foster carer. For example, on one occasion, a foster carer was assaulted by a child. However, in the following supervision, this situation was not discussed.

Children do have risk assessments, but these assessments are not regularly reviewed or linked to children's ongoing safety needs.

There is not enough oversight of adults who join the fostering family. For example, one adult has lived as part of a fostering household for a long period. Although this was known by the fostering agency, this person has not been checked for suitability and there is no evidence of safer caring practice having been discussed with them.

There is a lack of critical thinking and professional curiosity by the staff team. For example, an external agency contacted the fostering agency in August 2022 to alert them to a serious allegation that had been made against the adults in a fostering household. The fostering agency considered the fostering household safe, despite not visiting the child or asking the foster carers about the specific details of the concerns raised. The child had not been seen by a supervising social worker at the time of this inspection. There has been a lack of critical judgement by the fostering agency in ensuring that this child is safe and well.

As yet, there is no clear overview of whether supervising social workers and practice managers have undertaken safeguarding training. Furthermore, it is not clear whether supervising social workers have been trained to support foster carers through allegations, or to recognise the signs of child exploitation. Although it is recognised that there has been an emphasis on workers being supported to develop their therapeutic practice, the foundations of fundamental safe care and safeguarding practice are not yet in place. The local authority designated officer said that there is variability in the quality of information being relayed to them from the agency.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate**

Staff retention and staff stability have been a huge challenge for the agency. Supervising social workers' caseloads are relatively high and they are not receiving regular, good-quality supervision from their managers. In recognition of this, the fostering agency has recruited new supervising social workers and these staff are currently going through the induction process. Although some staff vacancies remain, progress is being made to recruit more staff. Staffing is still not stable enough to ensure that core social work practice is embedded.

Although supervising social workers are hard-working and committed to their roles, there are significant shortfalls in safeguarding and basic social work practice. Staff do not yet recognise when information gathered needs to be escalated, recorded or acted on. When children raise concerns, the agency has a duty to act on these and to investigate accordingly, through consultation with the child and all other relevant professionals. Children may not raise these concerns as formal complaints, however, they still need to be acted on to ensure that their well-being and safety are promoted.

Due to there not being enough social work staff, some practice managers are managing a caseload of fostering families. The practice managers do not have capacity to supervise these foster carers themselves. As an interim solution, the practice managers are delegating day-to-day tasks, such as foster carer supervisions, to duty social workers. This has led to gaps in practice and this system is not working well. Practice managers are not available to support their teams and to implement organisational change. Practice managers are not being provided with regular, good-quality supervision, and the fostering families that they are overseeing are not routinely discussed.

There is an overwhelming pattern of social workers not spending time with children. Sometimes supervising social workers will record 'child seen' in an observational record. However, often there is no narrative of the supervising social worker having had a conversation with the child. The fostering agency process is that discussions with children are recorded in foster carers' supervision records. Information for and about children is being lost because they do not have their own chronological records. Despite these shortfalls, foster carers are positive overall about their supervising social workers and describe them as supportive.

Staff are not always clear about organisational processes. For example, none of the social work staff understood that children needed to be seen as part of unannounced visits.

Senior leaders do not have accurate systems in place to measure both staff and foster carer training.

The senior leadership team has remained stable since the last inspection. A new manager was recruited in June 2022, and they have submitted their application to register with Ofsted. Some good initiatives have been introduced, such as carer celebration days, various support groups, reflective supervision and the introduction of virtual-reality training. However, at this stage, these are not fully embedded and their impact is untested.

There has been some progress in meeting some of the requirements set at the last inspection. Evaluative reports are being submitted to Ofsted. The agency decision-maker is making timelier decisions following panel. Overall, foster carer agreements are now completed and signed by foster carers. The fostering agency has an up-to-date children's list.

## 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 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))</p>	10 April 2023
<p>*The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— (a) the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (1))</p>	10 April 2023
<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.(2) 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).(3) 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))</p>	10 April 2023
<p>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.</p>	10 April 2023

<p>The registered person must ensure that - children are enabled to make a complaint or representation. (Regulation 18 (4) (5)(a))</p>	
<p>If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule &amp; 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))</p>	<p>10 April 2023</p>

\*These requirements are subject to a compliance notice.

## Recommendations

- 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 carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experiences. ('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

**Registered provider:** Northamptonshire Children's Trust Limited

**Registered provider address:** One Angel Square, Angel Street, Northampton, Northamptonshire NN1 1ED

**Responsible individual:** Christina Skeel

**Registered manager:** Post vacant

**Telephone number:** 01604 362161

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## Inspectors

Andi Lilley-Tams, Social Care Inspector  
Tracey Coglean Greig, Social Care Inspector



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