

Five Rivers Child Care Ltd.

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Maire Atherton
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure 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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Five Rivers Child Care Limited is a private limited company. The Five Rivers family placement service has a number of branches across the country. This London based branch, registered in 2001, provides placements in London and Essex. The service offers a range of placements covering an age range from birth to 18 years. These include: single placements and sibling groups; planned and emergency placements, both short-term and long-term, and respite care. At the time of this visit the branch at 306 Green Lane has 23 registered fostering households providing care and support to 27 children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Outcomes for children are generally good. Children's health, education and leisure are effectively promoted by the foster carers, supported by the fostering service staff. Foster carers report high levels of satisfaction with the support received. The promotion of equality and diversity is a considerable strength of the service.

This is a small agency and the manager is heavily involved in the day-to-day practice issues which leaves limited time to undertake management tasks and develop the service. There are seven requirements and seven recommendations arising from this inspection, the majority of which relate to records and management monitoring, others concern panel arrangements.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were six recommendations made in the last inspection report and all have been met. There has been a significant improvement in attendance at training by foster carers, including safeguarding. Staff have also attended training, both in house and external, as part of their professional development and have had line management appraisals.

Since the last visit the service has established its own panel, the membership of which is diverse, reflecting the diversity of the population of the area where the office is based.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The well-being of children and young people placed is effectively promoted by foster carers who have a sound understanding of the health needs of children and young people, and their part in health promotion. Children and young people report that their foster carers are good at helping them to keep healthy. Children talk about healthy eating, the importance of exercise and the help they get from foster carers to do this, as well as regular visits to the dentist, doctor and others when necessary. They also give examples of how they are kept informed and involved in decision making, for example, whether or not to have a brace fitted.

Foster carers receive paediatric first aid training which is refreshed as required. They are not trained in the management and administration of medication but understand safe storage and the need to maintain accurate records. Foster carers know what they may give consent for and when consent to medical treatment has to be obtained, although this information is not always available in writing. There are often delays by the placing authority in providing this information despite efforts by the service to secure the necessary documentation. Foster carers effectively support children and young people to manage ongoing health issues, developing and maintaining links with specialists for example.

Children are happy with the homes they live in and are proud to show their own space in the house. There are few bedroom sharing arrangements but not all have had the necessary supporting documentation in place. Foster carers' homes are warm, comfortable and well maintained. There is some limited use of CCTV cameras in foster carers' homes but there is no supporting policy and guidance in place. This has the potential to compromise the privacy of young people. Supervising social workers complete annual health and safety surveys to ensure that foster homes remain safe environments for young people to live in. Foster carers say that they also receive at least one unannounced visit to the home each year to make sure that it continues to meet the needs of the young people in placement.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people said they felt safe and well cared for by their foster carers. One child said, 'they make me feel safe, I know they care about me and make sure I don't get hurt.' Foster carers work with children and young people to help them understand and learn how to keep themselves safe, in using social media for example. The service supports foster carers to install internet safeguards and provides written guidance on e-safety. Foster carers establish positive, nurturing relationships with the children placed with them. Children seek physical contact with their foster carers who respond with warmth and affection within safe boundaries. Children and young people feel able to talk to their foster carers about any concerns they may have. As part of their induction carers are trained in safer-care practice and

this training is refreshed at regular intervals. This training is used by foster carers to inform their own safer caring policy which is updated regularly, which the child in placement can contribute to.

Children and young people rarely go missing from their foster carers' homes. On the occasions that this does happen there are clear protocols and guidance for foster carers to follow. These are implemented in conjunction with information about the individual risks or vulnerabilities of the young person that are established at the beginning of the placement. Foster carers know what to do and who to inform, and are good at keeping channels of communication with the young person open and encouraging them to return home. There is effective monitoring of records by the manager who is proactive in calling strategy meetings to address any concerns arising from frequent or prolonged absence, thus working towards safeguarding these young people. A significant success was achieved in engaging a young person to attend the strategy meeting in response to a pattern of absence.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children and young people enjoy good relationships with their foster carers. Foster carers establish clear boundaries and work with children and young people within these, using information gained in training. One foster carer expressed the view that, 'training has changed my behaviour.' Children and young people benefit from consistent messages that promote positive behaviour in accordance with the policies and guidance in place. Children and young people know the house rules that apply and know the consequences for breaking the rules, for example, going to bed half an hour early or no TV in their bedroom for one evening. They think that sanctions are fair and say they are not used often. The foster carer recording of any measures of control imposed is insufficiently robust to enable full management monitoring of these measures.

Children and young people talk positively about the range of leisure activities they are involved in both after school and outside school. These include: gym, after school sports; football; rugby; drama and trampoline clubs to name a few. Foster carers can make some decisions without seeking consent. The agency is working towards improving delegated authority to foster carers for children and young people in long-term placements, within an agreed framework. Children and young people's bedrooms reflect their individual interests and the help they receive in maintaining these as well as developing new ones.

Foster carers effectively support and promote the education of children and young people in their care. A placing social worker noted, 'The child has made excellent progress in education and the development of social skills.' When a young person is not in education or employment, the agency works hard to provide a range of education and training opportunities using local networks. Foster carers demonstrate strong advocacy on behalf of their foster children. Foster carers also work in partnership with schools, attending meetings and sharing information to set

meaningful and achievable targets for children and young people with clear reward structures. The service supports foster carers in this by funding additional tuition where this is an identified need. The organisation also employs a head of education services based at the head office, but this branch has not taken advantage of this facility.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Children and young people say that their foster carers actively seek their views about day-to-day decisions. One child said, 'They listen to me and act on my ideas', and gave an example of going to panel with foster carers for their annual review and giving verbal feedback. Foster carers support young people to participate in their review meetings to help them express their wishes and feelings. Children and young people know how to make a complaint and receive written information about how to do this; they also have the contact details for advocacy services and children's rights. They meet with supervising social workers regularly and have the opportunity to speak to them on their own. The previous inspection report noted that the organisation was reviewing ways in which it could effectively encourage young people to have a say in the development of the fostering service. There is no evidence that progress has been made to establish systems for gaining the views of children and young people to develop the fostering service.

Foster carers are effective in providing children and young people with care that is personalised and meets their needs. A placing social worker commented, 'the child is making steady progress. The foster carer is attentive to needs and has formed a positive working relationship with the child's parent.' A school report noted the, 'child's growing maturity and resilience in difficult circumstances.' Foster carers are proactive in seeking additional, precise information that they feel is necessary to promote specific aspects of young people's identity. The placement plans detail how age-appropriate skills may be learned. Children talk about some of the tasks they do around the house; for example, setting and clearing the table for meals and going to the corner shop unaccompanied. The service has a clear expectation that foster carers establish a savings pattern for the children and young people in their care, in addition to a personal allowance. Children and young person enjoy shopping for clothes and other things they need, with their foster carers or independently.

Children and young people receive good support from foster carers that enable contact with family and others to be a positive experience for all involved. Foster carers listen attentively to what children and young people say about contact and share the information appropriately so that changes can be made where necessary, a change of venue when a child is bored with a particular room for example. There is a local decision that foster carers do not usually supervise contact and so do not receive training in this area. However, there have been occasions when foster carers have supervised contact in the best interests of the child.

Children and young people are prepared for planned placements and, wherever

possible, visit the proposed home to meet the foster carers. Foster carers demonstrate a good understanding about the impact that transitions have on children and young people; they strive to minimise the negative impact of moving into a home or moving on from one.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers have a good understanding of the need to teach children and young people age appropriate practical skills when they are ready, for example, bed making and budgeting pocket money. The service has a structured independent-living skills programme that is underpinned by a resources pack. This provides a framework for young people and their foster carers to support preparation for independence through the development of the necessary skills. The framework encourages celebration of every achievement on the road to independence.

Foster carers, with support from supervising social workers, advocate successfully on behalf of young people to obtain the pathway plans, social work support and finance necessary to achieve independence. The service enables some young people to remain in placement beyond their 18th birthday or for those moving out, it helps them to maintain contact and receive support as appropriate.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

There is a steady flow of applicants to the fostering service achieved by word of mouth recommendations by existing foster carers, although the number of registered foster carers has remained largely the same. There is a recruitment drive scheduled to increase the pool of foster carers available and the manager is working with the marketing officer for the organisation on this. The fostering social workers are trained in assessment processes and produce satisfactory assessment reports for consideration by the panel. On occasion, the panel has deferred making a recommendation, asking for additional information for further consideration; this has ensured that only suitable people are approved. Annual reviews of foster carers are undertaken by their supervising social workers. All first reviews are taken to panel to ensure that these are thorough and that the foster carers remain suitable to foster.

The manager established a separate panel for the branch in September 2010. This panel largely comprises experienced members from a local authority panel; they are from different disciplines with a wide range of relevant skills and knowledge. However, the central list is not a complete list of all panel members. The panel has met five times since inception, and some members have had training with other panels, however, there has been no training for this group. The panel minutes also do not show the designation of panel attendees accurately, or clearly cover the key issues in each case.

The manager of the service has been in post 11 years and works with two members of staff. They had relevant experience of child care on appointment, but their experience of the fostering task has been gained since starting work for this service. The social work and administrative staffing of the service is not sufficient to meet the current needs of the service and the manager works as part of the team while staff are gaining the experience they need and pending recruitment of a further social worker. To meet this shortfall in social work staff, the manager uses independent consultants to complete foster carer assessments. Staff are appropriately qualified and receive regular supervision that enables them to undertake their respective roles. The staff work effectively as a team, providing consistent support to foster carers. Recruitment of staff is currently a head office function. Not all the information required by the regulations is available, either for staff or those on the central list; in particular there is no evidence that gaps in employment have been explored. This does not fully ensure that all those employed for the purpose of working for the service are suitable to work with children and young people.

Foster carers confirm that matching is good and that that service provides them with the information they need to care for the child or young person placed. Strengths in the matching process include a full consideration of other children in placement and their compatibility. One child said about the placement, 'I have nice grown ups and I like having someone to play with.' Foster carers, children and young people actively participate in placement planning and review meetings, and fully engage in decision-making. There have been instances where short-term placements have been made outside the foster carer's terms of approval. In the absence of supporting information it is not possible to evidence how the child's needs have been considered.

Foster carers receive a good level of support and training to enable them to care effectively for the children and young people placed. Foster carers describe the support and communication from the agency as, 'brilliant'. In addition to the regular monthly and unannounced visits, they appreciate the out-of-hours service, the prompt response to any queries or concerns and they say they like, 'not having to say things twice.' They speak positively about training. All established foster carers have achieved the Children's Workforce Development Council's Standards for Foster Care within the appropriate timescales, with good support from supervising social workers. Newly approved foster carers are working towards achieving this. Foster carers and staff are working proactively to improve attendance at their support groups and increase the frequency of these meetings.

Staff and foster carers are guided in their practice by the written policies and procedures and the Fostering Handbook. This ensures that records by foster carers are maintained to a good standard and that they understand their role in keeping memorabilia for the child, for example photographs. However, there is insufficient information provided about payments to carers and they express the view that there is little transparency in this area. The Statement of Purpose has not been reviewed and does not reflect the change in regulations in 2011, in respect of the panel for example.

Foster carers know what to do should they receive an allegation or have suspicions

of harm. However, the manager does not maintain records of allegations that have been investigated by the safeguarding services and are not substantiated, or are withdrawn. Therefore, it is not possible to determine that the action by the service in the light of an allegation is timely and appropriate, nor is there a clear and comprehensive summary of the conclusions of all allegations for the foster carer.

The manager knows the service very well and undertakes monthly monitoring but there is little evidence of formal evaluation to identify any patterns or trends. The service does not provide the Chief Inspector with a written report of the matters monitored, or about improving the quality of care, including consultation with children, as is required by regulations.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Staff and foster carers reflect the diversity of the local area and embed this in the provision of the service. This is underpinned by: specific training for staff and foster carers in equality and diversity; inclusion throughout written policies and procedures, and translation into practice through good matching of children with foster carers and access to interpreting services.

What must be done to secure future 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 Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg	Statutory Requirement	Due date
4 (2011)	keep under review and revise the statement of purpose and children’s guide, for example, to reflect the current fostering legislation and NMS (Regulation 4(a))	31/03/2012
23 (2011)	maintain a list of persons who are considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel (“the central list”) (Regulation 23(1))	31/03/2012
24 (2011)	ensure that there is a written record of the fostering panel proceedings and the reasons for its recommendations. In particular show the designation of panel members accurately and ensure the minutes clearly cover the key issues (Regulation 24 (2))	27/04/2012
20 (2011)	ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to all person's employed to work for the purposes of the fostering service in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20 (3)(c))	27/04/2012
12 (2011)	ensure that written records are kept of any allegation, and of the action taken in response (Regulation 12 (3)(d))	31/03/2012
11 (2011)	ensure that the welfare of children placed is safeguarded at all times, in particular ensure that children placed are within	31/03/2012

	the foster carers' terms of approval (Regulation 11 (a))	
35 (2011)	provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 and improving the quality of foster care; to include consultation with children, foster carers and placing authorities. (Regulation 35)	31/05/2012

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the decision making process and outcome of the assessment are recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed (NMS 10.6)
- ensure foster carers understand the service’s policy concerning the safety of children in the foster home. This with particular reference to a clear policy about the use of any closed circuit television in the home, children’s rights to privacy and protection (NMS 10.4)
- ensure the fostering service has a clear written policy on managing behaviour, which includes discipline. With particular reference to recording measures of control, restraint or discipline (NMS 3.8)
- except where there are particular identified factors which dictate to the contrary, foster carers should be given delegated authority to make day to day decisions regarding health, education, leisure etc’ (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.10)
- ensure foster carers receive the training and development they need to carry out their role effectively. Particularly in relation to training in medication and supervising contact for children (NMS 20)
- ensure that each person on the central list is given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the fostering service staff and has access to appropriate training and skills development to ensure they are kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation and guidance (NMS 23.10 and 23.11)
- provide a written policy on payments to foster carers that sets out the criteria for calculating payments. (NMS 28.5)