

Five Rivers Family Placement Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Five Rivers Child Care Limited is a national independent fostering agency operating a number of fostering services. This fostering setting, the Five Rivers South Central service, is based in Salisbury, Wiltshire. The organisation's head office is adjacent to the service. Foster carers are recruited in Wiltshire, Dorset, Hampshire and Somerset. The number of new foster carers recruited by this service is a lower proportion than the comparator figure of all independent fostering agencies.

The fostering service currently has 46 fostering households providing placements for 54 children and young people who have varying needs, including children with disabilities and/or learning difficulties and/or with complex health needs. The service provides short term, long term, respite and permanence placements, sibling groups and parent and child placements. The service does not provide short-term breaks.

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: **good**.

The fostering service demonstrates continuous improvement in its practice and is judged overall as a good service. Leaders and managers have a clear vision for the development of the service, which includes promoting the engagement and participation of foster carers and children and young people.

The South Central fostering service is led by its qualified and experienced manager, and also benefits from the on-going support and expertise provided by managers and leaders within the regional and national Five Rivers organisation. Management systems are in place to monitor the quality of the operation of the service and the progress of children and young people. The service has established effective partnership working arrangements with commissioners and local agencies to meet individual children and young people's needs.

The service makes and maintains successful and stable placements for most children and young people placed. The majority of children and young people are making good progress in their personal development. However, there have been some unplanned endings over the past three years for children and young people. The recruitment and assessment of prospective foster carers is thorough and the operation of the fostering panel is robust. Foster carers have a good range of skills and experience and they are able to effectively meet the diverse needs of children and young people.

The protection and safety of children and young people is given high priority within the agency. Recruitment and selection processes and performance management measures are rigorous and the service adheres to and works within Local Safeguarding Children Board policies and procedures. However, safeguarding practice within the agency requires improvement. The aspects of good safeguarding practice identified within the service are reduced by a lack of focus within some recording on safeguarding issues. Furthermore, one placement shows that there has been insufficient internal and external challenge by the service regarding the appropriateness of continuing care plans.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure children's safety and welfare is protected in all fostering placements; in particular, provide robust challenge within the agency and to the range of individuals with whom children living in foster care have contact, and who are responsible for identifying concerns about their safety and well-being. In addition, with regard to the identification of children's needs and the appropriateness of care plans in place continuing (NMS 4.1; Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.66)
- appraise the performance of the Panel Chair at least annually (NMS 24.6)
- ensure there is an effective system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-keeping and take action when needed; in particular with reference to the suitability of prescribed recording formats and the quality of recording of unannounced visits and the supervision of foster carers (NMS 26.2)

- ensure the learning and development programme equips staff with the skills they require to meet legal obligations and the business needs of the fostering service; in particular, ensure all staff are competent in using the agency's electronic database. (NMS 23.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Most children and young people fostered benefit from stable, appropriate placements that may also include being placed with their siblings. Receiving written information about and photos of their prospective foster family and/or meeting their foster carer(s) before they move in helps to smooth children and young peoples' transitions into a new family. They are comfortable living in their foster homes as they feel very much a part of the family. Individual's cultural and personal needs are accepted and effectively met by foster families and this helps children and young people to feel at ease in their new family environment.

Most importantly, children and young people are happy, feel safe and are well cared for. They generally enjoy taking part in family life. They respond well to foster carers' clear expectations of their behaviour, and benefit from receiving a consistent approach to their care. This helps them to understand what socially acceptable behaviour is and to make positive changes. Their development of social skills helps children and young people to integrate more successfully into their community and to sustain friendships with their peers.

Generally, children and young people make and maintain sound relationships with their foster family and they are developing secure primary attachments with their foster carers. One young person said about their foster carer, 'she is strict but I love her to death'. Children and young people's increasing trust in adults helps them to risk trying out new things and increasing their abilities and skills. Some young people have realised that they possess extraordinary talents in particular areas. The encouragement and opportunities provided by foster families to children and young people helps them to increase in confidence, feel proud of their achievements and encourages them to be aspirational and hopeful regarding their future lives.

Children and young people are making good progress. Their health needs are met; they are regularly attending their educational provision and entering into employment. Adolescents are moving successfully into adulthood and into independence with the support of their foster families.

Permanence planning is supported by the service. This means that children and young people may be able to 'stay put' for as long as they need or be helped to successfully return home or move on to adoptive families. Placements for disabled children and young people are provided for as long as they are required. This contributes to children and young people feeling more secure about the present and their futures. However, some children and young people have experienced unplanned endings to their placements.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Foster carers work as part of the professional team around the child. They attend relevant meetings and are involved in planning and decision-making. The fostering service recognises the value of foster carers views and opinions about the best interests of the children and young people they look after and staff support and encourage foster carers to advocate for them. Foster carers work closely with the service and with other professionals and settings to provide appropriate services to support their foster children. These collaborative working arrangements contribute to the good progress and promotion of positive outcomes for most children and young people in placement. 15 survey responses from placing social workers rated the service as either 'excellent' or 'good'.

The recruitment, assessment support and training of foster carers is embedded into the organisation's operation, with clear structures and procedures in place. The number of new foster carers recruited by this service is a lower proportion than the comparator figure of all independent fostering agencies. The service is clear that the recruitment of only high calibre foster carers is the determining factor regarding the number of new foster carers working with the service each year. The experienced panel chairperson effectively heads the panel which demonstrates robust decision-making and appropriate challenge to the fostering service. This interface with the service ensures secure and stable placements are provided to children and young people. The panel effectively undertakes a quality assurance function which promotes thorough assessments being completed. The quality of assessment and annual review reports is usually good.

The service has recruited and retained foster carers who possess a diverse range of skills, many of whom have a wealth of knowledge and expertise in particular areas. For example, therapeutic fostering, meeting complex health needs and working effectively with birth parents. Careful and considered matching processes contribute to placement stability and security for children and young people. Social workers commend the quality of care provided to children and young people in placement. Their comments include, 'excellent communication from the foster carers; the carers are one of my best'; and, 'the carer is a very strong advocate for the young person at school and has established a good relationship with the young person's birth mother'.

The organisation's virtual headteacher trains and supports foster carers and staff in helping children and young people access and maintain school attendance and improve their educational achievement. Subsequently, one foster carer felt confident enough to challenge a school about the use of the pupil premium to effectively support the fostered young person's learning.

Most foster carers say that they receive very good support from their fostering social worker and family support workers to help them to implement care plans to meet the

diverse and complex needs of children and young people. Foster carers value the support they receive from the agency to cope with the arising difficulties and challenges of fostering demands and their impact on family members' emotional well-being.

The service makes good effort to provide foster carers with the full information they need to care for children and young people in placement. Foster carers benefit from regular supervision and have access to the out of hours support service to support them in looking after children and young people well.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The organisation has well defined and rigorous recruitment and selection processes and performance management measures in place for both staff and foster carers. These processes contribute to protecting children and young people from unsuitable persons working within the service.

Safeguarding is given high priority within the organisation and permeates throughout the fostering agency's operation. The service works in accordance with the Local Safeguarding Children Board guidance and procedures to protect children and young people. Notifications of significant events are made to the relevant agencies. Staff attend multi-agency safeguarding training courses regularly to keep up to date with current practice. Staff and foster carers safeguarding knowledge has been enhanced by recent training covering e-safety, child exploitation and child trafficking.

The service is improving its safeguarding practice. It has established positive working relationships with local safeguarding agencies and professionals and acts on any advice given to improve the protection of children and young people. The service has: reviewed its safeguarding policy; is attempting to obtain clear delegated authority permissions from responsible authorities prior to children and young people's placements; reflected on the definition of 'responsible drinking' in foster carers' guidance; and considered ensuring a sharper focus on safeguarding issues within supervision frameworks.

Foster carers spoken with during the inspection demonstrated their good understanding of possible risk or abuse, and gave examples of robust safeguarding of their children and young people in placement. Their views are balanced by their recognition of the need for children and young people to take age appropriate risks as part of their development, and their need for guidance and advice about how to keep themselves safe.

The service promotes safe care. The recruitment and assessment of foster carers is rigorous and annual reviews are promptly undertaken to review the continuing suitability of fostering households to safely and effectively look after children and young people. An annual health and safety check of the fostering home is completed to ensure children and young people live within a safe environment. Each child and

young person fostered has an individual safer caring policy drawn up which is reviewed and updated. This includes both protective and risk factors.

Mostly, children and young people are kept safe by this service. Very few children and young people have gone missing over the past three years. Children and young people know how to make a complaint and they are fully looked into by the service and appropriate action is taken. Placement plans and risk assessments are in place identifying how the service is to meet the needs of children and young people placed. However, the inspection identified one example of insufficient evaluation by the service of the appropriateness of care plans in place, and an over-reliance on, and lack of challenge, to the professional network care planning decisions and identification of possible risk of harm. This shortfall resulted in poor outcomes for young people.

The service undertakes at least two unannounced visits to fostering households each year, to look at the home environment and to gain an understanding of the child or young person's experience of living there. Completed forms contain very brief comments from most fostering social workers and this sparse information does not fulfil the service's stated purpose of the unannounced visit. The lack of sufficient detail and evaluation of the visit means that this process does not effectively contribute to the safeguarding of children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Leadership and management of the service is strong. The Registered Manager is suitably qualified and experienced for the role, and demonstrates a good understanding of the operation of the fostering service. The head of fostering, the Responsible Individual and the Registered Manager have a clear vision for the development of this service and strive for improvement in outcomes for children and young people.

The national organisation is involved in two research projects to improve assessment processes and measuring outcomes for children and young people. The service is actively promoting the engagement and participation of foster carers and children and young people in the development of the service, to improve practice standards and outcomes for children and young people. Stakeholder feedback is collected to inform development and improvement.

The service has satisfactorily addressed the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection and there is evidence of continuous improvement in policy and practice.

Information and recording has improved in specific areas of work and the training programme for foster carers has been improved to better support their professional development and to support them in improving outcomes for children and young people.

The introduction and usage of the electronic database, 'CHARMS', provides staff with networked access to records which are maintained centrally. This improves communication within the service and enhances the level of support that staff may be able to offer to foster carers using the out of hour's service. This recently established database also supports improvement in monitoring and quality assurance processes within the service. It enables specific data reports to be produced for evaluation of the quality of practice and children and young people's progress, and the identification of trends and patterns to bring about further improvement. However, the organisation is yet to utilise the full capacity of the CHARMS database to regularly monitor, review and track all outcomes for children and young people and further development is programmed. The manager and some staff members are not yet fully conversant in using and understanding particular features of this database. This shortfall has the potential to reduce the effectiveness of management monitoring processes to assure the quality and adequacy of records and practice.

Staff are able to identify courses to meet their identified training needs. This enables them to pursue and develop particular areas of expertise that will enrich their fostering practice and this benefits outcomes for both foster carers and children and young people.

Supervision, appraisal and performance management systems are in place. However, although the supervision of foster carers is regularly carried out, the quality and timeliness of receiving supervision notes are variable. This means that some foster carers may not promptly receive clear written guidance to support them in looking after children and young people effectively. Furthermore, an annual appraisal of the panel chairperson has not been completed.

The service has updated its Statement of Purpose and Children's Guides, which are designed to meet the needs of differing age groups. These documents, alongside the organisation's website provide families, children and young people, foster carers and stakeholders with information. The service has developed its Fostering Charter, taking into account the views of its foster carers. The Foster Care Handbook provides foster carers with relevant information to help them to successfully complete their fostering task.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service, 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.