

# Five Rivers Family Placement Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	02/02/2012

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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 in England. This independent fostering agency is a social enterprise and therefore does not have shareholders and invests any profits into its own services.

The London and Essex branch of Five Rivers carries out the recruitment, assessment, training and approval of foster carers and provides ongoing support to foster carers. The agency provides placement opportunities for children looked after by a number of local authorities.

At the time of this inspection the London and Essex service has 25 fostering households providing placements to 23 young people.

### 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 overall effectiveness judgement reflects the fact that young people's happiness, welfare and safety are highly prioritised by this service. The majority of young people currently placed are in stable, long term placements which keep them very safe and fully meet their individual needs and, where they have developed positive attachments, enables them to make significant progress in all outcome areas.

The agency has a diverse range of foster carers who possess a good range of skills and abilities and a real commitment to providing positive, lasting placements for young people. Placement stability is very good.

In the period since the previous inspection carers and staff have experienced some significant disruption with changes in management, at both local and organisational level, periods of instability in staffing and changes in office location. There was a period when foster carers and staff felt very isolated and undervalued and a corresponding lowering of practice standards. The service has been without a registered manager since July 2014. These factors have not helped positive operational practice and progressive improvement of the service to be consistently sustained throughout the last three years.

Although there has been no designated manager during the last year support for foster carers and staff has stabilised. That support has been provided by two consistent supervising social workers. Foster carers currently receive a very high level of effective support and feel strongly that there have been very significant improvements throughout the agency over the last year. They now feel that they are well consulted, are able to influence the development of the service and are very much part of the team around the child. One carer now says: 'Once you join Five Rivers you don't fight any of the battles for the children on your own. You've always got someone on your side'. Good working relationships are now strongly embedded with local commissioners and partner agencies. Comments from local authority commissioners, placing social workers, staff, carers and young people have been 100% positive throughout this inspection.

Five requirements and twelve recommendations have been made during this inspection. These reflect shortfalls in recording and operational practice, which have largely resulted from the lack of dedicated management oversight. Whilst day-to-day management has been very effectively undertaken by a senior supervising social worker, this has been alongside his social work responsibilities and therefore restricted. This supervising social worker was formally appointed to manage the service in January. He has achieved significant improvements in standards of carer support and supervision and has ensured that young people's care and safety is the focus of all activity within the service. He has a well-developed awareness, through his involvement in service delivery, of the current shortfalls. He has a track record of effective leadership and management and has already begun to tackle areas of the service's operation that are in need of improvement. There are currently very positive indicators for the progressive development of sustained effective and efficient practice.

Whilst there has been variation in the quality of assessments, and there are current shortfalls in panel processes, the high calibre of foster carers recruited by the agency is demonstrated in the stability and positivity of young people's placements. Placing social workers recognise the skills of some of the agency's newer carers and say: 'I qualified in 1983 and never had a better carer. I can't believe they are new carers. They are utterly reliable, go the extra mile and fully understand the child's needs.

The agency is very efficient and effective. Every 'i' is dotted and every 't' crossed'.

Young people have been very effectively protected, from the impact of any practice shortfalls, by the stability and sound standards of care consistently provided to them by their foster carers and, more recently, by the child-focused, professional oversight of that care by dedicated supervising social workers.

## Areas for 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 with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
22 (2011)	maintain a record, in the form of a register, showing all of the information listed under Schedule 2, in relation to each young person's placement (Regulation 22(1))	30/04/2015
23 (2011)	appoint a panel vice chair who may act as chair if the person employed to chair the panel is absent (Regulation 23(4(ii)))	30/04/2015
25 (2011)	ensure that the fostering panel, when considering applications for approval, always has access to a full assessment comprising all the required information as specified under regulation 26 (Regulation 25(2(a)))	30/04/2015
28 (2011)	ensure that an annual review of each foster carer is always carried out not more than one year after initial approval and thereafter at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 28(2))	30/04/2015
39 (2011)	ensure that the registered person always gives timely notice, in writing to Ofsted, of the proposed absence of the manager and interim management arrangements or of any proposed changes to operation of the service as listed under regulation 39 ((Regulation 38 (2)), (Regulation 39(1)))	10/03/2015

### Recommendations

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

- review the process for panel members to provide quality assurance feedback on the quality of reports being presented to panel to ensure that this process supports the fostering service provider in consistently promoting improvement (NMS 14.1)
- review the way in which panel minutes are recorded to ensure that they clearly

cover the key issues and views of panel members, specifically demonstrating how issues of concern are addressed to panel members satisfaction and how the reasons for recommendation are determined (NMS 14.7; Volume 4 statutory guidance paragraph 5.25 )

- ensure that the decision maker lists the material taken into account in reaching decisions and also addresses the other considerations identified in this paragraph (Volume 4 statutory guidance paragraph 5.40)
- ensure that each panel member, including the panel chair has their performance reviewed annually. The agency decision maker should review the performance of the chair whilst the chair should conduct the performance review of other panel members (Volume 4 statutory guidance paragraph 5.15)
- ensure that all personnel involved in staff recruitment and selection consistently follow the agency's detailed recruitment practice, specifically in terms of obtaining a written explanation of any gaps in the applicant's employment history (NMS 19.2)
- ensure that the risk assessment process, which forms part of the organisations process for reaching decisions when criminal convictions are declared during the carer recruitment process, is fully recorded (NMS 19.5)
- ensure that all foster carers attain the Training, Support and Development Standards within the required timescale (NMS 20.3)
- ensure, where a foster carer is subject to an allegation, that a clear and comprehensive summary of that allegation and details of how it is followed up and resolved is kept on the carers confidential file as a dedicated record (NMS 22.7)
- ensure that administrative staff are provided with access to training to fully equip them to meet the business needs of the service, specifically in relation to panel administrative responsibilities and panel minute taking (NMS 23.1)
- ensure that all staff receive regular supervision and have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually, specifically in relation to administrative staff (NMS 24.4, 24.6)
- ensure that management monitoring incorporates the identification of any emerging patterns and trends and involves the completion of three monthly written reports to the organisation's directors (NMS 25.2; 25.7)
- improve the consistency of record keeping practices to ensure that all foster carers and young people's records, which are retained electronically, are properly maintained with information uploaded in a timely manner. (NMS 26.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people are happy and settled in their foster placements with many making exceptionally good progress. Of the 24 young people placed currently, 16 have been

with their carers for more than three years. A further three have been placed for at least one year. This indicates sound placement matching strategies, although these were not always well evidenced at the point of placement, and the agency is providing young people with good stability and security.

Young people are provided with good information about Five Rivers, and about being fostered, in guides for children and young people, which incorporate contact details for children's rights and advocacy services should they require to use these. Young people are provided with excellent information about their potential foster carers and foster home in the welcome packs foster carers compile. These colourful and attractive booklets contain photographs of the carers, their family and their home and tell young people what life in the household is like. This helps young people to get a real picture of where they are moving to and so allays some of their fears. Young people, who are fostered nationally with Five Rivers, have made an excellent video, featuring themselves and their carers. This supports young people, who are newly fostered, by talking about areas that the young people consider important. The video covers foster homes, foster carers, the role of support workers, education, pocket money and moving on.

Young people are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians in the community and are well supported by their carers to access these services appropriately. Some young children, with very specialist health care needs, are receiving excellent care because their carers have undergone very extensive training to equip them to provide that care expertly. A placing social worker for one such child said: 'Visiting the family twice a week and seeing the care provided, not only in the family home but during stays in hospital, I can confirm that the carers care for him as if he were their own child.'

Young people are attending school well. Where young people demonstrate an initial reluctance to attend school foster carers and supervising social workers positively encourage their engagement. This means that several young people, who previously had poor attendance and educational achievement, have engaged well with education as they have become settled in placement. For some young people this has resulted in them achieving excellent exam results, receiving certificates of achievement reflecting their educational success and, in some instances, decisions to continue into further education or university. One headteacher made the following comment about a young person: 'He is a courteous, conscientious and dedicated student. I am happy to wholeheartedly and unreservedly support his application for college'. Young people who had poor English language skills have received additional support to help them to improve these.

Young people are regularly consulted about their care and are actively involved in the planning for their futures because carers attend their reviews and meetings with them and consult with them on a day-to-day basis. Supervising social workers see young people regularly and consistently review how well their care and support needs are being met. The agency is actively working to develop group opportunities where young people can get together and have opportunities to influence the development of the service, since their capacity to do this is not well established. A

supervising social worker and a foster carer are attending training on participation imminently to enhance the agency's capacity to move this development forward effectively. Foster carers are actively involved in organising social gatherings where young people enjoy activities and have opportunities to share experiences of being fostered. Young people have been involved in choosing the venues for these. A recent trip to see The Lion King was a great success.

All young people are well supported to keep in contact with their families, where this is appropriate. There is good carer recognition of the value for young people of retaining positive contact with families but carers are also supporting young people well when family contact is inconsistent and not always positive.

Young people feel positive about their placements. Placing social workers are confident about the effect that young people's current placements have had on improving their life chances. They said: 'Many professionals have been involved in this child's life and have all commented on how caring, professional and committed these carers have been. We have all noticed a positive improvement in the child and feel confident that her needs will continue to be met at a very high standard'; 'This is one of the most stable placements I am witness to. In the three years I have worked with the young person, he has remained happy in placement with all his needs met. The carer is reliable, maintains good communication with all involved in his care and he is flourishing in and outside of placement'.

Young people are able to remain in placement after they reach 18 under the agency's staying put package. Foster carers show a real commitment to continuing their support for young people. One carer said of the young person: 'When he leaves, whenever that is, he'll have his own key for this house and come and go as he pleases. It's his home and always will be'.

Many young people have formed lasting and important attachments with their carers, which they will retain into adulthood and which have positively changed their lives.

## **Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Staff and foster carers present a very child-centred approach to practice. When young people are initially placed carers receive weekly visits from their supervising social workers to promote young people's positive integration into the foster family.

There are good examples of carers advocating pro-actively for young people to ensure that they get places at schools, which can fully meet their educational needs, and that they receive additional help to promote their educational achievement. Some young people have been well supported with securing legal support to address their asylum seeking status, helping them to feel more secure in their placements. The agency has foster carers from a very wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and those carers are very good at ensuring that young people are helped to understand and value their cultural heritage and family background. A



placing social worker said: 'The carers are very proactive. They are looking to him going to visit family in Turkey at Easter. The embassy had said it was too late to get a visa but the carers just wouldn't give up'.

The quality of foster carer assessments has been varied. Some assessments reflect clear identification of carer strengths and are robustly focused and analytical in identifying the skills those carers will bring to the fostering task. In some instances assessments have been completed by independent assessors who have had poor analytical skills and a lack of knowledge of the legal framework as demonstrated by the inappropriate approval recommendations made. The agency has recognised that this represented poor monitoring of the quality of independent form F assessments and the recently appointed manager now has responsibility for ensuring this is always undertaken effectively. He is very clear about the standard of assessments he requires.

The fostering panel is currently insufficiently robust and its quality assurance role within the agency is not sufficiently well developed. There is currently no designated panel vice chair. Panel minutes do not always clearly identify carer strengths and weaknesses making it sometimes difficult to see how the stated reasons for recommending approval are determined. There have been two instances where incomplete assessments have been presented to the panel. In one instance Disclosure and Barring Service checks were not in place and in another the applicants had not completed skills to foster training. This resulted in panel having to make recommendations subject to unresolved issues being addressed. None of this supports robust agency decision making. The agency has recognised that this is largely because of the infrequency of panel meetings. There have been only three panels in the last year and the panel chair said that because of this the panel is, 'still evolving rather than established. It feels a bit like a new panel all the time because we meet infrequently. We don't develop consistency or continuity'. Panel members receive feedback forms to comment on the quality of both initial assessments and annual review reports but some panel members are commenting on the quality of the carers rather than the quality of reports meaning that this unfocused feedback is not effectively supporting the agency to improve quality. The agency decision maker has not consistently clarified the reasons for the decision he reaches.

The agency has recognised panel operation as an area for urgent development and has recently undertaken training for the panel on the quality of assessments. The frequency of panels will increase with a renewed focus on carer recruitment. Four foster carers are currently being assessed, one of whom has transferred from another agency. The new manager has an expressed intention to work very closely with the experienced panel chair to develop the panel's role significantly.

Training for foster carers has vastly improved this year with an expansion of the training programme to incorporate areas of specific training requested by them such as internet safety, staying put arrangements, preparation for independence and procedure, policy and good practice in relation to young people who go missing. Foster carers value this and feel that it will help them to become more knowledgeable and skilled. The agency has supported some carers to access external

training to support them to meet young people's very specific needs. Some carers have not completed the training, support and development standards within the required timescale. Those carers are now being provided with additional support to ensure that they complete these in a short timescale.

Carers receive regular supervisory visits from their supervising social workers and speak very positively about how much their support has improved during the last year. Delegated authority has had a high profile in this agency because of the commitment to viewing young people as integral members of the foster family. Foster carers are therefore very clear about their capacity to make day-to-day decisions for young people and this ensures that those young people do not feel different from their friends. A carer said: 'From early 2014 there has been a big shift and a real improvement in the way Five Rivers is now operating. There have been management changes both locally and regionally. The carers seem more relaxed in their roles and are allowed to make decisions for the children in their care'.

Carers have benefitted from a period of real stability in terms of their immediate day-to-day support and supervision, which has been provided by two constant supervising social workers since November 2013. Staff retention immediately prior to this stable period was poor, resulting for many carers in several changes of supervising social worker. There have been changes of office location as well as management changes at local, regional and organisational level. There was a period when carers felt they were not well consulted and were not valued, and a number of carers chose to leave the agency. Carer motivation has improved significantly during this period of stability. This is demonstrated in their improved take up of training and better attendance at support group meetings. Foster carers say that they currently feel part of the team around the child, that they are consulted well, and that their views matter. Foster carer annual reviews were allowed to drift during last year with many not being undertaken within the required timescale. This is now being addressed urgently and annual review dates have been identified for all carers.

Foster carers have begun to take ownership of this agency and to become pro-actively involved in developing it. There are now carer representatives, who recently attended the UK consultation forum with management. The carers found this to be a constructive opportunity to contribute to how the service develops. One of the real positives to emerge from this is the staging, in April 2015, of a fostering recognition day to celebrate the provider organisations 25th anniversary and to recognise and celebrate the achievements of carers and young people.

Carers have a strong commitment to providing young people with high standards of care and support. One carer said of the two young people placed: 'They are amazing young men. It's been my privilege to look after them and watch them blossom and grow'. Some carers refuse to consider respite because they strongly view young people as part of their family. Some young people have travelled abroad with their carers to family functions whilst others have been positively influenced by birth children in the foster home. Young people, in stable long term placements, see their carers as 'mum and dad' and have built extremely strong attachments. Carers generally work well with placing social workers who value the positive elements of

the young people's placements. One said, 'He has integrated extremely well with their family,' and another said, 'This placement really has been heaven sent for this child.'

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has appropriate safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures, which ensure appropriate information sharing with relevant professionals, should the need arise. Supervising social workers and foster carers have access to regular training in safeguarding, child protection and risk assessment to ensure that they retain good awareness of their reporting and recording responsibilities should young people make a disclosure or if carers have concerns regarding risky behaviour.

Young people feel safe and well cared for and carers prioritise their safety well. Safe care policies are in place for every fostering household and are reviewed when young people are placed to reflect any specific safeguarding concerns. There are very few incidents of children putting themselves at risk or going missing. There are some good examples of young people's challenging and potentially unsafe behaviours reducing as they become settled in placement and feel happier, more stable and less vulnerable, for example reductions in instances of unauthorised absence and less displays of anger and frustration.

Young people receive the right information about how to complain. No complaints have been made since the previous inspection. There has been one allegation against a carer. This was appropriately referred to safeguarding professionals and properly investigated. Although the allegation, its investigation and outcome are recorded on the carer's file, this is within the carers daily case record rather than as a dedicated record making it very difficult to track and with the potential for this significant information to be overlooked. Where an issue was raised as a potential allegation the agency was able to clearly identify that it constituted concerns regarding standards of care and to record and investigate this to the young person's satisfaction.

The agency has experienced some difficulties in obtaining care plans from placing authorities, in a timely way. Whilst chasing the provision of these documents robustly, the agency has determined that from January 2015 it will compile a placement plan for all young people placed, at the point of placement. Whilst this incorporates only basic information it ensures that foster carers always have clear written guidance to meet young people's needs from the very outset of placement. Foster carer profiles detail their experience and skills well and help the agency and placing authorities to equate those skills to the needs of young people referred for placement. This makes sure that, in considering referrals for placements, the agency is able to carefully consider the capacity of carers to offer safe placements if young people have particularly challenging or unsafe behaviours.

Some of the very young people placed have serious and complex, life-threatening health issues. The foster carers looking after these young people have been highly commended, during this inspection, for the excellent care they provide, which has significantly improved those young people's life chances. One placing social worker commented: 'I believe it is due to the excellent care provided within this family home that this child, who was not expected to be with us now, is doing so well and approaching his first birthday.' In these instances young people's birth parents are also very appreciative of the dedication of carers, one said: 'If God made noble people then that is you. All in all, from the bottom of my heart I cannot thank you enough for taking care of my precious gift, my daughter'.

Whilst agency staff have a successfully focused on risk assessment, and on taking positive action to reduce risks to young people, this is sometimes poorly recorded. Risk assessment forms part of the organisations decision making where criminal convictions are declared by potential carers or members of their immediate family during the carer recruitment process. The agency's recruitment strategy states that written risk assessments, carried out under these circumstances, must be signed off by the registered person and this has not always happened. No young people have to date been placed at risk because of this oversight.

Staff and panel member recruitment is generally robust with appropriate checks with the Disclosure and Barring Service and with additional references being sought as a matter of course. The recruitment process is overseen by the organisation's human resources team. The team highlights any gaps in employment and refers these to those conducting the applicant's interview to be properly followed through. In one instance there is no written record of gaps in employment history being properly investigated. The worker concerned is able to provide a full and satisfactory explanation for the gaps, so young people have not been placed at risk but the written record was incomplete.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

There has effectively been no registered manager at this service since March 2014. The previous registered manager was initially on sickness leave and ultimately left the service in July 2014. The agency relocated in April 2014 from its office in Ilford to Milton Keynes, retaining a sub office in Barking. Administrative staff remained at the small Barking sub office. The agency has made determined, but unsuccessful efforts to recruit a manager at its Milton Keynes office and attempts to recruit a cohort of carers in that geographical area have been similarly unsuccessful. The provider organisation has recently decided to return to its original area, closer to its carers. Currently the service is operating from the sub office, which is too small, and will relocate to larger office premises in late March 2015. Ofsted has not been kept fully informed of location changes and interim management arrangements for the service.

Foster carers describe the period preceding the previous manager's departure as 'unstable' and 'frustrating'. Changes in management at both local and organisational

level and changes of office location exacerbated carers' feelings of dissatisfaction. They felt poorly consulted and inadequately informed. Questionnaires submitted to Ofsted at that time reflect this: 'If they treat their carers and staff like this how can they be expected to treat the children under their care any better'; 'Communication is so important but it is more like a dictatorship'; 'Staff turnover has been high. I have had five social workers in the last two years'.

During the last year, although there has been no appointed manager, significant work has been undertaken to stabilise and empower the carer group. A senior supervising social worker has effectively undertaken day-to-day management of the service with oversight by the regional fostering operations manager. This senior supervising social worker was appointed as manager in January 2014 and is currently undertaking registration with Ofsted. During this period carers have experienced a consistency of support and supervision, which they value highly. Currently the new manager retains supervising social worker responsibility for some carers but recruitment of an additional worker has been undertaken and interviews are imminent.

The new manager reflects an enthusiasm, determination and dedication to moving this service forward with foster carers and the young people they care for as central to service development. He has already established sound and mutually respectful relationships with the existing carer group, young people in placement and staff who all trust him and express confidence in his ability to promote positive change. He has established positive relationships with placing authority commissioners and social workers who value his openness and honesty in discussing placement potential. They said: 'I've had really good pieces of work done by Five Rivers. They respond quickly and appropriately to referrals and if placements are made out of hours they are supportive and supervising social workers always attend'; 'This is really effective and efficient partnership working. Some of their carers are exceptional, they really go the extra mile'.

During the last year the current manager has consistently monitored the activities of the service and records relating to its operation, through the completion of monthly reports. The annual quality and performance data forms have been appropriately completed and submitted to Ofsted. Monitoring, at local level, has been quantitative rather than qualitative and the manager reflects good awareness of the need to extend this to properly inform his development objectives. There is routine monitoring by the provider organisation, which addresses issues or themes, such as the effectiveness of recording systems.

During the last year there has been a real focus on driving improvement in services for young people through better engagement with foster carers. This has prompted much improved attendance at carer support groups, better attendance at training and the development of real enthusiasm from carers. Foster carers are now taking responsibility for organising activities and are strongly promoting mutual support networks to support newly approved foster carers.

Supervising social workers have good access to training and have received proper

supervision but, in the absence of an appointed manager, administrative staff have lacked formal supervision or appraisal since the departure of the previous manager. Both administrators are long standing staff members and are highly valued by carers who say that they are always helpful and supportive when they contact the office. Administrative staff have responsibility for panel administration and one is responsible for panel minutes. They have not had access to formal training to fully equip them for this role.

The agency's Statement of Purpose provides detailed information about the services provided and gives a good overview of Five Rivers as an organisation.

Time constraints have impacted on the consistency of record keeping. The agency retains electronic records for both carers and young people and audits demonstrate that there are current shortfalls in the content of some files, for example in records of carer supervision. The shortfall here is with regard to untimely recording rather than completion of tasks. Whilst the agency holds relevant information about young people it is not maintaining the required register of young people placed. The manager has recognised that, although monthly supervision and carers' monthly reports reflect how young people are progressing in placement, he needs to be able to better co-ordinate information to demonstrate young people's achievement of positive outcomes. An outcome tracker document is currently being introduced to achieve this for all young people placed.

## 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.