

# Five Rivers Fostering Service

Five Rivers Child Care Limited

Five Rivers Fostering Service, Unit 3, London Road Office Park, London Road,  
Salisbury, SP1 3HP

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is one of five branches of a national not-for-profit agency. This branch, which covers the south of England, operates from its premises in Salisbury, Wilshire. It offers a variety of placements, including parent and child, emergency, respite, long-term and short-term fostering placements.

On 31 March 2017 the total number of foster carers was 123, comprising 67 fostering households. At the time of the inspection there were 85 children and young people in placement.

**Inspection dates:** 4 to 8 December 2017

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people,</b> taking into account	<b>outstanding</b>
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	outstanding
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The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

**Date of last inspection:** 7 July 2014

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:**

None.

## Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- Children and young people, some of whom have very complex needs, make exceptional progress in many areas of their lives and this progress is sustained over time. Placement stability and duration are excellent, and therefore children and young people make positive attachments to their foster carers, develop their sense of worth and grow in self-confidence.
- Children's and young people's participation is excellent. They have a real voice in how the agency is run. Their contributions are valued and they effect change. Children and young people who find it more difficult to communicate verbally are enabled to give their views because the agency is creative in ensuring that they have the opportunity to contribute.
- A therapeutic approach based on attachment theory and research underpins the service. This is highly effective in enabling foster carers to develop their understanding of children's and young people's behaviour and respond in a way that is supportive. It helps children and young people to understand their emotions and learn strategies for managing them in a more acceptable way.
- Children's and young people's safety and well-being are given the highest priority. They become safer because of the care and support they receive, and the multidisciplinary approach to safeguarding.
- Foster carers provide an exemplary standard of care and support. They are committed to the children and young people for whom they care and they offer long-term support into adulthood.
- Foster carers experience an exceptionally high standard of training and support. Supervising social workers are responsive and supportive. Training is varied, high quality, relevant to the needs of the carers and regularly evaluated. It has a direct influence on the quality of care and support, and therefore has an effect on children's and young people's outcomes.
- Supervising social workers are extremely skilled, knowledgeable, committed and child-focused. They are well supported by the management team and they are encouraged to develop their skills and their interests in particular aspects of the service.
- The agency is led and managed extremely effectively at all levels. It places children and young people at the centre of its practice. It has a rigorous and systematic approach to monitoring and managers therefore know the service well.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development :

- When a child is placed alongside children already in a fostering placement, the written consent of the child's social worker is not consistently recorded on the file.

Consequently, the agency cannot be fully assured that all aspects of placement matching have been considered.

## **What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?**

### **Recommendations**

- Ensure that the local authority consent to placing alongside a child already in placement is clearly documented on the child's case record. ('The Children Act 1989: guidance and regulations volume 4: fostering services', page 14, paragraph 3.2)

## Inspection judgements

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

Children and young people are making exceptional progress and benefiting enormously from stable, secure homes that meet their needs. Currently, 77% of the children and young people have been with their foster carers for over two years, and 10% of those have been with their carers for over six years. This stability and duration of placement are important factors in children and young people achieving significantly improved outcomes. Children and young people make positive attachments to their foster carers and begin to understand their past so that they can move on with their futures. Placing social workers and independent reviewing officers made the following comments: 'He has done really well. The carers have been committed through thick and thin'; and, 'The carers have never wavered despite challenging years and will see him through to adulthood. This is a true success story. He has done amazingly well with their support.' 'Staying put', the policy whereby young people stay with their foster carers post-18 years old, is well established and ensures that young people have continued stability once they reach 18 years of age. A small number of children and young people, some of whom have additional needs, have achieved permanency with their carers through adoption or special guardianship.

The children and young people who have the most complex needs are benefiting from the experience of family life. This includes children and young people who have life-limiting illnesses, significant physical disabilities and learning difficulties. These children and young people account for 23% of those who are cared for by the agency. The agency has developed its services significantly in order to provide the right support and training for the foster carers who care for these children and young people. It has specific foster carer support groups and foster carers receive training that is relevant to the particular needs of the children, including specialist first aid and safeguarding. The agency also provided an all-day event for carers and the children and young people. Foster carers listened to speakers who had achieved a lot in their lives despite their disability, while children and young people took part in a music-based activity. Foster carers described this day as 'fabulous'.

The agency provides an exceptionally high quality of care and support to its foster carers, who in turn provide the same exceptional quality of care and support to the children and young people. Comments from children's and young people's social workers included: 'I cannot praise the carers highly enough'; 'He has made remarkable progress with their excellent care and stimulation; and, 'He is absolutely flourishing. The carers have a significant positive rapport with him and support all of his needs.' A young person said: 'My carers are really nice. They understand me and listen to me.' Another young person said: 'They are the best mum and dad in the world.'

Foster carers speak highly of the support they receive from their supervising social workers and the agency as a whole. Comments included: 'really helpful'; 'brilliant';

'amazing'; and, 'going above and beyond the realms of duty'. Carers describe a responsive service that has the well-being of children and young people at its heart. Family support workers provide additional support, often working directly with the children and young people by engaging them in activities or helping them work on developing their independent living skills.

Children's and young people's participation is a significant strength. The agency is fully committed to engaging them in shaping the service. This includes children and young people who are non-verbal. The agency has recently achieved the Investing in Children Membership Award in recognition of the importance that it places on participation. There are numerous examples that demonstrate how children's and young people's views have made a difference, both in relation to their individual situations and the agency itself. Examples include: developing the website; redesigning the safer care plan and evaluation form; better communication about social events through the use of a fridge magnet; a 'have your say' box at all events; and a welcome bag of resources. The agency has a children's charter, a youth council, children and young people are involved in the Skills to Foster training; they are involved in staff recruitment; and they help design calendars and leaflets. One young person said: 'They always listen to us. We have the chance to discuss things. If I thought there was something I felt strongly about I know things would change if I asked.' The views of birth children and young people are also valued. For example, birth children asked the agency if it could organise activities for fostered children and young people that enabled the birth children to spend quality time alone with their parents. This now forms part of the activity programme.

Children and young people told inspectors that they are happy, safe and settled in their foster families. They are welcomed and made to feel part of the family. They enjoy hobbies, make friends and experience all aspects of family life. For example, they go on family holidays, they have friends round for sleepovers, they play football, they go to youth clubs and scouts and they ride their bikes. One young person said: 'They take me to lots of places. I like going on Five Rivers days out, especially the beach and canoeing.' A social worker said of a young person: 'He has developed in self-confidence. He has an investment in the placement and feels part of the family.' Children and young people who are placed a long way from their homes are not disadvantaged, as the foster carers ensure that they maintain relationships that are important to them and obtain the services and support that they need. Children and young people continue to see their brothers and sisters, their parents and their other family members where this is assessed as being in their best interests.

Children and young people of school age are all engaged in education or employment. Some have made remarkable progress considering their starting points. For example, one young person is applying for a university place and has exceeded all expectations, despite missing two years of school prior to being fostered. The agency has a head of education who provides supervising social workers or foster carers with advice and support when it is needed. Children's and young people's physical and emotional health needs are very well met and they become healthier and more emotionally resilient. Foster carers demonstrate understanding and empathy when children and young people cannot manage their

anger and emotions, and they work hard to help children and young people become calmer. The therapeutic training underpins this, and provides foster carers with tools and strategies to use. Foster carers also have access to a clinical psychologist for advice, if needed. Foster carers are strong advocates for the children and young people. To quote a foster carer: 'We shout very loudly and knock on doors!'

Foster carers enjoy a very positive experience with the agency from their first contact. They are welcomed, given good information, and prepared and assessed as foster carers to a very high standard. Foster carers who have moved to this agency from other independent fostering agencies compare this agency very favourably to their previous experiences. Assessments are analytical and thorough to ensure that only people with the right skills and competencies are approved as foster carers.

Foster carers confirm that they are under no pressure to take a child if they do not feel it is right for them. Matching is well considered and all decisions have the approval of the supervising social worker and the manager. Where children are placed alongside other children in families, the consent of the child's social worker is sought. However, this is not clearly documented in some cases, so the agency cannot therefore be fully assured that this aspect of matching is as rigorous as it should be.

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

Safeguarding children and young people from harm has a high priority in this agency at all levels. Senior managers consider the agency's risk register on a regular basis to enable them to identify areas where safeguarding practice can be strengthened. They are also regularly informed of any significant incidents through the reporting systems and supervision. This ensures that safeguarding maintains its high profile.

Children and young people feel safe and are protected from harm in a number of ways. They receive a bag of resources when they arrive at their foster carers' homes. This includes information about who they can contact if they are unhappy or worried about anything. Supervising social workers also build relationships with children and young people as part of their supervisory visits. This provides children and young people with another person, in addition to their own social worker, with whom they can share any concerns.

Children and young people have become safer as a result of living in their foster homes. Foster carers build exceptionally strong relationships with the children and young people, and these attachments provide children and young people with an additional level of protection. For example, one young person who was frequently running away and committing offences is now more settled, as he knows his carers are committed to him. He has not committed any offences or run away in the last few weeks.

All potential risks are thoroughly assessed and documented within safer care plans. These plans are regularly updated in the light of emerging or reducing risks. One particularly strong aspect of practice is the introduction of child-friendly safer care plans. The agency devised these by reflecting on and responding to the views that

children and young people expressed when consulted. The new plans are more effective because children and young people are fully involved in considering their own risks and how these can be mitigated. Another area of outstanding practice is the work being undertaken with a local police force in relation to internet safety. This involves children and young people in developing a film to use with other children and young people to enhance their understanding of keeping safe online.

Foster carers demonstrate an exceptionally strong understanding of how to keep children and young people safe from harm. This is underpinned by a research-based model of care that has its foundation in attachment theory and therapeutic parenting. This helps foster carers to understand why children and young people behave as they do, and helps them to respond in a therapeutic way. Restraint is not used, as the training concentrates on de-escalation and how to keep both the child/young person and the foster carer safe. One foster carer who cares for a young person who had significant behavioural issues said: 'We are much more equipped now to deal with his needs because of the training and putting that into practice. We are a long way forward from where he used to be and I put that down to the training and support, and someone being on hand when we need them.' The young person is much calmer now, and is able to recognise his emotions and deal with them in a more acceptable way.

An exceptional aspect of safeguarding practice is the specific training received by foster carers who are caring for children and young people with additional needs. This recognises the particular safeguarding issues for this very vulnerable group of children and young people. All foster carers have training in all aspects of safeguarding including sexual exploitation, social media, drug and alcohol misuse and extremism. The quality of the training is regularly evaluated, and relevant external agencies are used to ensure that it encompasses up-to-date issues.

Children and young people generally do not engage in risk-taking behaviour and there are very few incidents of children and young people going missing. When this does occur, the foster carers have very clear guidance about what to do, including who to report this to. The agency's response to missing children has been significantly strengthened by the introduction of an escalation procedure, which is used when return home interviews are not completed by the placing authority. This has increased the proportion of return home interviews that are completed, and has thereby ensured that children and young people have the opportunity to talk to someone independent of the care giver. Any reasons for going missing can be fully explored and strategies can be put into place to minimise further incidents.

When there are concerns about any aspects of safeguarding, the agency ensures that these are fully discussed within a multidisciplinary meeting so that an effective action plan can be agreed. A designated officer from one local authority commented very positively on the engagement of the manager in this process, and the agency's openness and information-sharing. All concerns about carers' practice are managed in accordance with good practice guidance. These are investigated by someone independent of the agency and the conclusions are reported back to the fostering panel so that it can consider them and respond by making recommendations. This provides an additional tier of safeguarding practice to ensure that foster carers'



suitability to continue fostering is fully assessed.

There are robust procedures in place to ensure that staff are recruited in line with safe recruitment guidance. However, due to an administrative error, the agency is not able to demonstrate that it has obtained two personal references for each of the two most recently appointed panel members, although all the other checks are in place. The agency took immediate and effective action when this error was highlighted during the inspection, and has already implemented a system to ensure that it will not happen again. This error dates back almost two years and has had no adverse effect on the children's well-being and safety.

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

This agency has improved significantly since the last inspection. The manager is ambitious for continuous improvement. It is a child-focused agency and all staff want the very best for the children and young people living with its carers. A member of staff said: 'We want to make the service better for the children. That is what we are here for.' A foster carer echoed that sentiment, saying: 'Everyone is very positive and enthusiastic. They have a passion for children.' Another foster carer commented: 'The best thing about Five Rivers is that it has got the child's needs as its main interest. The staff support you to give the child the best.'

The training and support provided for the foster carers are of high quality, and are valued by the foster carers. Foster carers' commented included: 'I feel really supported by Five Rivers. The training is amazing'; 'Five Rivers is always responsive, including the out of hours service'; and, 'We have got to the stage we are because we engaged with Five Rivers and they provided a high-level comprehensive training package; everything was on offer.' A supervising social worker is responsible for the training available to foster carers. She has worked hard to ensure that training is varied, high quality, responsive to need and useful. Foster carers are always asked for their ideas as well as their evaluation of any training attended. Training has been made more accessible to the secondary carers by, for example, offering online courses, evening training and ensuring that there is a variety of venues. There are a number of new training opportunities available, including mindfulness for foster carers, autism training delivered by someone who is autistic, and a more in-depth course on diversity and inclusivity.

The foster carers' forum has also been well received. Foster carers, via their representatives on the forum, have direct contact with senior managers so that they can raise any issues. One foster carer described the responsible individual as 'very responsive and very approachable'. Foster carers can cite a number of instances when their views have been acted upon.

The management arrangements have been strengthened since the last inspection. The registered manager is now supported by a team manager, which gives additional managerial capacity to the team. The team has also moved to new premises; this enables team members to sit together. This has added to their cohesiveness as a team, and has improved communication. Supervising social

workers are very positive about working for this agency. One said: 'This is one of the best places for supervision and support.' Another said: 'It's a good place to work.' They all feel very well supported and receive regular reflective supervision to enable them to improve their practice. Additionally, they say that the managers are accessible and approachable, and always available for additional advice and support if needed. This includes senior managers. Staff feel able to voice their opinions and they feel listened to.

Staff receive high-quality training. If there are external courses that are relevant to the families they are supporting, then the staff are able to access these. They also do training alongside the foster carers, which has advantages because it provides a shared learning experience as well as a mechanism for quality assuring the training provided.

The staff are child focused, skilled and knowledgeable. The manager recognises their strengths and interests, and facilitates these by focusing on an area of specialism so that they can each develop their skills and knowledge base. They report that they feel valued. For example, one supervising social worker leads on missing children, another has a focus on disabled children and another is involved in developing foster carer training.

Monitoring systems at all levels are well developed and highly effective. The manager has oversight of all significant incidents, accident reports and medication recording. A data analyst runs a regular governance report. The manager and team manager supervise all staff and ensure that children's and young people's progress is discussed at those meetings. In addition to twice-weekly informal discussion, the responsible individual supervises the registered manager on a regular basis. He also receives regular reports that he uses to inform the senior management team and the board of directors. In addition, an independent person is commissioned to provide further objective scrutiny. These systems ensure that the monitoring and oversight of the agency are extremely rigorous, and that managers at all levels know the service well.

The agency works extremely effectively with its partners. Placing social workers speak highly of the responsiveness of the supervising social workers, and describe communication as excellent. The agency is a key provider of foster care in the area and is well regarded by the commissioners. One partner said: 'We have had a very good relationship for a long period of time.' The agency is an active participant at forums and events and it has a can-do attitude. However, sustaining positive relationships does not prevent the agency from challenging partners if it feels they are making decisions that are not in the best interests of children and young people. There are many examples of this challenge at all levels. Supervising social workers will escalate their concerns if they do not have a satisfactory response.

The fostering panel is well established, and is chaired by an experienced panel chair. It provides effective challenge to the agency when necessary, and in so doing ensures that the children and young people are living with suitably skilled foster carers. The agency's decision making in response to the panel's recommendations is timely and robust.

## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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:** SC036261

**Registered provider:** Five Rivers Child Care Limited

**Registered provider address:** Five Rivers Child Care, 47 Bedwin Street, Salisbury  
SP1 3UT

**Responsible individual:** Martin Leitch

**Registered manager:** Jeremy Orman

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## **Inspector:**

Ros Chapman: social care inspector



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