

Five Rivers Fostering Service - West Country

Five Rivers Child Care Limited

Park House, Threemilestone Business Park, Truro, Cornwall TR4 9LD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Five Rivers Child Care Limited is a national, independent fostering agency, which is not-for-profit. Five Rivers Fostering Service – West Country is one of five branches and is based in Truro, with one further office in Exeter.

The service provides a range of placements which include: emergency; short term; long term; respite and parent and child placements. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 85 fostering households with children in placement and six additional parent and child placements.

Inspection dates: 6 to 12 March 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers requires improvement to be good

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 10 February 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Relationships between foster carers and children are strong. The agency and foster carers are committed to supporting children in the long term and beyond adulthood. This enables children to feel more secure and settled.
- Managers, staff and foster carers are trained to have a consistent approach of therapeutic parenting to children. Foster carers have a good understanding of how children are affected by abuse and neglect and how to support them accordingly.
- The service supports children to develop in all aspects of their lives – emotionally, physically and educationally. Many children have made significant progress. Children are also supported to see their birth family and friends and to understand their life histories.
- A new system enables outcomes for children to be tracked more specifically, and this information is shared with local authority social workers so that they can have a clear understanding of children's development.
- Children have good opportunities to participate and make their views known within their local agency and nationally.
- Parent and child assessments are carried out very well and enable future decision-making for children to be effective and timely. Foster carers are experienced and are able to ensure that parents receive a fair assessment while ensuring that children's interests are paramount.
- Foster carers are supported well and are proud to be part of the agency.
- When allegations are made, managers ensure that these are dealt with properly and arrangements are made to ensure the safety of children. The manager has a good working relationship with the designated officer.
- If children go missing, staff and foster carers take action to search for children to try to keep them safe.
- Leaders and managers are child-focused and committed to providing the best care for children.
- The fostering panel is safe and effective and has a skilled and experienced chair. The agency decision-maker is thorough and knowledgeable, and scrutinises panel's recommendations robustly.

- Managers and staff have good working relationships with other professionals and agencies.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development :

- The agency has a positive approach to managing behaviour and has a policy of no restraint or physical intervention. However, individual foster carers who have had to use physical intervention as a last resort are not specifically trained in the use of physical intervention, which is the manager's plan. The written policy relating to physical intervention is out of date.
- In some cases, safer care plans are not thorough or fit for purpose and therefore do not provide adequate guidance for carers and others involved in children's care.
- Matching documents do not reflect professional discussions and reasoning when new referrals are considered. Therefore, there is potential for information to get lost and children's needs to be overlooked.
- Systems for management oversight and monitoring are still being developed. The manager has identified some, but not all, areas of practice that need to be improved.
- Supervision is generally of good quality but does not happen regularly for all staff.
- The panel has not received specific child protection and safeguarding training since it was set up 18 months ago. However, aspects of safeguarding training have been covered in the panel's training programme.
- Not all complaints and concerns raised are included in the manager's centrally recorded log, which means that there is a possibility of some complaints not being investigated properly and limits the manager having an overview of any learning following a concern or complaint being raised.

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

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>Review of quality of care</p> <p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35(1)(b))</p> <p>In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ have a strong management system in place to identify shortfalls in practice with a clear plan to address these shortfalls ■ update the service's written policy in relation to physical intervention ■ ensure that those foster carers who need specialist skills or may have to use physical intervention as a last resort are provided with training ■ arrange child protection and safeguarding training for the fostering panel ■ review safer care plans to ensure that they are meaningful documents for foster carers and children, if appropriate; ensure that plans provide adequate guidance to keep children safe ■ review the service's process in relation to matching children with foster carers to ensure that all relevant information about children is captured sufficiently ■ ensure supervision takes place in line with the service's policy and addresses all relevant issues. 	20/6/2018

Recommendations

- When a child is found, they must be offered an independent return interview. In particular, risk assess each children's situation individually rather than implementing a generalised rule of requesting an interview after 24 hours. (Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, 31, page 14).

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

This fostering service provides good, individual care and support for children.

While some foster placements do break down, placement stability figures are in line with national statistics. However, 74% of children have been placed with their foster carers for more than one year and 42% for more than two years, indicating that carers are committed to supporting children in the longer term. In the last two years, nearly all of the children who turned 18 remained in their placement as a 'stay put' arrangement, which the service encourages. This demonstrates a commitment from the agency to support children into adulthood and beyond, and so improves their life chances.

Relationships between children and their foster carers are strong. Foster carers help children to feel part of their family, while also supporting them to see their birth family and understand their backgrounds. A young person said: 'This is my best experience of being in care. I'm happy and I'm treated as part of the family.' Staff and foster carers also understand the importance of helping children prepare for the future, both practically and emotionally.

Foster carers receive a suite of training to equip them with the skills to care for children well. The agency's ethos of therapeutic parenting is an approach that staff and carers believe in and promote. An experienced and well-qualified psychologist was appointed in July of last year to further develop this ethos and is involved with supporting staff in the areas of assessment, support and training. The psychologist provides consultation to foster carers and social workers, reviews assessments for children who need extra support and provides training on attachment. Consultation is provided for foster carers in relation to specific strategies to help children, and the psychologist advocates for children by supporting referrals to the child and adolescent mental health service. This expert input has increased staff's and foster carers' knowledge of attachment and child development.

Foster carers receive good support from their supervising social workers, and a system is in place to represent their views within the organisation locally and nationally to make changes to improve the service.

All children are in education, although for a minority of children this is not full time. The registered manager has arranged training for eight support workers to help children attend and benefit more from their educational placements, although staff do already support children in this way. A headteacher wrote, 'Without (the support worker's) support, the child would not have made the transition into school... without this constant I don't think he would have made the progress he has.'

The agency has introduced a new electronic recording system designed to focus on evidencing progress and outcomes that children make. Foster carers have embraced this change and social workers receive monthly reports with this information.

The agency has a small team of carers who provide parent and child assessed placements, which are usually court ordered. The foster carers have specific training to provide these specialist placements. Most of the foster carers have considerable experience in this area of expertise and are able to provide a positive environment for assessment of families while safely managing child protection issues.

The supervising social worker and foster carers help prepare families for parent and child assessments and provide them with information beforehand. Placement planning meetings take place in a timely manner, and these clearly set out the aims and expectations of the placement. Supervising social workers provide higher levels of supervision and support to parent and child foster carers, in addition to the lead supervising social worker facilitating a support group. The supervising social workers' reports are well written and comprehensive. Most of the placements are completed within timescales and very few are needed to be repeated, which enables timely decision-making for children's futures. Foster carers rarely provide parent and child placements alongside providing a foster home for children. When this does happen, all potential risks are carefully considered and arrangements are made to ensure children's safety. A social worker commented that the parent and child arrangements are 'second to none' and that she 'cannot praise the foster carers highly enough'. The social worker is sent daily reports and said that the lead supervising social worker communicates well and is extremely competent.

Children have not made any formal complaints to the agency; however, they do know how to complain. Children voice their concerns to foster carers and to supervising social workers who advocate for them. The manager also attends participation events and meets with children. Children have suggested various changes in practice, such as making feedback booklets more suitable for older children, which the organisation has taken on board. The agency has appointed an independent reviewing officer whose role is to carry out foster carers' annual reviews. These reviews are comprehensive, and in the last year 86% of children provided written contributions to foster carers' annual reviews, enabling the service to have a good understanding of the majority of children's views.

National and local participation initiatives and groups are run by committed and enthusiastic staff. The staff are continually thinking of creative ways to hear all children's views and so influence service delivery, support children and give them opportunities to develop and achieve. Staff also think about those children who do not wish to attend support groups and are planning a strategy to reach all children in the service. Excellent examples of how children participate exist: designing and participating in training videos, individual membership of the Children's Rights Alliance, lobbying parliament and family events and activities, such as the national care day, to name but a few.

Some effective systems are in place prior to placement planning, including the involvement of foster carers from an early stage and careful discussions between the relevant professionals. However, matching documents do not reflect or enhance the systems that the agency has when new referrals are considered. Specifically the scoring system is rudimentary and does not include narrative and explanation as to

why decisions are made; the inclusion of these would assist in planning for children, particularly in more complex situations.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Children are not at risk of harm, but aspects of the service require improvement in relation to safeguarding and the use of physical intervention relating to children who have particularly complex needs.

The agency has a policy that foster carers should not use any form of physical intervention, and as a result it no longer trains carers in physical intervention, preferring an emphasis on de-escalating potentially distressing situations and providing an attachment-based therapeutic parenting approach. However, when physical intervention has had to be used as a last resort, foster carers have not had specific training on how to use it. Furthermore, the agency's policy is out of date and guidance for foster carers regarding physical intervention is not made clear in safer care plans.

Safer care plans are in place for most children but are not always signed by the relevant people. Some plans designed to be written as a child's document are not suitable for children and do not have corresponding risk assessments. In a minority of cases, when children have particularly complex needs, safer care plans are not thorough enough and arrangements for specific training for carers are not in place.

When children run away from their home, staff and foster carers support children and take action to keep them as safe as possible. The agency requests independent return home interviews for children, but on the basis of a child going missing for 24 hours, which does not take into consideration that children can be at serious risk when missing for a short time and therefore still need an opportunity to meet with an independent person.

Generally, the manager and staff recognise child protection and safeguarding concerns and take the necessary action to protect children. In one case, while the agency took action to ensure that the child was safe, child protection procedures were not followed and this had a negative impact on the subsequent investigation. Staff did not recognise or challenge the incorrect implementation of the procedures.

The agency's arrangements for recruitment are safe and managers are reviewing and updating the process. Managers have set up a specific team to scrutinise all recruitment records, which has identified a number of gaps. Managers are aware of shortfalls and are taking effective action. None of these gaps in the recruitment process indicate that children are at risk.

Generally, allegations are handled effectively and quickly. The agency prioritises children's safety and will appoint independent workers to carry out investigations to ensure objectivity and to maximise any learning as a result. The designated officer has good communication with the manager and described the agency as 'thorough and child-focused'.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

Since the previous inspection, there have been two changes of manager. The current manager took up his role in October 2017, around the time of the agency incorporating another smaller office as a sub-office. The new manager was subsequently registered with Ofsted on 26 January 2018.

The registered manager has attended management training and takes advantage of coaching and mentoring opportunities. The manager has worked hard to support the team through a period of change and demonstrates an openness and willingness to learn as a new manager. Senior leaders and managers are visible in the organisation and are child-focused; their ethos of providing children with the best care possible clearly comes across. Staff enjoy working for the agency and feel valued and supported. A supervising social worker said: 'It is a very positive team. I like the service's ethos and the emphasis on children's participation.'

The registered manager is focusing on understanding the agency's strengths and weaknesses. While the manager has analysed some data, he does not yet have a clear understanding and oversight of all aspects of the service that need to improve. Stronger auditing and monitoring systems would have highlighted some of the shortfalls identified during the inspection process. Examples of areas for improvement are: in some cases placement planning meetings have not been timely and of a good enough quality; a child protection investigation had not been notified to Ofsted; lack of recording or variable quality in documentation and not all complaints are recognised as such or centrally recorded.

Foster carers have stated that they do not always have enough information about children before they are placed. This is an issue which the agency does tackle and is continually thinking of ways to improve in placement planning. The manager raises this issue with commissioners at meetings but has not challenged this lack of information in relation to individual children.

Supervision for all staff does not happen regularly enough and therefore not all aspects of staff performance are monitored enough. Although supervision is generally of a good quality, reflection and learning from particularly complex cases is generally not recorded.

Staff have regular team meetings or training days. Managers and staff are committed to ensuring that they and foster carers receive regular training as part of the overall programme. Foster carers are supported to complete their training, support and development workbooks within their first year and completion is in line with national figures.

The fostering panel functions effectively, is safe and provides support and challenge appropriately. The panel chair is experienced in the field of children's social care and child protection and raises practice issues when appropriate to help the agency improve. The agency decision-maker is a senior leader in the organisation who is

thorough and scrutinises recommendations carefully when making decisions. The independent reviewing officer has provided added scrutiny of the panel and has carried out a review with recommendations, emphasising the service's keenness to continually improve. The panel chair and all members have received appraisals. Panel members have received a variety of training, but have not yet had specific child protection training and the panel chair does not have external supervision.

Managers and social workers provide good examples of challenging agencies or professionals to support children. Social workers and other professionals have good communication with the agency. A local authority social worker commented that foster carers and staff 'go above and beyond'.

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: SC062487

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Inspector

Sarah Canto, social care inspector



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