

Five Rivers Child Care Ltd.

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

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

The inspection judgements and what they mean

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

Service information

Brief description of the service

Five Rivers Child Care Limited is a private limited company. The Five Rivers family placement service in Cheltenham was registered in 2000. Currently, the service covers the West Midlands and West of England, offering placements in the Birmingham area, Worcester, Gloucestershire, South Gloucestershire, Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset and Wiltshire.

The service offers a range of placements covering an age range from birth to 18 years plus. These include: single placements; sibling groups; parent and child placements; emergency placements; short-term; long-term; planned placements and respite care. At the time of the inspection the fostering service provided 33 foster placements with 33 children and young people in placement.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Outcomes for individual young people are good and demonstrate the sound individualised care and support provided by the fostering service that reflects the young person's needs well. Young people's health and welfare is promoted and young people feel safe and are kept safe. Young people's regular attendance in education or employment is exceptionally high.

Matching is undertaken robustly, contributing to the stability and longevity of many placements. Young people in placement are extremely happy living in their foster homes; they are treated as part of the family and they are making good progress. Diversity and equality are promoted in all aspects of the service.

The staff team and the Registered Manager are knowledgeable and experienced and demonstrate enthusiasm in their ongoing development of the service to improve outcomes for young people. Foster carers are committed to providing good placements for young people. They commend the fostering service for the frequent and professional support they receive which helps them to look after young people well.

Areas for future improvement identified at this inspection mostly relate to issues at an organisational level, rather than at service level. These include: increased training opportunities for carers and panel members; policy and protocol development; the prompt provision of medical consent information; quality assurance reporting to Ofsted and increased opportunities for dialogue between the panel and the fostering service. The shortfalls in meeting the national minimum standards and regulations identified at this inspection have not directly impacted on the welfare of young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

The fostering service was asked to make improvements in: information contained within foster placement agreements; in recruitment processes; updating safer caring policies; the quality of records kept by carers; annual reviews and unannounced visits; educational arrangements for young people not in school and panel membership. The fostering service has taken satisfactory measures to address the seven statutory requirements and two recommendations made at the previous inspection.

Specific reference to matching is now included in foster placement agreements. Furthermore, these documents are up to date and include all of the required issues. The Five Rivers company has revised its recruitment and selection processes, which are now rigorous, ensuring key documentation and information is retained in personnel files. These improvements contribute to safeguarding and promoting young people's welfare.

Staff make sure that carers update their family safer caring policies regularly to ensure that they are fit for purpose to safeguard current placements. Carers have attended report writing training. Additionally, where needed, fostering social workers spend time during supervisory visits to work individually with carers to improve the quality and regularity of recording relevant information about young people's progress and development.

The service has devised effective data management systems which are vigilantly implemented to ensure that the fostering service carries out the annual reviews of carers and undertakes unannounced visits within given timescales. The panel is robust in its monitoring of the timescales of these processes. These developments contribute to improvement in practice by the regular monitoring of the quality of care provided to young people in placement.

The company has appointed a head of education who works with the staff team to ensure suitable educational provision or employment opportunities are set up for each young person. The service has successfully made such arrangements for most young people; only two young people in exceptional circumstances are not engaged in education or employment.

The service has made the necessary staffing arrangements to ensure that the constitution of the panel at each meeting held is in accordance with legislative requirements.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people benefit from the good health care they receive within their placements. Vigilant attention is given by the fostering service to the implementation of

placement plans to meet young people's identified health needs. Furthermore, staff and carers ensure that young people's presenting physical, emotional and psychological health needs are addressed as soon as they are identified. Young people report a high level of satisfaction with how the fostering service ensures their health needs are met. All young people are registered with local medical practitioners and carers encourage and support young people to attend regular medical checks. This promotes and maintains their well-being and ensures they receive the treatment they need. Fostering staff recognise that there is often a delay in the placing authority providing documentation which clarifies where consent for medical treatment needs to be obtained. Although the service has developed strategies to promptly gain this information to promote young people's welfare, these do not always prove to be effective.

At each supervisory visit, fostering workers talk with carers about how best to help young people sustain their good health. These discussions ensure that any medical issues young people experience are appropriately considered and quickly dealt with. The administration of medication records kept by carers are comprehensive and these documents are monitored at each visit by the fostering social worker; this supervisory oversight safeguards and promotes young people's welfare. However, carers have not undertaken training in the management and administration of medication and not all carers are rigorous enough in ensuring that young people's medicines are securely stored.

Young people have good access to the specialist medical services that they need. The fostering service works well in collaboration with external health agencies to address young people's health issues. An external independent psychologist said, 'the service offers good, sound foster care placements. The service is creative in their approach and seems to be very child focused.'

Carers help young people to understand their individual health issues and offer good advice about maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Young people are encouraged to take part in a good range of leisure activities which promote their good health. Dependent upon their age and level of maturity, young people are encouraged and supported to make informed decisions about their health care. Moreover, if it is assessed as safe for them to do so, young people are able to take responsibility for the safe-keeping and self-administration of their medication.

Young people live in foster homes which can comfortably accommodate all who dwell there. Annual health and safety checks of the home are completed to a good standard to ensure that foster homes remain safe environments for young people to live in. Fostering social workers make at least one unannounced visit to the home each year to make sure that the home continues to meet the needs of the young people in placement.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Young people feel safe and are kept safe. The service works effectively in partnership with other agencies concerned with child protection. Young people in longer-term placements rarely go missing. Staff and carers are proactive in taking appropriate action to find young people who are missing as quickly as possible. For example, staff and carers will phone the young person and their friends to establish the missing young person's whereabouts. When this is known, they make every effort to find the young person and return them safely to their foster home. Written records of all missing episodes are kept within the service and closely monitored by management. The service ensures that the placing authority and the young person's parents, where appropriate, are kept informed.

Staff and carers implement the fostering service's policy regarding missing young people and adhere to the missing person responses which are always discussed at the initial placement planning meeting for each young person. This ensures that individual vulnerabilities and risks for young people are identified at the commencement of each placement and the service is able to work effectively alongside the police and other agencies where appropriate. This is sound practice which minimises the risk that young people will go missing and reduces the risk of harm should the young person go missing. However, the service is yet to gain the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols and procedures applicable to the area where each foster home is located, to ensure that the fostering service's procedures are compatible with each geographical area that the service operates across.

Staff and carers work with young people to help them to understand and learn how to protect themselves and keep themselves safe. Relationships between carers and young people are based on mutual respect and honesty and young people feel able to talk with their carers about any concerns they may have. As part of their induction, carers are trained in appropriate safer-care practice. The carers draw up a safer caring policy for their family and an individual safer caring policy is written for each young person, or is written by more mature young people themselves. Thus, the defined clear boundaries and expectations of behaviour within the home are known to all which helps to keep everyone in the fostering household safe. The service encourages carers to adopt a proportionate approach to any risk assessment and this enables young people moving towards adulthood to take age appropriate controlled risks as part of their development.

Foundation safeguarding training and more focused safeguarding topics, for example, working with young people who self-harm, is available to carers to guide them in good safeguarding practices. However, the past year's arrangements for the provision of foundation safeguarding training have been insufficient in frequency to ensure that newly recruited carers are trained as soon as possible, to guide them in keeping young people safe. The service is aware of this and intends to access local authority multi-agency safeguarding training in the future to address this issue. The

service has no records to show that carers have been offered training in working with children and young people with disabilities, although working with autism is scheduled early in 2012. This will contribute to carers' understanding of the subject and help them to keep particular children and young people in placement safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service provides carers with all of the information that is available to them to help the carers provide the best possible care to meet young people's needs. Carers have high aspirations for the young people they look after. Their commitment to helping young people achieve their potential is demonstrated by examples of their robust advocacy and challenge on young people's behalf to ensure they receive the help they need from other agencies and services. An independent reviewing officer said, 'I have one long-term placement in which the young person has flourished.'

Relationships between young people and their carers are sound. Young people say that they are very happy living in their foster homes and they get on very well with the carers. One young person said, 'I feel well cared for because my foster carers are loving, nice, kind and thoughtful.' Good matching processes and the service's commitment to ensuring equality and diversity is prioritised in individual planning for young people, underpins young people's satisfaction with their placements. A foster carer summarised this by saying, 'the fostering service makes sure that the young person is placed with the right carers as far as culture and ethnicity is concerned. Young people feel happy and feel that they belong.'

The Five Rivers organisation's head of education services supports the Cheltenham fostering service to liaise with all local authorities to access suitable education provision for young people in placement. At the time of inspection, only two young people in exceptional circumstances were not in education or employment. Care is taken to find suitable educational provision to meet young people's needs. The fostering service works closely with other professionals, with some success, to ensure that fostered young people have personal education plans or pathway plans in place. Many young people attend mainstream schools and the family support worker, in conjunction with carers, support young people with their studies. Older young people in placement are helped to identify further education courses that they are interested in. Carers maintain regular contact with young people's schools and colleges, attending parents' meetings and advocating for young people as appropriate. Young people's attendance at schools and colleges is very good; for example, one carer recalled that a young person had only had one day off school in four years.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people's views and feelings are taken into account in aspects of their care. They are treated as individuals and are involved in daily decision-making within the home where they are able to exercise choice. Carers support young people to take an active part in their review meetings to help them express their feelings and wishes. One young person summed this up by saying, 'my carers ask me about everything before doing anything. They always listen to me and we have constant chats.' On admission to the service, young people are given information within the children's guide which tells them how they can make a complaint and how they can access an advocate and the Children's Rights Director.

The family support worker helps young people to complete life-story work to help them better understand their background. Young people benefit from the good support given to foster carers by the service to promote young people's social and emotional development. Carers are appropriately involved in any therapeutic work undertaken with young people to assist them in dealing with their personal issues. This helps young people to manage difficulties in their lives, helping them to increase their self-esteem and develop a positive self-view. The support provided is summarised by one carer's comment, 'if your social worker is not in the office, you can always speak to someone else who will help you with anything you are unsure about.'

The service has clear procedures for introducing young people into the foster home. Whenever possible, introductory visits are undertaken to help young people with their placement move. Carers understand how difficult it is for young people to come into and to leave their placements. They are sensitive to young people's feelings and make an effort to minimise the impact of such transitions in their lives.

Young people enjoy taking part in a range of activities and sufficient funding within the placement enables them to pursue their hobbies and interests. Carers treat the young people as they would their own children and young people can invite their friends into their homes and have friends to stay overnight. Carers are clear about what day-to-day decisions they can make for young people in placement and this means that young people are not discriminated against by carers having to seek consent unnecessarily.

The fostering service supports and encourages young people to maintain and develop family contact and friendships as outlined within their care and placement plans. The service provides carers with any practical support they may need to facilitate contact arrangements. Carers deal sensitively with contact issues and help young people to maintain constructive contact during difficult periods.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people moving towards adulthood and independent living situations receive good support from their carers in helping them to develop these skills. Carers understand the need to teach young people age appropriate practical skills as early as is reasonable for them to do, for example, by showing young people how to make their beds and prepare snacks. The fostering service has scheduled training in early 2012 for carers to learn about leaving care issues and young people's preparation for independence.

The service has a structured independent living skills programme in place which helps carers and young people prepare for the young person's future independence. This includes the completion of a workbook by the young person which helps the individual to identify their current level of knowledge and abilities and shows them the progress they are making. The family support worker is available, if required, to provide additional support to young people within the foster home to help them develop their independent living skills. The family support worker will guide and coach young people in specific tasks to help them increase their abilities. For example, budgeting, shopping for food and then preparing the evening meal for the household. This proves effective on a practical level while also developing young people's self-esteem and confidence.

The fostering service makes a good effort to ensure that young people have pathway plans. Carers work with young people and the placing authority to implement the plan. Carers are committed to supporting young people into independence and maintaining contact and support as appropriate. Some young people remain with their foster carers into legal adulthood.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good; it is fully embraced within the culture of the service. Staff and carers complete training in equality and diversity and written policies and documentation reflect this commitment. For example, the service has provided two children's guides to meet the needs of different age groups. Matching processes show due regard for individual differences and recruitment and selection processes are fairly undertaken. There is evidence to show that young people can access their records and comment on them.

The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports a range of foster carers to meet the needs of the young people they provide care for. The fostering social workers are trained in assessment processes and produce good quality assessment reports for consideration by the panel. The panel monitors carers' recruitment to ensure those assessed and the needs of young people are compatible. Recruitment and selection processes for staff are undertaken rigorously to make sure suitable persons are

employed; this protects young people in placement.

Reviews of foster carer's approval are undertaken by the panel, which is very thorough in its consideration, to satisfy itself about the carers' ongoing suitability to foster. However, this process is hindered by the organisational directive that fostering social workers do not attend the panel to present their report. This means that frequently, questions raised by panel members cannot be answered by the service's panel representatives and the sound functioning of the panel is reliant upon the panel chair pursuing these matters. The panel chair ensures that all matters are clarified, by either seeking answers to his own queries prior to panel, or pursuing matters after the conclusion of the panel meeting. Thus, the effective running of the panel is compromised and there is no clear written audit trail of some information seeking processes. Nevertheless, the panel provides detailed quality assurance feedback and makes good quality and appropriate recommendations to the agency decision-maker, with the overriding objective to promote and safeguard the welfare of young people in foster care. Panel members bring a good range of experience, skills and knowledge to contribute to their robust discussion of matters brought for their consideration. However, the panel members have not attended any training provided by the service to ensure they are kept up to date with current legislative and practice developments.

The service will only place young people with their carers when they consider that they have suitable carers available who can meet individual young people's needs. Matching is thoughtfully considered and benefits from the staff's in-depth knowledge of their carer's skills, experience and abilities. The effectiveness of good matching is evidenced by the stability and longevity of many placements made within the service and the high satisfaction expressed by both carers and young people. One carer said, 'the service is extremely good at supporting carers in maintaining placements as each placement we have had has been matched to us and each has been successful.' Carers and young people are fully involved in placement planning and review meetings and enable young people to engage in decision-making about their futures.

Foster carers receive good support and supervision which helps them to provide sound care to the young people placed with them. Carers are very positive about the high quality of support and supervision they are given by the staff team. Two carers summarised their feelings by saying, 'I feel I am supported 100 per cent of the time by Five Rivers in every way. Each employee at Five Rivers is friendly, approachable and professional'; and 'supervision visits are very regular and often at every three weeks which enables me to discuss and report anything that I might be unsure of.' Carers also appreciate the good quality of the training that is provided to help them look after young people well. Staff have supported carers to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care.

The service provides a range of policies and procedures and the Fostering Handbook, which guide staff and carers in the provision of sound placements. However, there is insufficient information provided about payments to carers. The Statement of Purpose has been reviewed and amended this year to ensure it reflects the current

operation of the fostering service.

The Registered Manager and the fostering staff team are well qualified to undertake their roles and staff receive regular supervision and training. Staff morale is high and the team work cohesively and effectively together to provide a high quality service to young people and their carers. The on-call system they provide is well-regarded by the carers who report that it works well to deal with any out of office hours issues; this helps to maintain placement stability.

The service has established an excellent database which provides workers with the key information they need to carry out their roles effectively. For example, workers are aware when annual health and safety checks and annual reviews are due, and the last date they carried out an unannounced visit to a carer's home. This helps ensure that the service carries out the required checks in a timely manner; most are completed within the timescales and only in exceptional circumstances are they not met. Overall, the service has established effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the various activities they undertake and to review the quality of care provided to young people. The manager monitors all records on a monthly basis to ensure compliance with the service's policies and to identify any concerns about specific incidents. Action is taken immediately to address any issues raised from monitoring and this ensures that young people are safeguarded and improvements are made as required. However, the service does not provide the Chief Inspector with a written report of the matters monitored, as is required by regulations.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg	Statutory Requirement	Due date
25 (2011)	consider and take into account any request from the fostering panel to the fostering service provider to obtain any relevant information or to provide such other assistance as the fostering panel considers necessary in considering what recommendation to make under paragraph (1) of this regulation (Regulation 25(2)(b))	24/02/2012
17 (2011)	provide foster carers with such training as appears necessary in the interests of children and young people placed with them; in particular, promptly arrange safeguarding training for newly approved carers and provide training on working with children with disabilities for all carers (Regulation 17(1))	24/02/2012
35 (2011)	provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect	31/03/2012

	of any review conducted for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 (Regulation 35(2))	
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Recommendations

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

- review the fostering service's procedures for missing children to ensure that the guidance is compatible with the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols and procedures applicable to the area where each foster home is located (NMS 5.6; Statutory Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: 3.92)
- ensure that at the commencement of placements, foster carers are clear about where consent for medical treatment needs to be obtained (NMS 6.5)
- provide training for foster carers in the management and administration of medication (NMS 6.10)
- arrange for each person on the central list to be given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the fostering service staff and to have access to appropriate training and skills development to ensure they are kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation and guidance (NMS 23)
- provide a written policy on payments to foster carers that sets out the criteria for calculating payments. (NMS 28.5)