

Five Rivers Fostering Service

Five Rivers Child Care Limited

Suite 7, Westbury Court, Church Road, Westbury-on-Trym, BRISTOL BS9 3EF

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 run as a not-for-profit social enterprise. Five Rivers Family Placement Service is one of five branches and is based in Bristol, with two further offices in Gloucester and Bromsgrove.

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 91 fostering households and 135 children in placement.

Inspection dates: 17 to 19 January 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	Good
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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	Good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 3 November 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:

- Children have strong and trusting relationships with their foster carers. The agency staff support carers to promote lasting attachments and long-term security for children. Placement stability data reflects this ethos, as does the careful matching process that occurs before children are placed in foster care.
- Children have a variety of different opportunities to give their views and affect change. They also enjoy positive experiences that the agency organises outside of the foster home, which promote their social, emotional and educational development.
- Foster carers receive excellent support and provide excellent care. Their contributions are valued and are included in developments that help children make progress. Supervising social workers can clearly identify foster carers' skills, and spend time getting to know them and the children.
- Children and others know how to complain. When allegations are made, they are properly dealt with. Action is taken from any learning that comes as a result of complaints or allegations.
- Training for foster carers and staff is of good quality and is tailored to the needs of the children. The agency provides training that focuses on the children's strengths and positive behaviours. This removes the need to use restraint.
- Children rarely go missing, but when they do the agency staff and carers put in place plans that reduce risk and help children to be safe.
- Leaders and managers are visible, responsive and focused on the best interests of children. Children, carers and staff have high regard for them. Managers are keen to promote research-based practice and improve quality assurance systems to analyse how well children's needs are met.
- Assessments brought to the fostering panel are of good quality, and the panel is well run and safe. The agency decision-maker scrutinises panel recommendations carefully to ensure that the best decisions are made for children.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- A high percentage of independent return home interviews are not carried out after children have gone missing. Managers have not escalated this problem to senior leaders in the local authority to ensure that it is resolved. However, they have raised the concern with local authority middle managers.
- Children are kept safe, but children's and foster carers' safer care plans and

agreements do not always reflect current arrangements and so have the potential to cause confusion.

- Recruitment is safe, but processes are not implemented consistently. However, this has been identified by the agency as an area for improvement and plans are being put in place to resolve this issue.
- Fostering panel minutes do not always reflect panel discussions clearly.
- Management review and quality assurance is good. However, analysing collective outcomes for children is a system that is in its infancy at present. Further information is collected by the agency that could be analysed to identify areas for development and any delays in planning for children.
- Supervision and appraisals generally take place within the required timescales. However, appraisals do not specifically include children's views. Additionally, more consideration could be given to how children contribute to carers' annual reviews and to the fostering panel.
- In a very small minority of cases, more timely and focused intervention is required, alongside explicit discussion and recording of concerns.

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

Recommendations

- The panel chair ensures written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. (National Minimum Standard 14.7)
- The fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice. (National Minimum Standard 19.2)
- Ensure that where staff are working with children, their appraisal takes into account any views of children the service is providing for. (National Minimum Standard 24.6)

Additionally, consider how children's views could be incorporated further into panel activities and carers' annual reviews.

- The manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (National Minimum Standard 25.2)

In particular:

Ensure that safer care agreements and plans are regularly updated and signed.

Ensure that concerns are documented explicitly in supervisions and reports so that all action plans are effective and address children's needs in a timely manner.

Increase internal review of particular issues such as exemptions and voluntary placements to identify any potential delay or drift of plans.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children have good relationships with their foster carers. They trust them, and are supported to achieve their potential emotionally and educationally and to improve their physical health. Placement stability rates are good compared to the national average, and a third of children are looked after by their carers for two years or more. The organisation supports 'staying put'. As a result, a good proportion of children either remain with their foster carers past their 18th birthday, or there are plans for this to happen. This is indicative of an agency that recognises the importance of stability and security for children and puts them first.

Children feel happy and are supported by their foster carers and the organisation. They feel valued and well looked after. Foster carers help them to maintain positive links with their birth family and to understand their life story. The agency takes seriously any queries children raise, and helps to resolve any problems. Education is prioritised, and careful planning is given to location relating to school. Children have good relationships with supervising social workers, who take time to get to know them.

A good proportion of children benefit directly from being involved in a range of well-planned and creative activities. They have many opportunities to meet and share experiences. These include: a yearly, accredited, residential independent skills programme for 10–12 young people that focuses on emotional preparation and security, as well as practical skills; a yearly family camping activity attended by approximately 14 families; and a new resilience workshop for 11 children, planned with a university, to help children deal with peer pressure and managing stress. Children themselves have developed a range of resources, including written and video material designed by them. They have also planned and organised a charity event to raise money for others in need. The agency staff have successfully evidenced to Investors in Children how well they engage with and help children they look after. A young person involved in this group believes that children are able to make valuable contributions to the agency. The only thing they would change is 'more of the same people with kind hearts to help children'.

The agency's recruitment panel sits with a 'young recruiter' on the interview team. The young recruiter is treated as an equal member of the panel, and their views are acted on. As a result, these experiences give children increased confidence and knowledge, which in turn helps them in their everyday lives and for the future.

Foster carers are unanimous in their positive regard for the support they receive, which is cited as 'fantastic' and 'second to none - 24 hours'. They are proud to be part of the agency, which they describe as 'an extended family', and report that they receive excellent supervision and challenge. One foster carer said: 'They know our family. They always ring back, and if our social worker isn't there, another will always help and know our situation.' Well-run and well-attended foster carer support groups happen regularly across the various locations that the agency covers. Foster

carer representatives attend the agency's national forum. This forum leads directly to changes and improvements being made to the service.

A clear process of matching children to the right foster carers is in place. Foster carers are involved from the very beginning, and potential matches are considered very carefully. Introductions are prioritised and carried out where possible. Generally, foster carers have broad ranges of approval. Therefore, their individual skills and expertise are discussed in detail by supervising social workers who know their carers well. Social workers will not agree to a match if they do not think it meets children's needs. A commissioner confirmed that: 'Social workers won't place a child without the proper matching being done. They don't end placements and will flag up issues of concern.'

Placements very rarely break down at the instigation of foster carers. Supervising social workers work hard to support placements. On one occasion, foster carers called the police for support to manage a child's behaviour, but aside from this, the out-of-hours service is robust and is able to deal with emergencies.

The agency keeps in good contact with outside agencies, and sends regular reports to local authority social workers about children's experiences and progress. One local authority social worker said, 'Overall, communication is good.'

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

When allegations are made, they are reported to the designated officer and resolved properly. When internal investigations are carried out, where necessary managers arrange for independent staff to carry these out to ensure objectivity.

The ethos of the agency is to help children to form secure attachments and to be parented therapeutically. The focus of parenting is to concentrate on de-escalating potentially stressful situations for children, and this avoids the need for physical restraint.

Children looked after by this agency do not go missing very often, but when they do they are helped and protected. Carers and children know what to do and use clear, practical strategies for getting children home safely. A high percentage of independent return home interviews are not carried out. While managers escalated this problem to local authority middle managers, it is yet to be escalated to senior local authority leaders so that it is resolved.

The agency prioritises safeguarding for children; carers are supported to help children who are at risk at home. Safeguarding and child protection issues are monitored closely, and staff know what to do if a child protection issue arises. Safer care plans and agreements do not always reflect this information or give clear written direction to carers. They are not all signed or updated as often as they need to be to ensure that all parties are aware of what should happen in an emergency.

Recruitment of staff, panel members and carers is safe. Relevant checks are carried

out, but not all details of telephone verifications are recorded if a reference is overly neutral. Responses to interview questions are not measured consistently and some interview practice is out of date. However, the agency's human resources manager has identified these areas for improvement and is reviewing recruitment practice for the organisation as a whole.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Senior managers in this organisation are visible, and are responsive to suggestions for improvement of practice. The registered manager is a good role model and is an approachable, caring and strong leader. He has a clear focus on children's best interests and is confident to offer opportunities to children and carers, even when risks make these decisions uncomfortable. When placements break down, the manager seeks to provide alternative homes for children within the agency to provide consistency.

When children need a service that is not provided, the manager and staff work together to find solutions, or raise concerns to the relevant agency. One example was ensuring that a child has an assessment by the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) when this had previously been refused by CAMHS. The fostering team, foster carers and children highly value the registered manager's leadership and feel supported and involved in the agency.

The manager logs complaints centrally and takes action to resolve concerns raised. The manager uses the learning from complaints to improve service delivery. For example, the manager analysed information following a fostering application to make a more informed decision about the next stage of the application.

Foster carers and staff receive the training they need to carry out their roles. In particular, if people need specific training that relates to the child they look after, this is organised. Managers listened to what foster carers said about training and organised accredited therapeutic courses set at different levels. Foster carers are enthusiastic about this training and eloquently describe how this has changed their care of children. Foster carers further demonstrate their commitment to training with 90% completion of their training, support and development workbooks within the first year.

The agency decision-maker is a senior leader in the organisation who is thorough in his practice and scrutiny of recommendations. The fostering panel keeps children safe and is well led. The panel chair has the necessary experience and ability to challenge practice. Discussions about the panel with professionals indicate that it operates in accordance with regulations, although the minutes do not reflect this compliance in full.

Staff value the team meetings, which include reflective discussion about children. A staff member said: 'I love working for this agency. I'm very supported and have regular supervision and team meetings. We offer good, safe and secure homes.' Supervision is prioritised for staff in the agency and generally occurs regularly. In

most cases, records show that supervision sessions are reflective and have agendas, actions and timescales. Appraisals of staff show the agency's commitment to improving staff performance. However, a previous recommendation to include children's views in appraisals is not met.

Quality assurance systems are in place that identify gaps in practice and documentation, and the manager reviews this information regularly. Extending this analysis to regularly review exemptions to usual fostering limits and potential drift in children's care plans will improve the impact of these systems further. Approximately 60% of children contribute to annual foster carer reviews using a written questionnaire, and this contribution could be improved further by using other methods. The agency employs a reviewing officer to complete the carers' annual reviews, which provides consistency. While the reviewing officer collects a wealth of information, it is not analysed in detail to identify any patterns or trends that could improve the agency further. The agency has started to implement a tracker system to show individual and collective outcomes for children. This system has not been running long enough to reliably analyse results just yet. The agency also has a research partnership with a university to look at children's starting points and the progress they make, their attachment and cognitive development. This has been running for over a year and has made a positive impact on a small number of children so far.

In a very small minority of cases, the manager and staff have not demonstrated enough timely and focused intervention, alongside explicit discussion and recording of concerns, so that children receive the care they need. This includes taking action more quickly, if needed.

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: SC036400

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Inspector(s)

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