

Five Rivers Family Placement Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	David Morgan
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Date of last inspection	22/08/2007

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency is part of a national limited company. It is a social enterprise, which invests any profit back into its own services. There are currently 23 fostering households providing short-term, long-term and respite care to 25 children. Carers are widely spread across the Midlands mainly but also the east of England and further south.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **inadequate**.

At the last inspection in 2007 the service was found to be operating at a good standard. A number of recommendations and requirements were made and have been addressed. However, in the intervening period the service has deteriorated. Children and young people do not benefit from a satisfactory level of service overall although outcomes for them are adequate. Insufficiently robust leadership, both locally and nationally, has led to substantial inconsistencies. Methods of monitoring are poor and the results of monitoring are not acted upon. The value of monitoring has not been understood. This has led, for example, to poor decisions about where some new children and young people should live and consequently poor outcomes in several cases.

The attention by carers and supervising social workers to individual children and young people's needs is not sufficiently well coordinated through placement planning; as a result they do not make as much progress as possible. Consultation with children and young people and with birth children occurs at a very low level and their views are obtained inconsistently. Consultation is not prioritised. The organisation does not know the views of stakeholders, children and young people, or staff, about the service that is provided. There is also no consultation with children and young people about the service itself, or by the organisation about how it might improve. This is reflected in the lack of contribution by children and young people, and others, to the inspection process.

Engagement by the service with its supervising social workers and carers is not adequate in all cases, which means that safe caring practices cannot be confirmed. Information about significant events, for example, is not consistently gathered and notified to other agencies as required. This means that emerging patterns are not adequately assessed. References have not been obtained for all staff either, which means that children and young people are not adequately safeguarded. On the other hand, children and young people do benefit from low levels of absconding and very few go missing.

Currently, the organisation and the local service are undergoing substantial developments. There have been changes to personnel in the last few months and new targets have been set. These improvements indicate that there is sufficient knowledge and capacity to make the necessary improvements.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

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

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
8 (2011)	ensure that the registered provider and the registered manager carry on and manage the fostering agency with sufficient care, competence and skill (Regulation 8(1))	17/09/2012
11 (2011)	ensure that before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child's wishes and feelings. This is with regard to consistent and ongoing consultation with all children and young people (Regulation 11(b)(1))	17/09/2012
11 (2011)	ensure that before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background (Regulation 11(b)(2))	17/09/2012
13 (2011)	must prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents. This is also with regard to the policy reflecting current guidance (Regulation 13(1))	17/09/2012
17 (2011)	provide foster parents with such training and support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. This is with regard to all carers receiving training as part of a programme, supervision, attending support groups and their reviews if they choose (Regulation 17(1))	15/10/2012
20 (2011)	ensure that no person to whom paragraph (2) applies, works for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so (Regulation 20(1)(b))	17/09/2012

21 (2011)	ensure that all persons employed receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. This includes administrative staff (Regulation 21(4)(a))	15/10/2012
25 (2011)	ensure the panel may obtain such legal advice or medical advice it considers necessary (Regulation 25(2)(c))	17/09/2012
25 (2011)	ensure the panel advises, where appropriate, on the procedures under which reviews in accordance with regulation 28 are carried out by the fostering service provider, and periodically monitors their effectiveness. This is with regard to matters raised by the chairperson including improving the independence of foster carer's annual reviews (Regulation 25 (4)(a))	17/09/2012
35 (2011)	ensure there is a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency, that provides for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (Regulation 35(1))	17/09/2012
36 (2011)	ensure that if any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36(1))	17/09/2012

Recommendations

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

- ensure children know their rights to advocacy, how to obtain an advocate and how to contact the Children's Rights Director (NMS 1.5)
- ensure that children can take up issues in the most appropriate way with support, without fear that this will result in any in any adverse consequences. This is with regard to ensuring that children and young people feel able to use the complaints procedure (NMS 1.6)
- implement a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. Specifically, that carers' ability to safely care for children is part of the matching process and ensured through household safety reviews (NMS 4.5)
- support foster carers to make reasonable and appropriate decisions within the authority delegated to them, without having to seek consent unnecessarily (NMS 7.4)
- ensure that, unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and information (including where appropriate, photographic information) they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding (NMS 11.3)

- ensure that the reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster. This is with regard to demonstrating competencies (NMS 13.8)
- ensure the panel chair ensures written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover key issues and views expressed by panel members (NMS 14.7)
- ensure the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs. This is also with regard to the matching tools being used appropriately (NMS 15.1)
- ensure the role of the supervising social worker is clear both to the worker and the foster carer. This is with regard to the frequency of visits being maintained at the prescribed intervals (NMS 21.7)
- ensure that foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings. This is with regard to records being made of all visits (NMS 21.8)
- ensure that on approval, foster carers are given information, either a handbook or electronic resources, which cover policies and procedures and which is updated regularly (NMS 21.10)
- ensure each panel member is given induction training which is completed within 10 weeks of joining the central list (NMS 23.10)
- ensure the registered person takes action to address any issues of concern that they identify or which are raised with them (NMS 25.8)
- ensure the carer is given a copy of the child's placement plan as soon as this is provided to them by the responsible authority. If provision of the care plan by the responsible authority is delayed, the fostering service follows this up with the responsible authority (NMS 31.2)
- ensure that children are assisted to secure an independent advocate to support them in providing their views, wishes and feelings to statutory reviews. This is with regard to this matter being understood by all carers. (NMS 31.8)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

Outcomes for children and young people are adequate. Children and young people are involved in decision making at their reviews and regarding their education. In some cases this contributes to excellent academic results and most children and young people attend school regularly. Children and young people are integrated into their new homes effectively; this is demonstrated by the long stays that most children and young people experience, the low level of disruptions, and the small number of carers that request respite care. Many children and young people go on foreign holidays and most enjoy a range of stimulating pastimes. However, children and young people experience frustrating and stigmatising delays when their carers

cannot give permission for school trips, for example.

Although there is much effective practice, children and young people's views are not obtained as frequently as the procedures require. This means that foster carers and the service are unable to benefit from their views. Also, it is not evident that children and young people feel confident enough to raise concerns. The needs of the most vulnerable children and young people are not supported as well as possible because the availability of advocates is not understood by all carers. Similarly, children and young people's needs arising from their backgrounds are not adequately addressed, for example, their religious affiliations. This has a negative impact on the social and emotional development of children and young people.

Children and young people do receive thorough attention to their health needs. Their mental and emotional health needs, for example, are identified and addressed appropriately by specialist services, such as play therapists. Their good health is promoted by minimal misuse of drugs and alcohol and young people are appropriately advised about sexual health. The training of carers means that children and young people benefit from effective behaviour management processes. However, the relevant procedures do not reflect the latest standards or give clear instructions regarding physical intervention, for example. This increases the likelihood of negative behaviours being mismanaged.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **inadequate**.

The service has operated an ineffective recruitment policy for foster carers. This has resulted in a particularly wide geographical spread of carers, which the service has not supported adequately. The distances involved mean that carers are insufficiently engaged with their service through attendance at support groups, training events and foster carer reviews. The expectations of management, staff, panel members and carers about attendance for both main and second carers do not reflect the company policy. This has led to inconsistencies and gaps. It has also contributed to a lack of clarity about the standards that carers must reach to be reapproved. For similar reasons, not all carers benefit from the support groups the procedures indicate will be provided.

Carers are positive about the support they receive from their supervising social workers, which occurs regularly in most cases. However, not all visits by supervising social workers are recorded. This contradicts company policy and leaves supervising social workers vulnerable to criticism. Shortfalls have also arisen in the visits to carers who temporarily have no children and the relevant policy is incorrect. This means that the carer's circumstances and standards of accommodation are not being reviewed and they are less engaged with the service. This contributes to several not identifying with their own office. The views of carers are not sought by the organisation either so they also feel detached from head office. These factors increase the risks of inconsistency and poor practice.

Carers have the benefit of a handbook and other policy documents to which they can refer. Several reported that these are useful tools. However, such guidance is substantially out of date, incorrect in many places, and does not reflect current practices in the service. This is indicative of the shortfalls identified in this inspection. It increases the risk of further shortfalls in staff and carer training, the practices of staff and carers, supervision, management, and panel processes. All these shortfalls have a direct impact on outcomes for children and young people and carers.

An additional consequence of the recruitment strategy is that there are insufficient carers in many areas. This has contributed to mismatching of children and young people and placement breakdowns. In addition, documents that are designed to assist staff in making appropriate matches are completed after the event rather than before it. This increases the risk of mismatching and poor outcomes for children and young people. The service is also not routinely helping local authorities, children and young people prepare for new foster placements by providing information about its foster households. This means that important information is not always available to children and young people until after some have started their placements.

Panel itself is appropriately constituted and operated; its members hold a substantial amount of knowledge that is of potential value to the service. For example, it considers and has raised concerns about the quality of foster carer assessments. The panel covers two agencies for the organisation. However, there is clear evidence of the same drift that has affected the local service. Panel does not have access either to appropriate medical advice or to legal advice, as required, despite such issues being raised. It also has only a minimal input to quality assurance matters. Also, panel members, like other staff, wish to contribute to important improvements in the service, for example regarding carer reviews and panel membership. However, their ideas are not acted upon and have not been for a prolonged period. These are significant limitations on the effectiveness of the panel, which reflect the low standards in the service. Panel minutes are not sufficiently clear about the purpose of meetings and do not always show how welfare concerns raised by panel members have been addressed. Any significant gaps in the competencies of carers have a direct impact on outcomes for children and young people. Procedures for panel members are in place but do not adequately address the whole range of issues pertaining to new and existing members. In light of these shortfalls, it is not clear how the monitoring undertaken by the panel adviser and decision maker contribute to effective and safe panel processes.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **inadequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people benefit from low levels of police involvement, going missing and high risk behaviours. Those that expressed a view, say that they feel safe in their placements. Carers indicate reasonable levels of awareness of safeguarding issues and consider that in the event of an allegation against them they are supported well.

However, patterns of negative behaviours are not readily and routinely identified and notified to other agencies. This increases the already significant risk of the service becoming professionally isolated and to services for children and young people being inadequately coordinated. The risk management strategies during the matching process are not robust. This has led to some carers being placed in situations they are unable to handle safely and to disruptions for children and young people. Gaps are also evident in the review of health and safety and safe caring processes in carer's households; also in the frequency of supervisory visits to carers and carers' attendance at training and other events. In addition, there are shortfalls in staff recruitment processes, for example, not all staff have references. The formal supervision of staff does not occur at the prescribed intervals. As a result of national standards and guidance not being integrated into practice, children and young people's safety and wellbeing is not assured.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **inadequate**.

Although there have been recent changes that indicate substantial improvements in accountability, there are shortfalls in the practice of senior personnel in the organisation. This applies in particular to ensuring there is sufficient and effective monitoring and supervision of the service manager. The management of the panel, which is also overseen by the organisation, also has inadequacies. Two supervising social workers are not employed by the organisation and their supervision and recruitment do not comply with the regulations. These are unsafe practices that also indicate a lack of understanding.

Leadership of the service has until recently been poor, as described above. This includes inadequate training and development of social work and administrative staff. Staff have not been kept up to date with professional developments and new staff and panel members have not received adequate induction training. Staff are insufficiently knowledgeable about ensuring equality and promoting social diversity. There is minimal evidence of these principles being used in the service, for example, regarding current events such as the Olympics and Ramadan. Recruitment does not reflect the diverse communities in which the service operates.

The coordination of care to meet children and young people's individual needs does not occur adequately. In particular because most carers do not have a copy of the child or young person's placement plan. This means that care is insufficiently focused by the carers and the supervising social workers and consequently children and young people make less progress than would otherwise be possible. Monitoring of the service is inadequate and does not adhere to the regulations. The monitoring that has occurred has included file audits but has had minimal impact. In particular, it has not ensured that all the service's activities are consistent with the latest regulations and standards. In addition, liaison with other agencies is not sufficiently supported by appropriate and timely notifications.

The organisation has introduced a variety of things to improve the service. A new manager has been appointed and administrative capacity increased; other staffing arrangements are under review. The new manager has been in post for a little over a month and has taken steps towards being registered with Ofsted. A new system of key performance indicators is currently being introduced that involves greater individual accountability and reflects the new business and development plans. Of key importance to outcomes for children and young people is that managers believe that the organisation has made a cultural shift and now has the correct personnel and vision to drive the necessary improvements forwards.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for independent fostering agencies.