

Five Rivers Fostering Service - Midlands and the North

Five Rivers Child Care Limited

Studio Suites, H, J & K Market Hall, Market Place, Chesterfield, Derbyshire S40 1AR

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Five Rivers Midlands and the North is one of eight independent fostering agencies owned by Five Rivers Child Care Limited, three of which continue to operate under their original names. Five Rivers Child Care Limited is a national independent child care agency providing integrated care packages of fostering, residential, education and assessment and therapy services across England. The agency is a social enterprise.

This branch, which covers the Midlands and the north of England, operates from its main base in Chesterfield, with two other premises in Doncaster and Thornaby. It offers a variety of placements, including parent and child, emergency, respite, long-term and short-term. At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing placements for 109 children. It had 80 approved fostering households, comprising 141 foster carers.

Inspection dates: 9 to 12 December 2019

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
---	------

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

Date of last inspection: 27 September 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children receive a high quality of individualised care and support from foster carers who are committed, empathetic and skilled at meeting the needs of the children they care for. Foster carers and children have positive and warm relationships and foster carers speak with pride about the children's achievements. Children become part of the foster carers' families and benefit from a sense of belonging. They also engage with the local community by getting involved in activities that support their social development.

Children make good progress in relation to their education, health and emotional well-being. Foster carers are supportive and non-judgemental, and this enables them to build positive relationships with children's birth families. Consequently, children maintain positive relationships with people who are important to them and they are supported to see family and friends.

A strength of the agency, and a development since the previous inspection, is the use of the in-house psychotherapist, who undertakes a thorough assessment of each child when they move in with their foster carers. This is used proactively to inform the need for any additional support at an early stage. The therapist is also used to support foster carers with the therapeutic parenting approach that underpins the agency's ethos for the provision of care. The therapist provides training, consultation and liaison with other services to ensure that children and foster carers receive the support that they need. She also supports staff through regular consultation and attendance at team meetings. As a result, support is consistently delivered by social workers, fostering support workers, foster carers and the therapist.

Another area of positive practice is the employment of fostering support workers, who work with individual children on either a time-limited or more long-term basis. The work is varied and carried out at the pace of the child to support their specific and identified needs. This helps to improve the stability of a child's placement and also improves children's confidence and skills. Children develop very positive and trusting relationships with the fostering support workers.

Children's participation, both at national and local level, is another area of strength, and Fiver Rivers nationally has shown a real commitment to this aspect of the service. Children appreciate the social events because they enjoy sharing their experiences with other fostered children. Multi-media events involving former care-experienced people have been used very effectively to help children talk about their feelings in a very moving and thought-provoking way. Children's views and experiences are valued, and children have contributed in many ways to improving the service, for example by being involved in staff interviews and developing podcasts. The birth children of foster carers are also valued and have their own consultation events.

The rate of unplanned endings in the last year (22%) is above the national average

(10%) for independent fostering agencies. The manager has scrutinised each ending to see if there is any learning to be had in order to reduce these in the coming year. On a more positive note, there are a number of long-term placements that provide children with stability and a sense of belonging that contributes to their emotional well-being. Five young adults are in staying-put arrangements and 31% of children have lived with their foster carers for over two years.

There is a steady increase in fostering households every year, and the agency has been successful in increasing the diversity of its foster carers. People who are interested in fostering receive a prompt and welcoming response to their enquiry. Preparation training is delivered by an enthusiastic practitioner who is keen to develop and improve the training in response to feedback. Foster carer assessments are reasonably timely, with 70% being completed within the six-month timescale. However, they would benefit from being more evidence-based and analytical. One assessment seen lacked professional curiosity and in another, all referees were connected with one of the two applicants. These shortfalls may lead to important information being overlooked.

There is a well-structured system for matching children with the right foster carers, and foster carers confirmed that they are never forced to take a child whose needs they feel they cannot meet. Where possible, placements are planned in advance so that all the available information can be shared, and children can be introduced to their foster carers before they move in. This aspect has improved since the last inspection as there are now systems for ensuring that the appropriate agreements are sought and documented for exemptions to the usual fostering limit and when children are placed alongside other children already in the foster home.

Foster carers feel well supported by their supervising social workers, who they describe as accessible and easy to contact. They have regular supervision and good-quality, relevant training. This enables them to provide good support to the children. Foster carers feel valued and say that the agency listens to their views. This is facilitated by a good system of carer representatives who meet with senior managers on a regular basis.

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

Most of the children currently living with this agency's foster carers are not engaging in risk-taking behaviour, such as going missing from care or misusing illegal substances. Foster carers know how to respond appropriately to risk as they receive good training in safeguarding issues, and they have access to support and written information. One particularly good piece of practice is the recent training in county lines that was attended by both foster carers and children. This was presented by a former care-experienced person to promote the attendees' engagement and also to provide a realistic view of the issue.

The agency expects its foster carers to parent in a therapeutic way. This is now embedded in practice. The agency has access to its own psychologist who provides training, consultation and support to both staff and foster carers. Foster carers have commented very positively about this aspect of the service. This enables them to

understand why children behave as they do and helps the foster carers to support the children in the best possible way.

Children's known and emerging risks are documented fully and the risk assessments are reviewed regularly. This ensures that foster carers have clear written guidance to follow to keep children safe from harm. Children are fully engaged in this process as they have a child-friendly safer caring plan that is devised with them. This helps the children to understand and take ownership of the strategies to keep them safe. At times, the agency's challenge to safeguarding partners could be more timely. For example, when foster carers have felt unsupported by the child's social worker, this has not been addressed with the urgency required.

The agency has clear procedures to follow in response to allegations against carers. However, these have not been followed consistently and in a timely way in a small number of cases. The child's voice was not given appropriate weight soon enough. The lessons learned from the situation were limited in scope and the discussion was restricted to a small number of internal professionals. On another occasion, concerns about a carer's practice were not recorded clearly and they were not reported to the designated officer in the local authority for a view on the best way to proceed. This prevents a full audit trail of actions being available for scrutiny and also means that the designated officer does not have full information about concerns raised over time.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The recently registered manager is providing strong leadership. She is enthusiastic about what she wants to achieve, and she has an ambitious and child-focused vision for the service. The manager has already started to implement a few changes to strengthen the service. She is supported by three team managers, two of whom are recent appointments. Her appointment has been received well by the staff, who say that she is approachable and knowledgeable.

Staff, including staff new to the agency, feel well supported. They receive regular supervision that enables them to reflect on their practice. Their performance is regularly appraised, and this informs their development needs. Staff have access to a good range of relevant, good-quality training that enables them to improve their knowledge and practice and support the foster carers and children effectively.

The manager has a good understanding of the progress that children are making. Since the last inspection, the outcomes tracker has become established in practice and that provides a graphical representation of progress in a number of areas over time. This is also sent to the children's social workers to provide them with evidence of the child's progress.

There are good monitoring and reporting systems that support effective governance across the whole of the agency and ensure that senior managers know the strengths and areas for development. Management information is accessible and collated well, including the tracking of placements and vacancies, and there are good reporting and audit systems across the service. These systems ensure that, for example, there

is a prompt response to placement requests. However, these systems rely on accurate information sharing and, although information sharing is generally good, there have been a small number of occasions when the manager has not been fully apprised of situations of concern.

Recording has not always been compliant with the agency's policies, and information has not been available on the electronic system or has been added late. Consequently, there is not an audit trail of how information has informed decision-making and actions. It also means that the manager has not been aware of everything that is happening as she relies on checking electronic records in addition to verbal updates.

Professional relationships are good. Commissioners comment that there is good communication and an openness to address and resolve any issues raised. They say that the agency provides good-quality foster carers who can meet the needs of the children. Children's social workers comment positively about the quality of the foster care provided and the professional information sharing so that the network of people around the child remain fully informed. This enables everyone to know what is happening so that all partners can work consistently together. There is also professional challenge, although the timeliness of this could, at times, be strengthened.

There is a properly constituted fostering panel chaired by an appropriately skilled and experienced independent person. It is administered well, and panel members receive the documents in good time so that they can consider them properly in preparation for the panel. Panel members have a range of personal and professional experience of fostering that enables them to provide scrutiny and challenge to the work of the agency. Panel members have access to training with staff from the agency and there is now a schedule of training available to them. They have annual appraisals. However, the panel chair's appraisal is not carried out by the agency decision-maker. This is recommended to ensure that sufficient weight is afforded to this important role. Decision-making has been strengthened since the last inspection. The agency decision-maker now follows the advice given in the statutory guidance to ensure that a thorough, well-considered and evidence-based decision is made in good time.

The arrangements for foster carers' annual reviews have also been strengthened since the last inspection. These are now carried out by an independent person, which adds an additional tier of scrutiny and challenge when assessing foster carers' ongoing suitability to foster and any changes to approval. The reviews are well planned and well organised and they are now carried out at least once within the 12 months following the last decision on suitability.

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

Recommendations

- The written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision. The reports are accurate, up-to-date and include evidence-based information that distinguishes between fact, opinion and third-party information. The reports are prepared, signed and dated by the social worker who assessed the prospective foster carer and countersigned and dated by the fostering team manager or a team manager of another of the provider's fostering teams. (Fostering services: National minimum standards, 13.7)
- Having regard to the child's age and understanding, their views, wishes and feelings must be known, listened to and acted upon in all aspects of their care in the foster home, unless to do so would be contrary to their interests or adversely affects other members of the foster care household. When this is the case, it is important that children are helped to understand why decisions have been made that are contrary to their wishes and views. The views of their family and others who are significant to them should also be sought and taken into consideration (standard 1). (The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 4: Fostering services, page 19, paragraph 3.32)
- The registered person takes action to address any issues of concern that they identify, or which are raised with them. (Fostering services: National minimum standards, 25.8)
- Allegations against people who work with children or members of the fostering household are reported by the fostering service to the LADO. This includes allegations that on the face of it may appear relatively insignificant or that have also been reported directly to the police or Children and Family Services. (Fostering services: National minimum standards, 22.6)
- Staff, volunteers, panel members and fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files (including files removed from the premises). There is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-keeping and take action when needed. (Fostering services: National minimum standards, 26.2)
- Each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, should be reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives. The service's decision-maker should review the performance of the panel chair, and for this purpose may attend a proportion of panel meetings but only as an observer. Views about the chair's performance should be sought from other panel members and from those who attend panel meetings, such as prospective foster carers and social workers who present reports to the panel. For all other panel members, the panel chair should conduct the performance review. (The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 4: Fostering services, page 41, paragraph 5.15)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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: SC062786

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: Jennifer Sutton

Telephone number: 01246 558292

Email address: martin.leitch@five-rivers.org

Inspectors

Ros Chapman, social care inspector
Cathey Moriarty, social care inspector



The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence>, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

© Crown copyright 2019