

Five Rivers Family Placement Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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 and therefore does not have shareholders and invests any profits into its own services.

There are currently 26 fostering households providing short-term, long-term and respite care to 21 children. Carers are widely spread across the Midlands 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 **adequate**.

The previous inspection was in August 2012 and the overall quality rating was inadequate. At that time the company had already begun to address the lack of management direction and attention to service delivery and a new manager had recently been appointed. Since then there has been substantial progress and all requirements and recommendations set at that inspection have been addressed.

Methodology is being introduced to track children's progress so that the effectiveness of the service in terms of outcomes can be more readily assessed. Engagement with carers has improved substantially and further work is planned. Consultation with children is effective in terms of their care but is not well-established with regards to monitoring and developing the service.

The staff, carers and children that contributed to this inspection all feel very positive about the service and the changes. They also confirm the high standards of safeguarding, care and safety enjoyed by children. There is well-placed confidence in the organisation and the manager to make further improvements.

No requirements and five recommendations result from this inspection. These are to ensure the full integration of children and other stakeholders into the development of

the service; to ensure that statutory guidance is followed, and, that monitoring is as analytical as necessary.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in developing the fostering service, with particular regard to engagement in the Foster Carer's Charter (NMS 1.7)
- ensure that the decision maker lists the material taken into account in reaching decisions and also addresses the other considerations identified in this paragraph (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.40)
- ensure the reviews of each carer's approval include an appraisal of performance against clear and consistent standards, with regard to having clear guidance about what constitutes mandatory training and minimum carer training per year (NMS 20.6)
- ensure that staff appraisals, where staff are working with children, take into account any views of children the service is providing for (NMS 24.6)
- monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to be satisfied that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children, with particular regard to quantifying outcomes, monitoring the panel records, and reflecting any consultation with stakeholders. (NMS 25.7(b))

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **adequate**.

Children are pleased with their placements and many make significant progress. They engage in a variety of stimulating and educational activities including holidays, some of which are overseas. Any needs derived from their cultural or religious backgrounds are carefully considered and carers are clear about which decisions they are permitted to make. Most children are involved in extra-curricular groups at school and also in their individual communities. For example, some attend football clubs, cadets and boxing clubs, while others enjoy horse riding and swimming. In particular, they establish meaningful relationships with their carers and are integrated into their foster families, which is the basis of their progress. One child reflected the views of many by saying, 'I get on fine with my carers and their families.'

There is a variety of ways in which children are consulted about their care, including at their reviews; by their carers on a day-to-day basis, or by the supervising social workers, who they see regularly. All the children who responded feel able to talk

about any concerns with an adult outside their foster household and advocates are obtained, when necessary. This helps children to feel secure, which is reflected in the stability experienced by the vast majority. However, as yet, the views of children are not firmly established as part of the development of the service.

Most children enjoy good health; appropriate health checks occur promptly. Children with disabilities and those with emotional health needs receive the specialist services they require. Children routinely achieve in their education. They enjoy high levels of attendance with additional support provided when necessary. As a result, children take examinations when appropriate, attend the schools and colleges that are best placed to help them, and learn to develop special interests, such as in construction, music and art. They are also supported to pursue education into adulthood.

Quality of service

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

All staff and carers agree that the new manager is 'getting on top of things'. The service has benefited from greater rigour throughout. In particular, carers receive regular and structured supervision, which facilitates them meeting their foster children's needs. Carers say, 'We find supervision very helpful; our social workers are always there when we need them.' Such support is now related to the competencies that individual carers display. This means that areas of their practice that require development are more readily identified and addressed, for example, at their annual reviews. The views of carers' sons and daughters are also routinely sought to help them deal with the pressures inherent in fostering. This is an important contribution to placement stability. External professionals, such as commissioners, confirm that leadership of the service is effective.

One in three annual reviews of carers return to panel, which allows panel members to keep a useful overview of progress. Improvements have been made to the panel arrangements, which is now more effectively integrated into the service. Substantial effort has also been invested in updating the procedural guidance available for panel members, carers and staff. Decision making about panel recommendations occurs promptly. However, the guidance about how to record the process is not being followed. This issue is particularly significant when a decision is contentious.

The service successfully ensures that new carers complete their induction training within the prescribed timescales. In addition, there is a wide range of additional courses that meet carer's needs well. Training is also provided that addresses the particular needs of children, arising, for example, from health issues. The majority of carers attend training events regularly and some also benefit from training at the new carer support groups. One carer represented the views of all by saying, 'Training is always good and particularly helpful.' However, there is a slight lack of clarity about the minimum number of courses carers should attend each year and what constitutes mandatory training.

Recruitment of new carers is at a low level but now benefits from a dedicated

recruitment officer; this is a significant improvement over the previous system led by supervising social workers. The assessment of new carers is now predominantly undertaken by supervising social workers and completed in a timely way. This is complemented by close, specific supervision of this task by the manager. As a result, the skills of team members are increasing and the quality of assessments is good.

Robust procedures are also in place to ensure that children are matched as well as possible, given the available information. This task has also benefited from the recruitment of a dedicated officer. Children's needs arising from any disability or educational needs are clearly identified and addressed. They are also given clear information about their new homes in advance whenever possible.

Staff ensure that relevant documentation is received from social workers, such as placement plans. The needs of children are routinely considered during the supervision of carers and of staff. Adequate procedures are in place to track children's actual progress and further improvements are currently being introduced.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children are very effectively safeguarded and, in addition to planned visits, the standards in each household are checked during at least two unannounced visits a year. All children who responded to the inspection said they felt safe and some felt that this was a particularly important feature of their care.

There are very few incidents of children putting themselves at risk or going missing. The number of incidents has fallen since last year, which reflects the closer monitoring of placements. Staff and carers have a good understanding of safeguarding procedures as a result of up-to-date training. In the event of any concern, prompt liaison with external agencies ensures that effective safety measures are in place.

Staff recruitment procedures comply with the latest legislative changes, for example checks with the Disclosure and Barring Service. A high standard is set, with additional references being sought as a matter of course. Also, children's views are gradually being introduced to the recruitment process, which is an important improvement.

Leadership and management

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

Staff report that leadership throughout the organisation is 'totally different and much more professional and responsive'. Important changes have been rolled-out and are gradually embedding. In particular, there is now the capacity both nationally and locally to achieve improvement. The integration of the service into the larger

organisation is now much more effective, and staff from different offices share their views on a regular basis. Effective leadership from the new senior management team means that the organisation is financially sound at a time when it is investing substantially in new posts and infrastructure. The new electronic recording system, for example, means that large amounts of time and effort are saved at all levels.

The previous inspection raised eleven requirements and fifteen recommendations. These have all been addressed as part of a coordinated development programme affecting all fostering services in the company. As indicated above, there have been substantial improvements in the leadership of the service and additional posts have been created. Monitoring has also improved in many areas. There is much clearer delineation of roles and therefore greater self-confidence within the team, despite social workers taking on new tasks. Improvements to processes, such as assessments and matching of children to placements, mean carers feel more confident in the service.

Engagement with carers has improved and clear strategies are being implemented for routine consultation with groups of children, at both regional and national level. The organisation has adopted the Foster Carer's Charter although there has not yet been effective engagement at a local level with staff or carers to use this as a method of driving improvement.

The service benefits from several levels of quality assurance. In addition, a thorough, independent report was recently commissioned by the new senior management team to benchmark the whole service; the views of staff have also been compiled. Local monitoring occurs every three months, as required, and routine monitoring by the organisation occurs around issues or themes, such as the effectiveness of recording systems. This provides a sound basis for the service. However, quarterly monitoring reports do not quantify patterns, trends or outcomes. There is also no analysis of the work of panel or reflection of the views of stakeholders. This means that the process is less effective in identifying shortfalls and raising standards.

Staff benefit from reasonable training and good development opportunities, and further improvements have been agreed. Staff are well supported and feel optimistic. One said, 'There is now clarity of expectations and consistency.' As a result, there has been a substantial improvement in the confidence of the team since the manager has been employed, which is beneficial to carers and children. Staff receive regular appraisals of their performance although these are not yet taking into account children and carer's views.

The premises that the service uses are adequate but steps are underway to relocate to an office that accommodates carers and children more appropriately.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.