

# Five Rivers Fostering Service – Midlands and North

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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| <b>Unique reference number</b> | SC062786          |
| <b>Inspection date</b>         | 26 September 2016 |
| <b>Inspector</b>               | Ros Chapman       |
| <b>Type of inspection</b>      | Full              |
| <b>Provision subtype</b>       |                   |

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| <b>Registered person</b>       | Five Rivers Child Care Limited                                                    |
| <b>Registered manager</b>      | Colette Abbiss                                                                    |
| <b>Responsible individual</b>  | Martin Leitch                                                                     |
| <b>Date of last inspection</b> | 19 July 2013                                                                      |

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency is one of five branches of a national 'not-for-profit' agency. This branch, which covers the Midlands and the north of England, operates from its main base in Chesterfield, with two other premises in Hessle and Thornaby. It offers a variety of placements, including parent and child, emergency, respite, long-term and short-term.

During the year 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016 the agency recruited 20 fostering households. During the same year, the total number of foster carers was 124, comprising 68 fostering households. At the time of the inspection, there were 76 children and young people in placement.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This is a good service overall because children and young people have their needs met in stable and safe fostering placements. They have positive experiences as a result of being part of a fostering family and they make good progress in many areas of their lives. For example, their confidence increases, they develop skills for independent living, and their outcomes improve as a consequence. A particular strength is placement stability and longevity, both of which contribute to emotional well-being and a sense of security and belonging.

Foster carers are recruited, prepared, assessed and supported to successfully meet the needs of the children and young people for whom they care. The assessment

process is timely and robust. Foster carers continue to develop their skills through good and relevant training and regular support and supervision. They are valued members of the professional team, and their knowledge of the children and young people in their care enhances the decisions and plans that are made.

A strength of the agency is its involvement of children and young people in the development of the service. This is relatively new, and it has been well considered to ensure that it is meaningful. One young person said: 'It's a good agency because there are nice carers, social workers and bosses.'

There are good relationships with partner agencies, particularly local authorities. The agency is responsive to the needs of commissioners in order to provide appropriate, safe and well-matched placements.

The registered manager has been in post for a year, and has provided strong leadership in taking the service forward. Staff are committed, knowledgeable, well supported and effective in providing good support to foster carers to ensure positive outcomes for children and young people.

There are shortfalls, but these have not had an impact on the safety of the service provided to children and young people. Recording of agency decisions needs to be enhanced, consultation with local authorities and social workers in relation to making placements should be documented more robustly and annual reviews of foster carers must be timelier.

## Areas of 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 within the given timescales.

| Requirement                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Due date   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation.<br><br>A review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year.<br>(Regulation 28 (1)(2)) | 25/11/2016 |

## Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- In reaching a decision, or making a qualifying determination, the decision-maker should consider *Hofstetter v LB Barnet*. It is good discipline and appropriate for the decision-maker to follow this guidance. (The Children Act 1989, guidance and regulations, volume 4: fostering services, page 46, paragraph 5.40)
- Ensure that the statutory guidance is followed in relation to exemptions from the usual fostering limit. (The Children Act 1989, guidance and regulations, volume 4: fostering services, page 47, paragraph 5.46)
- Ensure that when placing a child alongside another child already in placement that consent is given by the fostering service provider and any other responsible authority with a child already placed with the foster carer. This will require consultation with the social worker of any other child placed in the foster home. (The Children Act 1989, guidance and regulations, volume 4: fostering services, page 14, paragraph 3.2)

## Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency has effective procedures for ensuring, as far as possible, that children and young people receive information about the foster carers prior to moving in. Foster carers prepare a welcome book about their family, and this is emailed to children's social workers so that they can discuss the family with the child or young person and show them photographs. Many placements are planned and, in these circumstances, introductions are well planned and include visits and information-sharing prior to placement. This gives the placement more chance of success.

There is good placement stability, which contributes to children's and young people's emotional well-being and sense of security and belonging. Over 57% of the children and young people currently placed have lived with their foster carers for over two years. Two young people remain with their carers under 'staying put arrangements'. Unplanned endings, at 7% last year, are likely to be below the national average which, although not available for that year, were 12% and 8% in the two years prior to that.

Children and young people are happy and settled in their foster placements, where they make good progress and have positive experiences. They are part of the family, experience family holidays and outings, and take part in leisure pursuits such as going to the gym, dancing, bowling and swimming. This contributes to their sense of belonging as well as their enjoyment of life, and builds their self-confidence. One young person said: 'My carer is the best carer I have had. He is very respectful of me and I am very happy. I have increased my independence.' Another young person said: 'My carers are good. I really enjoy it. I am safe and happy, and part of the family.'

Participation is an area of strength, and one which is continuing to develop. Children's and young people's views are used to approve various aspects of service provision, such as the children's guide, and they meet with senior managers to give their views on how things could be better. Locally, they influence the activities and events which the fostering service provides. Their comments about the agency include: 'It's a good company, they are on board with everything,' 'They have got a lot of time for young people,' and 'Five Rivers is a good agency. It has become like a family.'

Children and young people are able to maintain positive contact with their birth families and significant people, where this is in their best interests. Foster carers are fully supportive of any agreed arrangements and understand their importance for the development of a positive identity. Children and young people from other cultures, for example unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, are supported to practise their religion, through attending places of worship, eating appropriate food and having contact with their communities.

Children and young people have appropriate educational placements. Their attendance and attainment are good and, for some, their progress in this area is significant. For example, young people who have been previously excluded, or in pupil referral units, are now in mainstream education and doing well. Young people have aspirations for themselves and their futures. The agency acknowledges success by sending a card and gift voucher and celebrating it in the newsletter. This contributes to improved self-esteem.

Children and young people who have had risk-taking behaviour, such as being missing from care, have reduced this and are safer as a result. Some children and young people are calmer and their behaviour has improved. This improves their acceptance in the community and at school.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency is able to offer placements to children and young people with a variety of complex needs, and the information on placement stability and longevity suggests that it does this successfully. Of the children and young people who have been screened by the in-house psychologist, 63% have elevated difficulties and attachment issues. Many of the placements are solo placements, to give them the best chance of success.

The preparation, assessment and approval of foster carers is robust and carried out in a timely manner. A foster carer, who had previously been an approved carer for another agency, said of the preparation training: 'It was 100% better than the one we did with our previous agency. It was informative and relevant.' Assessments are generally thorough and analytical and focus on the competencies required to be an effective foster carer. However, annual reviews have not always been carried out on time. Consequently, the capabilities and competence of foster carers have not been subject to additional oversight, including the identification of any supplementary support or training, in a timely way. The registered manager has already identified this shortfall and has implemented a procedure to minimise the risk of this occurring in future.

Foster carers demonstrate a good understanding of their role and that of the local authority and fostering agency. They work well with parents and relatives where appropriate, and in the best interests of the children and young people for whom they are caring. They ensure that children and young people feel part of their families and have positive experiences with them. One young person said: 'My carers treat me like family. It's going brilliantly. I get all the right stuff and tons of holidays.'

Foster carers receive a good level of child-focused supervision and support from their supervising social workers, which is enhanced by good quality, relevant training. Of the current carers, 96% have achieved the training, support and development standards and have an up-to-date first aid qualification. They are expected to undertake a minimum of four courses a year to enable them to continue to develop

and enhance their knowledge. One carer said of the training: 'I am very impressed.' Training is an area which has improved, in terms of quality, variety, relevance and accessibility.

Foster carers are universally positive about working for Five Rivers. One said: 'I am happy with everything.' They feel well supported by their supervising social workers. One foster carer commented: 'She is absolutely outstanding. She has never once let us down.' Another foster carer said: 'She is smashing, we get plenty of support, I have nothing but praise.' Foster carers also benefit from a responsive out-of-hours service, support groups and social activities, which facilitate the provision of good quality care. They have access to the in-house psychologist, who provides consultation to foster carers and staff, in order to assist them with strategies for managing children and young people with complex support needs. The agency's head of education is also involved when there are complex educational issues, to assist with negotiations or to provide advice in relation to education provision.

Foster carers feel part of the team and know that their views are respected. They contribute their views through a foster carer forum, and say that senior managers listen to them and take their views on board. Children's social workers are positive about the work the foster carers do to achieve good outcomes for the children and young people in their care. One social worker said: 'I am impressed with them.' Another social worker said: 'The carers are creative in dealing with the child's behaviour,' and another commented: 'They are attuned to his needs and good at advocating for him.' Children's social workers also comment that foster carers are well supported by the agency. This includes supporting birth children and extended family members and recognising their contributions to successful foster placements.

The fostering panel provides a robust quality assurance function and independent scrutiny of the work of the agency. The panel chair is experienced, knowledgeable and committed to the role. She, along with the panel members, provides appropriate challenge to the agency where necessary. Panel members have a range of personal and professional experience to enable them to fulfil their roles well. They are child-focused and have a clear focus on safeguarding. The administration of the panel is good, and the minutes are comprehensive and timely to enable the decision-maker to make an informed decision. Although he does this in a timely way, and takes the role seriously, the recording of the decision is not in line with statutory guidance. This would strengthen the process and make it more transparent, particularly if there was a challenge to a decision.

Matching is done well and there is no pressure to make a placement which may not be in a child's best interest. The agency works hard to obtain up-to-date information about the children and young people so that foster carers know what is expected of them. This results in stable and successful placements. However, there are areas of weakness in recording. When children and young people are placed alongside other children and young people already in placement, it is not always clear that the consent of the local authority for the current placement has been obtained prior to placement. When there have been exemptions to the usual fostering limit, again it is not always evident that appropriate written agreement has been obtained in a timely way. This could leave foster carers in a vulnerable situation.

The agency works well with local authority social workers in reviewing care plans. Foster carers provide comprehensive reports about a child's or young person's progress, which enables an informed and effective review of the future plans. Delegated authority is addressed within reviews to ensure that it remains appropriate for the current situation. Foster carers and supervising social workers also attend reviews for personal education plans to ensure that they are effective in addressing educational targets.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency operates a safe service. Children and young people say that they feel safe and that they can identify people they could talk to if they have any concerns. Any complaints they have made have been thoroughly addressed and lessons for improvement identified.

Children and young people are enabled to develop their independence and appropriate life skills through well-managed risk assessments. Foster carers ensure that they understand how to keep themselves safe, for example on social media as well as in the community. Young people who were at risk of exploitation have gradually earned the trust of their foster carers, so they can travel independently and see friends and family. One young person said: 'They are keeping me safe.'

Each child and young person has a safe care plan and a risk assessment which focus on their individual identified risks. These are updated as situations change. Currently, the agency does not have a high incidence of children and young people who go missing from care or are engaging in other risk-taking behaviour. Those who had been identified as being at risk have reduced the number of times they go missing or have unauthorised absences. A carer explained this by saying: 'We sat and talked and explained the consequences.' A social worker for a young person said of the foster carers: 'They have done their best to keep her safe.'

There are robust and safe procedures to recruit, assess, train and support foster carers. Safeguarding is part of the mandatory training, and the recent addition of training in how to recognise the risks from radicalisation and extremism has strengthened this. Foster carers are visited regularly, particularly when there are new children or young people in placement or there are signs that they are struggling. They also have two unannounced visits a year, and children and young people are seen alone. This promotes and supports the delivery of safe care.

Any allegations against foster carers are dealt with appropriately in order to keep children and young people safe. A designated officer for the local authority said: 'There was good communication and the service responded well and was not defensive.' Foster carers understand that any allegations must be followed up and have had training to help them understand the process. They also have access to an independent support service if they are the subject of any allegations. Where

appropriate, their approval as foster carers is terminated, and any concerns about standards of care are addressed through early annual reviews.

The recruitment of staff and panel members is robust, to ensure that anyone who works with children, young people and foster carers is safe and suitable to do so.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

There have been a number of changes since the agency was last inspected in 2013. It has moved its main premises to Chesterfield, and it has incorporated a separate branch that was based in the north of England under this registration. There have also been managerial and operational changes that are part of an agency-wide improvement agenda. Staff comment that these changes have been 'for the better'.

The agency has developed good relationships with placing authorities, including commissioners of fostering placements. One stakeholder commented: 'They are very flexible and super supportive.' Stakeholders also comment that the agency is responsive and works hard to find alternative in-house carers, in order to maintain some continuity for children and young people whose placements need to change. Referrals are closely monitored in order to give the agency a good understanding of the placing needs of local authorities. As a result, they are developing their service in the west Midlands, as well as increasing the carers' capacity to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. Local authority social workers also comment positively about individual supervising social workers. For example, one social worker said: 'The supervising social worker is very easy to work with, she is on the ball, and I can always get hold of her.' Another said: 'There is good communication. She works hard to keep me in the loop.'

One area to which the agency has given its full attention is children's and young people's participation. Support workers have been appointed in each area, in order to increase the level of activities which are available for children and young people. This is proving successful, and one young person said: 'Five Rivers do lots of activities.' A participation officer, who has been in post for a year, has been appointed to address this nationally. She commented: 'Senior managers have made a massive commitment to this work.' A young people's council has been established, and in the words of a young person: 'We are to speak out to make Five Rivers better.' Another young person commented: 'The agency listens to what you have to say.'

Another area in which the agency is continuing to improve is monitoring children's and young people's progress. This is not fully established in a systematic way, but it has made a start in analysing emotional well-being to obtain a baseline assessment. There are formal but less systematic measures of tracking progress in other areas through reviews, incident reports and supervision. The agency is quick to address

any concerns, including challenging the local authority for additional resources, or providing extra support to children, young people and carers.

The governance of the agency is strong. Leaders and managers have a systematic approach to obtaining regular reports about the service provision. This includes regular monitoring by the registered manager and monthly reporting to the board, which is carried out by an independent person. The responsible individual ensures that he has a good oversight through regular supervision of the registered manager, monthly meetings with senior and operational managers, and quarterly meetings with the foster carer forum.

The statement of purpose is on the website and provides useful information about the services it provides. There are two guides for children and young people, in order to reflect the understanding of different age groups. This is an area which has been improved through the involvement of children and young people, who have developed welcome packs which include DVDs as well as booklets. One young person said: 'The pack for Five Rivers is really good. Young people have approved it. The DVD is the right length with good information.' The agency plans to improve this further by developing information in other languages and formats for asylum-seeking young people.

The agency recruits appropriately qualified and experienced staff, managers and panel members. It is growing gradually and has increased both its number of fostering households and the numbers of children placed in the last year, in order to ensure its continuing financial viability.

Staff feel well supported by their colleagues, accessible managers, manageable caseloads and regular supervision. They say, 'It is a happy place to work,' and they enjoy the opportunities they have to meet with colleagues and share ideas through regional and national days. Access to relevant training is good, which enables them to offer a competent and effective service to foster carers, children and young people. The annual appraisal system is about to be improved by the use of children's and young people's views. This has been developed over the last year.

Five recommendations were made at the last inspection. One of these, which relates to the recording of the agency decision, has not been addressed and is made again. The others, which relate to children's and young people's participation, clarity of expectations in relation to foster carers' training and improved monitoring, have been addressed and are in the process of being embedded. This has improved the service, although leaders and managers have plans for further development and improvement.

## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and to support services to improve.

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.