

Five Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	David Putnam
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Date of last inspection	N/A

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Five Fostering Limited is a privately owned fostering agency based in Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex. The service was first registered in July 2013 and this is its first inspection. At the time of this inspection one young person was placed with one of the three fostering households registered. Four vacancies were available in the other two households. The assessments of two other fostering households were nearing completion.

The agency aims to provide short term, long term, permanent, respite, emergency and, parent and child foster placements.

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: **inadequate**.

This judgement stems from the fact that the judgement for safeguarding children and young people is inadequate. Leaders and managers fail to implement thorough or robust recruitment practices. They are unable to evidence that they have taken sufficient action to ensure that unsuitable people are not employed in the agency. A failure to keep up-to-date with changes in legislation and practice results in a policy relating to children missing from care not being in place. Advice given to foster carers about this is not in line with accepted guidance.

Administrative shortfalls result in failures to consistently share information with Ofsted as the regulatory body. Following recommendations being made by the fostering panel there are significant delays in making decisions and communicating these to foster carers. Supervision arrangements for staff lack clarity. While foster carers see the quality of training as a strength of the service, they are not currently supported to attain the Training Support and Development Standards.

Work is being undertaken to enhance the quality of assessments of fostering households. The fostering panel takes its quality assurance role seriously and works well to contribute to this development. Leaders and managers recognise the need for a 'critical friend' and have innovatively developed a Quality Assurance Committee to call them to account and drive improvement. Placing authorities view the service positively and see the availability and accessibility of staff as a strength.

Young people are positive about their experiences of being placed with this service. They identify changes in themselves that they attribute to the care they receive and say that they are helped to feel part of the fostering family.

A statistical comparison of this service with national trends is not included in this section. The newness of the agency and the limited number of placements made during its first year of operation results in a limited evidence base. Consequently any evaluation would be unreliable.

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
4 (2011)	notify Ofsted of any revision of the statement of purpose or children's guide within 28 days (Regulation 4(b))	26/09/2014
13 (2011)	prepare and implement a policy, which is agreed with the local police, setting out the measures to be followed to prevent children placed with foster parents from going missing from their placement, and the procedure to be followed when a child is missing from a foster parent's home without permission (Regulation 13(3)(a) and (b))	31/07/2014
20 (2011)	ensure that no person is employed to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so in accordance with all conditions set out in paragraph 3 of this regulation (Regulation 20(1)(a) and (3)(a) to (c))	31/07/2014
35 (2011)	maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of the foster care provided by the fostering agency. Provide	26/09/2014

	Ofsted with a written report of any review conducted. The system must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents and their placing authority. (Regulation 35 (1) to (3))	
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Recommendations

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

- ensure that 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 (NMS 13.7)
- ensure that the fostering service provider's decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel and, where applicable, the independent review panel, within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes (NMS 14.9)
- ensure that the foster carer or prospective foster carer is informed orally of the decision-maker's decision within two working days and written confirmation is sent to them within five working days (NMS 14.10)
- ensure that all people working in or for the fostering service, and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel, are interviewed as part of the selection process and have references checked to assess suitability before taking on responsibilities. Telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references (NMS 19.1)
- ensure that the fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for those working (including as volunteers) for the fostering service which included all matters listed in this standard (NMS 19.3)
- ensure that all foster carers, including all members of a household who are approved as foster carers, are supported to achieve the Training, Support and Development Standards appropriate to their approval (NMS 20.2)
- ensure that all staff have access to support and advice, and are provided with regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff (NMS 24.4)
- ensure that all fostering activity is consistent with The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and national minimum standards and with the service's policies and procedures. (NMS 25.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people benefit from receiving guides about the fostering service that are produced to a good standard. These are written for people of different ages or levels of understanding and are made available in different formats or languages if this is required. Young people also receive a brief profile of their foster families prior to placement. While they recognise that their early days in foster care can be 'nerve wracking'. They say that the information they receive helps them to know where they are going and what to expect. The provision of a 'goody bag' at the outset of their placement helps them to feel welcomed.

Young people clearly communicate that they feel safe and comfortable with their foster carers. They develop positive relationships between with their foster carers and others in the fostering family. Young people identify positive changes in themselves that they attribute to their foster placements. Comments include, 'I feel I've settled down more; I feel happier and more relaxed since being here'. Young people recognise that their calmer attitude helps them to manage their behaviour better in school. When necessary, young people are able to access external services to meet identified emotional needs or expressed behaviours. This helps them to improve their understanding of past experiences and learn to take more responsibility for their own actions.

Young people are clear about the plans for their care and understand how long they are anticipated to remain in their foster placements. Young people are encouraged to have their say about day to day arrangements and are able to influence decisions that are made about them. As a result young people say that they feel listened to. They contrast the approach of foster carers positively when compared with earlier life experiences or previous placements. This supports young people to say that they would be comfortable about making a complaint or speaking to someone if they were not happy.

Through the location of their foster placements, young people are able to continue to attend schools or education facilities that are identified to meet their individual needs. This provides continuity, consistency and allows young people to maintain positive friendships and relationships. Young people also benefit from contact with their parents and extended family members when this is appropriate. Close liaison with placing authorities, external agencies and committed foster carers ensures this happens regularly. The maintenance of these important relationships contributes to the effective implementation of care plans for young people.

Young people expand their life experiences through engagement in a wide range of activities. This enhances their well-being and helps them to feel part of the fostering family in a way that contributes to a sense of belonging.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The service works together with local authorities to identify specific areas of need. This supports focused recruitment in particular geographical locations and helps to

meet the expressed preference of placing authorities for foster carers in their locality. Expressions of interest in fostering come from a wide range of people, but result in a limited number of fostering households being approved. As a result the service does not currently have foster carers registered to deliver all aims set out in its statement of purpose. For example, no fostering households are currently approved for parent and child placements. This remains an aspiration for the service and work is in progress to achieve this.

Positive information sharing between placing authorities and the fostering service supports foster carers to meet the individual needs of young people. However, the limited number and variety of available placements affects the potential matches that can be put forward. Leaders and managers are aware of this and are realistic when considering referrals. They are clear when they are unable to meet the requests of local authorities and the requirements of children and young people, but actively promote positive matches when appropriate.

Foster carers describe the quality of training as 'top notch' and emphasise the strong focus on safeguarding children and young people. In addition to core skills, specialist courses are delivered to address additional needs when these are highlighted for particular foster carers. Most praise the quality of courses that prepare them for the fostering task, but a minority express a desire to explore issues in more detail. At the time of this inspection no carers had begun to complete the Training, Support and Development Standards. While none are currently outside the 12 month target for attaining this, a recommendation is made to ensure the service supports carers to achieve this in line with national minimum standards.

The fostering panel benefits from chairperson who brings considerable knowledge and experience. The panel is made up of people from a range of backgrounds with a strong focus on social care. Shortfalls relating to the selection and vetting of panel members are addressed elsewhere in this report. However, the contribution of the panel is a developing strength of the service. Panel members take their quality assurance role seriously. Clear feedback is provided to the service and suggestions for improvements in assessments of foster carers are made. Assessments are adequate but include limited evaluation of information gathered. Where issues are highlighted, follow up action is not consistently set out in a clear audit trail. As a result the fostering panel is required to clarify information prior to being able to make its recommendation.

Confusion around the appointment of the service's decision maker led to a failure to meet timescales set out in national minimum standards. Decisions were formally made two months after a fostering panel, significantly exceeding the expected timescale of seven working days. While foster carers were informed verbally of the panel's recommendation, some have never received written confirmation of the final decision which should have been communicated within five working days. This lack of clarity leads to confusion around the status of individual foster carers.

The service requires improvement to meet the full range of characteristics expected in a good service. However, shortfalls identified are not widespread or serious failings

that impact negatively on the safety and welfare of children and young people.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **inadequate**.

This inspection identified serious shortfalls in the processes for recruiting, selecting and vetting staff. Through not ensuring that these processes are robust, leaders and managers fail to put the safeguarding of children and young people at the centre of all the fostering service does. Deficiencies relate primarily to members of the panel and the agency's decision maker. However, weaknesses in recording and retention of information affect a range of staff. Recruitment practices are poor and ill conceived. While a Disclosure and Barring Service check is undertaken in all cases, effective interviews are not carried out or recorded. Information provided by potential staff is taken at face value. Gaps in employment history are not explained. Reasons for leaving previous employment are not consistently provided. References are not always taken up. When they are, the quality of references is not questioned or followed up through telephone checks. A reliance on personal references means that exploration of professional competence is not effectively addressed. Even when checks are sought, staff are allowed to commence work prior to all information relating to their fitness being received. For example, panel members and agency decision makers are provided with assessments and other documentation necessary to undertake their roles without formal checks being completed. Consequently, leaders and managers fail to effectively safeguard personal information about foster carers and their families.

In contrast to checks relating to staff, those undertaken for approved and potential foster carers are comprehensive and well evidenced.

The service has failed to produce and implement a policy to address the risks and impact of children and young people going missing from their foster placements. Elements of the advice given in the foster carers' handbook are contrary to the runaway and missing from home and care (RMFHC) protocols. Leaders and managers demonstrate limited awareness of these protocols for the area where carers live and the placing authorities of young people. While young people do not currently go missing, information provided by placing authorities in referral documentation highlights this as a potential risk. Leaders and managers had not made links with local police. Positive steps were taken to instigate an effective relationship during this inspection.

However, foster carers and supervising social workers work well to prepare thorough safer caring documents and assessments that identify and minimise risk in young people's placements. These are amended to reflect new information as it comes to light. In addition, young people clearly and confidently express that they feel safe in their placements. They demonstrate confidence in their ability to express their views and share any concerns they may have.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Leaders and managers engage well with a number of placing authorities to ascertain their particular needs. The service successfully goes through an accreditation process with local authorities prior to receiving referrals. Placement teams, consulted as part of this inspection praised the quality of service and the professionalism of staff. They highlight the availability of the service outside normal office hours as a particular strength.

The service has had limited opportunity to monitor progress and outcomes for children due to the limited number and duration of placements so far. However, procedures are in place to establish clear starting points for each young person to enable change to be identified over time. The views of young people are considered as part of this process, helping them to feel that their views count.

The Registered Manager's responsibility for monitoring of the overall function of the service is augmented through the introduction of an innovative Quality Assurance Committee. Members of the committee are clear about their role which is set out in terms of reference. They do not hold management responsibility but seek to provide a source of accountability to improve performance and drive up standards to benefit children and young people. The first formal review of the quality of care has been completed by the Registered Manager, but this was not submitted to Ofsted as required. The element of consultation and clear links to improvement are not effectively addressed in the report.

The arrangements for the supervision of staff lack clarity. Some are supervised by colleagues and detailed records of meetings and decisions are recorded. However, supervising social workers access supervision outside the agency. While this helps to promote their individual professional development, the Registered Manager does not have formal or consistent oversight of their work. In addition, arrangements for the supervision of the Registered Manager were not in place at the time of this inspection. Arrangements were made to rectify this situation during this inspection.

Leaders and managers fail to keep up-to-date with changes in legislation and practice. This leads to shortfalls in aspects of the service identified throughout this report. The features of a good service are not consistently met. Where regulatory requirements are not met they do not add to the negative impact on the welfare of children and young people. Therefore the leadership and management of the service requires improvement to be good.

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, 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.