

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. Five Rivers Child Care Limited is a national independent childcare 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 three other premises in Bromsgrove, Doncaster and Thornaby. It offers a variety of placements, including parent and child, emergency, respite, long-term and short-term placements. At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing placements for 224 children in 159 approved fostering households.

The manager registered with Ofsted in 2019.

Inspection dates: 17 to 21 July 2023

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| 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: 9 December 2019

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 have trusted relationships with their foster carers, who know them very well. Children enjoy being part of a family and develop a sense of belonging. Foster carers undertake therapeutic parenting training which helps them to understand how children's life experiences can affect them. This equips them to manage children's behaviours in sensitive and empathic ways. There is specialist advice and guidance available to carers from a psychotherapist when needed. Children and professionals speak highly of both the agency and foster carers.

Foster carers establish good routines for children. Children attend school and enjoy learning. Carers provide good opportunities for children to experience activities, holidays and new opportunities. Children have hobbies and interests, such as caring for pets, swimming and street dance. This helps them to learn new skills and feel proud of themselves. When children struggle with social situations, foster carers provide encouragement to try new things. This helps children to build confidence and resilience.

Fostering support workers provide valuable support to carers and children. They work creatively to support carers during stressful times, which minimises the risks of children having to move on in unplanned ways. Support continues when children move to independence. There is an outreach service for children, to help them manage this important transition. As a result, children have ongoing support into adulthood.

Foster carers are well supported to meet children's health needs. Children with complex health conditions and/or disabilities receive highly individualised care. Foster carers are attentive to children's specialist needs and ensure that they have access to a range of services to improve their quality of life. There is a policy regarding the agency's oversight of management of disability benefits, however, this is not always being followed. Managers recognise the importance of ensuring that records of expenditure are regularly reviewed to ensure that children have the maximum benefit from their additional income.

Managers carefully consider the needs of children before placing them with foster carers. An experienced placement officer leads the process, and carers are involved in the decision-making and planning. This helps to ensure that each placement has the best chance of succeeding. When children have moved on prematurely, senior managers scrutinise and analyse the reasons. This drives improvements to practice, helping to reduce these situations. There is a real commitment to minimising disruption to children's lives.

Foster carer assessments are thorough and completed in a timely way. Financial commitments are documented and assessed during the process; however, they are not reviewed at regular intervals. The agency does not therefore have ongoing oversight of the financial security of fostering households.

Children receive a 'welcome pack' when they move to live with foster carers. This includes clear information about the complaints procedure. Fostering support workers make a follow-up visit to help children understand the content. This process helps children to know their rights and how to seek advocacy when needed.

Children's participation is a real strength in all areas of the service. Children attend regular organised events such as puppet-making, drama, poetry and song-writing on issues important to them. The themes from these events have been made into a series of podcasts which are widely accessible to children. Children are also involved in the recruitment of social work staff. They also attend national youth council meetings. The agency has created a strong sense of community for children who are living away from their families.

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

Overall, children are protected from harm. There are some good examples where children have been kept safe in particularly complex situations, for example, where serious concerns were raised about carers. However, there are examples where practice could have been better. One child expressed some concerns about his foster carer and a regular visitor to the home. The child was visited and spoken to, however, there was a delay in the child being able to give a full account to a professional in his own language. The safety plan implemented by the agency was not sufficiently robust in addressing all the issues raised. This situation had the potential to place the child at increased risk of harm.

Managers have oversight of concerns about children. However, this is mainly evidenced in social workers' supervision records and evidence of managers' decision-making and action taken is not obvious on children's files. In some cases, there is little clarity about the rationale for decisions that are made and the review of actions to safeguard children. This could lead to confusion and inconsistent responses from involved professionals at key points, for example, from the out-of-hours service. Managers began to address this issue during the inspection, which has assured Ofsted that practice has begun to improve in this area.

Children's risk management plans are not kept up to date in all cases. This means they do not reflect the current situation for some children. Again, this leaves room for error and limits opportunities to identify emerging risks, particularly in the areas of neglect or exploitation of children. In some cases where concerns in relation to children have been investigated, it is not always clear from records what actions were taken and what the outcome was. This was evident in situations where children had been assaulted by other children, either in their home or in the community. As a result, children accessing their records would not gain a full understanding of significant events in their lives.

Managers have not notified Ofsted about some serious incidents involving children. This limits the opportunity for the regulator to carry out its duties regarding oversight of these incidents and the actions taken in response to incidents. Following

inspection, it was evident that managers had increased their understanding of the situations requiring a notification. Managers also demonstrated a strong commitment to improving this process.

The agency has a good system in place to ensure oversight of the most vulnerable children. Regular meetings are held to discuss and review the nature and level of risk impacting on these children. These meetings have been effective in identifying strategies to help foster carers keep children safe.

Children have trusted adults to talk to and they are able to share their concerns and worries with carers and/or professionals. Positive behaviour is promoted by carers, and they use their experience, skills and training to manage children's behaviour safely when children are upset or distressed. There are good examples of foster carers' records of these incidents.

Managers ensure that there is a thorough and robust foster carer assessment process to help ensure children are cared for by suitable people. Social work staff are also recruited safely, and the processes are well recorded by the agency.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

There is an experienced, dynamic manager who is committed to providing high standards of care for children. She is well respected in the agency, and she has provided stability during a busy period of growth and change. The manager has been quick to respond to issues raised during this Ofsted inspection.

The manager is very child-centred and this is evident in her decision-making across the organisation. She works creatively and flexibly with external agencies to achieve good outcomes for children. There are examples of working hard to help children to remain with their foster carers, and providing the right support to carers and children when they need it the most. As a result, professionals have confidence in the agency and speak highly of the team.

Managers have established systems to identify areas for development in practice. They have recently appointed an advanced practitioner to increase their oversight of practice in the agency. Thematic audits are being undertaken in focused areas which can then inform the direction of improvement work. This demonstrates the level of commitment to achieving high standards and improving the lives of children.

Team managers and staff receive regular supervision, which is reflective and focuses on the needs of children and their foster carers. The quality of supervision is good and team managers clearly care about their staff, valuing their contributions. Staff say they are well supported and enjoy working for the agency. This helps them to stay motivated and resilient in their work.

New staff benefit from a good induction. Along with established colleagues, they receive training on a range of issues relevant to their role. During inspection, there were concerns about staff's knowledge of contextual safeguarding, particularly

because there are a number of new staff. Managers understand the importance of reviewing this to ensure consistency of practice across the agency.

Foster carer applicants are well informed throughout the recruitment and assessment process. Following approval, foster carers are well supported, particularly in the early stages of their fostering career. There are a range of support groups and networks where carers receive advice and guidance from the agency and each other. Foster carers say that they have good support from their supervising social workers. There have been unavoidable changes in workers for some foster carers, however, this has been managed as well as possible by the agency.

Foster carers receive regular supervision and training. This enables them to continue to meet the needs of children in their care as they develop and grow. When children have more specialist needs, the agency sources training for foster carers to meet these needs.

The fostering panel has an experienced chair and members bring a wide range of skills and knowledge to the panel. There has been recent recruitment of new members as there is a recognition that diversity needs to improve. Panels are well chaired and quorate and minutes are clear. The panel applies useful scrutiny of foster carer assessments, enabling them to make clear and focused decisions about children. When the need arises, the panel process is used to consider and determine whether foster parents are safe to continue in their roles. There is a positive relationship between the panel and the agency, which aids continual improvement in practice.

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

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

| Requirement | Due date |
|--|-----------------------|
| <p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and</p> <p>sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for—</p> <p>liaison and co-operation with any local authority which is, or may be, making child protection enquiries in relation to any child placed by the fostering service provider,</p> <p>the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider,</p> <p>notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider, to the Chief Inspector,</p> <p>written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response,</p> <p>consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect, (Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b) (3)(a)(b)(c)(d)(e))</p> <p>This specifically relates to taking clear action in relation to concerns raised about or from children, reviewing these actions and recording them clearly on children’s files. When children’s first language is not English, measures must be</p> | <p>14 August 2023</p> |

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| <p>taken to ensure children can communicate their experiences in a timely way.</p> | |
| <p>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.</p> <p>Any notification made in accordance with this regulation which is given orally must be confirmed in writing.</p> <p>This relates to informing Ofsted of serious incidents, including the exploitation of children and assaults on children.</p> | <p>25 July 2023</p> |

Recommendations

- The service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.5)
- Where a child is eligible for benefits as a result of a disability, foster carers are encouraged to apply for those benefits. There are regular recorded discussions about how any additional benefits are being spent to promote the best interests of the child. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 28.9)
- Reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 13.8)
- Assessment and appraisal of all staff involved in fostering work takes account of identified skills needed for particular roles and is used to identify individuals' learning and development needs. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.5)

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

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Inspectors

Laura Walker, Social Care Inspector
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