

Phoenix Community Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Phoenix Community Care (PCC) is an independent fostering agency and was first registered with the Commission for Social Care Inspections in 2004. Its primary aim is to provide foster care placements to asylum seeking young people and unaccompanied minors. More recently however the service has broadened this scope to offering placements to 'mainstream' Looked after Children. The agency is privately owned and the office premises is in Edmonton within the London Borough of Enfield. The office building is easily accessible by British Rail and by bus. The fostering service employs a student social worker and a senior social worker to support approved foster carers while a qualified 'independent' social worker has been recruited to the assessment of prospective foster carers. At the time of the inspection the fostering agency had four approved foster carers, three prospective foster carers awaiting assessment and two young people in placement.

Summary

The purpose of the announced inspection of Phoenix Community Care fostering Service is to assess the service against key National Minimum Standards and gauge improvement made to the service since the last inspection that was conducted 14 months ago. The inspection process was conducted over three days; its scope is wide ranging. Overall Phoenix Community Care fostering service is judged to be a good service. It offers sound assessments of prospective foster carers and its support of approved foster carers is good, foster carers are appreciative of the service's 'personal touch' to ensure they receive adequate support. The staff team are committed to making the focus of their work child centred and there are plans in place to offer more specialised training to foster carers and recruit foster carers with differing skill mix and experiences. The outcomes for young people in placement are positive.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection highlighted six areas of concern which were addressed via six requirements. These related to the revision of the service's child protection procedures; the revision of the fostering panel meeting protocols, and training for panel members. These issues have all been resolved satisfactorily. In addition requirements were made at the last inspection that related to the prompt payment of foster carers, the prompt presentation of foster carer reviews at the fostering panel and for foster carers to be supervised by a suitably qualified and experienced social worker. These three requirements have also been addressed satisfactorily. One good practice recommendation was also made that related to the appointment of an independent chairperson to the fostering panel. This issue has been resolved.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Phoenix Community Care (PPC) fostering service promotes the health and development of children in their care. The registered manager comments that maintaining a healthy lifestyle for young people, which includes good levels of exercise and a well balanced diet, is a high priority for the service and its foster carers. During the referral process, staff of the fostering service seek to obtain comprehensive information about the physical and emotional health of

young people and then explore these with foster carers as part of the matching process. Good documentation is available on young people's files that outline any identified health care needs and how these needs are to be addressed. As a feature of the service's initial preparatory training for prospective carers, training is provided that is focussed on the health care needs of 'Looked After Children'. Similarly, as part of the assessment process, prospective carers are required to demonstrate their competency in supporting children and young people live healthy lifestyles. Files evidence that the service's focus on encouraging young people in placement to live healthy lives is consistent and, for example is routinely explored during supervisory visits and feature in monthly progress reports. Foster carers understand their responsibility in supporting young people maintain healthy lifestyles and ensure that young people in their care are registered with GP, dental and optical services soon after placements are arranged. Where necessary, the fostering service supports the input of specialist services. Foster carers confirm that they have access to good information regarding health issues via the foster carers' handbook. Health care leaflets that address issues such as sexual health are distributed by the fostering service. Many of the service's foster carers are first aid trained and have access to a dietician who provides guidance as part of the initial training available to prospective foster carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service protects young people in their care. There is no record of any complaint against the service since the last inspection and there has been no allegations made against any foster carer. Managers of the fostering service are well experienced to work effectively with young people and keep them safe. There are sound safe caring and child protection policies in place that further enhance the safety of young people in placement with the fostering service. Foster carers receive child protection training as part of the service's core preparatory training for prospective carers and thereafter at appropriate intervals. As part of the assessment process, prospective carers are required to demonstrated competency in caring for children and young people safely. Foster carers comment that they are very much aware of safe caring as this is keenly outlined in the foster carer's handbook and consistently features as part of supervisory visits. Files evidence safe caring policies for individual foster care households, although this document was not seen on the file for one foster care who at the time of the inspection had a child in placement. This is contrary to the service's stated policies and procedures. There are written policies in place that address issues of bullying and young people absent from placement without permission. Foster carers demonstrate a good understanding of these policies. Foster carers' homes provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. Health and safety checks are conducted by staff of the service at the initial home visit and thereafter on an annual basis. Foster carers comment and there is documented records on file that confirm this practice. The fostering service employs a home maintenance, 'handyman' who is responsible for the health and safety checks of foster carers' homes. Subsequent health and safety reports are detailed and comprehensive, outlining environmental issues that need resolving. With regards to the matching process, the fostering service gives careful consideration to the identified needs of the young person and whether or not its pool of foster carers can provide a placement that can meet well the identified needs. The registered manager indicates that where this is not the case, referrals for placements are refused by the service. Staff of the fostering service seek to obtain comprehensive information to assist inform decisions about the matching process. Equally, comprehensive information about foster carers that highlight particular strengths or areas in need of development is available to staff in making decisions about placement matching.

In particular good attention is paid to the cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious experiences of both the young people and prospective foster carers. One foster carer survey received states: 'PCC always aims to give as much information as is available at the time. They gave us all they had'. File records are explicit in highlighting skills and experiences of foster carers in these areas to ensure that the young person's holistic needs are considered. Where placement matches are not exact, for example where the ethnic background of the carer differs from that of the young person, issues of identity, race and ethnicity remain a high focus. Staff of the fostering service are suitable to work effectively with young people in placement. As part of the inspection process, five staff personnel files were reviewed. All staff files evidenced a Criminal Record Bureau check had been completed. However, while most files evidence full staff information as outlined in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations, two staff members' files failed to evidence positive proof of identification and one of these files also did not contain any written references or a documented history of employment. In reviewing required information for members of the service's fostering panel most files evidenced none or only one of the required two written references. Other files of members of the service's fostering panel failed to evidence positive proof of identification. This is not in accordance with the regulations and is not conducive to robust staff vetting practices in order to protect vulnerable young people. With regards to the service's fostering panel, the service has identified and is due to appoint a new chairperson for the fostering panel eminently. No fostering panel meeting was observed during this inspection, however minutes of two previous fostering panel meetings were reviewed. Records of discussion of the fostering panel are somewhat brief and are not demonstration of best practice. One of the meeting minutes was a record of a 'virtual' fostering panel meeting. Telephone discussions were held amongst some members of the fostering panel as the panel did not actually convene. This method of decision making via the fostering panel is not conducive to best practice and indeed is contrary to the service's own policies and procedures in relation to the functioning of the fostering panel, which reads: 'The foster care panel will be convened each time there is a need or at least quarterly....' Young people and foster carers and prospective foster carers will benefit from a review of the service's management and functioning of its fostering panel.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering service values diversity and has good experience of working effectively with young people from varying backgrounds as a result of the agency's continuing extensive work with asylum seekers and refugees. Issues of diversity and equality are explored with prospective foster carers and approved foster carers as part of the assessment process and regularly thereafter. The service has appropriate policies in place that address issues of diversity and equality such as an Equal Opportunity policy and foster carers understand and are supported to actively embrace differences and the individualistic needs of young people in placement. In particular the fostering service carefully monitors issues of diversity and identity where transracial placements are made. One foster carer survey received regarding a transracial placement states that the service is: 'Always encouraging to keep X in touch with cultural roots and ethnicity'. Good written guidance is available regarding issues of diversity and equality to both foster carers and young people via the foster carers' handbook and the children's guide respectively. The service has plans in place to recruit foster carers for differing backgrounds in order to better address the needs of young people seeking placements. The registered manager comments that future training plans for foster carers will include exploration of disability and issues of sexuality. The fostering service considers the educational progress of young people in placement

to be of paramount importance and foster carers understand their role in promoting the educational achievement of young people in their care. This ethos is supported by other services provided by the umbrella organisation, which includes a number educational resources. For example, the agency runs a school on the same premises as the offices of the fostering service. Supervisory visits consistently focus on issues relating to young people's educational development as does formal statutory 'Looked After Children' (LAC) reviews. One foster carer survey received comments: 'My link worker tried to encourage my young person a lot about getting up for school and tried to help her think about her future'. Young people's files contained comprehensive information about educational resources accessed and foster carers are very much involved in supporting young people develop educational interests. The fostering service ensures that young people live in learning environments and so, for example in some instances the service has provided young people with their own computers to enhance learning opportunities. The service's fostering panel includes members whose field of expertise is education and so are able to provide guidance around educational issues via the fostering panel process. The fostering service provides short term breaks primarily for the use of existing foster carers managing placements. The service has in place two established respite carers approved specifically for this provision, which functions well.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes contact arrangements for young people in placement. The importance of this feature of the fostering task is understood by staff and foster carers. Foster carers confirm that information about promoting contact between young people and their significant others is provided by the fostering agency both via training and written guidance. Consultation with young people is promoted by the fostering service. Young people's case files evidence good attempts by the supervising social worker to obtain the views of young people about the quality of the placement and files evidence well frequent ongoing discussion between young people and their foster carers. One foster carer survey received comments about the PCC's consultation with young people: 'They will always ask what X will think in any discussion and take what he says seriously' Young people are also encouraged to participate fully in the LAC reviewing process. Supervisory visits consistently explore 'the views of the child' on each visit.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service prepares young people for adulthood. Foster carers caring for older young people understand and acknowledge their role in assisting young people to develop independent living skills in preparation for when they leave local authority care. Good evidence of this is documented in the nature of the routines of young people that highlight for example, the ability to travel independently, preferred bed times and competency around cooking meals. Foster carers are supported by supervising social workers in this task and so, for example, issues around self care, finance and budgeting, personal safety are all explored. Foster carers encourage young people to start to save money so that they are somewhat economically independent once the move on to live in the wider community. Young people's case files contain details of their financial entitlements and young people's allowances are a consistent issue for discussion during supervisory visits. With regards to foster carer allowances, foster carers indicate that they receive payment of fees promptly and at the agreed rate.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The fostering service has a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the service and of the facilities and services they provide. The Statement of Purpose document contains all information as specified in Standard 1 of the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards. The Children's Guide is an attractive easy read booklet that offers young people good guidance and information regarding services provided by the fostering agency. Staff are managed and organised effectively and the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff. An 'independent' qualified social worker has been recruited to completed foster carer assessments and these are completed to a high standard. A student social worker is employed whose primary task is to support existing foster carers approved by the agency. The work of the student social worker is supervised by a senior social worker recruited by the fostering agency. Foster carers comment that support received via the fostering service is good. This level of staff support is accurately reflected in file documentation. There has been marked improvement in the supervision of the student social worker since the last inspection. This has primarily been due to the relatively recent recruitment of a qualified and experienced senior social worker. Foster carer files evidence some gaps in the documentation over the past 12 months; for example the documentation of an unannounced visit was missing from a foster carer's file at the time of the inspection. However, since the recruitment of the senior social worker the quality of documentation seen on file has improved. The fostering service has a clear strategy in place for working with and supporting carers. Supervisory visits are regular and consistently monitor a range of issues that assess the quality of care provided to young people in placement. Some foster carers indicate however, that at times more careful planning and better sharing of information may address difficulties that subsequently arise. Other foster cares are very satisfied with the support they receive. One survey received from a foster carer comments: 'PCC are so helpful and supportive they are at the end of a phone and will come round and help straight away if you have any problems'. Foster carers have access to good training opportunities and find training sessions useful in supporting existing knowledge and skills. The service continues to develop its training programme for foster carers and has plans in place to offer more specialised training to carers in the near future. Respite care and out of hours support arrangements are well known to foster carers. Young people's files contain comprehensive information and foster carers confirm that they receive good background information to consider before agreeing placements. Administrative support of the fostering service is generally good; it has been noted elsewhere in this report that minutes of the fostering panel meetings are not as comprehensive as they could be, nonetheless, clerical systems are in place that support the functions of the fostering service.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
6	evidence individual safe caring documents on all foster carer files. (Regulation 12)	30 November 2007

15	follow clear procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff/foster carers to ensure children are protected as per Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations (Regulation 20)	30 November 2007
30	implement and maintain clear procedures for the operation of the Panel and follow written protocols consistently (Regulation 25)	30 November 2007
25	maintain a record of all unannounced visits to foster carer homes on file (Regulation 42)	30 November 2007

Recommendations

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

- consider providing a more detailed recording of fostering panel meeting minutes

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.