

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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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. The agency's original aim was 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.

Since the last inspection the agency has moved its office premises and employed a permanent operational manager. The fostering service employs a student social worker to support approved foster carers while qualified independent social workers have been recruited to complete the assessment of prospective foster carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Overall, the service is judged to be satisfactory. The staff group is committed to promoting good outcomes for children and young people. Looked after children live healthy lifestyles and are protected from harm or abuse. The service promotes the educational attainment of children and young people and they enjoy a range of leisure activities. Children and young people are involved in decision-making about their lives and the service promotes effective consultation with children, young people and foster carers. The service's recruitment, assessment and support of approved foster carers is very good. Staff are well supported and supervised and the fostering panel is well organised and efficiently run. Staff and foster carers have access to good training opportunities. Areas for improvement include medication administration practices, the review of written guidance available to foster carers and looked after children, staff recruitment practices, and the timely completion of required training for foster carers. The service does not currently have an appropriately qualified decision-maker and staff appraisals are not consistently conducted on an annual basis.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection resulted in four actions. These issues related to safe care policies, staff recruitment, the operation of the service's fostering panel and the recording of unannounced visits. This inspection notes that all outstanding issues have been resolved satisfactorily. The previous inspection also resulted in one recommendation. This related to the quality of the fostering panel meeting minutes. This issue has also been successfully addressed. The fostering service now employs an operational manager in addition to the existing Registered Manager. This has resulted in improvement in operational systems. For example, new recording methods that enhance the service's ability to track placement events more efficiently.

The fostering service has also moved premises, to a building that better meets the needs of the service. Managers have paid good attention to new regulations and guidance to enhance compliance with relevant legislation. The number of foster caring households approved by the agency has increased since the last inspection. This allows the service an increased number of potential foster care placements to facilitate effective matches with looked after children.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Children and young people's physical, emotional and social development needs are promoted by the fostering service. Children and young people live healthy lifestyles and have good access to primary and specialist health care services. Staff and foster carers maintain good records of all health care appointments and of their outcomes. Children and young people are promptly registered with primary care services and have easy access to specialist services. Foster carers and staff of the fostering service consistently review and address the health care needs of children and young people. This is particularly true of placement and supervisory visits. The health care needs of children and young people are also routinely explored during statutory looked after children (LAC) reviews and foster carers' annual reviews. Foster carers have access to first aid training and more general training that focuses on health care and medical matters. The fostering service's foster carer handbook also has written information relating to the role of the looked after nurse.

Foster carers understand the importance of healthy eating and provide children and young people with varied and nutritious meals. Foster carers explore with children and young people any dietary needs, based on taste preference, religious or cultural needs. Staff and foster carers encourage young people to access activities that include physical exercise to help promote healthy lifestyles. Some young people are members of and play for sporting (football) clubs or attend activities such as swimming and dance regularly.

Weakness are noted in the fostering service's management of children and young people's medication. The service is yet to provide training to foster carers in the administration of medication and written guidance is not available. Foster carers' written records of the administration of children's medication is not consistent. The lack of training and clear written guidance does not promote the safe administration of medication.

Children and young people live in suitable accommodation. Their carers' homes are comfortable and well furnished and decorated. The fostering service provides foster carers with training in health and safety matters and each foster home is inspected annually to monitor the suitability of the accommodation. Each child and young person has their own room unless otherwise agreed with the placing authority.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children and young people are protected from harm and abuse. The fostering service promotes their safety and welfare and foster carers are proactive in safeguarding children and young people. The service provides foster carers with comprehensive child protection training, some of which is facilitated by the host local authority. However, weaknesses are noted in the fostering service's written child protection guidance to foster carers. Child protection information available to foster carers is not user friendly or written in a manner that is easily understood as the information is largely procedural in nature.

Children and young people share positive relationships with their foster carers and relationships are built on mutual trust. Foster carers provide young people with guidance with regards to taking risks and offer appropriate support. For example some foster carers work with young people helping them to refrain from alcohol and tobacco use. Young people's case files detail clear risk assessments which assists foster carers in managing known or potential risks to the well-being of children or young people in their care.

Foster carers receive training in safe care practices and each fostering household has a documented safe caring policy on file. This is to ensure that appropriate boundaries are in place that help keep children and young people safe.

Children and young people very rarely go missing from their placements. In recent years only one incident of a young person being reported missing has occurred. The fostering service has comprehensive written guidance available about the management of missing children or those who are absent without permission. The service maintains appropriate records. Foster carers demonstrate an awareness of procedures and understand what action is to be taken in such an event.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children and young people share sound relationships with their foster families and staff of the service monitor this aspect of the placement well. There have been no serious or significant incidents reported by foster carers or the agency since the last inspection. Placements are positive, secure and well sustained; children and young people clearly benefit from this. Foster carers respect children and young people's privacy and keep their information confidentially. Foster carers have access to good information about recognising and addressing issues around bullying.

Foster carers receive good training, information and support about the management of challenging behaviour. This helps to support them respond appropriately to any unacceptable behaviour from children and young people. Staff consistently share background information about looked after children with their assigned foster carers

to ensure they are aware and well equipped to address any behavioural issues.

Children and young people participate in recreational activities of their choosing. Many are involved in sporting activities, such as swimming, football and dance. Other pursue other interests such as the care of animals. Children and young people are involved in community based and school leisure activities and participate in a range of trips and excursions. Young people largely accompany their foster families to enjoy holidays away. Children and young people make and sustain positive relationships with others. The fostering service and foster carers have a sensible and flexible approach to allowing young people's friends to visit and/or stay overnight.

Foster carers' homes promote learning and children and young people benefit from access to a range of play and learning materials. Staff of the service and foster carers ensure that children and young people are engaged in education, including those who do not attend mainstream school. Children and young people's educational attainment is a priority of the agency and educational needs are consistently explored in a number of different forums. These include placement visits and foster carers' annual review meetings. The fostering service is supported by educational experts and resources available through other enterprises of the organisation. Children and young people benefit from the close liaison between staff, their carers and school personnel. There is effective communication between all parties and foster carers are involved in relevant meetings such as parents' evenings and personal educational planning meetings. Foster carers are keen so see children in their care do well and demonstrate a commitment to securing appropriate educational placements to support successful learning.

Foster carers' households are well equipped to facilitate learning. For example children and young people have access to desks, access to the internet and quiet areas for homework.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people have good access to staff of the fostering service in order to share their wishes and feelings. Staff routinely meet in private with children and young people to explore placement issues. Young people feel the fostering service is interested in their opinions. Children and young people also have good access to relevant information about advocacy services and resources such as independent reviewing officers and national advocacy organisations. This acts to further enhance their opportunity to participate independently in the decision-making process. As appropriate, staff consult with the parents of looked after children to ensure their views about key issues are known.

Children and young people receive personalised care and the fostering service promotes individual identity. This is explored at the initial stages of the referral process. As appropriate, foster carers conduct life-story work with children and young people to assist with their understanding about their life history individual

identity. Children and young people enjoy a good choice of meals that meet religious and cultural needs. Young people's allowances and pocket money are appropriately facilitated and foster carers ensure each child and young person in their care has a savings account.

Children and young people enjoy regular and consistent contact with family members and friends where it is deemed safe for them to do so. Foster carers understand the importance of contact and facilitate complex and intricate contact arrangements. These arrangements are conducive with court orders and as advised by the placing authority. Where necessary, the fostering agency provides financial and practical assistance to ensure contact arrangements are conducted smoothly. Where contact with children and young people is prohibited, this is clearly highlighted to all parties to ensure risks to looked after children are minimised. Staff and foster carers ensure that the placing authority is made aware of the impact contact has on children and young people.

The fostering service has clear procedures to address preparation for placements. These support practice and encourage placement starts to be managed smoothly. Where placements are planned, the fostering service carefully co-ordinates introductions between potential foster carers and looked after children. The service has an effective matching process that ensures identified placements meet the needs of children and young people. There is written guidance available to staff to support successful matching. Staff are consistent in sharing, with foster carers, all available information about children and young people seeking placements. This is to ensure that foster carers have a good understanding about the needs of children and young people and of the placement objectives. Placements are well sustained and placement disruption is rare. Staff ensure there is consistent follow up with the placing authority when information is missing. Children and young people are well supported when placements end. This particularly the case for the preparation of children moving on to identified adoptive families.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service helps prepare older young people for adulthood and to leave local authority care. Foster carers are clear about their role and responsibilities in supporting young people become more independent. They support young people to independently complete household tasks, address self-care issues and participate in routine daily tasks such as budgeting, independent travel and the completion of applications for employment. Young people and their foster carers contribute to leaving care plans and are aware of the purpose of future pathway planning.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The fostering service has clear and effective procedures in place that address the recruitment and assessment of prospective foster carers. Staff are consistently prompt and robust in dealing with initial enquiries, exploratory home visits and submitted applications. The agency's skills to foster training is offered to all suitable applicants and this provides them with a clear understanding of the fostering task and the agency's expectations. Foster care applicants consistently receive relevant information to assist their decision making about becoming foster carers. Staff ensure that, in every instance, all required vetting checks are undertaken. Foster care assessment reports are thorough, comprehensive and evidenced based.

The fostering service's fostering panel benefit from clear written procedures to guide practice. All fostering panel members have extensive expertise in their respective chosen fields. The service's fostering panel performs its quality assurance role well and as a direct result the quality of the assessments of applicants' suitability to foster have improved significantly. The administration of panel meetings is efficient and records of meetings are accurate and detailed. Foster carers routinely attend the fostering panel in person and decision making with regard to approval and re-approval is timely and appropriate. The fostering service's decision maker is not a qualified social worker as new legislation now requires.

The fostering service has a Statement of Purpose document that accurately outlines the aims and objectives of the service. The document is readily available to interested parties. The service's children's guide contains useful information, but its format and written style is not readily accessible to younger aged children. Information is currently geared towards older children. The guide also does not include information about Ofsted, as required.

Managers of the fostering service have good knowledge, expertise and qualifications in child development, child protection and the fostering task. The Registered Manager is appropriately qualified as is the newly appointed operational manager. The service is financially viable with good financial procedures in place. The agency's development plan indicates further growth and expansion of the fostering service.

Staff, volunteers and students working within the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people. This safeguards children and young people from potential harm and abuse. The service's recruitment and selection process of staff are sound, with the exception of telephone enquiries to verify written references not taking place in every case.

The fostering service continues to develop an effective training programme for foster carers. All new foster carers receive induction training, which they find useful. The fostering service pays good attention to the developmental needs of its foster carers. Good support and training is made available at flexible times to meet the training needs of participants. Foster carers receive training in safe caring and child

protection which is mandatory. The fostering service keenly supports foster carers to complete the Children's Workforce Development Council training for foster care. However, very few foster carers approved by the service have completed this training as required. This is important to ensure that foster carers continue to enhance their skills in providing quality care to children and young people.

Foster carers are clear that they feel the support and supervision they receive from staff is outstanding. The fostering service has an effective out-of-hours system, staff are accessible and approachable for support and advice during unsociable hours. The service facilitates peer support and membership of foster care associations to further support the efforts of its foster carers. Each foster care household is allocated a staff member to work with them and staff conduct annual unannounced home visits. Foster carers have access to the service's foster care handbook, which contains key policies and procedures. However, the handbook is not user friendly and is heavily focussed on procedures as opposed to practical advice and information. The handbook also fails to provide foster carers with key information, for example, about health and education promotion, and the administration of medication.

The fostering service has a comprehensive complaints procedure in place that is well understood by foster carers. Since the last inspection the service has received one complaint which the service managed appropriately and in accordance with written policies. There is effective communication between staff of the fostering service and the local authority. This collaboration assists with the effective co-ordination of children and young people's care.

There have been no allegations made against staff or foster carers since the last inspection. The service has clear and effective policies in place that address the management of allegations. Staff and foster carers receive useful training in the management of allegations and child protection issues in general.

The service has in place a good quality learning and development programme in place for staff that address their individual development needs. Induction training is available for all those on the service's central list. Social work staff are appropriately qualified and experienced in child care, child protection and fostering. Social work students are appropriately supervised by experienced social workers.

Staff and volunteers are supported and guided to fulfil their roles and provide a quality service to children and young people. Staff supervision is regularly conducted. However the operational manager, a qualified social worker, does not receive clinical supervision from by an appropriately qualified line manager. This is important to ensure that senior staff have access to supervision to enhance their professional development in working effectively with children and young people. Some staff appraisals are also overdue.

Staff maintain excellent records of placement activity on individual case files. Recording by staff is clear, relevant and comprehensively recorded. This practice has been enhanced by new recording tools used by foster carers and staff. The fostering service ensures that written information is kept confidential and electronic recording

systems are secure. There are robust administrative and IT systems in place to support the fostering service achieve its stated aims. Relevant records are shared with the placing authority to ensure that involved professionals are aware of placement issues and progress. Appropriate notifications of events are made to relevant bodies as required. Since the last inspection, the fostering service has moved office premises. The new office better meets the needs of this expanding fostering service.

Payments to foster carers are fair and paid in a timely fashion. Foster carers have access to financial advice and the fostering service has clear effective financial procedures and systems in place.

Shortfalls are noted in the agency's capacity to effectively monitor the operation of the fostering service has been outlined elsewhere in this report. However, identified weaknesses have minimal negative impact on the outcomes for children and young people. Outcomes for looked after children remain positive.

Children and young people are cared for in line with their care and placement plans. The fostering service's placement planning and reviewing systems are consistent, robust and well co-ordinated with the placing authority. Children and young people proactively participate in these processes and are supported to share their views and opinions. This acts to ensure that all parties are involved in the decision-making process and results in successful, sustained foster care placements which is to the clear benefit of children and young people.

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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg	Statutory Requirement	Due date
15 (2011)	provide foster carers with guidance, support and advice on health, in particular the administration of medication (Regulation 15(2)(d))	02/01/2012
3 (2011)	ensure the children's guide includes the address, including email address of and telephone number of the Chief Inspector (Regulation 3(c))	02/01/2012
4 (2011)	keep under review and revise the children's guide (Regulation 4(a))	02/01/2012

Recommendations

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

- ensure telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify written references (National Minimum Standard 19.1)
- facilitate foster carers completion of the Children's Workforce Developments Council training within specified timeframes as outlined in national minimum standard 20.3 (National Minimum Standard 20.3)
- provide foster carers with an updated foster carer handbook (National Minimum Standard 21.10)
- appoint an agency decision-maker who is a social worker with at least 3 years post qualifying experience in childcare social work and has knowledge of childcare law and practice (National Minimum Standard 23.12)
- ensure that managers are provided with regular supervision by appropriately qualified staff and that managers' appraisals are completed at least annually (National Minimum Standard 24.4 & 24.5)