

Phoenix Community Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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. In recent years however, the service has broadened this scope to offering placements to mainstream looked after children. The agency is privately owned.

The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers. The service works with the local authority to offer foster placements to children and young people on a planned or emergency basis, for short and long term duration, and for respite care. The service also offers mother and baby placements and foster care placements that allow siblings to remain together.

Since the last inspection the fostering service has recruited additional social work staff in order to meet the demands of the service. Recent appointments include an independent social worker responsible for the management of all foster carer reviews and the monitoring of the fostering service's overall operation and function.

At the time of this inspection, the service has 11 fostering households with 10 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**.

The fostering service demonstrates a commitment to developing children and young people's individual potential. Their identified, individual needs are well met by the service and children and young people feel their views are taken seriously. Placements are well sustained; many have been in place for a significant number of years. Unplanned endings are rare; the stability of placements promotes the progress achieved by children and young people. Children and young people feel safe, valued and part of the fostering family.

The fostering service's recruitment, assessment and preparation of prospective foster carers are robust. Foster carers are subject to thorough, review, training and regular supervision processes. This enhances their skills in providing children and young people with the care they need to grow and develop into confident young adults. Foster carers are committed to providing a high standard of care ensuring that children and young people have good opportunities to reach their full potential. The fostering service works in close partnership with other professionals to identify and address the individual needs of children and young people; foster carers feel very much a part of an effective team effort.

Safeguarding practice is at the heart of this fostering agency. There are effective systems in place to ensure that children and young people are kept safe. Thorough assessments of foster carer's skills are conducted and robust risk assessments and safer care plans are carried out. These ensure that children and young people's welfare is promoted and that they experience positive outcomes.

Leaders and managers know the young people very well and regularly monitor the progress they are making. They are passionate and committed about the service they are providing and ensuring positive outcomes for children and young people. Managers are accessible and approachable for foster carers, staff, and young people. Leaders are ambitious for the service and continually want to improve and develop.

Four shortfalls have been identified as a result of this inspection. These relate to the service's consultation efforts with young people, quality of care monitoring reports, the effective monitoring of recording information and the revision of the agency's statement of purpose document.

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
35 (2011)	maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals and provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted under this regulation (Regulation 35(1)&(2))	01/09/2014
4 (2011)	keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose. In particular, to state the differing types of foster care placements offered by the fostering service. (Regulation 4(a))	01/09/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account in developing the fostering service (NMS 1.7)
- Staff understand the nature of records maintained. there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (NMS 26.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The experiences, progress and outcomes for children and young people are positive. Children and young people live with their brothers and sisters in stable and well matched placements where this is in their best interests. Children and young people receive individualised care that meets their needs well and this promotes positive outcomes. Children and young people feel safe and at ease living within the fostering family and develop appropriate attachments. They know how complaints are to be made; no complaint has been recorded for a significant length of time. Children and young people grow in confidence and learn to take responsibility for their behaviour. They settle quickly into their placements and have a strong sense of belonging. One young person comments, 'X has been very good to us. I don't know what we would be without her'.

Children and young people receive clear, age-appropriate information about the agency, usually prior to the placement start and they have access to good information about the foster family selected to care for them. Introductions between the two parties are carefully and sensitively co-ordinated. This helps settle children and young people into their new surroundings and supports a positive placement start.

Children and young people have good access to family members, friends and others when it is safe for them to do so. Arrangements for contact are carefully managed by

the fostering agency with a consistent focus on the impact and the best interest of children and young people. Children and young people have access to information written about them by the fostering service.

Children and young people live in a healthy environment where their physical, emotional and social wellbeing is promoted. They have excellent access to primary health care services and receive advice and support from specialist services where this is required, for example to manage issues such as enuresis. In relation to their emotional health, children and young people also have good access to mental health professionals such as clinical psychologists for mental health assessments and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for on-going support and counselling. Documented health care plans ensure that children and young people gain the advice, support and treatment they need, when they need it.

Children and young people engage in a range of physical and social activities that are of their choosing. These typically include sport, attendance at local youth clubs, fishing, family holidays, and a range of leisure activities organised and facilitated by the fostering service. These activities ensure that children and young people enjoy good health and wellbeing. Children and young people enjoy well-balanced, nutritious diets, which meet their cultural and religious needs.

The agency is very active in promoting education, and this has a positive impact on children and young people's educational attainment. Historically, the organisation has provided formal education at their school which is based very close to the offices of the fostering service. As a result positive educational experiences are a high priority on the organisation and the fostering service's agenda. Children and young people very much benefit from the organisations educational expertise. There are excellent examples of looked after young people new to the UK, with very limited command of English who very quickly with the support of the organisation, excel in their academic achievements. All children and young people of school age are actively engaged in education and most are making remarkable academic progress.

Children and young people are able to express their views through review meetings, with their social worker, foster carers, and supervising social worker. Children and young people have access to independent advocacy via their responsible placing authority when there is a need. However, the agency has not yet implemented firm arrangements for capturing children and young people's views or opinions to influence or improve the services provided to them in foster care. This is important to ensure that as the service continues to develop that those who the service cares for have the opportunity to use their expertise and experiences to help shape the service in a meaningful way.

Children and young people are prepared for, and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their potential and achieve economic well-being. Foster carers provide all children and young people with creative opportunities to take measured risks and to learn independence skills. These are appropriate to their age and ability. Early in the placement start, children and young people are encouraged to develop practical skills and emotional strategies to support them taking personal responsibility for their

actions and behaviour. In relation to developing independence, older young people benefit from their foster carers assisting them develop skills which aid their independence when they move on. This is particularly important for those young people for whom living in the UK is a new experience. A foster carer caring for unaccompanied minors comments, 'When they first arrived, I thought they were in culture shock, they had never even seen escalators. Now they travel on public transport, up and down London, like you and I'. Young people confirm they are now better able to shop, cook meals, wash and clean up after themselves as a result of the support received from their foster carers.

Children and young people remain in touch with their family where this is in their best interests. They see their brothers and sisters and foster carers fully support this. Any issues arising from contact are handled sensitively by foster carers enabling the children and young people to develop emotional resilience, knowledge and understanding of their background. They remain connected to their family through these arrangements thereby ensuring their identity remains intact.

Children and young people's identity needs are very well met by the service and at all levels, issues of equality and diversity are well explored. For example, as required, children and young people have access to translation and interpreting services to ensure any language barrier is minimised. Children and young people are encouraged to explore and celebrate individual faith practices and placements are supportive in helping looked after children understand their backgrounds and the events that have happened to them. In some cases this has included experiences of post traumatic distress and is addressed through work with relevant mental health professionals. As a result of the service's keen attention to issues of equality and diversity, children and young people have increased self-confidence and self-esteem.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Foster carers share very positive relationships with the children and young people they care for. In turn, looked after children feel emotionally secure and have a strong sense of belonging within their foster families. One foster carer comments, 'I love having children in my home, watching them grow and have fun whilst their here, despite what's happened to them in the past. That's what it's all about'.

The fostering service ensures prospective foster carers are robustly recruited and assessed to ensure they meet the diverse needs of children and young people, including those with complex needs. Preparation is thorough and conducted with appropriate depth and rigor. Foster care assessments are largely comprehensive, analytical and identify the competencies and strengths foster carers have or need to develop. All assessments and approvals have been completed within eight months of the foster carers' application. Foster carers are clear about their role and the roles of the agency and local authority.

The service's fostering panel operates effectively and benefits by having its members

drawn from a diverse range of professional backgrounds. The panel undertakes clear and appropriate analyses of the work that is presented at panel meetings. There is strong communication between the panel chair and the manager and panel contributes effectively to specific improvements in the service. The administration of the fostering panel is effective and there are occasional training opportunities for those on the fostering service's central list.

Foster carers receive good quality support from staff through regular visits, telephone calls, supervision and support groups. Foster carers feel highly valued within the agency. They feel a key strength of the agency is the support they receive to achieve positive outcomes for children and young people. All feedback received from foster carers has been extremely positive. A newly approved foster carer comments, 'Dealing with PCC has been a positive experience for me. They are a small agency, but competent and knowledgeable. I am so happy I started this journey with them'. Carers are positive about all the training they receive, including that which occurs pre-approval. An experienced foster carer for the agency comments, 'I feel PCC engages with my husband and me very well, ensuring we deliver best practice at all times. The support that my husband and I have been given through regular training, supervision and support groups has given us confidence. And the ability to continue to foster and equip us with the skills to provide a high standard of care to our foster children'. Yet another foster carer said of the service, 'Any issue, anything at all and the staff come running to support you'.

The vast majority of carers complete their induction development standards within a year; this is significant progress and work is underway to train the remainder. The overall training programme available to foster carers is adequate in meeting their needs and ensuring they are able to offer good quality care.

Children and young people are carefully matched to their foster placements to ensure that individual needs are clearly identified and met. There is a formal process to ensure that appropriate matching is taking place. This process successfully identifies any gaps and provides additional support, resources and training that are needed to support the foster carers and the young person's placement. The fostering service's careful matching processes directly contributes to placement success and stability; unplanned placement endings are extremely rare within the service.

Foster carers and staff of the fostering team work in effective collaboration with external professionals. This is important to establish placement objectives and determine collectively, how children and young people's needs are to be met. Commissioners and social workers from placing authorities are complimentary about the care provided to children and young people. One local authority commissioner comments of the service, 'PCC are very tight with their referral process. They don't put forward foster carers often, but when they do, they are able to meet the needs required. Their foster carers are quality - they are genuine people and the agency has a good understanding about young people's needs'. Placing authority representatives cite good communication and quality of care as reasons for choosing the agency.

The fostering service works well with local authority partners to gain information about children and young people to inform care arrangements, make appropriate matching decisions to ensure the individual needs of looked after children are well met. Children and young people's care plans are well adhered to by all parties and statutory reviews are convened at appropriate intervals. This assists to timeously explore placement issues and progress and helps to minimise unnecessary placement drift and promote permanency.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering service staff team and foster carers ensure that the safety and well-being of children and young people is paramount. The service ensures that foster carers are aware of the vulnerabilities of the young people with whom they are working and are well informed about the underlying causes of the behaviours they can exhibit.

The assessment, preparation, training and supervision of foster carers is good and emphasises safeguarding children and young people. Additionally, policies and procedures are in place to guide foster carers and supervising social workers in caring for children and young people safely. Foster carers confirm that they understand the impact of abuse upon young people's behaviour. Consequently, they are guided to respond to children and young people's changing needs for protection.

All foster carers and staff receive training that helps keep children and young people safe. This includes training on child protection, trauma, attachment and safe caring. Foster carers' skills and knowledge in this area of their work is supplemented by written guidance in their handbook; carers have immediate access to information about how to respond to disclosures or safeguarding concerns. There have been no allegations or enquiries of a child protection nature made against any foster carer since the last inspection, three years ago.

Children and young people feel their foster carers and staff of the fostering service take their views seriously. They are aware how complaints are made and any risks they are exposed to are discussed with them on an individual basis. Any hazards are assessed so that children and young people are helped to have new experiences. Staff ensure that documented risk assessments and safe care policies are consistently reviewed and updated to enhance the safe care of children and young people. The service's development plan outlines plans to introduce the position of a 'Child Advocate' to better involve children and young people in a range of forums and discussion groups to key matters including issues of safety.

Children and young people in placement do not generally exhibit challenging behaviour and risk taking behaviour, such as absconding from placement is quite rare. The service had clear and comprehensive policies and procedures to address undesired behaviour. Staff and foster carers are very familiar with these protocols and take appropriate action, when required.

The fostering service has good systems in place for staff vetting and recruitment. These processes are well-organised and comprehensive. The organisation ensures that appropriate checks are carried out which confirm that staff, members of the central list and students are suitable to work with children and young people. Unannounced visits are undertaken annually and children and young people are seen without their foster carer, to gain their views.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Leaders of the service are ambitious for change, and many aspects of the fostering service's leadership and management are sound. There is a qualified, Registered Manager in post who is supported by the responsible individual, the team manager and a newly recruited independent social worker. This new post is responsible for the strategic monitoring and development of the service and to conduct and manage all foster carer reviews. As a leadership and management team, they are committed to delivering a quality service to children, young people and foster carers. All of the requirements and recommendations made at the previous inspection have been satisfactorily resolved. The service has an ambitious, yet realistic development plan in place to improve practice further and sets the future direction of the fostering service. Despite these improvements in service provision the effectiveness of quality assurance requires improvement.

Managers acknowledge that the fostering service's current IT and information data base systems are no longer fit for purpose. The service is in the process of acquiring alternative systems to better achieve the aims of the service. Managers and staff acknowledge that the current IT system is somewhat cumbersome to navigate, however, this does not account for noted recording errors. Discrepancies are found in the documented nature of some completed visits. For example, on one case, file numerous placement visits are recorded, yet very few supervisory visits appear on the system. Managers explained that regular supervisory visits had been completed but not recorded as such. Robust monitoring of staff's recording regimes would have highlighted this issue and prompted an effective solution. Managers acknowledge there is a need for improved clarity when recording to establish and document accurately the purpose of each visit, even when one visit serves a number of objectives.

The inspection also identified other isolated examples that highlight weaknesses in the auditing of staff records. These include failure to amend the approval conditions of a foster carer timeously and not being alert to a system's trigger that no unannounced visit had taken place to a foster care household within 12 months. The fostering services monitoring of its case file information records are not sufficiently robust and so does not consistently ensure records are kept current and support required fostering tasks.

The fostering service has other monitoring systems in place, which are effective.

These include for example, the tracking of individual children and young people's progress and outcomes, and the team manager's completion on quarterly overview reports to the organisation's directors. However, managers failed to produce any review of quality of care reports for the review of Ofsted as required by regulations. This is in breach of regulation 35 of the Fostering Services regulations, which requires providers to monitor and report matters set out in Schedule 6.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide are available. However the Statement of Purpose does not in any way state the types of placements provided by the service. This is important so that placing authorities in need of foster care placements are clear whether or not this fostering service can offer the kind of placement required generally or at the point of referral.

Staff are appropriately qualified and extremely committed to providing good support to children young people and their fostering families. They are supported through access to training, regular supervision, appraisals and reflective practice. One staff member comments, 'The staff team has changed. The new team brings freshness; they're young, with fresh ideas and bring an interesting dynamic to the service'. A newly recruited member of the team, comments, 'The team is a good team. We're small and it's often all hands on deck. Support is good and I feel we all have lots to offer'.

The agency currently does not engage young people in the appraisal process; consultation with children and young people has been highlighted elsewhere in this report as an area for improvement. The agency is committed to supporting, valuing and developing staff, for example, through promoting flexible working patterns and supporting access to professional qualifications.

The fostering service is adequately resourced and is financially viable. The fairly recent recruitment of additional social work and administrative staff is good illustration of the service's capacity to invest and develop while continuing to offer a quality service. The premises and administrative systems are suitable to enable the fostering service to meet its aims and objectives.

The fostering service has a good track record of successfully addressing shortfalls identified at previous inspections. The service has a clear vision for its developmental path and demonstrates a commitment to ensuring the outcomes for children and young people are positive. The service has realistic plans in place to support its efforts to continue to offer quality care and enhance improvements to service provision. Shortfalls identified in the service's leadership and management do not impact negatively on the safety or welfare of children and young people.

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.