

Phoenix Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC357652
Inspection date	11/07/2014
Inspector	David Morgan
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Date of last inspection	10/10/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Phoenix Fostering is a private fostering agency operating a model of therapeutic parenting for children who have experienced trauma, abuse, loss and separation. Carers are usually approved for one child only. On admission, children exhibit a range of behaviours arising from trauma, such as offending behaviours, aggression, sexualised behaviours and inability to trust. The agency employs a psychologist and a team of family support workers who work on a one-to-one basis with children.

The agency currently has 42 carers in 24 households caring for 19 children. Six new households (10 carers) were recruited last year. Care is predominantly provided in long term placements.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The overall effectiveness of the service is good. Although the overall judgement remains the same as last time (2011), the service is clearly continuing to improve and there is a large amount of practice that is outstanding. In particular, outcomes for children are remarkable. This reflects the unusually concentrated focus of the whole service on meeting the individual needs of each child. Children benefit, for example, from high levels of permanency; very few disruptions; minimal safeguarding concerns, and excellent attention to their education and emotional

progress. They recognise the substantial difference the service has made to them and their opportunities.

Progress and improvement are evident throughout the whole service and there is complete commitment to the therapeutic model. All the issues arising from the previous inspection have been addressed and staff are meaningfully engaged in national debates about fostering. This inspection confirms that data from the service compares favourably to national averages.

This inspection makes seven recommendations and no requirements. This is a significant number but does not represent major failures. Instead, it shows a slight lack of attention to the national minimum standards, especially during monitoring exercises. In each case the actual impact of the shortfall is low because of the exceptional work that is underway. Consequently, the service is well-positioned to improve further.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the decision maker lists the material taken into account in reaching decisions and also addresses the other considerations identified in this paragraph (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.40)
- ensure there is a written development plan, reviewed annually, for the future of the service. This is also with regard to consulting carers about the Foster Carer's Charter (NMS 18.2)
- ensure the reviews of each carer include an appraisal of performance against clear and consistent standards set by the agency. This is with particular regard to secondary carers (NMS 20.6)
- ensure that appropriate training on safer caring is provided to all members of the foster household, including young people of sufficient age and understanding (NMS 20.9)
- ensure that all social workers and other specialists are registered by the appropriate professional body. This is with regard to confirming that such registrations are current (NMS 23.4)
- ensure that all staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually and, where they are working with children, this appraisal takes into account any views of children the service is providing for (NMS 24.6)
- ensure the manager monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. This is also with regard to such monitoring being evaluative. (NMS 25.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children make exceptional progress; the external professionals who are involved with the service unanimously describe children's outcomes as 'excellent'. The nature of the service means that children arrive with profound emotional difficulties in particular. At their own pace they develop the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in and benefit from the same opportunities as their peers. Older children are able to reflect on the 'maturity' they have achieved. Learning to use dining utensils and having appropriate eye contact, for example, are individually small steps that contribute to social integration and self-confidence. In some cases, social opportunities, such as overnight stays with friends, become possible because personal hygiene, that was previously not understood, has been mastered. In many cases their successes not only exceed expectations but are exceptional by any standard.

Children are effectively engaged in understanding their journeys. This is based on highly secure relationships with their carers and exceptionally few disruptions. Most experience carefully managed admissions during which they learn about the foster families. Any individual needs arising, for example, from their religious beliefs, are in place from the start. All children are engaged in effective communication about their needs and wishes. One professional said, 'It's a very safe service: nothing is allowed to fester.' Subsequently, children engage in meaningful life-story work and benefit from particularly close investigations into their backgrounds, which gives each of them as clear a history as possible. As a result of the exceptional level of care, they gain emotional strength and learn to use this effectively in new situations, such as their educational placements. They consider the service they receive to be exceptional, compared to the large number of others they have experienced. Older children in particular are able to describe the progress they have made with immense clarity and articulate how it was achieved.

The majority of children experience new school placements when they transfer to the agency. This is higher than the national average but arises because of the specialised placements on offer and the close attention to their individual needs. Thereafter, however, there are very few changes in school placements; extremely high levels of attendance, and exceptional progress from individual starting points. Exclusions of any sort are minimized. Some children reported progressing from being permanently excluded from school to now undertaking mainstream examinations. Most children achieve far more than expected, with some attaining university placements. Their formal educations are supplemented well by wide-ranging recreational opportunities that facilitate their social inclusion.

Because of the severe difficulties most children experienced at home, they are nearly always placed over 20 miles from their home areas. Also, the vast majority have a high degree of permanency in long-term placements and are not expected to return home. As a result, children experience carefully controlled contact with their families.

This is pursued in line with their placement plans. Consequently, a significant proportion choose to remain with their carers after they reach 18 years of age. The fact that nearly all placements are solo placements with at least one full-time carer, means that each child receives a high level of individual guidance, including to their preparations for adulthood. Individual issues arising, for example, from learning difficulties are addressed well and children approach the future with confidence.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

New carers are recruited gradually so that the high quality of the service is maintained. This has proved to be a successful strategy as indicated by the outcomes for children and minimal turnover of carers. Senior personnel improve the recruitment processes in light of lessons learnt. One carer said that 'having contacted Local Authority and other independent agencies, the response from this agency stood well above the others, both in terms of friendliness but most importantly clarity of information given'. Innovative work is underway using social networking that has attracted favourable peer reviews from professional bodies. The assessments of new carers are also of a high calibre, occur well within the required timescales, and are effectively monitored prior to reaching panel. This too is an important contribution to the positive support of carers.

Carers receive an excellent package of training, which includes five days of preparatory training and a four day course on behaviour management prior to taking any foster children. This is a substantial investment of time and money, which pays dividends in terms of effective direct work with children. Existing carers and some of their sons and daughters provide invaluable input to the training of new carers. Previous delays in carers completing national induction standards within timescales have been addressed. Subsequent training is adapted in light of feedback to ensure it is as effective as possible, for example, by increasing the amount of group work and offering courses on Saturdays. Although this facilitates the developmental needs of secondary carers, it remains insufficiently clear what minimum amount of training such carers must complete each year. The effect of this shortfall is minimal because the majority of carers attend a significant amount of training each year.

There is highly effective matching of children with carers and, subsequently, a particularly high level of 'wraparound' care of each child. Not only does each child benefit from the direct support of at least one full-time carer but they also receive at least one weekly visit from an allocated support worker; this work is adapted in terms of frequency and purpose. Also, the vast majority of carers are only approved for one child. This accounts for the exceptionally low level of unoccupied beds compared to the national average. It also facilitates highly personalised attention to children's complex and challenging needs. The therapeutic programmes are reviewed frequently with all the relevant professionals (including a psychologist and the local authority social worker) at least every six weeks, which means that the service is adjusted to meet individual needs particularly quickly. One professional said 'the service is as truly child-centred as it is possible to be'; this was supported by all the

other professionals who were consulted. Children experience the excellent continuity of care and security of placement necessary for outstanding progress.

Exceptional and innovative support is provided directly to schools, which helps to sustain important educational placements by training teachers about the impact of trauma on children. One such example was described by a headteacher as the best of its type he had ever seen. The service maintains clear evidence of the marked improvements such input provides, for example, to substantial reductions in exclusions. As a result, children feel greater self-confidence and benefit from improved integration with their peers.

Carers also receive exceptional support from staff they describe as passionate and dedicated. One said, 'My supervising social worker is a star; I cannot praise her enough. She's an integral part of what we do - always on hand to support, guide and offer tips.' Appropriate caseloads mean that supervising social workers can provide the level and type of care that is required. Local authority commissioning officers confirmed that the service is 'above and beyond' what they would normally expect even at a high cost per child. Panel members feel there is a consistently high standard of work undertaken by staff and carers. Improvements have been made to the support that is provided to carer's own children. They also attend certain training courses including those about attachment and trauma. This too is an important contribution to the success of placements.

The panel is managed well and any conflicts of interest are addressed thoroughly, for example when a panel member became a carer. Panel members feel a high degree of commitment to the service and the model of care it applies. They offer a useful quality assurance function too and have a good understanding of the service through attending training events and receiving regular feedback. Decision-making also occurs in a timely way so that carers are not kept waiting. However, such decisions are not recorded. In normal circumstances this has minimal impact because the high quality of the assessment and panel processes mean the decision maker usually agrees with panel's recommendations.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The safety and safeguarding of children is undertaken well. Children rarely go missing or have cause to make allegations and the links with external agencies are well-established. Many children are able to poignantly reflect on the progress they have made. However, because of the complexities of their behaviours and backgrounds, especially in the early stages of their stays, negative incidents are relatively frequent in some cases. This is acknowledged by stringent attention to the training of carers in facilitating positive behaviour. The percentage of children who are physically restrained is higher than the national average (although this is falling year on year) but the frequency in the usage always reduces markedly over time for each child. Such success is partly attributable to excellent work by a member of staff who is responsible for monitoring, training (both in-house and external) and the

frequent reviews of behaviour management issues. Positive behaviour is systematically encouraged and is facilitated persistently. Excellent practice is demonstrated by each incident being reviewed on site with the carer and also the child and new strategies devised to prevent a recurrence. Such strategies are compiled in great detail. Currently, however, the opportunities for the birth children of carers to routinely complete safeguarding training are not being taken. This potentially reduces their understanding although their involvement in the agency's activities is otherwise unusually high.

Since the last inspection, improvements have been made to the safeguarding procedures. These have been shared with local authorities and accepted as a template for best practice. The risk assessment process has also been reviewed. It is now a thorough process that produces quantifiable assessments. This allows greater clarity about children's progress.

The recruitment of new staff and panel members follows a clear and thorough process. This results in children feeling safe with their carers and establishing positive relationships with them. A manager oversees human resource issues and is suitably trained. The process has been improved recently to include carers and serves to provide a high degree of protection. However, the monitoring of recruitment records has not ensured that the procedures are addressed as thoroughly as possible in all cases. For example, good practice is undertaken through the use of pre-interview discussions between candidates and staff, but these are not always recorded. Also, there is no system for repeating the checks of accreditation that specialist staff have with their professional bodies although these do occur on appointment. This too is a relatively minor shortfall but reflects negatively on the monitoring of the service and its attention to certain national standards.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Leaders of the service are ambitious, child-centred, and effective and ensure that the service operates efficiently. They are involved in national debates, including Government consultation exercises, and with professional organisations. The inclusive ethos of the company flourishes at all levels and the effectiveness of this model is demonstrated in the progress that children make. The values of the Foster Carer's Charter are firmly ensconced throughout the service although carers and staff have not had the benefit of participating in the debate. An appropriately qualified and experienced registered manager has been in post since early 2012 and, along with others, provides an important source of consistency. Lines of accountability are clear but the management team operate in a particularly cooperative rather than hierarchical way. This is reflected in a particularly high degree of communication throughout the service and empowerment of individuals. As a result there is minimal staff or carer turnover and a sense of excitement about the work.

Similarly, the development of individuals is strongly promoted, whether it is of children, staff or carers; there is substantial ongoing investment in training at all

levels. All staff members present themselves extremely well. One professional described certain staff as 'technically expert and tenacious', and this is applicable to the whole team. The service itself continues to develop and improve as lessons are learnt and plans implemented although this is not reflected in a written development plan. This shortfall has minimal impact but means that opportunities for coordinated discussion and reflection have not occurred. Improvements have been made as a result of the previous inspection's requirements (three) and recommendations (four). Certain policies and procedures have been amended as a result, such as the safeguarding policy. Also, the acceptance of parent and child placements has been reviewed and is now a much less significant part of the service. Carers are now routinely trained in medicine administration and storage, which provides a safer service to children.

Clarity has also been obtained about the specific responsibilities of qualified social workers in the agency, for example, in overseeing assessments of new carers. Social workers and other staff are supported well via one-to-one meetings with their line managers. They also receive generous financial support to complete a range of professional courses. On the other hand, they do not benefit from annual appraisals. This means the opportunities to take into account the views of children, for example, are not being used in their development. Although formal consultation exercises regarding the service are under-developed, there is ample evidence that the views of carers and staff are gathered informally and affect how the service improves. This applies in the case of carer's training, for example, and the increased usage of social media. This approach means that the actual impact of the shortfall is far less significant than it appears at first.

A similar issue arises with the monitoring of the service. Senior personnel are familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the service and are intent on making it better. Progress and improvement are evident and the progress made by individual children is routinely checked by the manager. However, the formal monitoring process does not always reflect the detailed scrutiny and evaluation that occurs. As a result, the full benefits of such an approach being applied comprehensively are not being seen and gaps are arising, as indicated in this inspection. This does not mean that there are major shortfalls but rather that some opportunities to improve, as described in the national minimum standards, are not being used thoroughly. As a result, the capacity of the service to continue to improve further is substantial.

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.