

Barnardo's North West Fostering Service (NW Region)

Barnardo's

Business First, Block B, Room 110, 23 Goodlass Road, Liverpool L24 9HJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Barnardo's North West Fostering Service is an independent fostering agency. It is part of a larger national organisation, Barnardo's, but operates under its own name and registration. Barnardo's North West Fostering Service covers the areas of Cumbria, Cheshire, Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside.

The agency offers a range of foster placements, including long-term, short-term, and specialist foster care for children aged from birth to 17 years. Children who reach the age of 18 years can continue living with their foster carers as young adults. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 65 carer households providing care to 76 children.

There has been no registered manager in this agency since the last inspection. While each manager has applied to register, the process has not been completed by Ofsted prior to the manager changing roles within the organisation. The current manager has been in post since January 2024 and has submitted an application to register with Ofsted.

The inspection was completed on-site at the office. Inspection activity included speaking with managers, supervising social workers, foster carers, children, and other professionals.

Inspection dates: 3 to 7 June 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 9 August 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Most children have lived with their foster carers for a number of years and are helped to make exceptional progress in all areas of their lives. Children speak fondly of their foster carers with one child saying, 'she's just a delight' while another said of their current foster carers, 'they're amazing'.

On rare occasions, some children have not experienced the care and nurture they deserve from their foster carers. Leaders and managers have taken action to address the concerns and minimise the impact on children. They have also identified learning to further develop practice across the agency.

Children are provided with varied opportunities to try new things, including days out to new places, sports clubs, and special interests such as bushcraft skills and musical theatre. Children are often viewed as 'part of the family' and are taken on family holidays, both in the country and abroad. This helps children to feel included, learn new skills and improve their self-esteem and social network.

Supervising social workers work well with professional networks and advocate strongly for children's best interests. When decisions are made that may not be in children's best interests, these are respectfully but confidently challenged, and escalated when required.

Foster carers and supervising social workers strongly advocate for children's right to education. They challenge schools when children are excluded or suspended, and ensure children receive their statutory right to education. When children's schools are not meeting their needs, supervising social workers work with foster carers to challenge decision making and ensure that children receive the best educational outcomes.

Children's health needs are well understood, and foster carers are able to meet these needs effectively. Children are supported to make healthy choices and take measured risks in line with their developmental needs. Foster carers support children to begin to take steps towards their independence as they become emotionally ready to do so.

When children's needs are significant, specialist support is commissioned to prevent children from having to move from their foster home. This provides intensive therapeutic support to children and foster carers. In addition, a support worker helps foster carers with therapeutic responses when they are struggling to understand children's behaviour. Support workers also work directly with children to help them understand their emotions and healthy relationships.

Children's views are requested regularly. Supervising social workers have completed some excellent work with children to ensure that their views are heard, including for non-verbal children. When children have shared their views about what can be

improved, supervising social workers have discussed this with foster carers to progress the change needed. This helps children to feel heard.

Many children have been supported to achieve permanence within their foster family. This includes foster carers who have been matched with children for the remainder of their childhood, foster carers who are supporting their now young adults under shared lives arrangements, and foster carers who are exploring special guardianship for the children in their care. This enables children to develop a sense of belonging within their foster family.

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

Children are seen regularly by supervising social workers and other professionals through planned and unannounced visits. Supervising social workers often speak with children away from other adults to ensure that children have the chance to talk openly. Foster carers say that their supervising social workers sometimes take children out into the community so that they can speak with them privately. This provides children with the opportunity to tell someone if they are worried.

Children's safe care plans are unique to each child and updated regularly. These are detailed and thorough, outlining key risks for each child and carer household. They provide useful strategies for carers to help them keep children safe.

Many carers provide excellent care for children, helping them to understand their feelings and cope with these effectively. Foster carers agree that there is a varied and interesting training programme which can help them better meet the needs of the children they care for. However, some foster carers have not been provided with key training to help them develop the skills required to meet children's specific needs. This does not ensure that children are cared for by foster carers who have completed relevant training.

When children go missing from home, they receive a quick and effective response to ensure their safety. The agency communicates well with other professionals and escalates concerns when children are not visited. The manager reviews all incidents of children going missing from home to identify patterns and trends.

Incidents of carers holding children to keep them safe are rare. Foster carers only access restraint training when it is identified as needed to keep a child safe. When physical interventions are used, it is as a last resort with oversight from the agency.

Foster carers and staff have a good understanding of what they need to do when safeguarding concerns arise. When children tell an adult that something has happened, the agency responds quickly and effectively. The agency investigates concerns from children thoroughly and works well with other professionals, keeping children's safety at the heart of those discussions. However, on one occasion, managers did not respond effectively to concerns shared by an internal professional. Decision-making following this focussed on appeasing the foster carers. This does not ensure that children are effectively safeguarded.

Supervising social workers speak regularly to foster carers about understanding and responding to behaviour that may result from trauma. However, on at least one occasion a lack of professional curiosity and pre-conceived ideas about the reasons for a child's behaviour led to the communication behind a child's behaviours going unrecognised. Leaders and managers are taking action to strengthen practice in this area.

Safer recruitment practices are followed when recruiting staff, panel members, and foster carers. Thorough checks are completed and when prospective foster carers do not agree to reference checks, these are not carried forward for assessment.

The fostering panel and agency decision maker provide independent scrutiny to approvals and reviews of foster carers. Any gaps identified in assessments are raised and addressed with any learning used to further develop practice in the agency.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Leaders and managers are supportive and nurturing. The care they provide to staff is rippled through to carers and children.

Since the last inspection, there have been several changes in the management team. Most managers have worked within the agency prior to taking on the manager's role which has offered some stability to staff, carers and children. Efforts have been made to ensure robust handovers between managers to minimise the impact of these changes. When missed opportunities to safeguard children are identified, managers have responded swiftly to identify any learning and to further develop practice across the agency.

Management oversight of significant incidents is robust and effective. However, when smaller concerns are consistently raised, managers are not proactive in identifying patterns and exploring these to identify any trends. While supervising social workers and practice managers do consistently explore issues with carers, there is little evidence of strong and active challenge when carers are not meeting the expectations of the agency.

Foster carers benefit from a strong team of skilled and experienced supervising social workers. Staff are provided with excellent support and ongoing training to enable them to do their jobs effectively. Staff at all levels are extremely positive about the support they receive and feel valued and heard within the agency.

Staff benefit from regular supervision and team meetings which offer them a space to reflect and seek support. Staff say that managers create a safe space to talk openly about their strengths and difficulties. Staff feel valued and heard by the management team and are enthusiastic about their experiences within the agency.

The agency drives continued innovation and learning, testing out new opportunities for improvement and disseminating their learning to the wider organisation. This

includes programmes such as the 'Young Inspectors' and a joint project with the Bank of England to support care experienced children with their budgeting skills. This helps to continually improve the care they offer as well as their understanding of children's experiences.

There is a strong and open culture of learning in the agency. Reflection and development are embedded throughout their practice, and points of learning are shared with staff, panel, and the wider agency to ensure continued improvement.

Carers are provided with varied training both virtually and in person. However, managers have, at times, failed to identify specific training that would support carers to better meet the needs of the children they care for. This was a recommendation from the last inspection and has been restated.

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

Statutory requirements

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

Requirement	Due date
The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. Specifically, the registered person must ensure that when consistent concerns arise, these are looked at as a whole. In addition, the registered person must ensure that carers have the skills to meet children's individual needs. (Regulation 11 (a))	11 August 2024

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children's safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placements. Children are protected from abuse and other forms of significant harm. Specifically, the registered person should ensure that all staff have an understanding of children's behaviour as communication. Staff should remain professionally curious and consider whether children's behaviour could be related to current distress rather than assuming that it is related to past trauma. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the manager regularly 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. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. Specifically, the registered person should ensure that low-level concerns are monitored when these occur regularly. The registered person should ensure that, when required, poor practice is actively challenged. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.2)
- The registered person should ensure that support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers; to assist them in meeting the needs of the child. This was a recommendation at the last inspection and has been restated. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.8)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the social care common inspection framework. This inspection was carried out under The Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC040580

Registered provider: Barnardo's

Registered provider address: Tanners Lane, Barkingside, Ilford IG6 1QG

Responsible individual: Rebecca Quigley

Registered manager: Post vacant

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Inspectors

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