

Barnardos North West Fostering Service (NW Region)

Barnardo's

5 Lineside Close, Liverpool L25 2UD

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 based in Liverpool. This service operates in Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Cumbria.

The agency provides emergency, short-term and long-term placements for children. It also provides short breaks for disabled children who may be living with their own families or children living in foster care. At the time of this inspection, the fostering service had 77 foster carers providing foster care to 76 children and young people.

The manager registered with Ofsted in June 2016.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 9 to 13 August 2021

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	outstanding
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	outstanding
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The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 15 May 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

A significantly high proportion of children placed by the agency are making exceptional and sustained progress. They benefit from living with foster carers who receive regular, high-quality training, support and guidance which gives them the skills they need to provide care that enhances the children's overall outcomes. Foster carers form robust and trusting relationships with children, and this further underpins children's progress and sense of security.

Comments received from placing social workers confirmed the high-quality level of care and the positive effect this is having on children. One social worker said: 'Since [name of child] has been living with his carers, he has made exceptional progress. It is obvious he has an excellent relationship with them, and he is very much a part of the family.'

Supervising social workers have an in-depth knowledge of the children that are placed with carers. This direct contact ensures that they speak with the children on a regular basis to find out their wishes and views. In addition, children's feedback is gathered by engaging with the children through children and young people's groups.

During COVID-19 restrictions, the agency and staff have been creative in the use of technology to conduct on-line meetings and events when face-to-face visits have not been appropriate. The strong relationships they build with children encourages highly effective support to be provided to carers to develop them in their role. In addition, the agency has a support worker who has direct experience of being a foster carer. He provides highly individualised support to carers when additional help is required. Foster carers speak very highly of the on-going and effective support provided by all staff from the agency. The vast majority of foster carers who responded to surveys or spoke with inspectors said the reason for joining this agency was because of the high-level, good-quality support provided to them as carers.

Education of the children is highly valued by staff and foster carers who take an active role in successfully encouraging children to achieve the best possible educational outcomes. This has enabled some children to far exceed their initial predictions for educational attainment and for others to make sustained progress from their starting points. Foster carers have continued to provide good-quality educational support throughout the period of COVID-19 restrictions, for example, by supporting children to learn in the home and engaging them in other activities to further enhance their learning and development.

All the children have excellent access to primary and specialist health care services that meet their individual health care needs. Foster carers take the children's health seriously and actively support children to develop healthy lifestyles, encouraging

engagement with health care professionals, as well as supporting healthy eating and lifestyles.

Children are enthused and inspired to take part in activities that reflect their interests and to engage with other children. Virtual events arranged by the agency during the COVID-19 pandemic helped children and foster carers to feel connected to the agency and other families. Events included on-line bingo, chatter and natter groups and a virtual Christmas Ball.

Children are very well supported to maintain strong and positive relationships with their families. Where agreed and appropriate, carers make sure that children are able to travel to see family members and they help them to manage any issues that may arise from these meetings.

Children reaching the age of 18 are supported to remain living with their foster carers under a 'staying put' scheme, in accordance with their wishes. The agency has its own 'staying put' scheme as well as working in line with the national scheme. This enhances the stability for children moving into adulthood and continues to make them feel valued as a member of the family.

Care and support provided is unique and individually responsive to children's identity and history, with children's cultural needs met sensitively. For example, carers ensure that children can attend their chosen places of worship and that cultural dietary requirements are followed. This means that children's individual beliefs are respected.

Children benefit from having carefully planned introductory visits to carers. This enables them to feel well prepared for their move and to begin to form attachments quickly. When children are unable to have an introductory visit, they are provided with foster family welcome books which include pictures and information about the foster family. This offers children reassurance prior to moving and helps them to settle quickly. One child said 'I met with [name of carer] before I moved in. It helped me to feel really welcomed from the moment I met them. I'm part of their family and I am happy that I can continue living with them until I am ready to move.'

Some children have the benefit of being able to go from their main carers to linked support carers for planned breaks. This follows a period of introductions and is carried out sensitively. Strong and effective communication means that the care and support provided to children are seamless.

A significant strength of the agency is stability of placements. When there is an unplanned ending, the agency reflects on why this has happened and learns from this to minimise the chance of it happening again.

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

The agency has a strong embedded culture of safeguarding. Managers, supervising social workers and foster carers make sure that children live in safe and supportive

households. Health and safety checks are undertaken annually and supervising social workers also check at the twice-yearly unannounced visits that the home continues to provide a safe environment. During the time of COVID-19 restrictions, these visits were undertaken virtually with carers contacted by video calls which enabled the carer to show the supervising social worker around the home. Some visits took place face to face where it was assessed to be safe to do so. Since the latest lifting of restrictions, home visits in person have restarted.

Incidents of children going missing from their foster homes are monitored and reported on. Foster carers know who to contact if a child goes missing and they follow agreed protocols. This helps to keep children safe. When children return home, the majority are offered an independent return home visit. However, the agency does not always receive feedback following the return home interview, which would provide information that may be helpful in understanding why a child has been missing.

Children have up-to-date, individual risk assessments which are unique to each child. These are kept under review and support foster carers and staff to manage risks effectively. Foster carers help children to understand behaviours which may increase risks. They offer strategies to children to help to minimise risk while enabling them to take reasonable risks as part of their development.

The agency provides training and support to help foster carers understand and manage children's behaviours. The agency has a non-physical intervention protocol in place and advises carers on de-escalation techniques. However, some carers have intervened when behaviours have placed the child or carers at risk, which has previously led to allegations being made. The agency is aware of this and is reviewing further support they can provide to carers who support children who may have very challenging behaviours.

Foster carers are trained in subjects that help to keep children safe. This includes training around substance misuse, exploitation, self-harming behaviour and domestic violence. This helps carers to speak confidently with children to help them to feel safe.

Some face-to-face training has been postponed and this has affected the timely completion of first-aid training. On-line training has been provided and plans are in place to ensure carers undertake the face-to-face first-aid training as soon as possible.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since June 2016. She fully understands her role, the legal responsibilities and her accountabilities as the registered manager, demonstrating drive and ambition for the service. She is supported in her role by three experienced practice managers who mirror her drive and commitment to enhancing ways of improving outcomes for children placed with the agency's approved foster carers. This ethos and ambition are reflected in the

practice of the foster carers and supervising social workers, who demonstrate in-depth knowledge and understanding of the needs of the children in placement.

Foster carers say they feel extremely valued by the agency, with the vast majority saying that the support they receive enables them to fulfil their role exceptionally well. Foster carers, supervising social workers and staff are very knowledgeable and experienced, and are determined that the children will achieve the best possible outcomes.

The agency has addressed the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection. There are robust systems in place to enable effective monitoring and review of the quality of care provided. This enables any shortfall to be addressed swiftly and effectively, ensuring that the children's needs and outcomes remain central to the staff's practice at all times.

The responsible individual, managers and practice managers have an in-depth understanding of the agency's strengths and areas for ongoing development. This enables them to make continuing and sustainable improvements which benefit the children placed with carers. For example, it was identified that the recruitment of carers had remained static. Additional funds have been identified to enable a targeted recruitment campaign to take place via the media and social networking. The agency feels this proactive approach will increase the numbers of people applying to be foster carers and, in turn, increase the number and diversity of carers able to provide care to children, to reflect the diversity of the area the agency covers.

The fostering panel makes safe and timely recommendations about people's suitability to foster. These recommendations are considered thoroughly by the agency decision maker and allows for decisions to be made based on the information provided. However, foster panel minutes could be enhanced so that they clearly reflect the discussions held by panel. Also, although the panel always asks a question of a child in their service, it is not consistently recorded in the minutes.

The fostering panel members have a wide range of skills and knowledge about meeting children's needs, including people with a health background, those who foster and those who have experienced being a child looked after. Panel could be improved by increasing the diversity of its members to reflect the demographic of the area it covers. This has been recognised by managers, who are actively seeking additional representation on panel to reflect the diversity of the demographic area the agency covers.

Independent reviewing officers undertake timely and in-depth annual reviews of foster carers. Reviews provide excellent information to enable decisions about their continued suitability to be approved as foster carers.

Throughout the period of COVID-19 restrictions, the manager and staff have been creative in supporting the foster carers to fulfil their role. Staff and foster carers are

passionate about promoting positive outcomes for children and this is reflected in responses from children, carers and staff.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that written records kept by the fostering service when a child goes missing detail action taken by foster carers, the circumstances of the child's return, and any reason given by the child for running away from the foster home and action taken in light of those reasons. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 5.10)
- The registered person should ensure that fostering panel membership should appropriately reflect the diversity of the local community. In addition, people who are, or have previously been foster carers are likely to make a valuable contribution to panel discussions, as are their sons and daughters and people with experience of being in foster care themselves. ('The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services', page 39, paragraph 5.8)
- 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, – specifically in relation to first aid. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 20.8)
- The registered person should ensure that that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the issues and views expressed by panel members, particularly if there have been differences of opinion regarding recommendation or when a question has been asked on behalf of a child. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 14.7)

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: Brenda Farrell

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Inspectors

Sarah Oldham, Social Care Inspector
Kathryn Grindrod, Social Care Inspector

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