

Barnardos North West Fostering Service (NW Region)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Barnardo's North West Fostering Service is an independent fostering agency based in Liverpool. It was established on 1 April 2009 following the reorganisation of Barnardo's fostering services. This service operates in Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Cumbria.

The agency provides emergency, short-term and permanent placements for children and young people. It also provides a short-break service for disabled children who may be living with their own families or living in foster care.

At the time of this inspection the agency had 158 approved foster carers, in 87 households, providing placements for 70 children and young people. 10 households provide exclusive short-break care.

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**.

This is a well managed fostering agency that prioritises the diverse needs of children and young people. The progress that they make following placement with the agency's foster carers is good. Children and young people live in safe fostering households. Thorough preparation and assessment culminates in the approval of families in which the agency has confidence.

Children and young people are welcomed into their foster families and enabled to feel secure. Many short-term placements have become permanent; young people have been able to develop attachments; engage in a range of activities that they enjoy; and their self-esteem has improved.

The agency has expanded since the last inspection. Senior managers have engaged in positive partnership working and have developed the agency to meet the needs of placing authorities. The recruitment of foster carers is targeted to meet this demand. Potential applicants are welcomed and given the opportunity to meet with experienced foster carers early in the application process, so that they have realistic expectations about the fostering role.

The large majority of approved foster carers feel respected as professionals by the agency staff and say they receive a good level of support. One foster carer commented, 'we have been overwhelmed with the support that we have received. We feel part of a large family. We are so proud of our foster children and what they have achieved'.

Leaders and managers have a good understanding of the strengths of the service. However, the agency has not developed an effective way for children and young people to be able to contribute to its development.

Three requirements and eight recommendations have resulted from this inspection. While the agency's safeguarding processes require improvement the shortfalls identified on the inspection have to date had no direct impact on the safety of children and young people. Managers have also demonstrated their commitment to address the issues identified and a number of them had been actioned by the conclusion of the inspection.

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
3 (2011)	ensure that the written statement in relation to the fostering service('the statement of purpose') is available on the agency's website and that Ofsted is notified of any revision to this or the children's guide within 28 days (Regulation 3(2) and Regulation 4(b))	25/07/2014
12 (2011)	ensure that records maintained relating to any allegations of abuse or neglect include full details of the investigation and action taken, as prescribed in the organisation's written policy	25/07/2014

	(Regulation 12)	
28 (2011)	ensure that when reviewing the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation that they give notice to the foster parent regarding the revised terms of approval('a qualifying determination'), allowing them 28 days to appeal or alternatively that they are in receipt of the foster parents written agreement to the changes prior to making the agency decision. (Regulation 28(7)(9))	25/07/2014

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)
- ensure that the fostering service's procedures are compatible with the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care(RMFHC) protocols and procedures for the area where the foster home is located; and that these are agreed by the police (NMS 5.6)
- ensure that the agency decision maker is in receipt of the final agreed set of panel minutes prior making a considered decision (NMS 14.9)
- ensure that all approved foster carers attain the training, support and development standards within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)
- ensure that the fostering services child protection procedures include the actions that will be taken in the event of a disclosure of historic abuse (NMS 22)
- ensure that the fostering services child protection procedures are submitted for consideration and comment to the Local Safeguarding Children's Board(LSCB) and to the Local Authority Designated Officer(LADO); and these are consistent with the local policies agreed by the LSCB relevant to the area where the foster carers lives (NMS 22.4)
- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with policies and to identify patterns and trends; particularly missing documents on staff and foster carers files (NMS 25.2)
- endeavour to appoint an independent member of the fostering panel with expertise in the education of young people. (Volume 4, statutory guidance para 5.8)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are well matched with foster carers who are largely able

to meet their needs. Foster carers are confident that all those working in the fostering service are aware of their particular circumstances and this helps match children appropriately. Pressure is not placed on foster carers to take additional children and as such children in placement benefit from stable placements with foster carers who are able to prioritise their needs. Consequently, some children who were originally placed on a short-term basis are now benefitting from permanency in these families, including some on 'staying put' arrangements. Many children have also been enabled to live with their brothers and sisters. This placement stability and sense of security ensures that young people make good progress and are able to fulfil their potential.

Children and young people who make a planned move to foster carers receive a personalised profile of the foster family. This contains details about the family, as well as photographs of the foster home and the family members. This helps prepare young people for their move as they are able to develop an understanding of their future placement and are made to feel welcome.

Children and young people are able to remain in contact with their birth family members where this is part of their care plan. Foster carers help facilitate this contact. This helps to re-assure young people and ensures that they are able to maintain their identity and an understanding of their background.

Children and young people attend school regularly and are making good progress. However, currently this is difficult to track as the agency is in the process of transferring to a new electronic system. Some young people have had a change of school when their placements have been confirmed as permanent. However, these decisions are only been made following appropriate consultations. The agency's educational psychologist is involved in this important decision and assists in the transition process to ensure that young people are best prepared for this move. Some young people have made such pleasing progress since placement with their foster carers that they have been enabled to return to mainstream school.

Children and young people's health needs are addressed well by their foster carers. This includes disabled children, as their foster carers receive specialist training to enable them to meet their needs if required. Children and young people receive encouragement to lead healthy lifestyles and to have the same level of social integration as their peers. Their individual interests are promoted. This helps young people form friendships in the community and aids the development of positive self-esteem as their achievements are celebrated. Currently, young people engage in a range of activities including: youth club; scouts; music lessons; gym; athletics; drama; football; swimming; and golf. Supervising social workers also address the issue of delegated authority with children's social workers. Hence, children and young people are able to feel part of their foster family and take part in activities such as a sleep-over with a friend, with the consent of their foster carer. Foster carers are clear about the decisions that they are able to make.

Children and young people are able to express their views through their own social worker, at their review meetings and via the foster carers supervising social worker.

They are also asked their views as part of the foster carers annual review process. Young people have also been assisted to access an independent advocate via their placing authority when they have needed one. However, the agency has yet to establish effective arrangements to capture the views of children and young people to help inform the development of the service. The agency has a participation plan in place but this is yet to be implemented.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has sufficient foster carers to meet the demands of placing authorities. The number of approved foster carers remains relatively static over the last year; as some new families have been approved but others have resigned or been de-registered. Although the vacancy rate appears high, this is due to some carers being approved for a sibling group but having just one child in placement. Historically, the agency would not have considered placing any additional children with these families. However, they have recently revised this policy. An update assessment is now completed, along with consultation with the child or children already placed, and their social workers. If the outcome of the assessment is positive the agency will now consider the placements of unrelated children. Foster carers are positive about this change as they sometimes feel they are able to offer stability to more than one child. Young people spoken to on the inspection were also enthusiastic about this change.

The fostering agency recruits a suitably diverse group of foster carers. Managers have a good understanding of the needs of local authorities and target their recruitment accordingly, both in terms of needs and geographical location. The agency is currently supporting a 'word of mouth' campaign as many of their foster carers have been encouraged to approach the agency as a result of positive recommendations from family and friends. There is a recruitment strategy in place which is subject to regular review.

Foster carers comment on the welcoming approach they received from the agency following their initial enquiry. Potential applicants also have the opportunity to meet with experienced foster carers prior to starting the assessment process. Fostering assessments are largely completed within timescale; the agency will employ independent assessors if they are unable to allocate all assessments following attendance at preparation groups. Fostering assessments are comprehensive and analytical, helping to ensure that only the most suitable applicants proceed to approval.

The agency has an appropriate central list of panel members; although it currently has no panel member with expertise in children's education. The panel chair is independent of the agency and suitably qualified and experienced. Panel members are subject to checks and references prior to taking up their position on the panel. The panel demonstrates appropriate vigour prior to reaching a recommendation. The agency decision maker also clearly records her own reasons for reaching the agency

decision. However, this is made on sight of the draft set of minutes only before the panel members who were present have agreed them as accurate. Furthermore, when considering a change of approval status of foster carers the agency decision has been made prematurely. Foster carers have not been informed of the qualifying determination process or of their right to appeal in these circumstances.

Post approval, foster carers are able to access a range of additional training opportunities. One foster carer commented, 'we have access to the training programme in advance so we can identify what we need. This has helped us give quality support to our foster child'. However, insufficient emphasis is placed on foster carers completing the training, support and development standards within 12 months of approval. Without this foundation of understanding it is difficult for the agency to build on the skill set of their foster carers.

Foster carers benefit from a good level of support following approval. Foster carers say, 'fostering for Barnardo's is like being part of a family; everyone is so supportive'. The agency operates an 'out of hours' support service to provide advice and guidance to foster carers should they require it. Those who have accessed this service say it works well. One foster carer commented, 'whoever you speak to knows your particular situation, which is so re-assuring when you need some advice'. Foster carers are also able to access the support and advice from the agency's educational psychologist. Foster carers unanimously commented about the effectiveness of this. One foster carer commented, 'she has given the most fabulous practical suggestions about how to deal with some of the most challenging children that we have fostered'. This support has prevented placement breakdown and enabled foster carers to continue to care for young people, with some ultimately resulting in permanence.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

While this judgement area requires improvement, many elements are sound. Children and young people indicate that they feel safe living in their foster families. One young person said, 'it is great in foster care, you get looked after properly and get to go places'. Foster carers complete a safe caring policy specific to the needs of the child that is in their care. Foster carers and staff receive regular safeguarding training, and are able to access specialist training if applicable, such as child sexual exploitation. This ensures that foster carers have the knowledge and skills to advise and protect young people.

Health and safety risk assessments are in place for each fostering household. These are subject to regular review. Risk assessments are also completed on family pets. This ensures that children and young people are appropriately protected. However, foster carers also support young people to take age appropriate risks similarly as they would do with their own children. This helps young people learn about making their own decisions.

The agency undertakes two unannounced visits to each foster home annually. This helps ensure the quality of care provided to children and young people is consistently good. Supervising social workers also visit at different times of the day, so that the family can be seen together. This gives them the opportunity to speak with the foster children placed, as well as the foster carers birth children. This allows all those in the family the opportunity to express any concerns that they may have.

The agency has safeguarding policies and procedures. These incorporate the procedure for allegations against foster carers. Arrangements for direct access to independent support for foster carers, who are the subject of an allegation, was agreed during this inspection. However, when allegations have arisen the agency's records do not consistently provide a clear audit trail of events. It is difficult to confirm if all the necessary safeguarding agencies have been involved and minutes of meetings held are not maintained by the agency. This issue was identified at the last inspection and has not been adequately addressed. Furthermore, these procedures do not include detail about the actions that the agency will take in the event of the disclosure of historic abuse, so that those they are working with are clear about the implications. Additionally, the procedures have not been submitted to or agreed by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board(LSCB) or the Local Authority Designated Officer(LADO).

The agency has a procedure for young people who go missing from home, although this has not been agreed by the police. Additionally, copies of locally agreed Runaway and Missing from Home and Care(RMFHC) protocols for local authorities are not available to foster carers. Although, the incidents of young people going missing is currently small the procedure being followed by foster carers may not be in line with those agreed in the area where they live. Foster carers were not aware of the need to follow local protocols.

There are a high number of physical interventions performed by foster carers. However, these largely involve specialist carers who care for children and young people with challenging behaviours, such as autism. These foster carers have received training in a recognised form of restraint to ensure the safety of young people. On one occasion the agency sourced this specialist training at very short notice in order to assist their foster carers manage the behaviours of a young person. This enabled the carers to continue with this placement which may have otherwise resulted in disruption.

The recruitment of staff and foster carers is thorough. Robust checks are completed prior to individuals having access to children and young people. However, despite verification checks being made to referees and good records maintained about these, they could not be located on one staff members file. If individuals have worked or lived abroad the agency seeks additional checks. These procedures help safeguard children and young people placed through the fostering agency.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The Registered Manager is appropriately qualified and experienced. She has worked for the agency for a number of years before being promoted to her current role in April 2013, and being registered by Ofsted in October 2013. The strategic development of the agency is good. Senior managers are keen to implement new ideas and enhance their effectiveness. Two team managers assist the Registered Manager in the management of the agency and the supervision of staff. Although, at the time of the inspection one post was vacant.

Staff receive regular supervision and appraisal. Supervision is also extended to independent assessors completing assessment work, ensuring that these are completed to agency requirements. Staff feel confident in their learning needs being addressed and being able to express their views in a supportive environment. Staff comment on the accessibility of senior managers who are approachable and knowledgeable.

Management oversight and decision making is clear on foster carers' records. Managers complete routine audits of records designed to highlight missing documentation. Generally, these are of a good quality and indicate when issues identified have been completed. However, this monitoring failed to identify the missing documents relating to the allegation record. Similarly, some documents were missing from staff files that had not been identified. The later was immediately rectified.

The agency has addressed the two requirements from the last inspection. Foster carers' reviews are now completed annually and chaired independently. The Registered Manager has developed a matrix to assist her in the monitoring of these timescales. Secondly, the agency has successfully implemented a procedure to ensure that Ofsted are informed about the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiry. Additionally, four recommendations resulted from the last inspection. Children with communication difficulties are now enabled to make their wishes and feelings known via their chosen method of communication and the agency has produced its children guide to the fostering service in various formats to ensure that it is understood. Additionally, no concerns have arisen from this inspection relating to young people's case records. However, although the agency did appoint an individual with expertise in children's education as a member of their fostering panel, there has been no individual fulfilling this role for some time. Hence, this recommendation is repeated. The agency has failed to address the final recommendation relating to allegation records, as referred to above.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose of purpose in place and this is subject to regular review. However, this was not readily available to commissioners and social workers on the agency's website. A copy has also not been forwarded to Ofsted following its last review; nor has a copy of the children's guide to the fostering service. However, the manager was quick to rectify this during the inspection.

Senior managers in the agency are eager to engage in joint working with other independent agencies and with local authorities. They work well in partnership with others and are keen to embrace new initiatives. The fostering agency has a development plan in place. This is subject to regular review to ensure that the agency continues to be effective.

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.