

Barnardos North West Fostering Service (NW Region)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Sharon Lloyd
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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

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 the former Barnardo's North West Fostering Service for children with disabilities and Barnardo's Fostering Futures, a fostering service for vulnerable children. It is part of the Barnardo's organisation that has a range of services for disadvantaged children and families in the north west of England. The service operates from its main offices in Lineside Close, Liverpool.

The fostering service provides stable family placements for children including those with disabilities. It has two specialist teams. One focuses on providing families for children with severe learning disabilities. The other provides temporary, task centred or permanent family placements to vulnerable children. Short break carers provide a respite service where needed to children living with their own families and those living with foster carers. The service is expanding to cover a wider geographical area.

Summary

The inspection included case tracking two children, meeting with foster carers, observing the panel, checking records and discussions with staff. Thirty four people returned questionnaires, including children and young people, social workers and foster carers.

This is a good service with many outstanding features. It is well organised and managed so that staff provide an excellent level of support and supervision to carers. This enables foster carers to deliver very high quality care to children and young people. A typical comment from a foster carer is: 'Barnardo's is extremely professional in its dealings with us, yet retains a supportive and almost "family-like" ambience.' The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding with all staff and carers working to promote inclusion and to ensure children and young people with diverse needs have the opportunity to develop their self-confidence and to reach their potential. A typical comment from a child is: 'I am happy living here... and I want to live here for ever.'

The service is hampered in its delivery of care to children and young people by the failure of local authorities to provide foster carers with important information relating to the children and young people they are caring for. This means that some foster carers do not have full details of children's health, education and personal history or their assessed needs. Despite this, they provide a good or outstanding level of care in all of the Every Child Matters outcome areas.

Shortfalls in the service relate to auditing and record keeping practices and a lack of required information on children and young people's files.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Five recommendations for good practice were made following the last inspection and all of these have been met in full. The service promotes children and young people's good health by ensuring that all foster carers have clear and current consent to administer medicines, treatment

and first aid. It effectively monitors the administration of medicines. Supervising social workers routinely check the medicine administration records kept by foster carers to make sure that children and young people receive the medicines they need to be healthy.

The fostering panel is well organised. It provides effective scrutiny of applicants so that only suitable people are recommended to be foster carers. Foster carer reviews are chaired by one of two independent reviewing officers to ensure independent scrutiny of practice. All foster carers appropriately maintain and add to children and young people's records. This ensures that children and young people have a good and clear account of their time spent with foster carers and in particular of significant incidents in their lives.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service has some outstanding features. It provides foster carers who are trained to administer first aid to children and young people and to store, administer and dispose of medicines appropriately. They have parental consent to administer treatment and first aid and those who undertake specialist health tasks are trained to do so. This means that children and young people receive the medicines and treatment they need to promote their health.

Foster carers know about the importance of good nutrition and provide children and young people with healthy, well balanced meals, including foods from different cultures. Children and young people report that they are very well cared for. One child commented: 'they keep me healthy by telling me not to eat loads of junk food and giving me proper food, cleaning my clothes when they are dirty and telling me to clean my teeth'.

Foster carers receive a very high level of support from the service to promote children's health and well-being. A large number of children have disabilities and associated health problems. Many require frequent health checks and visits to hospital. The foster carers and supervising social workers liaise closely with health professionals to ensure the best possible health outcomes for these children. Foster carers ensure children and young people have the opportunity to engage in and enjoy exercise.

Foster carers do not always receive the health information they need from placing social workers. In some instances, the local authority provides no health plan and no health history. One carer said: 'He has been with us for nearly three years and we are still finding out about his medical history.' This means that children's health is not promoted as well as the service would like because children's health needs are not identified.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service has very good and outstanding practices that keep children and young people safe. One young person commented, 'I feel safe because she treats me like her own children'. Members of the management team are well qualified and appropriately experienced to provide sound leadership and management of the service. Robust suitability checks are carried out on all staff who work for or on behalf of the agency. This protects children and young people as far as possible from contact with potential abusers. Similar checks are carried out on foster carers and the service aims to renew Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks on foster carers every three years. This ensures that they continue to be suitable to look after children and young

people. The system for renewing these checks is not sufficiently robust so that in some instances, more than three years has elapsed before CRB checks are renewed.

Foster carers provide safe, comfortable homes where children and young people feel welcome and relaxed. A health and safety risk assessment is carried out before and after approval. It is reviewed annually or prior to any new placement to ensure the home environment is suitable to meet the needs of the child or young person. Safe caring policies are in place for each child and young person and these consider the particular safety needs of each individual, including, for example, the need for privacy, assistance with personal care and the potential for self harm. Foster carers protect children and young people by storing their confidential information securely in a lockable metal box provided by the service.

A strength of the service is the careful attention it pays to matching children and young people with long term and respite carers. Introductions are carried out slowly so that children or young people and carers get to know each other well before a decision is made to proceed with the placement. Very few placements disrupt and many children and young people remain with their carers into adulthood and beyond. This means that the service loses a number of carers each year as they move to providing an adult placement when the young person reaches 18.

Until very recently, the service has successfully provided a small number of well trained foster carers to take children and young people in crisis. They have looked after children and young people needing emergency placements for a period of eight weeks or more, where necessary. This has enabled the local authority social worker to complete an assessment and make appropriate medium to long term plans for the child or young person. Despite the lack of information available about many of these children and young people, the service has provided a stable, secure respite service to them and has ensured, wherever possible that they have continued to attend school and to maintain close links with their families.

A social worker said the service, 'trains foster carers to have a high level of awareness in child protection issues'. Good links are maintained with local safeguarding units and the service protects children and young people from harm by referring any allegations, disclosures or suspicions of abuse to the local authority designated officer.

Restraint is used rarely and only as a means of preventing injury to or by children and young people with disabilities. For example, it may be used with children and young people with autism who display aggressive behaviour. Restraint takes the form of holding and is agreed in writing with the placing authority. Carers who use restraint are trained by the placing authority to hold a particular child or young person safely. Records of restraint are monitored and any concerns are immediately addressed. This ensures that children and young people are restrained appropriately and only where necessary to keep them and others safe.

The service notifies the relevant authorities of serious incidents. However, it does not always notify Ofsted of the instigation and outcome of child protection proceedings and this prevents Ofsted from exercising its safeguarding function of ensuring the service has acted appropriately and in accordance with the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Fostering Service Regulations 2002.

The fostering panel is well organised and effectively safeguards children and young people because it provides good scrutiny to foster carer applications and to first reviews. A community

paediatrician sits on the panel and provides medical advice so that very good consideration is given to how applicants will meet children's health needs. Panel members have a good range of expertise and knowledge relating to children's needs. A care experienced young person and a current foster carer from another service provide useful and insightful contributions to discussions. Although two panel members are school governors, and some are involved in delivering adult education, there is no member who has expertise in children's education. This means that scrutiny of carers' skills to support children and young people's education may be less robust than the service would like.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service provides foster care for children and young people with severe and profound learning and physical disabilities. Through the outstanding support it gives to carers, it enables these children and young people to experience family life with carers who are highly skilled and dedicated to meeting their needs. Foster carers ensure that children and young people have many opportunities to participate in their local community and to mix with peers, both disabled and able-bodied.

Foster carers report that the service 'goes the extra mile' to support them and there are many examples of foster carers who also 'go the extra mile' in the level of care they provide. For example, in order to enable a young person with disabilities to experience the joy of Disneyland, carers have spent many months preparing for a trip, liaising with a range of health professionals and travel companies to ensure that the young person will travel in comfort, that the accommodation will be suitable and that the young person will have the nutrients, medicines, clothing and equipment he needs during the trip. Another young person has received extensive support to engage in physical activities and has gone from struggling with mobility and health problems to the enjoyment of winning many gold and silver medals in a range of high profile sports events.

The service encourages able-bodied children and young people to engage in social activities with disabled peers. For example, one young person enjoys attending a youth club where deaf and hearing young people mix. There is a good deal of excitement in the service about the forthcoming social event organised by the service to promote integration and inclusion for all children, young people, carers and staff.

The service values diversity and provides employment, volunteering and training opportunities for people with disabilities and for people from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The ground floor of the premises is suitable for wheelchair users and appropriate washroom facilities are available.

Foster carers work with schools to ensure that children and young people attend school and receive additional education support where needed. A number of children have booster lessons to enable them to catch up on previously missed work. One child said: 'I do reading at home and play word games...I like school and I will be having a tutor soon to help me with reading and spelling'. The service employs a highly competent psychologist who ensures children receive the education support they are entitled to. A carer said: 'She has been a star with school. Without her support he may have been expelled'. The psychologist also provides invaluable advice and guidance to foster carers and gives them strategies for addressing education and behavioural issues with individual children and young people. Carers comments include: 'They

ensure that any problems that may arise are tackled promptly, before a situation gets out of hand' and 'with extra home tuition, he has come on leaps and bounds educationally and behaviourally'.

Some foster carers provide short-term breaks for children who live with their parents or with long term carers. This provides children and young people with additional support and enables them to continue living at home because it provides parents and carers with regular breaks. Short term break carers work well with parents and long term carers to ensure they look after children and young people in accordance with agreed plans and their usual routines.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Foster carers understand the importance of contact with family and friends and work with the service to ensure that children and young people have contact in accordance with their individual needs and plans. The service liaises with local authorities where contact arrangements are not clear and represent the views of the child or young person concerned. They support contact through transporting children to meet their families and supervising the contact visit where necessary. Foster carers enable phone and letter contact and the psychologist works with children and young people to establish their views about future contact when they can no longer return home.

All children and young people with disabilities have an individualised children's guide in a form suited to their communication style. For example, for some children the guide is produced in widget form, for others, their personal Picture Exchange Communication System is used. Some have talking books. Two written guides are available to able-bodied children and young people, and are provided in accordance with their reading and language skills. This ensures that all children and young people have information about what they can expect from the service and have information about how to make a complaint. Foster carers confirm that they go through the guide with the children and young people they care for.

Children and young people report they are listened to and one said, 'It's nice to have a carer that listens to me and treats me like one of her own children'. The service invites children and young people to contribute to foster carer reviews and to their own placement reviews. One foster carer commented, 'Barnardo's do everything in their power to empower and listen to the young people'. Many children choose not to comment formally on the care they receive. Children and young people's feedback forms are not specifically designed for those with communication difficulties. The service does not currently obtain the views of children and young people prior to service developments; however, plans are in place to address this shortly and a meeting has been set up with children and young people to begin the process.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers receive encouragement from staff to consider the developmental needs of each child or young person they care for and to ensure that they reach their potential. They do this by providing children and young people with opportunities to develop self-care skills and to participate in household routines. Children and young people receive advice and guidance in money matters.

Most young people with disabilities have been with the same carers for many years and remain with their foster carers into adulthood. To enable this, at the point of transition, some foster carers reluctantly leave the service and are approved as adult placement carers. However, despite their long term attachments, some local authorities prefer young people to go into supported lodgings in shared houses. This causes distress and anxiety for young people and for carers who wish to continue living as a family unit until young people are more independent and ready to leave home. The service supports carers and young people through this trauma, whilst remaining impartial. It provides foster carers with information about advocacy services.

Foster carers report that appropriate allowances and payments are made on time. This means they have sufficient funds to ensure they look after children and young people well.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Much of the practice within the service is outstanding and results in very high quality of care to young people. The service provides good information to parents, social workers and contractors through an informative Statement of Purpose that clearly sets out the aims of the service and the arrangements in place to meet them. The manager is a qualified, experienced and competent practitioner who is very well thought of by all who use the service. The level of support, training and supervision to staff is extremely good and this enables them to deliver an outstanding support service to foster carers. One carer commented: 'I have always had excellent support and at times I could not have continued without it.' The number of unplanned placement endings is very low and foster carers consider this is directly attributable to the high levels of support, advice and guidance they receive. This means that children and young people live in stable, secure homes.

Good staff policies and effective leadership and management encourage staff retention so that staff turnover is very low. There is a high level of expertise within the staff team, many of whom are longstanding members of staff who have provided good continuity of support and supervision to carers. A carer said: 'They are on hand 24 hours a day if needed: they are very helpful; nothing is too much trouble'. Recent staff changes and shortages have been well managed so that they have not impacted negatively on the service provided. Staff development opportunities are available and staff use their skills and knowledge to enhance the delivery of the service and contribute to its continuing development.

The service contracts with independent assessors to supplement the staff team so that foster carer assessments are carried out within reasonable timescales. Staff who carry out assessments are qualified social workers, trained and experienced in assessment work so that the quality of assessments is good. All assessing social workers receive good levels of supervision and this ensures that any issues arising are addressed at an early stage. The service values independent scrutiny and contracts with two independent reviewing officers to chair reviews of foster carers. This ensures that foster carers have the opportunity to speak to someone independent about the quality of the support, supervision and training they receive. Despite its efforts, the service has limited success in engaging placing social workers and children in the review process so that their views are often not available for the review. Some reviews have not taken place within the required timescales and this means that some children and young people are living with foster carers whose care practices have not been thoroughly scrutinised for more than a year.

An experienced, competent and efficient team of administrative support workers facilitate the smooth running of the service. Foster carers appreciate their high levels of professionalism delivered in a cheerful and friendly manner.

The foster carer recruitment strategy is based on research into the numbers and types of referrals the service receives. This ensures the service continues to meet the needs of vulnerable children. The service is expanding to cover a wider geographical area so that its specialist, high quality provision can be made available to more children.

The service provides appropriate training opportunities for staff and carers so that they have the skills they need to provide good quality care to children. The first cohort of foster carers are coming to the end of their Children's Workforce Development Council training and a number of carers have completed National Vocational Qualifications in Caring for Children and Young People. This enables carers to develop their knowledge and skills in looking after children and so to provide an even better service. A carer commented, 'Training courses are well run and very informative'.

The service does not hold all the required written information it needs about individual children to ensure that it is meeting their assessed needs. Proactive attempts to obtain this information include meeting with social work team managers and writing to them requesting information. Although communication with social workers is good, gaps in information is a feature for a number of children and this impedes foster carers from delivering the best possible service to children. Complaints are not always appropriately logged and investigations are not always held on the relevant file. This means that the service cannot effectively monitor the numbers and types of complaints and use this information for the development of the service.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. A carer commented: 'They address a broad area of needs and promote equality in all areas to an outstanding degree'. This is a specialist service that delivers a very high level of care to many children and young people with challenging physical and learning disabilities. Foster carers and staff demonstrate an outstanding level of commitment and care to the children and young people they are responsible for. The service encourages inclusion in family, community and school based activities so that children and young people have the highest possible quality of life. Children and young people who have short term placements are made welcome at a time of crisis in their lives and foster carers ensure they provide these very vulnerable children and young people with a stable and nurturing home. The service ensures it identifies and meets each individual's specific needs.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
16	carry out reviews of foster carers at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 29 (2))	30 June 2010

9	ensure that you notify Ofsted of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiry involving a child placed with foster carers in accordance with Schedule 8. (Regulation 43 (1))	30 June 2010
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Recommendations

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

- ensure allegations and complaints are clearly recorded on the relevant files for staff, carers and children, including details of the investigation, conclusion reached and action taken. Ensure also that you keep separate records that bring together data on allegations and on complaints (NMS 25.13)
- ensure that an up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each child or young person in foster care which details the nature and quality of care provided and contributes to an understanding of the child or young person's life events and that this information is shared with the foster carer (NMS 24)
- consider whether more suitable means can be provided for any child with communication difficulties to make their wishes and feelings known regarding their care and treatment (NMS 11.4)
- ensure, as far as possible, that an independent member of the panel has expertise in children and young people's education. (NMS 30.8)