

Barnardo's West Midlands Family Placement Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency has been registered with Ofsted since 2004. The agency is part of the Barnardo's national charity. There are currently 35 fostering households offering care to 38 children and young people. An additional 10 foster families provide supportive internal placements. The service offers largely planned, long and short-term care to children and young people, and has an additional specialism in caring for those with disabilities.

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 fostering agency has established good outcomes for children and young people over many years, and continues to do so. The service has experienced some change and development in the last 12 months. A regional office in Herefordshire closed and the main agency office moved from Dudley to Halesowen. An experienced manager, who still manages another Barnardo's fostering agency in Warwickshire, assumed responsibility here in January 2015.

Management is stable, and the social work team is now fully staffed. There are some areas for improvement, but these do not have a bearing on the positive experience of children and young people. These include: securing placing authority care plans; clearer documentation about foster carer responsibility for decisions; better panel minutes, and more systematic managerial review and monitoring after significant events. Overall, the agency is maintaining a high standard of performance guided by reflective, experienced managers and an ethical child-centred approach. Safeguarding practice is sound. Staff and foster carers, and excellent risk assessments, support safe care. Staff feel they work from a strong value base: 'it's about the children.'

Training and support for foster carers is good. One foster carer said, 'I am very happy with the fostering service.'

Excellent 'team around the child' support for foster carers is supplemented by an experienced, respected consultant psychotherapist who works directly with foster carers and staff. Two support workers deliver creative direct working with children and young people to resolve significant issues in their lives.

Good, responsive partnership working keeps the child in mind. A placing authority identified the positives thus: 'Communication, Availability, Support, Friendly team.' The agency places a high value on children's participation and involvement. Children and young people are very enthusiastic about their experience of living with their foster families: one said, 'What's good? Everything.'

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
17	Ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6 (3) (d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17 (3))	31/05/2016

Recommendations

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

- Ensure all fostering service staff, specifically, out of hours support staff, understand what they must do if they receive an allegation or have suspicions that a person may have:
 - a. behaved in a way that has, or may have, harmed a child;
 - b. possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child; or
 - c. behaved towards a child in a way that indicates he or she is unsuitable to work with children.The fostering service ensures that the required actions are taken, or have been taken, in any relevant situation of which it is aware. (NMS 22.1)
- Ensure, as soon as possible after an investigation into a foster carer is concluded, their approval as suitable to foster is reviewed. (NMS 22.8)
- Ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring the activities of the service. This includes any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality of the service: to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. (NMS 25.1 & 25.2)
- Ensure the panel keeps written minutes of its business, including the reasons for recommendations made. It is important that these are full and accurate so that the fostering service is clear about matters discussed and the reasoning behind recommendations, as they will form the basis of decision making by the fostering service. Specifically, the shared panel must make clear for which

registered fostering agency the foster carer is being considered and recommended. (The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services: page 43, paragraph 5.25)

- Ensure that foster carers know what authority they have to make decisions about everyday matters involving the child. Arrangements for delegating authority from the parents to the local authority and/or from the local authority to the foster carers, must be discussed and agreed as part of the care planning process, particularly at placement planning meetings, and agreements should be recorded in the placement plan. (The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services, page 16, paragraph 3.13)

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

Judgement outcome: Good

Children and young people are welcomed with introductions to carefully chosen foster placements. There have been some excellent enduring placements leading into agreed permanency and even adoption. Foster carers are vocal about the pressure currently put on them and children by placing authorities to choose Special Guardianship Orders over permanency through long-term fostering, and the agency has supported them. A good number of young people 'stay put' after the age of 18 and others have moved in to independence and are still in touch. Foster carers are skilled and resourceful in negotiating difficult relationships and several go to extraordinary lengths to maintain positive family relationships. For example, holidaying every year in Scotland to keep contact with Scottish relatives. A placing authority described how one set of foster carers delivered: 'fantastic care, worked brilliantly with the independent visitor.' This good support for contact with birth families and important people in their lives supports children's positive identity and sense of self.

There is improving learning about placement disruption and early endings. The manager is aware that some historical placements of a second child with a foster family have been over-ambitious. The manager has been clear to improve this aspect and protect children and young people already there. A foster home is only offered when the match is right.

Excellent input with children and young people, in crisis, in transition, or for life-story work, by the agency's support workers, gives meaningful, practical help to make sense of their situation. This extends to imaginative, fun support for children with learning disabilities or for whom communication is an issue: they use drawing, play, puppets, and alternative tools to get a message across. Foster carers have created 'app' tools to help young people into independence, to share recipes for cooking. A placing authority commented on how flexibly the agency supported young people: 'Whatever task you give them, they're ready for it.'

Foster carers, including those looking after young people with learning difficulties, autism and complex health needs, take great care to shape their home life around those needs. Scrupulous forward planning makes sure young people are not bored; they enjoy holidays, have hobbies after school, get the most out of school, keep health appointments and have the services and equipment they need, including to support wellbeing and mental health. One independent reviewing officer was pleased at the progress one young person was making with new foster carers, saying he is: 'moving forward with his insecurities, pleased that things are working out well for him.'

A creative approach to behaviour looks at children's underlying needs and there is a 'no restraint' policy. Children and young people live with foster carers who know how to diffuse and deescalate challenging situations and get support from the consultant

psychotherapist to take an insightful, reflective view about why they get angry or are not in control. A social worker was very positive about the behavioural approach: 'It is clear that they have a very good understanding of the young person and how to manage challenging behaviours that he displays.'

Attendance and achievement at school is good. The agency and foster carers have high aspirations and celebrate this every year at an award ceremony where each child's success is valued and rewarded, however small. A social worker praised the agencies determination for young people: 'They are actively trying to support the young person back into education, training or employment and are attempting different methods to do this.'

The agency makes sure that any child or young person, who wants to have their say, has private access to the support worker and to wider advocacy services.

Information for children and young people in their accessible guides to fostering is clear about this. They are involved and participate in recruitment, in consultations about the service and in creating resources to help new children in foster care. A group helped to devise a new leaflet advising: 'You may feel upset or sad now- but it will get better.' Children and young people are happy with their foster carers and the agency listens to them if they are not, taking their views into account at each annual review of foster carers. One young person said of their foster carers: 'They look after me and are kind.' Another said: 'They care about me and listen to my opinions and take me seriously and we get to go to amazing places for our holidays.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: Good

The agency functions of recruitment, assessment, supervision, training and support of foster carers are based on ethical, 'not for profit' principles that prioritise children and young people. In recognition of the need to stabilise and consolidate the service over the last year, recruitment of new foster carers and placement of children has been slow. The agency is now shaping its services towards more mainstream placements, alongside the established and trusted service for children and young people with complex health needs and disabilities. A development plan makes clear how the registered provider will support foster carers in gaining skills towards this change and will focus future foster carer recruitment towards this need. Some assessment and approval timescales have been over-long, but have been for acceptable reasons, not drift. These are now back on track. There is planning to avoid future difficulties in staff turnover and all social workers carrying out assessments are now fully trained.

Robust approval and first review recommendations are made by an experienced panel and a new chairperson. The panel is shared with the registered manager's other service. Minutes of this shared fostering panel, do not always make clear for which registered agency the panel is considering and making its recommendation. Thorough reviews of approval consider continuing suitability, but after allegations, reviews of foster carer suitability have historically taken too long.

Areas of concern are not always addressed when they are identified rather than waiting for review. There is improved practice more recently and the decision maker, who is the responsible individual, is good at identifying action plans for improvement at foster carer review.

Foster carers are skilled, well trained and feel part of a team. Their pre, and post, approval training is carefully linked to the needs of the agency and the children they care for. For example, online and face-to-face training in: attachment; creative responses to behaviour; disability; Autism; child health; medication and safeguarding. The agency values and has invested scarce resources in an attachment-based approach of reflective parenting, and sees that this works. It gives a strong theoretical base to the work that the agency does. Foster carers and children and young people see the benefit of this. More intensive training around parenting skills has been sourced and some staff have already completed this. 'Practice development groups', attended by supervising social workers, foster carers, teachers, placing authority and the agency's consultant psychotherapist, are especially helpful in focusing strategies and understanding around particular aspects of need for individual carers or children. One placing authority described a young person's relationship with foster carers: 'Excellent rapport.' He gets really anxious, they dealt with it brilliantly.' Annual training in equality and diversity and a strong focus on challenging prejudice helps children who feel different, experience acceptance.

There have been staffing shortfalls and unavoidable turnover has meant that some foster carers have experienced changes in their supervising social worker. Despite this, they have confidence in the quality of that support, though miss some previous long-established relationships. They describe supervising social workers as accessible '24/7' and their support as, 'brilliant' and, 'fantastic.' Supervisory visits cover child and foster carer issues, are regular, and form the basis of the agency's outcome tracking. Some carers' miss previous local, small support groups and attendance at larger agency support and consultation meetings has been mixed. The agency demonstrates its good commitment to supporting foster carers with breaks that benefit the children. All foster carers, even those who offer short-breaks to support long-term placements, are recruited and supported to the same high standard.

The current focus on consolidation of the service to existing children and young people means that there have been few placements in the last year. The manager has plans to strengthen formal matching systems. A placing authority commented positively about how the service found the right home for a child: 'Identified excellent foster carers. They support the carers and communicate with myself well.'

Getting up-to-date placing authority care, or placement plans, and delegated authority agreements remains an area of difficulty for the agency. Approximately half the current children have out-of-date, or missing, documentation, though all have current statutory review information. The agency chases this, but misses opportunities to report formally to the independent reviewing officer about this in foster carer reports to the statutory review, and in monthly children's progress summaries. There is no sign that this is impacting negatively on children and young people's care or life experience, because communication generally about children is

good. An independent reviewing officer commented that foster carers: 'never faltered in delivering the care plan.'

Current foster carers feel well supported: 'I have worked for Barnardo's for the past 5 years, having placements all this time. They have been more than supportive, are always at the end of a phone and help me to improve on my skills as a foster parent.' For children and young people, this means their place with the foster family is more likely to succeed. One young person said: 'They are the perfect carers I could have asked for and I wouldn't change anything.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Good

Child protection and safeguarding systems at the agency are well established. The focus on protection is evident through foster carer recruitment, assessment, approval and supervision and in the supervision of the work of supervising social workers by the management team. Social work, support staff and foster carers have a range of training and guidance about their responsibility to protect and how to implement procedures, including for children with disabilities. Creative input by a consultant psychotherapist helps foster carers to see the impact of children's history of poor parenting and trauma on their behaviour and vulnerabilities. A foster carer recounted how their training had helped when their child was ready to share significant information about their past abuse: 'managing disclosures (training) really helped me when my child disclosed.'

Child protection issues are few. Staff working for the out-of-hours service, based in another region for a different agency, did not demonstrate a clear understanding about action to take on one occasion when there were concerns about an allegation. This led to a short delay in referring to the local safeguarding team. The allegation was not substantiated. Managers subsequently took this up within the organisation. Safeguarding and child protection practice, after an event, is not always fully evaluated to inform agency developments and improve foster carer and staff practice, for example within the review of the quality of care.

Children who go missing are rare and there have been no concerns about vulnerability to sexual exploitation with the last 18 months. Staff and foster carers are trained and ready to implement local procedures in this event. The manager has identified new partnerships to support the changing profile of young people, for example, with specialist police and community services to help children who may be at such risk. The organisation is well placed with its own local specialist teams to assist this.

Strong systems of positive risk management are based on consultation and involvement of placing authorities, parents where relevant, and young people. This shared approach is evidenced in an excellent assessment format which focuses specifically on the child in the family. The agency encourages foster carers to consider a wide of risk reduction and take account of children and young people's age and stage. They balance young people's need to live an ordinary life and learn to

take responsibility for their behaviour and actions as part of growing up and maturing. This is also especially true of the children and young people with development delay or behavioural considerations. The result is agreed plans for safe care that encourage independence and are not risk-averse.

Staff and foster carers are recruited safely. Regular unannounced visits to foster homes make sure that the environment is safe for children and young people. Everyone is clear about their responsibility and the route to raise concern about children's safety, through whistleblowing procedures.

Support workers have done some excellent direct work with children and young people about understanding the risks they face in the community, on line, about safe relationships and self-protection. They are, consequently, better able to navigate a safe path in the community, with their peers and in the virtual world.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Good

Consistent skilled management by the responsible individual and the new, but experienced manager, registered in June 2015, has ensured smooth processes for children and young people throughout a period of organisational change. The departure of previous supervising social workers and the previous manager, to a new adoption team within Barnardo's, created instability for some foster carers. Several foster carers have found the change difficult and moved to other agencies. The registered manager shares her time between this office and that of the other registered agency she manages. An experienced, resourceful deputy supports the team in her absence. Leaders and managers now have the confidence of staff and foster carers.

The registered person has taken effective action to meet previous good practice recommendations from the last Ofsted inspection. Much better information and guidance now makes sure foster carers know all about children's health needs. Rigorous approval and review decisions by the agency decision maker are made in children's best interests. A much higher percentage of foster carers have now achieved the Training, Support and Development Standards within 12 months of approval. Foster carers are on board with the agency's high expectations of their development and how this links to the quality of foster care that children and young people experience.

A range of consultation, monitoring, reporting and development plans combine to meet the requirement to review the quality of care. The registered person has not yet formalised their timely review and 'lessons learnt' approach, to improve practice after investigations, at endings of placements, or when foster carers leave the agency. Systematic managerial follow up, to ensure actions are implemented and concluded in foster carer's supervision records and managerial reporting systems, is less well established than wider development planning.

Well-organised administrative systems assist in maintaining a smooth process of recruitment, assessment, approval, new placement considerations and review. One foster carer said: 'We are emailed with all latest developments to the service and changes within the law. Also updated with the latest training dates etc. we are also reminded regularly when things are due for renewal or changes to policy etc.' Computerised recording is now established for social work staff, but not for foster carers. Good new electronic systems for monitoring outcomes are about to be implemented. The agency knows its foster carers and the children and young people living with them. Placement instability has been supported by creative use of resources, such as the direct support workers and the consultant psychotherapist. Foster carers and agency staff value this.

An intelligent, positive, child-focused team of qualified social workers and two support workers, work directly with foster carers and children and young people. New social work staff have brought extensive experience to the service of local authority social work with children, and are building experience and specific skills in fostering. Experienced, long-standing Barnardo's supervising social workers bring a wealth of experience of fostering to the new team. There is now good succession planning to fill any staffing vacancies with familiar, skilled social workers. The responsible individual recognises, and has plans to improve career development, particularly of more experienced staff. New staff feel well trained and well supported through professional supervision and appraisal. Management advice is accessible, constructive and 'hands-on.'

The manager and staff work constructively with independent reviewing officers and social workers, including those at considerable distance. They challenge when necessary in children and young people's interests. Changing local authority systems of purchasing, commissioning and review have created a challenge for the agency to consult and meet directly with partners at a strategic level. Despite this, the responsible individual brings an experienced and respected strategic lead across the region, well placed to maximise opportunities for Barnardo's and the children and young people they work for.

Placing authorities respect the agency. A placing social worker said: 'They work well with Children's Services and are good at communicating with me via emails and phone calls. During the visit they will provide a clear update on how things are going in the setting with the young person.'

The agency is part of an ethical not-for-profit organisation that invests in children's futures through the wider organisation. One foster carer summed up their views: 'I wouldn't want to be with any other organisation than Barnardo's.' Supervising social workers are also proud of this aspect and feel that it 'sets them apart' from other agencies.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and 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. Inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.