

Midlands Fostering Families Service

Barnardo's, Brooklands, Great Cornbow, Halesowen B63 3AB

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

West Midlands Fostering Families Service was first registered in 2004. It is operated by Barnardo's, a national charitable organisation. The agency is based in Halesowen.

The agency provides foster homes for children who need short-break foster care and mainstream foster care. It also has a specialist intensive service for children involved with the criminal justice system or who are at risk of child exploitation. At the time of this inspection, 68 children were living in 51 fostering households.

The manager was registered with Ofsted on 23 June 2023.

Inspection dates: 13 to 17 November 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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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	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 15 April 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are happy and settled living with their foster carers. Children have developed positive relationships with their foster families and enjoy the time that they spend with them. Two children said that they would give their foster carers '10 out of 10' when asked about their foster families. Overall, children feel that they can talk to their foster carers and that they are safe in their care. Positive relationships with their carers help children to feel secure.

Supervising social workers make sure that they match children with foster carers who can meet their needs. Matching assessments are comprehensive and provide a detailed overview of how children are matched to their carers. Children are well prepared and welcomed into their foster families. Before children move in to their foster home, they receive a detailed welcome guide. When children leave, they are provided with a memory box that captures their time with their foster carers.

All children are receiving education. Foster carers are strong advocates for children. This helps to ensure that children access learning opportunities that are appropriate to their needs. For example, one child told inspectors that they had not attended school for several years. However, with the support from their carer, they are now engaging in and enjoying learning in an alternative education setting.

Foster carers understand children's health needs and work hard to ensure that they are met. Children are supported by their carers to attend all routine and specialist health appointments. Supervising social workers routinely update children's health plans to reflect the children's health needs. This focus ensures that the children receive the medical treatment that they require.

Children enjoy a range of leisure and social activities. For example, children regularly go on holidays and days out with their carers. One child told inspectors that they were looking forward to seeing the 'illuminations at the seaside'. Furthermore, children are supported by their carers to pursue their interests and develop hobbies. For example, one child attends a studio to record music. Another child is an active member of Beavers. These opportunities help children to build confidence and self-esteem and create life-long memories.

Children who access short breaks have done so for many years. Children have developed positive relationships with their short-break carers and enjoy spending time with them. Parents have also developed strong links with the carers and feel confident when leaving their children in their care. One parent told the inspectors that the opportunity of having short breaks has been vital to her and her child's life.

Foster carers provide short-term care to children who are at risk of criminalisation. These children are often subject to or vulnerable to other forms of exploitation. This unique and bespoke service prevents children from moving to a secure

environment. The foster carers providing this support are tenacious and are excellent advocates for children, as well as providing them with a nurturing and supportive home environment. As a result of the care they provide, some children have experienced stability for the first time in their lives. One child told the inspectors, 'Youths like me, we live for today only, we don't think about tomorrow or the next day, we live for today. [Foster carer's name] has helped me live for today, next week, next month and the future.'

The fostering service is supported by highly skilled and committed project workers. The trusting relationships developed between the project workers and children provide the opportunity for children to learn about how to keep themselves safe. For example, information disclosed by one child prompted the involvement of external agencies, who were then able to intervene to keep the child safe.

Foster carers say that they do not feel supported when they contact the out-of-hours service as their calls have been answered by professionals who do not know them or their children. One foster carer informed the inspectors that during a time of crisis, the phone was not answered out of hours. Dissatisfaction with the out-of-hours arrangements has resulted in some carers not reporting significant incidents promptly. The agency is taking steps to address this shortfall.

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

Foster carers understand the risks for children, and they are proactive in keeping children safe. Children report that they feel safe in their foster homes and can identify someone who they trust and can talk to about their worries and concerns.

Within the last 12 months, there has been an increase in children going missing from care. When children go missing from their homes, foster carers follow plans and share information in a timely way. A multi-agency approach with all professionals working with the child ensures that children return home quickly. This joined-up approach increases children's safety. When a child returns from being missing, there is an opportunity for the child and carer to explore why the child went missing.

The agency manages allegations against foster carers appropriately. The registered manager shares information with relevant agencies, including the local authority designated officer, and ensures that children are appropriately safeguarded when concerns are raised.

All foster carers are trained in the agency's approved behaviour management model. This ensures that carers are aware that physical intervention is to be used as a last resort to prevent children from harming themselves or others. On the rare occasion when a physical hold has been required, the reason for this is clearly described in a written record. Records of holds are reviewed by the registered manager to ensure that holds are proportionate and completed safely.

Supervising social workers undertake two annual unannounced visits to foster households. During these visits, children are spoken to alone and their bedrooms are seen. This provides further opportunities for professionals from the agency to meet the children and ensure that they are happy and safe.

The recruitment of foster carers, staff and panel members is thorough, and there is clear management oversight of all recruitment. This helps to ensure that only safe adults provide care and support to children.

Overall, children's risk assessments are detailed. Risk assessments are individualised and provide guidance to foster carers about how to respond to risk-taking behaviours. However, when the risks for some children are higher, their risk assessments do not provide realistic or clear strategies to enable foster carers to respond effectively. For one child, their history of self-harm and suicidal thoughts had not been fully explored with the foster carers. Consequently, foster carers were not equipped to identify the indicators that the child's mental health was declining. Nevertheless, when a significant incident happened, the foster carers responded to safeguard the child and ensured that they received appropriate medical attention. The child then moved to live with foster carers who were more equipped to meet their needs.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager joined the agency before its last inspection. She is committed to the agency and strives to ensure that the children experience the best outcomes. The registered manager has good oversight of the operation of the agency and has a good knowledge and understanding of the agency's strengths and areas for development.

The staff team is stable and has a wealth of experience. Staff are committed to and passionate about children receiving good-quality care, and they make sure that children's achievements are celebrated no matter how big or small. The staff are dedicated to supporting foster carers to be the best they can be.

Leaders and managers have effective monitoring systems in place to oversee the quality of care provided. Monitoring systems have recently been reviewed to help managers take a more thorough review of practice. Findings from these reviews have been well received by the staff and have prompted reflective thinking.

Managers ensure that social workers receive regular, good-quality supervision. This provides opportunities for reflective discussions about practice and case complexities.

Staff receive good-quality training that supports their practice. Staff deliver some of this training to foster carers to help them to understand children's behaviours and how to respond to them. Staff also source their own training when they identify a need. For example, some staff have identified a learning need in relation to children's mental health and have attended training with a plan to deliver the same

training for foster carers. As a result, staff not only improve their practice but also the care that children receive from foster carers.

The fostering panel has independent members who are diverse in terms of skills, gender and cultural diversity. Panels are timely and robust and provide rigorous quality assurance. This ensures there is a good level of oversight of the quality of assessments. Clear reasons are given by the panel chair for the recommendations made. The panel process is supported by the area decision-maker who makes clear, timely and reasoned decisions that demonstrate a good level of reflection on and consideration of all elements of the application and approval process.

Managers have not consistently followed processes when transferring carers in to the agency from another agency. Although managers did ensure that foster homes were safe for children, leaders did not demonstrate a clear understanding of the regulatory requirements and, subsequently, children were in living in unregulated placements. The agency has now rectified this shortfall.

This

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

Statutory requirements

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

Requirement	Due date
The welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (1)(a)) This specifically relates to leaders and managers ensuring that children's risk assessments are thorough and take account of all known risks.	29 December 2023
The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1)) This specifically relates to providing foster carers with effective support outside of office hours.	29 December 2023

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that those involved in carrying on and managing the fostering service have a good knowledge and experience of law and practice relating to looked after children. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 17.1 a)

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: SC042455

Registered provider: Barnardo's

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

Responsible individual: Rebecca Quigley

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Inspectors

Lydia Isaac, Social Care Inspector
Sarah Berry, Social Care Inspector

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