

Barnardo's Fostering North England

Barnardo's

Osprey House, Kingfisher Way, Wallsend, North Tyneside NE28 9NX

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Barnardo's Fostering North England is a registered charity. It provides foster care placements used by several placing authorities in the north of England.

A range of placements are provided, including short-term, long-term, emergency and respite, as well as placements for parent and child, disabled children, unaccompanied children and 'staying put' arrangements. The agency is responsible for the recruitment, training, and support of foster carers.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had 42 fostering households and 39 children placed with its families. Three young people were accommodated under 'staying put' arrangements. These are arrangements that enable young people over the age of 18 years to remain living with their foster carers.

Inspection dates: 6 to 9 October 2025

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 August 2022

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 become part of their fostering families and develop a sense of belonging. Some children enjoy long-term stability, including into adulthood, because of the care and commitment of their foster carers. Children build trusting relationships with their foster carers, who provide the foundation they need to achieve positive outcomes now and in the future.

The agency promotes 'staying-put' arrangements as natural stages in children's lives. The agency has continued to offer support to young people who benefit from these arrangements, for example securing funding to access therapy. One young person told inspectors that they continue to spend time with their foster family now they are an adult and said, 'I would not be where I am today if it was not for them.'

Foster carers understand the importance of children maintaining relationships with their birth family. Some foster carers go above and beyond to develop relationships with children's families. Foster carers welcome children's birth family members into celebrations and family events. Equally, foster carers are welcomed into children's birth family celebrations. Some foster carers become part of children's birth family support network. One child described themselves, their foster family and birth family as 'one big happy family.'

Children move into their foster family home in a planned and sensitive way. Some children live away from their placing authority. However, the matching process carefully considers children's needs as well as the foster carers' skills and knowledge. For some children, they are reunified with their sibling and supported to live together in preparation for a plan of permanence. This careful matching process provides children with the opportunity to live together throughout their childhood. Several professionals spoke highly about how well children and foster carers are matched.

Children are helped to develop a healthy lifestyle. This includes attending universal health appointments and being active, for example playing football, cheerleading, dance, and drama. Some foster carers develop an in-depth and robust knowledge about children's complex health needs and diagnoses. Foster carers develop strong relationships with health professionals and communicate effectively to ensure that children receive specialist support when they need it.

Foster carers promote the importance of education, and children have good attendance. Children make progress towards their individual targets and achieve good outcomes. Children have aspirations, and some children progress to further and higher education. This increases children's prospects and life options for their future.

The agency recognises and celebrates children's achievements. Children receive certificates and are nominated for national awards from the agency. For example,

one child used their skills and knowledge about first aid to help another child at school. The recognition gives children a sense of pride and increases their self-esteem.

Children access short-break care arrangements when needed. The agency promotes children being introduced to their short-break carers before they stay over. However, there are occasions when children access these arrangements with little notice and do not have the opportunity to meet or visit their short-break foster carers. This does not prepare children for the change in their care arrangements.

Some children have been involved in a 'young inspectors report' to share their views about the agency. The leadership team took this seriously and developed an action plan in response. The agency has systems to seek feedback from people who are important to children, for example birth families. However, the systems are not an effective platform for consultation or to gain feedback. This is a missed opportunity to consider others' views to make improvements to the service children receive.

Supervising social workers routinely review the accuracy of children's savings and finances with foster carers. However, some children do not have their own bank account, which limits how the agency monitors children's savings and finances that could benefit them now or as an adult.

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

Children have individual risk assessments that are detailed and provide practical and helpful guidance for foster carers to help reduce risks. The foster carers and supervising social workers communicate with children's local authorities to identify risks and to implement effective strategies. Children spoken with during the inspection said they feel safe and cared for by their foster carers.

Children are treated with dignity, respect, and acceptance. For one child, this has helped them to feel secure to explore their feelings about their identity. Foster carers are strong advocates for children and provide excellent support. This includes travelling to other parts of the country with the child to access highly specialised support. As a result, the child is developing positive relationships with professionals who can help them. Additionally, foster carers seek and follow advice from professionals about gender identity, which increases their knowledge to help children.

Foster carers receive training to help them respond to any behavioural incidents. Foster carers use this to respond effectively. Incidents are infrequent and, for some children, are reducing overall. When children are missing from home, foster carers take proactive steps to look for children and welcome them home sensitively. Additionally, when there are concerns about children's self-harm, foster carers respond with care and encourage children to access appropriate support.

Safer care plans and household health and safety risk assessments provide an overview and expectation of safe arrangements in foster carers' homes to keep all

household members safe. Staff update assessments regularly, for example when incidents occur or there are changes to the home environment. This practice helps to ensure that children live in a safe environment that is suitable for their needs.

Allegations and standards of care concerns are responded to promptly. The manager consults with appropriate safeguarding professionals and follows procedures. Highly knowledgeable independent reviewing officers complete reviews in preparation for return to the foster panel. Additionally, the manager responds to complaints, and an independent person is identified to complete a thorough investigation. The leadership team and supervising social workers complete a 'lessons learned' review and have reflective discussions to help to improve practice.

Assessments of prospective foster carers are completed by either supervising social workers or independent social workers. Assessments are a good standard, and there is appropriate scrutiny by the panel. If concerns arise during the assessment process about the foster carers' ability to foster, the leadership team completes a thorough analysis of the concerns and strengths, evidencing the rationale for decision-making.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Since the last inspection, a new manager has been appointed. They are suitably qualified and have a wealth of transferable knowledge. Two practice managers support the manager, and they have high expectations of staff. Supervising social workers say they feel supported by the management team. The team is suitably staffed for the number of fostering households. There is a mixture of long-standing practitioners, and some are new to the agency. New members of staff receive an effective induction to the role. Staff say they feel that their work is recognised.

Foster carers said that they have recognised several changes at the agency over recent years, which include a change of supervising social worker for some foster carers. However, foster carers also identified that the agency is now more stable, and they feel supported by their allocated supervising social worker and other members of the team.

The fostering panel is chaired by an experienced person who has relevant experience of working in fostering services. The panel has representation from independent people with a range of relevant professional and lived experiences. New panel members have recently been recruited, and the agency is committed to increasing the diversity of the panel. The panel chair and panel members receive annual appraisals and topic-specific training as a group. Panel minutes and recommendations are clear, and the agency decision-maker provides oversight. This helps to ensure that children are being cared for by adults who can meet their needs.

The manager uses a variety of monitoring tools to monitor the service, and the quality-of-care children receive. Regular audits identify any gaps in records. However, some children's case files do not contain up-to-date information from placing authorities. The manager has implemented a process to request this information and

is confident to professionally challenge placing authorities, with some success. The agency's current escalation policy supports the manager to challenge placing authorities for documents provided at the time a child is placed with foster carers and not for ongoing documents. The absence of an effective policy that includes timescales does not help the manager to escalate requests.

In consultation with foster carers, the agency has created an online resource called 'Padlet.' This resource includes a wealth of information that foster carers can access quickly through an application or online. Information includes processes and procedures, helpful guides and telephone numbers, pay arrangements and training dates. The foster carers who use it report that they find it easy and helpful, although some foster carers have not yet used it. The agency continues to promote the resource and help foster carers understand its benefits.

Staff receive regular supervision and say they benefit from training that is available. This helps to ensure that staff have the skills and knowledge to support foster carers. Supervising social workers know the foster carers and children well and develop positive relationships. Wider professionals provide positive feedback about the quality and stability of placements. Children's social workers are confident in the care provided and communication with the agency.

Some children's records do not always use language that is sensitive or helpful to children. This includes foster carers' daily records and recordings by supervising social workers. Furthermore, some records do not distinguish between fact and opinion, and in one incident, the recording did not accurately reflect the incident. This is not helpful for children should they read their records now or in the future. The provider has a plan to address this area of development.

The leadership team understands the areas for improvement and growth for the agency and has appropriate development plans to support this. Plans are regularly reviewed with senior members of staff, which ensures transparency and accountability. The leadership team is committed to making continuous improvements and was responsive to shortfalls raised during the inspection.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that information about a child is recorded clearly and in a way that will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards,' 26.6)
- The registered person should ensure that information and entries in records, decisions, and reasons for them are accurate, legible, clearly expressed, non-stigmatising, distinguish between fact, opinion and third-party information and are signed and dated. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards,' 26.5)
- The registered person should ensure that the wishes, feelings, and views of those significant to children are considered when monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards,' 1.7)
- The registered person should ensure that children are helped to develop skills that will help prepare them for independent living. In particular, the registered person should ensure that there is a consistent approach to monitoring children's finances and savings in preparation for their future. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards,' 2.6)
- The registered person should ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. In particular, the provider should ensure that there are effective systems in place to escalate concerns to local authorities when statutory documents are not received. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards,' 25.1)
- The registered person should ensure that when children are leaving the foster family for short breaks, children are supported during the transition. In particular, children should have the opportunity to be introduced to their carers before they stay over. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards,' 11.5)

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: SC042759

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Inspectors

Cat Makel, Social Care Inspector (lead)

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