

Barnardos East Midlands Family Placement Service

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC044607
Inspection date	05/01/2011
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Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	22/10/2007

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

The East Midlands Family Placement Service is part of Barnardo's, which is a registered charity. The fostering project was set up in 2001 and works in partnership with local authorities across the East Midlands region. The agency provides long-term placements for a number of children and young people and additionally provides a range of short term and respite placements for children looked after by its own carers and also to meet the needs of children living in the community or in local authority placements.

The agency recruits, assesses and approves foster carers in addition to providing support, supervision and training for all current foster carers. At the time of this inspection the agency is supporting 30 foster carers who have 31 children placed with them. The agency operates its own fostering panel.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

A number of carers, placing social workers and young people completed questionnaires prior to the inspection and several carers and young people have been visited or contacted during the inspection. No placing social workers, carers or young people have had anything negative to say about this service.

The Registered Manager has provided vast amounts of written information, both before and during this inspection, which has adequately demonstrated that this service is competently managed and that there is a strongly evidenced commitment to promoting positive outcomes for children and young people. There is extremely good monitoring of the agency's performance against regulations and national minimum standards. Robust policies and procedures, and sound recording practices, underpin all the agency's practice. A strong, experienced and dedicated staff team are committed to supporting foster carers in providing sound and stable placements for young people, which encourage them to achieve well. Young people are generally happy and settled in their placements and have good relationships with their carers. Systems for assessing, approving, training and supporting carers are clearly stated and are very robust. There is a real focus, on the part of carers and staff, on ensuring that young people are safe, healthy, happy and well cared for.

Although carers generally retain good records relating to young people's health, there is not always a separate health record, updated during placement, which moves with the child. Some carers are unclear about what decisions consent to medical treatment entitles them to take. The agency does not always ensure that young people's placing social workers complete a risk assessment giving

consideration to the issues, which may arise for young people in relation to contact with their birth families, and to the potential vulnerability of carers who facilitate or supervise such arrangements. Sometimes, where supervising social workers identify shortfalls in carer recording practices, and determine additional support strategies to help them improve their recording practice, they are not properly recording this in the supervision record.

Improvements since the last inspection

Four recommendations were made, during the previous inspection of the service, in October 2007.

Carers were not always recording health appointments, health assessments and treatment received. The pro-forma daily record, now retained by all carers, ensures that this information is appropriately recorded but there is no separate health record, updated during placement, which moves with the child. A recommendation, in respect of this has been made within this report, although the new national minimum standards, which come into force in April 2011, do not require this to be a separate record.

Safe care policies did not include any risk assessment component to consider known presenting behaviours and the measures put in place to reduce danger. Individual safe care policies are in place for all children placed and these are robustly supported by comprehensive individual risk assessments to ensure that potential hazards, associated with placements, are clearly identified and that strategies are in place to safely manage them.

Panel minutes did not routinely detail the reasons for recommending approval of foster carers. Panel minutes, examined during this inspection, reflect careful consideration of the carer skills demonstrated by the assessment process and summarise the strengths and weaknesses of the application well. There is good reflection of appropriate questioning, by the panel, where there is any lack of clarity.

In relation to staff recruitment there was one instance where the records failed to demonstrate that a gap in a newly recruited staff member's employment history had been properly investigated. The recruitment records, examined during this inspection, reflect that the agency has robust recruitment processes and practices. The manager confirms that gaps in employment history are always fully investigated and recruitment records indicate that this has certainly been undertaken in relation to all staff appointed since the last inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has clear policies and procedural guidance to reflect the need for foster carers to ensure that young people consistently receive good health care. The carers' handbook contains good practical guidance about how carers can fulfil their

responsibilities in respect of ensuring that children get full access to services to promote their continuing good mental and physical health and emotional well-being. Carers are routinely provided with first aid training, which is updated every three years, to ensure that they are able to respond to any health emergencies in the home. Carers additionally receive training on meeting the health needs of looked after children. All carers have consent to medical treatment so that young people are able to be provided with emergency medical help, should the need arise, but some carers are not wholly clear about what decisions this enables them to make. The agency often experiences difficulty in obtaining full health histories from placing authorities and has been exceptionally pro-active in endeavouring to obtain current copies of all young people's health care plans so that carers have a full knowledge of any presenting health care needs when young people are placed.

Carers generally retain comprehensive daily records in respect of the young people placed with them as well as completing monthly placement summaries. The agency requires carers to retain these records under the Every Child Matters outcome areas so there is a dedicated section, within each of these reports, to young people's health. Records examined show a dedication to retaining sound records of health appointments, treatment received and medication administered. Both the agency and its carers are pro-active in identifying any need for specialist medical involvement with young people and there are good examples of the involvement of the children and adolescent mental health service, the autistic society and the continence service with some of the young people currently in placement. Specialist assessments are strongly promoted, where these are seen as necessary to promote the involvement of additional services, for example where young people may need mental health or counselling input. Although the records retained contain wholly appropriate information relating to young people's health there is not a separate health record, updated during placement, which moves with the child. Where placing authorities issue young people in their care with a health passport carers maintain these but they are not common.

Young people feel that their health needs are well met by their carers and state, 'I'm well fed and I like living in a nice, comfy house with clothes that fit me. We have great fun' and placing social workers speak positively about the input of carers in supporting specific health care needs and state, 'The carers have modified the child's diet to combat obesity and provide him with a healthy diet and good access to medical services'.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has extremely sound processes and practices in relation to the appointment of staff and the recruitment of foster carers. All necessary checks and references are in place for all staff and all have clear contracts of employment, which appropriately cover confidentiality requirements. Additionally staff are required to sign a safeguarding agreement, and a professional boundaries agreement, clarifying their responsibilities to protect young people. Panel members are subject to similarly

robust checks. The panel requires that all checks and references, for prospective foster carers, are complete and satisfactory before recommending approval. A placing social worker describes this service as, 'A fantastic service. This is an excellent placement based on the success of sound recruitment of carers and open communication with social workers.'

The agency has carers approved from a range of different backgrounds, and with a wide range of skills and capabilities, to ensure that they are well able to meet the needs of young people referred for placement. There is a careful and considered matching process, which gives excellent attention to any carer's potential capacity to meet the presenting needs of a child referred for placement. The manager and staff are confident that the needs of existing young people in placement are always given full consideration before any new placement is made and this is fully confirmed by the high level of placement stability. The homes visited are providing an excellent standard of care to the young people in placement and young people are happy, settled and achieving very positive outcomes within those placements. In some cases young people have achieved a level of success, both personally and academically, which written records prior to placement indicated was impossible. Young people value the support of their carers and state: 'They listen and try to be good fun and they have been very supporting and understanding'; 'we are a real family'.

The agency has clear and comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures. A safeguarding day is held each year, which staff, carers and panel members are encouraged to attend. Both staff and carers have good, regular access to training to ensure that they are fully aware of their child protection and safeguarding responsibilities. Written safe care policies are in place for each child placed by the service and these are detailed and clear. The agency completes a commendably comprehensive health and safety risk assessment of every fostering household annually and an individual risk assessment of each child placed. This ensures that any potential hazards, associated with placements, are clearly identified and that strategies are in place to safely manage them. Foster carers are provided with realistic and appropriate guidance about managing young people's challenging behaviours, both through the carers' handbook and through appropriate access to training such as 'creative parenting'. Placing social workers feel confident that young people are provided with safe placements and state: 'The service has taken all necessary steps to providing a very safe service for the young people I work with'; 'The organisation always puts the needs of the child first'; 'The child's safety remains paramount whether in the home or outside'; 'The carers allow the child exploration within safe and manageable boundaries'. Barnardos conducted an audit of safeguarding within its services between 2007 and 2009 and this agency was deemed to be performing well in this area. The report stated, 'Staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding and reporting requirements and there is evidence of correct procedures being followed in respect of allegations against carers and safeguarding concerns'.

There have been six allegations against foster carers since the previous inspection. All have been appropriately managed by the service, have included timely and appropriate notification to, and involvement of, all relevant professionals and

demonstrate that the safety of young people is always the priority. Carers receive good information about the management of allegations but say that it is still 'a really traumatic experience'. Carers say that, in such circumstances, they have received robust support from the agency in general and from their supervising social worker in particular. There have been two complaints, received by the agency, since the previous inspection. These are clearly recorded; the agency complaints procedure has been followed and they have been appropriately resolved.

The fostering panel has not been observed during the inspection but the panel chair and vice chair have been interviewed and the minutes of several panel meetings have been reviewed. The panel has a strong position within the agency and is viewed by staff completing assessments as 'they are your quality control system'. Panel members have a good range of relevant knowledge and experience and records demonstrate that they are diligent in their investigation of the motivation and potential suitability of applicants for the fostering task. There is good social work experience and expertise reflected in panel membership but currently the organisation's Responsible Individual, who also line manages the Registered Manager of this service, is also one of the organisation's two designated social workers on the fostering panel. The agency recognises the potential for this to compromise transparency and is reviewing membership as part of the process of recruiting additional members to replace two who have recently left. The agency ensures that the panel chair, panel advisor and minute taker have access to appropriate training, in respect of their roles, through the British Association of Adoption and Fostering. There are excellent booklets for panel members, detailing their role and responsibility, and for carers, explaining the panel process. Panel minutes provide a comprehensive record of the business conducted but currently the listing of attendees does not separate the panel advisor as a non voting member.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers and placing social workers feel that this agency is strong on equality and on valuing the individuality of carers and young people. This is clearly evidenced through robust carer assessment processes, which clearly highlight individual strengths, and through comprehensive individual placement plans, compiled when a child enters placement, which strongly highlight young people's individual care and support needs and how these will be met. Some of the carers visited are providing excellent support to young people with severe and complex disabilities to achieve very positive educational success and to enjoy some very positive and rewarding activities. Other young people are being robustly supported to explore their ethnic and cultural heritage and to get involved with church and youth groups, where this is appropriate. Visits and records demonstrate that young people are well matched to carers able to meet their ethnic and cultural needs. Diversity training is mandatory for all staff and carers and carer attitudes to equality and diversity issues are fully explored as part of the initial assessment process, where any inappropriate views are robustly challenged and recorded. The agency provides good access for staff and carers to training, which specifically equips them to meet the needs of the young

people placed. For example some carers and their supervising social workers have recently attended training on foetal alcohol syndrome and the agency has paid for other carers to access training by the Autism Society. The staff team have developed an excellent resource library of books, toys and games, which can be used to promote carer knowledge or to utilise in specific work with young people. Carers visited find this extremely useful and some currently have books on loan to help them better understand specific issues with young people they have in placement. The agency additionally operates a 'buddy scheme' where carers who have young people placed who are presenting similar issues, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, are put in touch with each other for mutual support.

All young people receive excellent encouragement and support to attend school regularly and to achieve their full potential. Carers are very aware of the expectation that they liaise regularly with young people's schools and attend all meetings concerning children placed with them. Supervising social workers support carers well by attending meetings with them and providing ongoing support where issues arise in relation to young people's education. Carers retain robust records relating to the educational achievement of young people placed and the agency recognises young people's successes with certificates and articles in the newsletter and often rewards them with vouchers.

The agency has sound information systems in relation to the attendance and achievement of young people in placement. These currently demonstrate very high standards with 88% of young people achieving better than 96% attendance last year and the remainder achieving better than 75% attendance. Where placement has required that a young person changes school carers say that supervising social workers have been extremely supportive in helping them identify a school to meet the child's needs. Carers are actively involved in the development of young people's personal education plans and young people talk about the real support carers have given them to do better at school and, in some cases apply for college or university places: 'They took me to Dyslexia Action to get help and support and took me to the skills festival and helped me to get to college'.

The agency is very focussed on ensuring that respite care is a positive experience for the young people placed with its carers. There are many examples of family members or friends being approved to provide respite, often within the main carer's home, to provide consistency. This ensures that young people really feel part of the family. The agency occasionally, though not frequently, provides respite care for parents, in negotiation with local authorities. Although policies, procedures and the staff handbook are very clear about the central role of birth parents in promoting health and educational needs for these young people the manager has recognised that the carers' handbook is a little vague in respect of clarifying this.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There are policies to ensure that staff, carers and young people understand their rights and responsibilities such as equal rights of all children, access and advocacy, record keeping, information sharing and confidentiality. There are policies to ensure that staff understand professional boundaries and to help them establish positive personal relationships, which support young people well in their placements. There are some very good examples of the agency encouraging and supporting young people well to use the Barnardos children's rights service as well as to access independent advocacy services, including the Ofsted Children's Rights Director. Foster carers and young people are not, however, always aware of the contact details for children's local authority children's rights services or fully aware of their role. The agency proposes to incorporate training about children's rights into this year's programme.

There are good systems for ensuring that young people are able to give their views about their care. Looked after children are encouraged to complete evaluation forms for the foster carer's annual review and the agency has recently introduced similar evaluation forms for birth children. Looked after children are similarly encouraged to contribute to their own reviews and to give their opinions about plans for their future. Social workers are confident that carers make sure that young people's views are listened to, even where young people may have difficulty in communicating them and state, 'The carers have consulted well with the teachers in ensuring a child with a learning disability is able to make a very positive contribution'. The agency is very conscious of the need to involve carers' children in the fostering process and is beginning to utilise Fostering Network materials to involve the birth children better in the assessment process. An excellent booklet entitled 'My family fosters' provides good information about fostering, and is interactive, allowing work to be undertaken on an individual or group basis to ensure that children understand the potential impact of fostering on their family life. The agency stages two big events each year for carers, their own children and fostered children to encourage socialisation and to provide opportunities to share views about the service. The young people, in their questionnaires, rated these events as one of the best things Barnardos do. Foster carers are confident that their own and young people's views really count and state: 'There is always someone to speak to when needed and they advocate for us and for the young people placed with us'; 'They really listen to what is important for each child'; 'I feel confident and comfortable that the agency is working for the children'; 'They work as a team and are welcoming and approachable and they are excellent with the children and always have time for our children'.

Young people's records and visits to carers demonstrate that foster carers are very pro-active in supporting young people's contact with their birth families. Many carers supervise contact arrangements and some make regular long journeys to support young people to visit their families. At present the agency does not always ensure that placing social workers complete a risk assessment to consider the potential vulnerability of carers in relation to their involvement in facilitating or supervising

contact. Carers can be very vulnerable in this situation. Social workers say that carers promote contact well: 'They go that extra mile to make sure that young people get the right opportunities to retain contact with parents and siblings'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

All foster carers are paid appropriate allowances in a timely manner. Carers receive additional allowances for children's birthdays, Christmas and an annual holiday. The manager feels that foster carers are paid a fee, which enables them to give up work or reduce their working hours so that they are able to focus and dedicate their time to caring for the children in placement and meet their individual and complex needs. Young people in placement are robustly encouraged to open bank accounts and to begin to save money.

Young people are being encouraged by their carers to develop self care and independence skills. This is particularly evident with the young people visited during the inspection, some of whom have complex learning disabilities. Some carers are continuing to provide excellent support to young people after they have reached 18 either on a supported lodgings basis or just as a member of the family, without any remuneration. The agency has helped some young people to challenge proposals for them to leave foster families when they reach independence, where those young people have felt the need for the continuing support of their foster family.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The East Midlands Family Placement Service has a clear and comprehensive Statement of Purpose, which fully clarifies the services provided as well as detailing the Barnardos organisational values. The service is self funding and is not for profit so any money made, over and above the amount required to fund the service, is reinvested to develop and enhance the East Midlands Family Placement Service or invested in Barnardo's Children's Services in the region. There are extremely child-friendly children's guides for looked after children and for carers' children, which provide them with all required information, and a comprehensive information pack, detailing services available, for placing authorities.

The service is extremely well managed by a confident, knowledgeable and committed Registered Manager, supported by an experienced and able deputy. There is excellent monitoring of the quality of service provided, both internally by the management team, and by the provider organisation, which conducts annual quality audits. The manager produces an annual, extremely comprehensive report covering all aspects of service provision. The manager completed a full audit, in April 2010, of the service's capacity to meet national minimum standards and regulations. This is a very in depth piece of work demonstrating a real commitment to continuing improvement of service provision to both carers and young people.

Carer assessments are completed to a very good standard and social workers evaluate the information gathered to provide a good overview of prospective carers' strengths and weaknesses. This supports social workers, post carer approval, to ensure that new carers are provided with appropriate training and support. All foster carer assessments are supported by a second opinion visit and the assessment paperwork is fully reviewed by the manager and deputy, prior to being presented to panel, in order that any shortfalls can be addressed before the application is considered for approval. There is a strong and experienced social work team, with a sound knowledge of the foster carers' capabilities and of the individual needs of young people in placement. Administrative staff are confident and capable and are very much part of the team. Carers say that administrative staff provide 'an excellent front line service' for the agency. Staff say that informal systems of mutual support are as valuable as their formal supervision. Staff provide a high level of support to foster carers. Carers are visited every month, as a minimum, and records of carer supervision indicate that they receive good support with individual issues as well as ample opportunities to discuss placement specific concerns. Foster carers and staff have good access to training opportunities. There is a lot of joint training for carers and staff promoting good sharing of knowledge and experience and supporting a consolidated approach to meeting young people's individual needs. The agency has been especially pro-active in supporting and encouraging all its carers in completing the Children's Workforce Development Council qualification. Social workers complete appropriate training to enable them to retain their registration with the General Social Care Council. Staff say 'we are encouraged to stretch ourselves'. All foster carers have a written foster care agreement, which is renewed annually after the annual review, and written foster placement agreements are in place in relation to all children placed with the agency. Foster carer annual reviews are held in a timely manner and any applications for changes to approval recommendations are considered by the fostering panel. All carers receive at least one unannounced visit each year to monitor the standard of care they are providing for young people.

Carers really value the support they receive from the agency and state: 'We are right at the beginning of our fostering career and have been really impressed by the professionalism and personal support'; 'We are proud to be carers within such a great team'; 'Barnardos really does have a heart for children'.

All administrative records are retained to a very high standard. The staff say that, over the last year, there has been greater involvement with the wider Barnardos organisation. This is valued by staff and has involved a greater standardisation of some recording practices. Staff from this service have attended the national Barnardos conference giving them opportunities to share experiences and knowledge in a wider arena. The recording system, for young people's placements, is based around the Every Child Matters outcomes and, as such, records very clearly demonstrate how young people's progress in key areas, such as health and education, is strongly and consistently promoted by their carers. There are great differences in carers' capabilities in respect of record keeping and the agency endeavours to maintain its high standards of recording by providing less capable carers with close monitoring, strong support and good training on recording

requirements. Carers are also provided with training on completing life story work with young people and encourage young people to collect memorabilia throughout their placements. Some carers are retaining very impressive DVD records of young people's placements and this will provide these young people with a life-long record of their childhood.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that carers maintain a written health record, for each child placed in their care, which is updated during placement and moves with the child and that all carers are fully aware that they have consent to medical treatment for the children they care for (NMS 12.3, 12.4)
- ensure that children's social workers always carry out a risk assessment in relation to children's contact arrangements and the supervision of those arrangements by foster carers and that they have supplied carers and children with contact details for the placing authority children's rights service (NMS 10.6, 11.2)
- ensure that supervising social workers' records of foster carer supervision clearly highlight any shortfalls identified in the carer's recording practices, and fully detail how these shortfalls are being addressed with the carer, in order to promote the retention of comprehensive case records for children placed (NMS 22.6, 24.1).