

Barnardo's East Midlands Family Placement Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Barnardo's East Midlands Family Placement Service is an independent fostering agency. It is one of a number of services operated by Barnardo's, a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity.

It provides long-term, short-term, emergency and short break fostering placements for children and young people from 0 to 18 years of age, including individual placements, sibling groups and parent and child placements.

On 31 March 2015 it had 37 children in placement and 53 foster carers in 33 fostering households. During the year 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015 it received four applications to become approved foster carers.

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: **Outstanding**

Leaders and managers at all levels are passionate and committed to providing services of the highest quality. They inspire the staff team to share their vision and strive to constantly develop and improve the service. Rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems are firmly established throughout the organisation, and research has been commissioned to develop the service further. A number of innovations have been introduced or are about to be implemented as a result of analysis, feedback and a desire to improve outcomes for children and young people. These include building foster carer resilience through a specific commissioned programme, consultation and training in relation to educational attainment, and research-based training on attachment.

Children and young people have their needs met to a very high standard. They flourish and develop in safe and secure fostering families, and as a result many make exceptional progress. When asked what was good about the foster carers, a young person responded: 'Everything! I make my own choices, do lots of activities, and get extra treats when earned.' Work with children and carers is of a high quality and has resulted in some exceptional outcomes. Children and young people have good school attendance and many attain over and above what was expected of them. A significant strength of the service is placement stability which leads to improved emotional well-being and resilience and enables children and young people to develop positive and secure attachments to their carers.

Prospective foster carers receive a positive prompt response and assessments are timely, thorough and analytical. Foster carers are fully supported by regular in-depth supervision and training and are seen as valued members of the team around the child. This results in carers who are skilled, committed and provide excellent long-lasting placements to children and young people, some of whom have complex needs. Carers say, 'they support us brilliantly', and, 'the support is fantastic.' Carers work well in partnership with other agencies, using their knowledge of the children and young people to enhance the support they need. Consultation and participation are well developed and have influenced many aspects of service provision, such as the training programme and literature.

Highly effective working relationships with partners provide both support and challenge to meet children's and young people's needs. Partners speak very positively about the agency, particularly its flexibility, its understanding of the needs of local authorities and its willingness to tackle any issues raised. One stakeholder commented, 'I really rate this agency.'

No requirements or recommendations have arisen from this inspection.

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people are well cared for, safe and happy in stable and secure placements that meet their needs. Children and young people have a range of very positive experiences with their foster families, where they thrive, develop, and in many cases, make exceptional progress. These experiences contribute to very positive outcomes in all areas of their lives.

A significant strength of the service is placement stability. There are very few unplanned endings of placements; at 2.6% last year, this is well below the national average of 8%. Another significant strength is the longevity of placements. Over half of the current children and young people in placement have been with the same foster carers for over two years, many for much longer, and there are three young people under 'staying put' arrangements. Such stability has a significant impact on emotional security, their sense of belonging and overall well-being which enables them to progress positively into adulthood.

The majority of placements are planned in advance. There are many examples of excellent practice in relation to preparing children and young people to move into the foster family. For example, one fostering family prepared a high-quality record of the child's time with them in preparation for a move to a long-term foster carer. There are frequent pre-placement information-sharing meetings between foster carers, children's social workers and the agency, and introductory visits occur wherever possible. Foster carers have made family books to provide children and young people with basic information about themselves, so they know a little of what to expect to make the transition easier. These arrangements enable children and young people to settle better, feel more at ease, and for carers to understand the needs of the children and young people so they can support them appropriately.

Foster carers are committed to supporting arrangements for children and young people to maintain relationships with people who are important to them. The agency facilitates nearby placements so that brothers and sisters who may not live with each other nonetheless can see each other regularly, including sharing transport to school. As a result, children and young people retain a strong and positive sense of their identity. Their cultural needs are also well met. Carers demonstrate a really good understanding of the importance of this, even with a very young child, for example, using simple words and flash cards in the child's first language, and celebrating religious festivals.

Children and young people have many opportunities to share their views, and as a result they develop in confidence, feel valued and improve their self-esteem. They are encouraged to contribute to their own reviews, and for some this is significant progress as they have developed in confidence and become more articulate. Their views are also included in the reviews of foster carers, and have also contributed to the development of the form whereby their views are obtained. Some excellent direct work with young people has resulted in the production of a well-used booklet on safe

relationships. Not only has this been effective in ensuring the booklet is age-appropriate and meaningful for other young people, but it also promotes pride in achievements which are widely circulated. Other young people have had similar experiences through their contribution to the agency's newsletter, which led to a young person's story being used at a national event and having an impact on other foster carers and children. This demonstrates the value the agency places on the direct testimony of young people. All achievements are celebrated in the newsletter and with an individual letter of praise and a gift token. This further supports the development of pride and self-esteem.

Children and young people are healthy. Carers ensure they are registered with and access appropriate services. All who are assessed as needing the child and adolescent mental health service are in receipt of it. Carers are astute in identifying potential health issues and are proactive in exploring this with health professionals so that children and young people receive the right support.

Children and young people are fully included as part of the fostering family, and as a result they have a number of experiences they may otherwise not have had. This includes family holidays, family events, weekends away, and having birthday parties. Interests and hobbies are fully encouraged, such as swimming, scouts and football. They are encouraged to socialise, visit friends, have friends over and play a full part in the community.

Children and young people have good school attendance, and for some this is exceptional progress as they had not been to school at all prior to coming into placement. Attendance levels are above the average for looked after children as all are above 90%, with some at 100%. All children and young people have appropriate educational placements and some are achieving above expectations. Carers are excellent advocates for children in school, attend all relevant meetings and fully support homework.

The children and young people who are currently in placement are not engaging in risk-taking behaviour such as going missing, offending or drug and alcohol misuse. This ensures they are kept safe from harm. Because they settle and make secure attachments, their behaviour improves, they become calmer and their involvement in and access to the community becomes easier as they are more accepted.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Foster carers are recruited who are able to meet the complex and challenging needs of the children and young people requiring foster placements and they are well supported to do so. This includes the provision of bespoke training to promote strategies to manage particular issues as well as funding attachment-based family therapy to sustain placements. To quote a social worker: 'The foster carers provide a stable and supportive foundation on which to develop.'

The preparation, assessment and approval of foster carers is a thorough yet timely process. Enquirers receive a prompt and welcoming response and are provided with comprehensive information through an initial visit, the basis of which supports a decision to proceed. The preparation training has been recently updated and arrangements for its delivery remodelled to make it more accessible. The assessments are analytical and focus on the competencies required to be a foster carer. The agency is currently considering adult attachment-style assessments as an area for development.

Panel and decision-making processes are thorough, timely and effective. The fostering panel provides a good level of enquiry and challenge to ensure that only foster carers who are suitable are approved. The quality and timeliness of the work is monitored regularly and an annual quality assurance report provided, in addition to the annual panel report. This enables the agency to take any remedial action necessary. The central list is currently being enhanced to offer a wider variety of experience, as this is an area which the agency feels it can improve upon. The panel chair, who is relatively new to this agency, is knowledgeable, child-focused and brings a significant level of both personal and professional experience to the role. The administration of the fostering panel is timely and the minutes are of a good standard to reflect the discussion and enable the decision maker to make an informed decision. The decision maker demonstrates a robust understanding of her role and takes it very seriously, again providing appropriate challenge to ensure that only safe and suitable people are approved and continue as foster carers. The effectiveness of these systems is evident in the placement stability.

Training, support and supervision of foster carers are areas of significant strength. All foster carers are up to date with, or have almost completed, the training and development standards. First aid and safeguarding training are closely monitored so that these are kept up to date. There is an impressive range of training which is constantly being evaluated and developed to keep it fresh and up to date. Some high quality training on attachment, based on recent research, is planned to supplement the training on attachment already provided. Carers comment that the agency is responsive to its requests for particular training to meet the needs of the children and young people placed. For example, some carers had training in signing to facilitate the placement of a deaf child; others have requested and attended training on drug misuse. Training is of a high standard and carers use it to improve the care and support they provide. They also appreciate the opportunities for socialising at these events.

Foster carer supervision is very regular, in depth, child-focused and challenging where necessary. It is very clear that supervising social workers are not collusive and are prepared to challenge and support foster carers to improve their practice. To quote a foster carer: 'The children are the agency's first priority.'

Foster carers are clearly very committed to the children and young people and see them as part of their family. They involve them in family occasions, holidays and treat them as their own. One social worker said: 'It's a lovely placement. The carers go over and above.' Another stakeholder commented: 'The quality of care and commitment is outstanding; they put the interests of the children at the forefront.' Sons and daughters of foster carers are supported in the fostering task through their own group which enables them to share their experiences, contribute to agency developments and feel valued for their contribution in making fostered children feel accepted into the family. Carers respect and value the children's birth family and facilitate contact arrangements so that they sustain important relationships. Although carers are able to have respite care, many do not access this, and where they do, this is provided in a child -focused way so it is seen as a positive break for the child/young person.

Carers are universally positive about working for this agency and are proud to say they are Barnardo's carers. They really value the 'family feel' and the fact that they know the staff, the staff know them and staff are responsive to any request for advice and support. Comments include: 'staff go above and beyond'; 'the support is brilliant'; 'they are just a phone call away'; and 'I can't fault them.' They also appreciate the out of hours' service and the buddying system. Foster carers feel valued and part of the team. Children's social workers value their contribution and comment on high quality review reports and good communication. Foster carers are good advocates for children and young people and are supported by the agency in this, for example, with education issues.

Matching is another area of strength, demonstrated by the longevity of placements and low rate of unplanned endings. Clear decision-making processes based on the needs of the child and the capacity of the carers is evident. The agency does its best to challenge local authorities to provide missing information, and in many cases pre-placement meetings are held to share information directly with foster carers.

The agency and the carers fully support reviews and other professional meetings, such as personal education plan meetings, which supports effective, child focused planning. One social worker commented: 'The carers never miss a meeting and they contribute really well.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This is a safe and effective service where children and young people grow and flourish in families where they feel safe and protected from harm. Foster carers understand that some risk taking, such as walking to school alone and going out with friends, is appropriate to enable children and young people to develop and reach their potential. This is carefully managed through thorough risk assessments and safe care plans which are regularly reviewed, updated and shared with the child/young person where appropriate.

Children and young people are given written information in the children's guide about how to raise a concern or complaint. They have a number of avenues of support, including the agency's supervising social workers, their own social worker and the independent reviewing officer. The agency staff ensure they form positive relationships with the children and young people in placement, including seeing them alone, so they can be a meaningful contact and source of support. This also enables them to support the foster carers more effectively as they know the children and young people.

Carers understand the impact of abuse and neglect on children's and young people's behaviour and are well versed in how to keep children safe. They have access to appropriate guidance, underpinned by regular training, so they know what to do if a child goes missing or makes an allegation. Currently none of the children or young people are engaged in risk-taking behaviour such as going missing from home.

Allegations against carers are dealt with in line with current guidance, and carers are given support while investigations take place. Carers comment positively about how they were supported during this difficult time. Relationships with the local authority designated officer have been enhanced by involving them in a recent staff training event to ensure staff are fully up to date with current procedures. There are effective relationships with other safeguarding agencies such as the local police. Protocols and procedures for all the local authorities where children and young people are placed are available for staff to access should they need them.

The safety of placements is further assured by a minimum of two unannounced visits to foster homes a year, seeing children alone and foster carer reviews chaired by an independent person. The fostering panel and agency decision maker add further robustness by commenting appropriately if they have any concerns about foster carers' practices. Reviews are brought forward if there have been allegations or concerns about practice and conduct so that the ongoing approval of foster carers can be considered at the earliest opportunity. A senior manager of Barnardo's oversees all safeguarding incidents and complaints, which are then shared with the trustees, to bring an additional tier of oversight to this process.

Recruitment is based on best practice and ensures that staff, foster carers and panel members are only appointed if they are safe and suitable people to work with children.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The leadership and management of the agency are very strong at all levels. Senior managers are passionate and committed to excellence for children and young people and have instigated a number of developments to support this. On a local level, both the Registered Manager and the team manager provide excellent leadership. They are clearly ambitious for the children and young people and willing to innovate and try new ways of working. They demonstrate openness, and a willingness to listen, adapt and change.

There are excellent working relationships with partner agencies. Commissioners speak highly of the service, particularly its responsiveness, flexibility and communication. One stakeholder said, 'they go over and beyond'. Regular communication ensures a good understanding of the requirements and needs of local authorities.

Children and young people have lots of opportunities to have fun. The partnership with a local theatre has provided some excellent opportunities for new experiences. The agency's social events are well received and based on what carers and their families want. These provide opportunities for children and young people to meet other fostered children, get to know the staff in more relaxed surroundings and feel a part of the service.

Leaders and managers have an excellent awareness of how children and young people are progressing in placement through a number of different channels which is being further enhanced by the recently implemented electronic system.

Extensive monitoring systems at all levels provide for high quality review and evaluation. This feeds into the annual agency report as well as other reports at more frequent intervals. Senior managers and trustees receive regular information through the dashboard and scrutiny committees to enable them to have good oversight, discharge their duties effectively and provide challenge. The business plan and action plan clearly link into the review and monitoring systems and provide detailed information about where the service intends to develop and continue to improve. The three recommendations from the previous inspection have been fully addressed, resulting in improved foster carer record-keeping and information about children and young people.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide are clearly written and comprehensive documents which give a good understanding of the service to those who read them.

Foster carer recruitment has been the subject of a lot of analysis, as the rate has been slow of late. This is being addressed through the appointment of a project worker to provide a more local service, as well as feedback from commissioned

research. Retention of carers is good and many have worked for the agency for some time.

Staff, managers and panel members are appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. Supervision is reflective and enables staff to consider casework decisions and how to improve the support they offer. They have access to external training as well as internal courses so they can offer a competent and effective service to foster carers and children. Research is promoted, through access to recent articles and team briefings. Staff are very positive and highly complimentary of the managerial support, saying it is accessible and helpful. This enables them, in turn, to provide exceptional support to foster carers and achieve excellent outcomes for the children and young people in placement.

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.