

Barnardo's - Making Connections

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Making Connections is a branch of Barnardo's, a voluntary adoption agency. It provides a national service, although it is managed as a part of the London East and South East (London) region of Barnardo's.

The branch provides adoption support services to adults only; it does not recruit, assess or approve adopters, nor does it work with children. Staff provide advice and support to adults who have been in Barnardo's care or affected by adoption, whether as birth family members or as adopted children, and help service users to access their records. The branch has service level agreements with three London boroughs to provide an independent counselling and intermediary service for birth family members.

The branch holds 6,000 records for all adoptions made by Barnardo's since 1947, 390 records for adoptions made by the Children's Aid Society, and a large number of records for children who were not placed for adoption.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

The branch achieves good outcomes for adult service users, who were all very positive about the service. The service is of high quality, and delivered by skilled and experienced staff and managers. The strength of leadership is evident and the premises suitably support service delivery. Despite a current review of the service, which may have a significant impact on its future, the branch continues to be innovative and creative in the work undertaken with service users. No statutory requirements or recommendations have been made following this inspection.

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

This outcome area considers the branch's work with all those receiving adoption support services. The service is delivered to adults only. Staff carefully listen to the wishes and feelings of those who have been adopted regarding the service they require. A flexible and responsive service is provided to those seeking information about their past, with the utmost of care taken to ensure they receive the very best possible service.

Those using the branch to access their birth records report that it is efficient and sensitive to their needs. There are examples of innovative practice in relation to those individuals who face significant challenges in securing their birth records. This is particularly evident to families and individuals that now live outside of the United Kingdom.

The branch works closely with local authorities within the geographical area they serve. Local authorities comment that the branch responds well to local needs, meeting and exceeding the expectations of those whom they have supported. Currently the outcome of the service review is not known and this limits the branch's ability to demonstrate how it will continue to meet the needs of those using the service in the future.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

The branch ensures all service users receive information about the services provided. This information can be produced in a variety of ways to meet the differing needs of those using the service. Requests for birth records counselling and intermediary services are responded to within three months and an initial appointment is normally offered. The branch is committed to reducing this waiting time further to a maximum of two months. The welfare of the service user is of paramount importance, and service users are supported in a sensitive and caring manner. When the branch is not able to offer a service, enquirers are signposted to the most appropriate agency who can offer a service.

The branch greatly values and respects those using its services, and this is reflected in the written policies and procedures. The branch's services are commissioned by several local authorities and these are supported by a written agreement, which is regularly reviewed. Feedback from two local authorities was extremely positive; one service manager said, 'I rate them (Barnardo's) very highly', while another said, 'they offer a valuable service to birth parents and are able to respond reasonably quickly to any referral that we make'. Those using the branch's services are informed of their right to make representations and complaints and are helped to do so, if this is required. The branch is committed to equality in practice and works hard to ensure that all service users and contacts are treated equitably regardless of race, religion, gender, sexuality or disability.

Feedback from service users is seen as extremely important and is regularly obtained from those who use the service in order to monitor and improve it. Making

Connections undertakes its own annual stakeholder survey and all surveys reviewed were very positive.

All services are tailored to meet the individual's needs and are thoughtfully and sensitively delivered by experienced and well qualified staff, all of whom have a great deal of experience in birth records counselling and intermediary services.

Information obtained from those that use the service confirm that the branch provides a clear explanation of the service provided, that they are fully consulted and are actively supported in any decisions which affect their future lives. All of those using the service confirmed that it is an extremely professional service and delivered to a very high standard. Service users advised that without the branch's support they would not have been able to trace and find former family members. One service user commented: 'I was very impressed by the conversations I had with my social worker and would like to express my thanks for his help.'

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

All social workers have regular safeguarding training. In addition, there is an annual safeguarding training event which includes issues relating to historical abuse. The branch is able to deliver this due to its expert knowledge and experience in managing historical abuse. Safeguarding is also regularly discussed at team meetings and in supervision, so that staff are regularly reminded of these issues and make appropriate responses. Any issues of potential historical abuse are overseen by the 'historical abuse management group' that the branch has in place. The service manager of the branch advised that they are still able to work with those who disclose historical abuse while in the care of Barnardo's, and by separating the issues out they can continue to offer counselling and support, which is seen as extremely positive.

Service users advise that they are aware of the branch's complaints procedure, although at the time of the inspection the branch had not received any complaints. Any concerns or complaints that the branch may receive usually relate to historical abuse, and the branch has a transparent policy and procedure to manage such issues.

The recruitment of staff and volunteers is thorough and organised to ensure that staff appointed and volunteers approved are appropriately vetted and are aware of their responsibilities to service users.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the voluntary adoption agency are **good**.

The performance and delivery of 'Making Connections' are monitored on a regular basis by the service manager and senior managers within Barnardo's. There are

effective and robust quality assurance systems in place, which scrutinise the branch's work and ensure good outcomes are achieved for those using its services. The manager regularly monitors all branch records to ensure that any issues or concerns are addressed and raised with senior managers as appropriate. In addition, senior managers of the agency receive regular reports on the management of the branch and monitor the management of the branch to ensure that positive outcomes are achieved for service users. An annual report and business plan are drawn up which help support the development of the service.

At the time of the inspection, Barnardo's was conducting a thorough review of the work undertaken by 'Making Connections' and this may well have an impact on the service. It is evident from discussion with senior management and staff that there is a degree of uncertainty about the future direction and possible changes that may well affect 'Making Connections'. However, it is of credit to the management and staff team that they continue to offer a very good service to all who use the service. While the branch continues to work hard and develop the services it offers to local authorities and individual service users, it is clearly difficult to plan for the future given the ongoing review.

Managers are very skilled and experienced. The service manager, who has 28 years of post-qualification experience, also holds a National Vocational Qualification at level 4 in management. All of the social work staff have worked within the service for many years and are very experienced and knowledgeable. All social work staff hold professional qualifications in social work and are registered with the General Social Care Council. Managers and staff keep up to date with legislative changes through training, team meetings and supervision. In addition, there is a programme of induction for all new staff, and staff appraisal takes place at least annually. Staff receive regular high quality supervision, and a great deal of informal support. They receive training opportunities, although they commented that this is often in the form of electronic courses. The manager ensures that there are opportunities for staff development and training, although external training is difficult to access given the cost. There is an expectation that staff who attend external training courses will cascade the information to colleagues. These mechanisms ensure that service users receive an appropriate service of a high quality from competent staff.

The branch has written policies and procedures, which accurately reflect and support the services provided. The Statement of Purpose and information for service users are clearly written, frequently reviewed and describe the aims and objectives. This ensures that anyone using the service knows what to expect.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

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 voluntary adoption agencies.