

Barnardo's - West Midlands Family Placement Service

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Date of last inspection	11/08/2009

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Barnardo's is a well-established voluntary adoption agency, of which West Midlands Family Placement Service is one of eight branches. The branch manager is also the Registered Manager of the Barnardo's fostering branch, which occupies the same premises in Dudley.

Currently the service is not recruiting or assessing new prospective adopters, and has not done so since 2008. It has one family with a child in a pre-adoptive placement. The branch provides adoption support, both post placement and post adoption, to adoptive families approved by Barnardo's, and the children placed with them.

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 **adequate**.

This is an improving service which now has a clear focus and direction. The branch has made significant improvements since the previous inspection and is now judged as providing an adequate service overall. There is a new leadership team, and staff and managers are committed to develop and drive the service forward. Leaders and managers have a strong awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the service through the extensive monitoring and reporting systems in operation.

It is a child-focused service which delivers good outcomes for children. The quality of the service is improving but improvements have yet to be fully embedded to demonstrate their effectiveness. Children are safe, and the agency as a whole has robust arrangements which ensure safe practice. Staff are appropriately qualified, supervised and supported to provide an effective service.

There are weaknesses in the recording of service provision; this means the branch cannot fully demonstrate how positive outcomes are achieved or how service users are consulted and involved. There are also some documentary shortfalls.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure service users receive written information about the service they are to receive, what the service is designed to achieve, what is involved in the particular provision and how the service will be monitored to ensure it is delivering the intended outcome (NMS 15.3)
- ensure feedback is sought from service users on the success of the service provision, and this feedback is recorded centrally and on the case record of the service user (NMS 15.6)
- ensure staff understand and follow the agency's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files (NMS 27.2)
- ensure there is a business continuity plan, which staff understand and can access, which includes both provision of premises and safeguarding/back-up of records (NMS 28.3)
- ensure there is a system to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 19 or regulation 24, including what to do where a notifiable event arises at the weekend. (NMS 29.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children make good progress in their adoptive families. Their needs, including those relating to ability, gender and ethnicity, are assessed, and appropriate support is put in place to meet those needs, for example, training in attachment issues. They enjoy safe, stable and secure family lives which enable them to develop appropriate attachments and emotional resilience. One stakeholder commented: 'The child is blossoming.' No placements have disrupted since the last inspection of the branch.

Children develop confidence and self-esteem through taking part in leisure and social activities. For example, they go on holiday, play with friends, take part in sporting activities and join community groups. They also have opportunities to meet with other adopted children through the annual social event. A stakeholder commented that a child, 'has really developed confidence and social skills,' through having new experiences with the adoptive family.

Children make good progress in their educational attainment, behaviour and social skills. A stakeholder commented that a young person, 'was really settled and had made huge progress at school,' and the school report made reference to the 'marked improvement', both in attainment and behaviour. This is borne out by the outcome

assessment which the branch carries out, which clearly shows significant progress in all areas.

Quality of service

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

This branch has not recruited, prepared, assessed or approved adoptive parents since 2008, thus the current operation of the adoption service is limited to post-placement and post-adoption support. Adoptive parents became disengaged with the adoption branch when recruitment activity ceased, and the branch manager, together with the staff, have been trying to repair this relationship over the last few months. There have been real efforts to try and re-engage with the adoptive families to ensure they are fully aware that Barnardo's is there to offer support. For example, all adoptive families have been contacted by letter, and there is now a twice-yearly specific adoption newsletter, as well as a more general service newsletter, so adopters are aware of who to contact and the service that can be provided. This letter also gives an email address to enable feedback.

There are now clearly defined processes for dealing with referrals for adoption support, so all staff know what to do if an adopter or young person contacts the branch. There is a designated post-adoption support worker, who is developing her skills and knowledge in this area. There is an out-of-hours helpline for foster carers and adopters, so they can access advice and support when the office is closed. The branch is a member of Adoption UK, a registered adoption support agency, which entitles the adoptive families to access training events and support groups which that adoption support agency runs. The training which is available to Barnardo's foster carers is also available to adoptive parents. This is extensive and includes attachment, child protection, behaviour management and social networking. Adoptive families are also invited to the annual social event. As yet the take-up for training and social events has been limited, but these efforts demonstrate a clear commitment to improve the quality of service for adopters. The attachment training, which is specifically about re-parenting children with those issues, has been particularly well received.

Only a small number of adoptive families have contacted the branch for adoption support in the last 12 months. Most of this has resulted in signposting to other agencies, but there have been instances when attachment training was offered in response, and this proved effective. Social workers have also made home visits to assess the need for support, and attended meetings at school with adopters at their request, to provide additional support. However, the records of the interventions are poor and not in line with either Barnardo's own procedures or the expectations of the national minimum standards for adoption agencies. For example, they do not include a written assessment of need, the service to be provided, whether this is in accordance with what the service users wants, regular review, and feedback following the service provision. Thus the outcome and impact of providing support cannot be adequately evaluated.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children are safe and feel safe because the branch's arrangements for safeguarding are adequate. Children have written information in a child-friendly format which gives them details of a variety of people they can talk to if they have a worry or concern. They receive regular visits from their own social worker and the branch's social worker, who, although is there to support the adoptive parents, has a clear focus on the child's welfare and safety. This ensures there are adults who are accessible and to whom they can talk.

The agency as a whole places a high priority on safeguarding. It has developed a comprehensive raft of policies and procedures to guide staff in their work in this area. For example, it not only has safeguarding procedures, which include historical abuse, it also has policies on appropriate professional boundaries, children who are missing, whistle-blowing and e-safety. These are readily accessible to staff on the intranet, and all staff must read and sign them before they have any involvement with service users.

The agency ensures staff are appropriately trained, and safeguarding is included in their induction. There is an annual safeguarding day in each branch, and ongoing training at different levels. Staff have access to the local authority's Local Safeguarding Children Board training, and have recently undertaken training on child sexual exploitation. Safeguarding is an agenda item on every staff meeting and every staff supervision session. This emphasis and commitment to safeguarding ensures staff are up to date with current issues and know how to respond if there are concerns or allegations, and thus protect children appropriately.

Adopters are made aware of how to protect children from the dangers of social networking. There has been a recent article in the newsletter, and appropriate training is available for them which looks at the impact of abuse, protecting disabled children, and social networking. Safe care guidelines are discussed where this seems relevant, to ensure adopters are aware of potential dangers and provide appropriate and safe care. There are also useful leaflets on child sexual exploitation. No issues have arisen, and no new adopters have been prepared or assessed since the previous inspection, so the effectiveness and impact of this cannot be evaluated.

Barnardo's has robust procedures for the recruitment and vetting of staff to ensure they are competent and safe to work with children and service users.

Leadership and management

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

This is an improving service, with leaders and managers who are committed to ensuring good outcomes for children. Two requirements and nine recommendations were made following the previous inspection of the service. Many of these are no

longer relevant as they pertained to the assessment and approval process for adoptive parents. However, those that are relevant have been appropriately addressed to improve the service and provide more positive outcomes for children. For example, there is now a more developed adoption support strategy, and staffing and management arrangements ensure a safer and more effective service.

Barnardo's has robust monitoring and reporting arrangements at all levels. The trustees receive quarterly reports on the work of the adoption agency, including this branch, so they can monitor the effectiveness of the service. The assistant director undertakes an annual service quality assurance on behalf of the regional director, who uses this information to decide whether to do his own inspection. Barnardo's also has a central auditing team who undertake unannounced checks, so there are a number of systems to assure quality. There are also regular meetings of managers involved in adoption, so the agency manager is fully informed of the work of each branch.

The competence of staff is assured in a number of ways, so they provide an effective and safe service. At a local level, the branch manager supervises the deputy children's services managers who in turn supervise the social work staff. Supervision is regular, recorded and includes a clear focus on outcomes for children. Staff are appropriately qualified and experienced and afforded training opportunities to further develop their knowledge. For example, a social worker and her manager have attended external training on concurrency planning, and the post-adoption social worker has attended training on child exploitation and post-adoption issues. Additionally she has made links with a number of other services to develop her knowledge and share information.

The branch manager has been in post for 18 months and has made a real difference. Staff comment on her 'infectious positivity' and her 'clear focus and direction', and feel she listens and is able to prioritise effectively. She provides good leadership, and is assisted in this by the assistant director and agency manager. All leaders and staff demonstrate a strong commitment to adoption and want to develop the service. This is in the embryonic stages and has not been fully embedded in practice.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide give comprehensive and clear information to anyone using the service so they know what to expect. The children's guide has been developed with the input of children using the service; it is very child-friendly, gives good information and is available in alternative formats so that children of different abilities can also access the information. The Statement of Purpose, which details the agency's commitment to improving outcomes for all children, regardless of age, ethnicity, additional needs or difficulties, can also be translated into other languages and formats on request to improve accessibility of information.

There are positive working relationships with local authorities. Stakeholders confirm the branch works well with them, attends meetings where appropriate and communicates effectively. Should the branch start to recruit adopters in the future, it has strong links with contracting authorities in relation to its fostering branch which

will be extended to adoption work.

There is a system for notifications of significant events; however, the written procedure which is being reviewed, does not address notifications in relation to adoption as clearly as it could, and thus may lead to staff misunderstanding what actions to take.

The premises are accessible and secure. They are appropriate for the purpose, and have rooms available for meetings, training, and staff supervision. There are many displays promoting diversity, both in the reception areas, offices and meeting rooms. This ensures there are positive images of people from a range of backgrounds and experiences, and emphasises the branch's commitment to promoting equality and tackling discrimination. Records are stored with appropriate security and accessibility, both electronically and in hard copy. There is a business continuity plan but this does not address the safeguarding and back-up of records or the provision of alternative premises, which may lead to a disruption of the service in the event of a crisis.

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.