

New Families - North East

Inspection report for Voluntary Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC051835
Inspection date	23/07/2009
Inspector	Marian Denny
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Barnardo's, 1 Lumley Court, Drum Industrial Estate, CHESTER LE STREET, County Durham, DH2 1AN
Telephone number	0191 240 4814
Email	
Registered person	Barnardo's North East
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	John Tebbet
Date of last inspection	10/07/2006

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

Barnardo's has been registered as a voluntary adoption agency since 1947. It is a well established agency and has four adoption branch offices and an adoption support branch in England.

New Families, North East is one of those four adoption branches and is based in Chester-le-Street. This adoption branch specialises in finding adoptive families for those children with additional needs, whom the local authority finds difficulty placing. The branch therefore recruits, prepares, assesses and approves prospective adopters. Approved adopters are offered a variety of support services, both prior to and after the making of an adoption order. These services include social work visits and in collaboration with other adoption services in the area, adopter support groups and a variety of training. The service will also negotiate with a local authority, on behalf of their adoptive families, complex packages of therapeutic support.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection. All the adoption national minimum standards and regulations were addressed under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation, which were judged as good.

The branch has a recruitment strategy, which promotes equality and diversity and is clearly based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption.

It is thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. The agency is extremely child focused and works hard to ensure children are well matched with agency adopters. The branch has limited in-house services, however in collaboration with other local services is able to provide a range of support services to adopters, both before and if necessary, after the adoption order is made.

The service has a clear understanding of the life long implications of adoption and actively supports the inclusion of birth parents in adoption plans. Adopters are encouraged and supported wherever possible, to meet with birth parents. It also seeks to plan, support and facilitate direct contact between birth families and children, providing it is in the child's best interests to do so. There is a small letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available.

The adoption procedures of the branch and the literature provided for adopters has been revised in accordance with recent adoption legislation. However, further

revision is required, if it is to fully comply with this government guidance.

Since the last inspection, there have been changes in the operational management team, which has impacted on the development of the service. This is being currently addressed and a number of plans are being implemented to address this. The current managerial team are able to manage the service effectively and have considerable experience in adoption. However, quality assurance systems are not sufficiently robust in relation to the agency's records.

The risk assessment in relation to recently archived records also needs to be improved upon, if it is to fully meet the adoption national minimum standards.

There is a sound recruitment and selection procedure, which is robustly followed. However, such a robust approach is not adopted in relation to adoption panel members.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection of the branch was carried out in July 2006, which resulted in one action and four recommendations being made. The service had made considerable efforts to address these matters, as a consequence, whilst the action was still outstanding, all the recommendations had been completed at the time of this inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The branch has a recruitment strategy, which promotes equality and diversity and is clearly based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption. It specialises in recruiting adopters for children with additional needs, whom the local authority is finding difficulties placing in adoptive homes, for example, older children, children with special needs, children of dual heritage and sibling groups. The branch has been particularly successful in recruiting black adopters and in the past year, successful recruitment campaigns have resulted in an increase in the number of its adopters.

There are clear processes and procedures in place to handle domestic adoption enquiries and to follow up any expressions of interest, which are compatible with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice. Adopters confirmed that the information provided had been 'very helpful'. However, not all information provided was in accordance with the Adoption and Children Act 2002 Practice Guidance.

The service has a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters, which fully complies with the Adoption and Children Act 2002 Practice Guidance. The branch holds regular preparation training, however occasionally there are too few prospective adopters to attend a preparation group. In these circumstances, the service arranges for adopters to attend neighbouring local authorities preparation training. This ensures adopters can attend a group without too long a wait. The preparation materials used are appropriate, effective and ensure adopters become fully aware of the complexities of parenting and adopting a child from the care system. Adopters were complimentary about the preparation training, which they stated was 'well organised and presented'. Several indicated that they thought the training materials used were 'informative', 'honest' and 'challenged one's thoughts about adoption'.

Adopters' assessments are generally well documented and of good quality, in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover such issues, as parenting capacity, life experiences, the impact of adoption and support networks well. Views of birth and adopted children are also obtained regarding their parents' decision to adopt. Written references in relation to the adopters, as well as employer references and checks with applicants' former partners are also obtained. In addition, all necessary enquiries are obtained in relation to prospective adopters and other members of the household who are aged 16 years old or over. The service also ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner, through the use of comprehensive pet and health and safety risk assessments. Second opinion visits are also undertaken, which are thorough and well documented. However, in a small percentage of the cases inspected, assessments were not as well documented and lacked detailed analysis.

Adopters were positive about the assessment process, which they described as being carried out in a thorough manner. Staff were said to be extremely 'professional' and 'knowledgeable'. Adopters stated that their report was accurate and with one exception, given to them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive good written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register and the local adoption consortium. Adopters confirmed that the information provided was 'extremely useful' and ensured that they had a 'very good understanding of the process'.

The service's practice is child focused, as demonstrated in the care and thought given, when determining whether adopters can meet a child's needs. Nevertheless, whilst the child is at the centre of the agency's practice, their responsibilities to adopters are also fully recognised. Consequently, staff work hard to obtain up-to-date, qualitative information about a child, which is thoroughly discussed with adopters, prior to any match being agreed. In addition, the service can access a variety of specialist advisers, who can meet with adopters to discuss specific issues relating to a child. This enables adopters to fully consider the implications of such issues for themselves and their family.

There is a clearly written policy and procedures, which govern the adoption panel's function and operation. This documentation contains all the information required under the adoption national minimum standards and regulations. There is a well established practice of adopters being invited to attend the adoption panel. Good preparatory work is undertaken with them prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them, made real efforts to put them 'at their ease' and the questions asked were 'relevant and appropriate'.

The panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. It is well organised and effectively chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask pertinent questions. Panel minutes are informative and meet the adoption national minimum standards.

The agency's decision maker ensures all information relating to a case, as well as the panel minutes, are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are sent out within the necessary timescales. However, not all documentation relating to the agency decision was accurately dated.

Staff recruitment practices are robust, which ensures children are effectively protected. The manager and staff working within the adoption service are appropriately qualified, knowledgeable, skilled and experienced in their work.

There is a clear, written complaints policy and procedure, which is given to adopters. A complaints system is in place, which enables the manager to collate and monitor all complaints. This information is incorporated into the agency's annual adoption report. No complaints have been made during the last 12 months.

The service has a safeguarding policy and procedure, which meets the adoption national minimum standards and regulations. There is a good recording system in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. All those working in the agency are well supported to handle and manage any safeguarding matters that may arise.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service recognises the importance of providing support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. Thus, in the early stages of placement, adopters are visited weekly by their worker in order to offer any support or assistance required. They also have access to the office duty system and an out of hours emergency duty system. The service will also assist adopters in negotiating a required support package from the local authority. In addition, arrangements have been made with neighbouring local authorities and a voluntary adoption agency for adopters to receive a variety of pre and post adoption support services, for example, support groups and various training events. Adopters can also access a variety of

specialist advisers, who are attached to the adoption service or part of the wider Barnardo's organisation, for example, the medical and legal advisers, a clinical psychologist, staff experienced in disability issues or in undertaking therapeutic work with children or young people, who have been sexually abused. Levels of support to adopters are reviewed according to need and families are always made aware that they can contact the agency in the future, after an adoption order is made.

Adopters are made aware of the various support services available to them at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Requests for support are responded to 'quickly' and the support provided is described as 'good'. Adopters confirmed that they had been informed of the support package available to them and were confident such support would be provided, if required.

The adoption service has access to specialist advisers and written protocols are in place regarding their roles. The range of specialist advisers available, together with their accessibility, ensures adopters receive appropriate support.

People receive a service from the adoption service that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need. They are treated fairly, openly and with respect and sensitivity. In situations where the service is unable to provide a service, people are re-directed to another more appropriate service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

This branch of the adoption agency has limited contact with birth families, who are currently going through the adoption process, as this is the responsibility of the placing authority. However, it does have a clear understanding of the life long implications of adoption. This is demonstrated in their recognition of the vital importance of a child's heritage and maintenance of contact agreements. These issues are fully addressed in the adopters' preparation training.

Strenuous efforts are made to ensure the local authority provides up-to-date and comprehensive information to adopters regarding their children. This is appreciated by adopters, who recognise such comprehensive information increases their ability to care for their children. Adopters clearly understand the importance of keeping and sharing information about the birth family and demonstrate openness in talking about adoption.

The agency recognises the importance of prospective adopters meeting birth parents and relatives and will support such meetings, wherever possible. In situations, where these meetings can take place, the agency ensures adopters are carefully prepared and that the meetings are sensitively handled and well managed.

A small letterbox service is operated and maintained, which relates to past adoptions arranged by the agency. This scheme facilitates contact between birth families and their adopted children and is well organised and managed.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good and is an integral part of Barnardo's philosophy. The service quite clearly reflects this in their practice, as demonstrated by the commitment shown in providing a service that values and supports people's differences. This is also underpinned by Barnardo's policies and practice. Recruitment of adopters is prioritised to reflect the needs of children awaiting adoptive placements. The service focuses on the specific needs of children when considering matches with their adopters. Children's needs arising from their religion, culture or disabilities are carefully considered. Good support is provided for children and adopters. The service is non-discriminatory in considering the suitability of people to adopt.

There is a comprehensive, up-to-date statement of purpose, which contains all the information required under the Adoption Agencies Regulations. The written policies and procedures have been revised, however, not all the adoption procedures have been amended in accordance with the Adoption and Children Act 2002 Practice Guidance.

Similarly, whilst the information provided to adopters is in the main, well written and provides comprehensive information regarding the adoption process, some information does not comply with the Adoption and Children Act 2002 Practice Guidance. The literature from the branch effectively addresses equality and diversity issues and clearly indicates that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice. It is also reflected in their practice, as demonstrated in the increased diversity of adopters and the fact that the service is able to provide local authorities with a greater choice of adoptive placements. This is of particular benefit to those children with additional needs, whom local authorities are finding difficulty placing in an adoptive family.

Barnardo's adoption agency has a clear strategic and operational management structure, which governs the activities of this service. Since the last inspection though, there has been a change in the operational management team, which has had an impact on the development of the adoption service. The branch is actively addressing this and a variety of plans are in place to develop their service, particularly in relation to adoption support services. The managerial team are all appropriately qualified, skilled, experienced and knowledgeable in adoption law and practice. The service is operating in accordance with its statement of purpose and ensures good outcomes

are achieved for children and adopters.

There are clear, written procedures for monitoring and controlling the service's adoption activities. There is a supervisory and appraisal system in place, which is used to monitor staff's performance and to ensure a quality service. Staff are supervised and appraised in accordance with the agency's policies. The administrative support at the branch is of a good standard and enables staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. The quality assurance systems in place are generally effective in monitoring the service's performance, though some improvements are required.

Barnardo's has sound employment practices and staff have appropriate experience, qualifications and skills to meet the needs of the agency. Staff receive good training opportunities and support and Barnardo's is generally regarded as a good employer.

There is a complaints policy and procedure, which is available to all staff and service users. This documentation fully meets the adoption national minimum standards. A separate system to record complaints is kept. Records are detailed and fully comply with the standards and regulations. The complaints procedure is regularly reviewed to ensure it is operating effectively and checks are made to identify if there is any pattern to these complaints. Since the last inspection, there have been no complaints made in relation to this service.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording and access to records. Case records are well organised and in good order. There is a case decision and file audit system in place. Decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files, however not all files contained the case decisions arising from staff's supervision.

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meets the legislative requirements and this is strictly followed.

Administrative records are well maintained, stored confidentially and securely kept. The current records for the branch are stored securely and in a manner to minimise harm from the risk of fire and flood. Some recently archived records are stored in additional premises, very near to the adoption premises. These records are securely stored and in a manner to minimise harm from the risk of fire, however the risk assessment does not effectively address the risk from flood. The past archived records are stored at Barnardo's head office and were not inspected at this time.

There are clear, written recruitment and selection procedures. Personnel files demonstrated a rigorous approach to recruitment and selection, all files included the required information, were well ordered and securely stored. However, whilst the personnel files contain all the information required under the Adoption Regulations, some panel members' files did not contain all the information required, for example, a photograph, documentary evidence of qualifications or a second reference.

The premises used by this service are well resourced. There is space, storage, good

information technology and communication equipment. The premises are compliant with disability legislation and accessible to all service users. The premises have sufficient parking and are fit for purpose. All the necessary insurance policies are in place. There is a disaster recovery plan, which fully meets the adoption national minimum standards.

There is a clearly written set of financial policies and procedures governing the agency’s financial management, which are properly operated and externally audited.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
28	ensure all the required information relating to panel members is obtained (Reg.5(3)(c)).	05/10/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure all adoption procedures are written in accordance with the Adoption and Children Act 2002 Practice Guidance (NMS 1)
- ensure all agency decision documentation is accurately dated (NMS13)
- improve the quality assurance systems used by the adoption service (NMS 17)
- ensure case record decisions arising from supervision are consistently recorded and all records signed and dated (NMS 25)
- improve the risk assessment in relation to recently archived adoption records (NMS 25).