

Barnardo's New Families Project

Inspection report for Voluntary Adoption Agency

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| Inspector | Rosemary Chapman |
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| Date of last inspection | 24/07/2006 |

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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

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| 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 is a voluntary adoption agency and has been registered as such since 1947. The head office is in Barkingside, with branches in England and Wales, and a specialist adoption support service in Scotland. Barnardo's is registered for domestic adoption and for the provision of adoption support services to children and adults; it does not undertake inter-country adoption. The adoption agency is part of the wider family placement service which has fostering services throughout the UK.

This branch (London, East and South East) is based in Colchester but has additional office premises in Barkingside and access to office and meeting space in Crawley.

It recruits, prepares, assesses, approves and supports prospective adoptive families and works with local authorities to place children in need of an adoptive placement with these families.

The agency supervises and supports placements before an adoption order and offers an adoption support service after placement and after the adoption order is made. This includes therapeutic counselling and attachment-focused counselling. The agency also offers support and counselling to young people and adults who have been affected by adoption, including services to birth family members, which it provides on behalf of four local authorities who commission its services.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a key announced inspection which looked at all the key standards under the Every Child Matters outcome areas, and those relating to the organisation of the branch. It also assessed the progress made in relation to the actions and recommendations set at the previous inspection.

The inspection found that this branch provides a good service with some outstanding features. There are extremely robust procedures and practices in relation to the assessment of adoptive families which ensure that children are placed with safe and secure families. Safeguarding is given a high priority throughout the provision of all the services. Support to adoptive families is outstanding; there is a lifetime commitment to provide help and advice whenever this is needed, and a range of services, including counselling and support meetings, which complement the support given by social workers. This contributes to the maintenance of adoptive placements and enables children to enjoy and achieve. The service which this branch provides to birth family members on behalf of commissioning local authorities is also outstanding. It enables birth family members present their views about their child's

adoption and also understand what is happening. This in turn helps them contribute to their child's heritage and sense of identity.

The branch is well managed by a committed, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and experienced manager. Staff, including social workers, project workers, counsellors and administrative staff, are similarly committed, professional and skilled which enables them to provide a very good service to all those affected by adoption. The shortfalls identified do not impact on the well-being of children, or their safety and security.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection was carried out in July 2006 by the Commission for Social Care Inspection, the former regulatory body for children's social care. That inspection identified six actions and eight recommendations to improve practice. The six actions related to improvements in documentation, file maintenance and policies. The recommendations related to improvements in assessments, agency decision-making and administrative and organisational issues. All these have been fully addressed.

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 an inclusive approach to the recruitment of adopters, with the primary focus being on the needs of the child. The branch has approved adopters who are single, in same sex relationships and from a variety of cultural backgrounds, as the main consideration is the capacity of applicants to meet the challenges faced by being an adoptive parent. As a branch of a voluntary adoption agency it is aware that local authorities will approach them for families for children who are generally older, in a sibling group or seen as harder to place.

The branch has a very robust and thorough approach to the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters to ensure that safe placements can be made. A manager or deputy manager undertakes the initial counselling visit to answer any queries. Once a formal application is made, applicants attend a thorough preparation course, which is held at different venues to try and be as convenient as possible. Feedback from adopters about the preparation is very good, and they feel it does prepare them as much as possible for a child being placed with them. One adopter said: 'There is a well organised and brilliantly delivered three-day preparation course', and another commented, 'it was extremely thorough'. Checks and references are comprehensive, as are the assessments. These are underpinned by written agreements which ensure that all parties are clear about the expectations and time scales. A midway review is

further evidence of good practice and enables any shortfalls to be highlighted and addressed. The health and safety assessments are excellent; the initial assessment is undertaken prior to approval but a further one takes place prior to a child being placed and this is geared towards the need and risks associated with that particular individual. This is extremely comprehensive and is supplemented by a lot of information on home safety.

Once a possible match is identified, the branch ensures that adopters are provided with as much information as possible, so they are fully aware of the needs and challenges of the child or children and feel they can meet those. Social workers always read the child's file in the local authority to reassure themselves that all information is available. They highlight area of concern or clarification, and support adopters in any meetings which take place. They also promote life appreciation days as a way of obtaining first-hand information from previous carers and social workers. Although not a statutory requirement, the adoption panel hears the proposed match and makes a recommendation to the local authority. This is an added check to ensure it is appropriate and is likely to be sustained.

The branch has two adoption panels, both chaired by the same independent chairperson. One is held in London and the other in Colchester. They are underpinned by appropriate policies and procedures which guide their work. Adopters are invited to attend and are made welcome, so that the process is transparent. One of the panels is not properly constituted however, as there is no management representative. All panel members are properly appointed and have an induction and further training to ensure they are competent and understand their role. The panels have members with a wide range of personal and professional experience which enables them to give robust scrutiny to the work of the agency. The panel is chaired very well and all members are well prepared, ask appropriate questions and play a full and proper part. The organisation of the panel is very effective; papers are sent out in good time to enable members to give them appropriate consideration. The minutes are thorough and completed very swiftly which enables the decision maker to make her decision without delay and take into account all the information.

The manager and staff are all appropriately skilled, qualified and experienced to ensure they are suitable people to provide a safe and robust service to adopters and children. Staff are recruited with safer recruitment practices underpinned by written procedures, and current practice indicates that references are always verified by telephone. However, this was not evident in the procedures or with some staff previously appointed.

There is a complaints procedure of which service users are made aware at an early stage in their involvement with the service. There have been a small number of complaints, all of which have been addressed appropriately, showing that the agency as a whole, and this branch in particular, have a positive attitude to enabling service users to voice their views and use this as a means to improve the service.

The branch places a high priority on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of

children. There are thorough policies and procedures which are implemented in practice, staff have regular training to ensure they are aware of safeguarding issues and any allegations are dealt with appropriately. All the leaflets advertising the services make clear that safeguarding the welfare of children is of paramount importance and a stakeholder commented: 'Barnardo's give safeguarding issues a high priority and it is integral to their practice.'

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The branch demonstrates an outstanding commitment to providing support to adoptive families both post placement and after the adoption order is made. Support with providing a stable and permanent home begins with extremely thorough preparation and assessment. Adopters are also provided with a wide range of useful and practical information to assist them with parenting, such as booklets about first aid, safer caring, and attachment. Network meetings are open to applicants as well as approved adopters and this affords them the opportunity to hear first-hand experiences about adoptive parenting and strategies for coping. Social workers visit frequently once a child is placed with an adoptive family to provide support, advice and guidance and to ensure the needs of the child are being met. Good partnership working with the local authority's social worker also ensures that appropriate support is being given. The branch is proactive in requesting additional support if this seems appropriate, for example, additional finance to provide therapy. In addition, there is an out-of-hours helpline, which is an invaluable resource in an emergency. The helpline, which operates Monday to Friday in the morning, is another source of help and support in the event that the social worker is not available.

The branch has ready access to medical, legal and educational advice from their specialist advisers. The medical adviser provides advice and guidance to staff and adoptive families to clarify the implications of any medical issues. The educational adviser provides good support to adoptive families when there are issues in relation to their child's education and this proves invaluable on many occasions. For example, the education adviser was able to liaise with a local authority to facilitate an adopted child having a statement of special educational needs. The legal adviser provides written comments on any proposed matches and the standard of this advice is excellent.

Although the branch does not have a legal responsibility to provide support to families once the adoption order is made, it is very clear that there is a lifelong commitment to support families whom the branch has approved. Families can and do ring the branch with any worries and are either supported by the helpline or allocated a social worker to provide more ongoing support. Support includes pragmatic help such as attending meetings at school, as well as being there to listen. One adopter said: 'Barnardo's has been there at the right time with the voice of reason and expertise.' There is a range of therapeutic support which can be accessed. This includes therapeutic counselling and attachment-focused counselling. One adopter commented: 'The counselling was nothing short of a life saver'. The

branch has been proactive in recruiting counsellors from all over the region so that a prompt and convenient response can be made to any request for the service. The network meetings provide an avenue for regular self-help support. These also include opportunities for adoptive children to get together, which is an excellent means of not only having fun but developing a sense of belonging and building resilience.

The branch has a service level agreement with four local authorities to provide services for adoptive families and birth family members. These are regularly reviewed and adapted to suit the needs of the agencies. All the stakeholders are extremely positive about the service they receive from Barnardo's. One commented: 'The services provided enable adoptive parents to better cope with their children which, in turn, helps the children enjoy and achieve.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Although the branch does not have any legal responsibility to provide a service to birth parents, it undertakes this role through its service level agreements with four local authorities. All the evidence shows that this work is of an outstanding standard and feedback from service users includes: 'I don't know what I would have done without it.' One local authority invites birth parents to its adoption panel and Barnardo's provides a counsellor to contact birth parents and meet them at panel, to explain the process, gain their views and enable them to express them to the adoption panel. This is done in an extremely caring and empathetic manner to ensure they are able to present their wishes and feelings and contribute fully to the meeting. This is followed up with advice, support and counselling if the birth parent requires this. One birth parent commented that this service was really really good. Engaging with parents and enabling their view to be heard facilitates their involvement in providing information and memorabilia for their child and thus promotes the maintenance of the child's identity and heritage.

The branch ensures that the adopters it approves are empathetic towards birth parents and understand the importance of maintaining a child's heritage. Adopters demonstrate that they have embraced this aspect of adoption and undertake one-off meetings with birth parents, direct contact, which their social worker will support them with, as well as indirect contact. They also use life story books as working tools to help their child understand their situation.

The branch provides support to birth family members in a variety of ways; they can access the helpline for advice and support, they can have therapeutic counselling, they can have a number of sessions of advice and support or they can attend a group for birth parents, which is run in a particular local authority area. The standard of all these services is extremely high and birth parents are very pleased with them. In relation to the group, a birth parent commented that it enables them to meet other people who understand and who do not judge them, and also gives them access to advice and guidance in relation to tracing, should they wish to do this: 'I couldn't praise them more.' A stakeholder commented: 'Barnardo's works to high

professional standards and their practice is sound. An excellent agency to have in our region.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a comprehensive, updated written Statement of Purpose, supplemented by specific information for the branch, which clearly outlines the aims, objectives and the services provided, so that anyone using the service knows what to expect. It is provided to applicants at an early stage of the process. However, there are some minor inaccuracies, such as the address of Ofsted, detailing the Link service as a separate branch and not providing staffing details for the branch. Although this has no major impact, it is a shortfall. The Statement of Purpose is underpinned by a comprehensive range of policies and procedures which give good clear guidance to staff so they know how to carry out their duties and the expectations of the agency about their roles, responsibilities and conduct. The branch has a child-friendly children's guide which is currently under review; this gives children an understanding of adoption and what Barnardo's can do for them. This is available in other formats to meet the needs of the child.

The agency provides very good information to enquirers; this makes the application and approval process very clear. The booklet includes photographs of older children, and children from a variety of backgrounds, as well as giving information about their possible needs, thus ensuring enquirers have a realistic view about the children who may require an adoptive family. The written information is complemented by information evenings and an initial counselling visit from a manager, both of which give further opportunity to the enquirers to obtain more information and ask any questions; additionally, the counselling visit gives the agency the chance to explore any issues.

The branch is well managed by a very competent, experienced, knowledgeable and skilled manager. There are clear deputising arrangements which ensure staff always know who to contact in an emergency. Roles and responsibilities are clearly designated and there are good channels of communication, so the service is provided in an effective and efficient manner.

There are good systems to ensure the branch is monitored by the agency as a whole. The family placement scrutiny committee receive regular reports on the work of the branch and the agency as a whole, to enable them to ensure the service is effective and delivering good outcomes. On a local level, the manager has good systems to monitor the work of staff so she is aware of the level of service provision

and any shortfalls.

The branch currently has a small number of employed staff who are all appropriately skilled, knowledgeable and experienced. This includes social work staff, counsellors, project workers and administrative staff. They are sufficient in number to meet the needs of the service but additionally, there are a number of independent workers who are called upon to supplement the service and any shortfalls. Staff are well supported by regular supervision, annual appraisal and training.

Appropriate case records are maintained in relation to adopters and children and there are thorough policies and procedures which guide staff in relation to record keeping, confidentiality and access to records. There is a system for audit and clear evidence that cases are discussed in supervision and decisions recorded. This ensures that staff and managers are accountable for the quality of service. Separate records are maintained in relation to complaints and allegations. All records are stored with appropriate security.

The premises are suitable for the purpose. There are two main office bases, in Colchester and Barkingside, and subsidiary space in Crawley. These premises are identifiable and accessible, to facilitate anyone visiting. There are appropriately secure IT systems and security of the premises and records, to prevent unauthorised access. The disaster recovery plan addresses relevant areas to enable continuity of the service in the event of an unexpected disaster.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The policies and procedures which underpin the work of the agency and this branch clearly promote an inclusive ethos and values. The agency is welcoming and accessible and provides all information in appropriate formats. Individual needs are assessed, promoted and met in a variety of ways.

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 |
|------|---|------------|
| 11 | appoint a person to sit on the adoption panel who is a director, manager or other officer who is concerned in the management of that society (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 3(3)(c)) | 26/11/2010 |
| 1 | ensure the Statement of Purpose consists of all the matters listed in Schedule 1. (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments Regulations | 26/11/2010 |

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| | 2003 (3)(1)) | |
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Recommendations

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

- ensure that the written recruitment and selection procedures for appointing staff follow good practice in safeguarding children and young people, with particular reference to verifying written references by telephone, and that these are always carried out in practice. (NMS 19.2 and 19.3)