

Barnardo's - London, East & South-East

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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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 five local authorities.

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**.

This is an extremely effective agency, where forward thinking and a passionate approach to adoption continues to provide good outcomes for children. Since the last inspection, the agency has maintained its high quality Link service, which provides post-adoption counselling and attachment-focus counselling services. Barnardo's has a total commitment to treating people fairly, openly and with respect throughout the process. Adopters confirmed they felt well supported throughout the adoption journey.

The agency is highly effective in recruiting adoptive parents from a wide cross section of society. Prospective adopters confirm the extremely welcoming approach they receive from Barnardo's, from their initial enquiries right through to the agency's decisions.

The assessment of prospective adopters is robust and they are very well prepared, supported and trained. The agency is open to considering any enquirer, regardless of their ethnicity, sexuality or marital status. This has resulted in an increase in the number of applicants. This means that the agency has a very diverse range of adopters who are well able to meet the needs of children needing adoptive families. This service is in its final year of a three year development plan and recruitment of adopters has significantly increased. The service has provided placements for 43 children in the year 2011-2012. This has necessitated an increase in staff to carry out the assessments. New processes have been put in place to ensure that timeframes can be met.

While this agency does not have care planning responsibility for the children placed with their adopters, it is firmly child focused. For example, the service carries out, following matching, additional assessments of children in order that the agency and the adoptive parents are clear about the children's needs prior to placement. This also enables the agency, using its highly skilled therapeutic counselling team, to identify the appropriate support services that need to be in place.

The agency routinely seeks the views of people using its service at a variety of stages throughout the process and these views feed into the development of services. However, although children's views are sought, they are not formally taken into account in monitoring and developing the service. Feedback from other professionals working with the agency, including service commissioners, spoke highly of the staff's practice and commitment.

The leadership and management of the agency are impressive. They are a well-respected and imaginative group which engages nationally with the latest developments in adoption and this feeds into the agency's development plan. From the members of the board to all members of the team, there is a clear vision about the promotion of adoption and continued adoption support. The senior management team and board members are highly experienced and skilled and provide good oversight. All staff are passionate and committed to ensuring good outcomes for all their service users.

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 that a formal system is developed that clearly shows that children's

wishes, feeling and views have been taken into account by the agency in monitoring and developing its service. (NMS 1.6)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children are encouraged and are well supported to make progress in all aspects of their development. Their needs, including those relating to ability, ethnicity and identity, are extremely well met. Children have a variety of skilled therapeutic support before and after placement to enable them to settle into their new adoptive families. For example, one commissioning authority commented on the good progress one child had made; another said that the 'placement went really well.'

Through training and preparation, adopters fully understand the benefits and risks of their children having contact with their birth families. This means that children maintain a link, in a safe way, to those who have been significant in their lives.

Children feel safe and are safe living within their families. They are well supported to develop, in most areas of their lives, extremely well despite their past experiences. Children are enabled to develop positive relationships with those around them and children do form secure attachments to their adopters.

Children's behaviour improves as it is managed well by adoptive parents, with tremendous support and guidance from the agency. Parents adapt their parenting styles to meet the needs of their child. Counselling can be provided for those young people who need the support and comments such as, 'talking has really helped'; 'some bad feelings have gone away'; 'the best I have felt in a long time'.

Children and young people are well supported to achieve well in their education, in line with their potential. A 24-hour helpline is in place to support adoptive parents with any difficulties within the school environment. This then triggers support from a former headteacher who contacts the adoptive parents and the child and then liaises with the school. This enables the school to understand the needs of the adoptive child and how to manage their behaviour. The child can then engage fully, enjoy the school experience and enjoy learning. One counsellor, following a series of counselling sessions, commented that, 'the class teacher reports that the child is generally more focussed and calmer in school.'

Quality of service

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

The agency has a clear aim to provide secure and sustainable adoptive placements. There is a clear recruitment strategy in place which is regularly reviewed to ensure the agency is responding to the needs of the children waiting. However, currently most adopters are recruited through 'word of mouth' and people coming back to adopt a second time are a testament to the service provided. The information which

enquirers receive is informative. This is complemented by a comprehensive initial counselling visit, where any queries can be answered. The preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters is a thorough and rigorous process, which ensures that the adopters understand the challenges of adoptive parenting, the needs of the children, and are able to meet those needs in a safe and appropriate way. Adopters commented that the preparation was 'very thorough' and they feel 'well prepared for the task.' Another adopter said, 'I feel I have gained knowledge and the ability to go forward with our adoption journey, with more confidence and understanding.'

Prospective adopters' reports are comprehensive and analytical. The agency provides a range of network meetings for prospective adopters and this provides a regular self-help support group.

Thoughtful adoption panels, which comprise a very good mix of people with differing but relevant backgrounds and experiences of adoption, adds further rigour to the process by ensuring a thorough discussion of all the issues. Decision making is robust, timely and well-considered. A thorough report is presented to the scrutiny committee every six months.

A significant strength of the agency is the calibre of its staff at all levels. They are committed, enthusiastic and hard-working, as well as being knowledgeable, experienced, skilled and appropriately qualified. They are well supported through regular supervision and access to relevant training to ensure that they retain their competence and up-to-date knowledge of adoption issues. This ensures that they deliver a child-focused service of a good quality. The effectiveness of this is reflected in comments received from service users; 'patient and sensitive'.

Due to the increase in enquiries, the staff team has been supplemented with independent assessors in order to meet timeframes. Most prospective adopters are subject to a panel recommendation within eight months of receipt of their formal application. Where the agency has not met the eight-month target, there is a valid reason for the delay. There are also extra processes being put in place to manage the volume of work and timeframes.

The agency works very effectively with birth parents in a number of ways, which also has a significant positive impact on their adopted children. It enables the birth parents to understand what has happened to them, but also helps them make effective contact arrangements with their children and contribute to their life journey work and heritage. Birth parents are very appreciative of the support. Surveys show that sensitive work is carried out. For example, a birth mother commented, 'I have always been able to access counselling from Barnardo's. They have helped me to understand the process of adoption better and to come to terms with the loss of a child.' Another said, 'Thank you, it has helped me and my family greatly.'

All services are tailored to meet the individual's needs and are thoughtfully and sensitively delivered by experienced and well-qualified counselling staff. The service is also adept at challenging the local authorities to provide more support, if this is

identified as necessary to meet the child's needs. The agency supports placements; for example, by providing a nanny to help an adopter managing the placement of three children.

The service greatly values and respects those using its services and this is reflected in the written policies and procedures. The services are commissioned by five local authorities and are supported by regularly reviewed written agreement. Those using the services are informed of their right to make representations and complaints and are helped to do so, if this is required. The service is committed to equality in practice and works hard to ensure that all service users are treated equitably, regardless of race, religion, gender, sexuality or disability.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The manager delivers an extremely clear message that she has a zero tolerance on ineffective information-sharing. This is at the heart of what the agency delivers and expects. The agency ensures that through thorough preparation and on-going training, adopters have the necessary understanding and knowledge to keep children safe from harm. All adopters demonstrate an excellent understanding of safeguarding and are well aware of what to do if a child discloses possible abuse. Excellent communication and high levels of trust with their social workers help to ensure that adopters would seek advice promptly in the event of any difficulty. Adopters' preparation training informs them about how to keep children safe from inappropriate use of the internet and social networking sites. There is also a variety of clear and practical advice on how to safely manage children's behaviour. Adopters all receive a variety of written material on how to keep children safe. The 24-hour helpline is also available, should support be needed urgently.

Social workers from the agency, in addition to the children's social worker, regularly visit children in placement. This ensures that there are a number of adults to whom children can turn if they need advice or support. The placement reviews are thorough and child-focused, so any safeguarding issues are highlighted and addressed. The child-friendly children's guide to adoption support, which is customised to each individual child, provides information about other agencies which provide support and guidance. This provides children with further choices of people to contact, should they have any concerns or worries.

Allegations or suspicions of harm are handled promptly and carefully. Support is provided to all those involved, to ensure that children are kept safe. This in turn informs future learning and development of the agency.

Recruitment practices are extremely robust for all members of staff, independent assessors, counsellors and those panel members on the central list. This ensures that only those people assessed as safe are able to work with children and service users. All staff are trained in safeguarding and this is regularly reviewed. The agency also

carries out its own safeguarding audit, which provides a further element of ensuring children's safety. Children's safety is also assured in practical terms by robust health and safety risk assessments in relation to the adopter's home environment.

Work with birth parents and relatives is underpinned by comprehensive and clear written guidance to staff, which recognises the potential vulnerabilities of those who access the counselling services. This, together with clear procedures which address historical abuse, ensure that these services are delivered in a safe and sensitive way.

Leadership and management

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

The leadership and management of the agency are really strong. This is despite a number of changes to the staffing structure and the increase in applications and assessments of prospective adopters. The agency serves a large area. Practice managers are in post to serve some areas, but one area is awaiting a practice manager. All of these issues have meant that the manager has had to adapt to different ways of working and ensure consistency of practice across the three areas.

All the written information, such as information for adopters, the Statement of Purpose and the children's guide to adoption support is clear, comprehensive, child focused, accessible and professionally presented. It is available in other formats so that it can be accessed by all members of the community. The website is particularly helpful, with links to a DVD about the adoption process. It ensures that people feel welcomed, whatever their backgrounds. This was reinforced by a group of adopters attending the networking meeting.

Leaders and managers have established rigorous monitoring at all levels to ensure a high quality of service and to identify areas where the agency can develop further. For example, managers routinely monitor records and case files, regularly discuss cases in supervision and have a significant input into the assessment process. This takes place at the mid-assessment review and at the end of the process. Service users are regularly consulted about their experiences of the service. Their views are given considerable weight. Prospective adopters have commented, 'we feel we have really been listened to and that our feedback was taken seriously.' Listening to adopters has led to changes in the preparation training. There is also clear measurement of outcomes for service users. This is shown in the annual report and in the case records.

There have been two disruptions in the last year. This is below the national average. Lessons have been learned from the result of the disruption meetings.

The agency has demonstrated a very good capacity for improvement, based on its track record. The agency uses inspection to improve the already good services it provides. It has addressed the requirement and two recommendations from the last inspection.

The staff, including administrative staff, are highly valued and included in considering how the agency can develop and move forward. They are very well supported by their managers. This includes regular and effective supervision, a variety of training opportunities and regular team meetings. This has resulted in staff who are extremely highly thought of by families and professionals alike, who deliver a good quality service. They are exceptionally committed, child focused, skilled, knowledgeable and experienced. The counsellors also receive professional clinical supervision alongside regular meetings with the manager and other counsellor colleagues. This ensures that they deliver a child-focused service of a good quality. The agency invests in and learns from research; this is crucial to achieving good practice and good outcomes for children.

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.