

Barnardos Fostering North East

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The North-East fostering service is part of Barnardo's, which is a registered charity. The agency provides long-term placements for a number of children and young people and additionally provides a range of short-term and respite placements for children looked after by its own carers. The service has 78 approved fostering households and there are 74 children and young people in placement.

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 fostering agency is effective and promotes positive outcomes for children and young people placed with foster carers recruited by the agency. The vast majority of foster carers say that they are supported well to support children and young people to sustain placements with a very small minority of unplanned endings.

Comprehensive and analytical assessments of potential foster carers ensure that carers approved have the necessary skills and to support children and young people.

Foster carers benefit from good levels of supervision and support from supervising social workers who are appropriately qualified, knowledgeable and have experience of working within fostering and family placement. Most of the carers say that they feel valued as a member of the professional team and demonstrate an on-going commitment to supporting young people to achieve positive progress from their initial starting points across all aspects of their welfare, physical, social and emotional needs.

Recruitment strategies ensure that the agency recruits carers to meet specific needs of young people. The recent updated matching criteria and a dedicated duty social worker has enabled effective matching to be undertaken and this reduces the risk of unplanned endings to placements.

Managers and staff have a clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the service and are proactive in supporting young people. Where weaknesses are

identified, these are acted upon to ensure good continuity of the service.

Four recommendations have been made in relation to ensuring that all documentation is received from placing social workers in relation to the children and young people, including health care plans; that all foster carers undertake the Children's Workforce Development Standards (CWDC) in a timely manner; and that the children's guide is available in a range of formats, specifically for children with non-verbal communication. Parts of these recommendations have already started to be addressed to ensure that the service continues to promote good outcomes for children and young people.

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 the fostering service follows up with the responsible authority where all information has not been provided (NMS 3.9)
- ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval. For foster carers who were approved as such before April 2008, the fostering Standards are attained by April 2011 (NMS 20.3)
- ensure that oral and written communications are made available in a format which is appropriate to the physical, sensory and learning impairments, communication difficulties and language of the individual (NMS 25.12)
- ensure that health needs assessments and health plans are obtained for all children who are fostered (Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.55)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children and young people feel that they are supported well by their carers. They say that they have very positive relationships with them and they are encouraged to participate in their own reviews and provide comments to link in with their foster carer reviews. They are encouraged to discuss their views about the agency and consultation events are in the process of being arranged. Activity events have taken place that enable the young people to join together and get to know one another. These have included some music and creative events as well as the Christmas Party.

Children and young people say that they feel safe and well cared for living with their foster carers. They feel part of the family and some young people have continued to stay with their carers over the age of 18 within supported lodging arrangements.

One young person said 'this is the best placement I have ever had and I have had a few. I feel that my carers listen to me and my views and this makes me feel included in my care.' Another young person said 'my carer helped me to settle in straight away, we are like a team and help each other.'

The service considers matching arrangements well. Over the past year the matching arrangements have been further supported by a designated duty officer and the development of effective matching documentation. This has enabled children to be placed with foster carers who can meet their needs and reduces the risk of unplanned endings to placements. Matching considerations include assessing the needs of any young person currently in placement with carers. Supervising social workers have a clear understanding of the families and carers that they support and this further ensures that appropriate placements are made. Recruitment strategies have included recruiting carers to provide sibling placements to minimise the need for sibling groups to be placed separately unless it is their best interests to do so. Many young people who were originally placed on a short-term basis have remained in placement and are benefiting from permanent placements within the family. These measures support young people to feel secure within stable placements that enable them to reach their full potential.

Children and young people's health care needs are supported. However, the agency does not always receive full health care assessments in a timely manner. This is followed up with placing social workers by the agency as a high priority. The agency ensures that young people are registered with appropriate health care professionals and carers support them with accessing health care services that they require. Foster carers receive training in first aid and health care and can also access additional training on attachment and emotional development. This assists carers to support the emotional health of young people in a positive and supportive way. The agency ensures that delegated authority with regards health care support is in place. Supervising social workers also follow up with placing local authority's all areas of delegated authority to ensure that foster carers are clear about the decisions they can make on a day-to-day basis. However, some placing authority social workers are unclear about this and further information is requested of by the agency. This is to enable young people to feel and to be treated as part of the family and the process of decision making clear.

Young people are supported with their educational needs. The vast majority of children and young people of school age are in full-time educational placements with a very few experiencing fixed term exclusions from school. This enables them to make good educational progress from their initial starting point with some young people achieving national qualifications. Foster carers are proactive in supporting young people to attend school. They attend parents' evenings and have developed good links with schools. This further supports educational outcomes for young people.

Children and young people are encouraged to attend and follow a range of activities within the community that enables them to follow their own interests. For example; attending football clubs, riding, sport and leisure centres as well as going on holidays

and taking part in activities with their foster families. This enables them to develop a wide range of experiences that they can enjoy. One young person said, 'there is always lots that I can do and my carers encourage me to try new things that I have never had the opportunity to do.'

Young people are supported well with their transition into adulthood. Carers encourage and support them to develop a range of skills to prepare for independent living. This includes support with budgeting, shopping and developing life skills. Some young people remain in placement past the age of 18 and they are supported to do so.

Quality of service

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

The fostering agency recruits carers from a range of ages, ethnicity and backgrounds to meet the needs of young people. The agency has a clear recruitment strategy to ensure that carers recruited meet the current demand. This includes carers with skills and abilities to provide care for children with complex needs, mother and baby placements, sibling groups and therapeutic placements. A number of whom have fostered for the agency for a number of years both within the short break fostering service and main fostering service. These services amalgamated two years ago to form the current service. This has enabled the current service to build on the strengths of the two previous services. The vast majority of carers say that they are happy with the fostering service and feel that they are well supported with their role. A very few say that they have found that the change in services have had an impact on the times of training and support offered. The agency is aware of this and has a programme of support groups that are held both during the day and the evening in various locations within the North-East to address this.

The preparation, assessment and initial training for foster carers is thorough. Information events held provide a clear over view of the fostering task and this is further discussed during the first visit. This ensures that potential foster carers are clear about the role of foster caring and the overall impact it will have for them. This is further discussed during the 'Skills to Foster' training. Individual skills and abilities are fully assessed during the assessment period to ensure that potential foster carers have the skills and life experience to meet the needs of children and young people who will be placed. Assessments are thoroughly scrutinised by managers to ensure that all required information is in place prior to being presented to the fostering panel.

The fostering panel is correctly constituted from a central list of panel members who have the necessary skills, experience and understanding of the fostering task. This includes panel member with experience in social care, those that have fostered and who have been fostered. The panel also has access to a legal advisor and support from a panel advisor. The panel chair is suitably qualified and experienced and ensures that the panel members are fully involved in the process of making recommendations to the agency decision maker. Panel minutes are detailed and

provide a clear overview of discussions held and recommendations made. All panel members have annual appraisals and undertake training with the agency's staff. This ensures that their skills, knowledge and performance as panel member is effectively supported and monitored.

The agency ensures that all foster carers have access to on-going training and development as well as good levels of support and supervision to assist them to fulfil their role effectively in providing good levels of care and support to children and young people. Detailed supervision records are maintained and this enables supervising social workers to address any areas for development. It also enables foster carers to reflect on their practice. In addition to regular supervision, supervising social workers undertake unannounced visits to foster carers' homes. These were undertaken on an annual basis but over the past year this has increased to two per year. During both planned and unannounced visits, wherever possible, supervising social workers speak with children and young people in placement to hear their views about their placement. There is a wide range of post approval training. This links into annual personal development plan and reviews. Core training includes safeguarding children, first aid, recording skills, E-safety, education and disability awareness. All carers are expected to complete the CWDC standards in foster care. However, not all foster carers have completed these, with the current level standing at 59% of carers having achieved this. All recently approved carers have or are in the process of completing this within their first year of approval. However, some carers who have been approved for a longer period of time have yet to complete the workbooks. To address this shortfall, the agency has identified a number of workshops and support groups to provide training and additional support for carers.

Foster carers complete detailed records and reports on the daily events, education and health, contact and any issues that are impacting on the young person. Supervising social workers review these at each monthly visit. These daily records provide a clear overview of how the young person is developing within the placement and support any future decision making. However, some foster carers report that initial information received from placing authorities is limited. The agency provides as much information from the initial referral as it can but struggles to get further information in a timely manner for a minority of placements. This could have an impact on the support provided to some children and young people. To address this the agency writes to placing social workers to request outstanding information.

Placing social workers who responded to questionnaires or who spoke with the inspector during the inspection process stated that the level of care and support provided to the young people in placement was of a good standard. One social worker said, 'the placement has made a significant impact for the young people. They are flourishing within their placement and the care provided is of a high standard.' Another social worker said 'this placement supports and meets the needs of the child exceptionally well.'

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people are safe and say that they feel safe living with their foster carers. All foster carers undertake safeguarding training to enable them to have a clear understanding of ensuring that appropriate safeguards are in place to effectively support young people. All fostering households have a generic safe care policy in place and specific safe care policies for individual young people. These policies are reviewed on a regular basis and updated as required.

The vast majority of children and young people say that they know how to make a complaint. They say that they feel that any complaints that they have will be listened too and appropriately addressed. They have information about contacting Children's Rights and independent advocates. However, the complaints procedure is not available in a range of formats to ensure that it is accessible for all young people. This could disadvantage some young people from being able to clear about the complaints procedure.

All fostering households have annual health and safety risk assessment in place. Any outstanding issues are followed up by the supervising social workers to ensure that households provide a safe environment. Additional specific risk assessments are in place; for example, dog and pet assessments. Health and safety risk assessments are monitored by the independent reviewing officer who undertakes foster carers reviews. This ensures that appropriate measures are in place to protect children and young people from hazards within the home.

The agency now ensures that a minimum of two unannounced visits to foster homes are undertaken within a twelve month period in addition to the supervision visits. These enable supervising social workers to have the opportunity to observe the fostering family and young people in placement as well as provide support to foster carers. Detailed records kept by carers are checked and signed by supervising social workers and any accidents or incidents are promptly reported by foster carers to the agency. These measures enable the fostering agency to ensure that the needs and safety of young people is being met in accordance with their individual needs.

Foster carers undertake safeguarding training and this is updated on a regular basis. They are aware of the procedure and protocol to follow in the event of a young person going missing from home, although incidents of this are very few. Further training is provided regarding e-safety and social media. This ensures that foster carers are aware of current risks and are aware of how to promote safer access to the internet and use of computers. Further training and support is provided with regards emotional and attachment issues that young people may have. This includes helping foster carers to understand how this impacts on young people's behaviour and provides them with positive interventions to support young people.

There are clear and detailed procedures in place in the event of any allegation being made against a foster carer. The agency ensures that these are handled sensitively. Carers are offered appropriate support and children and young people's welfare is promoted effectively.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **good**.

The fostering agency has a clear development plan in place that provides details of future development of the service. Since the last inspection, the service has become one fostering service. There has very recently been a change in the management with a new manager appointed. An application to be the Registered Manager is being submitted to ensure that the service continues to act in accordance with Regulations. The acting manager holds appropriate qualifications and has appropriate experience of working within fostering and adoption services and has a good understanding of the strengths and areas for on-going development of the service. The staff team are an established team and all hold qualifications appropriate to their role. All supervising social workers are qualified and have a range of knowledge and experience to support foster carers provide appropriate care and support to young people. All staff receive regular supervision and have an annual appraisal. They are supported to attend training in accordance with their own personal development plans and say that they feel exceptionally well supported to deliver a good service.

The agency holds records in both electronic and paper versions, with the addition of a further electronic system currently being implemented. This makes some information difficult to find. To address this, monitoring of information held is being reviewed.

The fostering agency has adopted the Foster Care Charter following consultation with carers and this has been made available along with an updated foster carer handbook. The Statement of Purpose is clear and accessible and the children's guides are written in age appropriate formats. However, these have not been further developed to take into account the various communication methods of some of the young people and, therefore, are currently not fully accessible to all children and young people.

The vast majority of foster carers reviews are held within timescales and are undertaken by an independent reviewing officer. All young people are consulted as part of these reviews. The agency also requests views from placing social workers. However, returns of these are intermittent and only form a small minority of the information for the reviews. The agency follows this up with social workers to try to get verbal opinions. Reports received from placing authority commissioners as part of this inspection process confirm that the agency works well with the agencies and provides a positive, high quality service to the children and young people placed.

The agency has addressed the recommendations made at the last inspection under the previous Fostering Service regulations and national minimum standards, and demonstrates a clear commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.