

Barnardo's Fostering South East

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Barnardo's Fostering, South East provides long term, short term and some short-break placements. Placements are provided for children of all ages including asylum-seeking and trafficked young people, individuals, sibling groups and parent and child placements. The service also provides a Supported Lodgings service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

National comparators demonstrate that placement stability is a strength of this service with lower disruption rates than the national average, and this is confirmed by local commissioners. This trend continues through to adulthood, in that recent figures show that all young people reaching 18 stay on in placement. Children and young people thrive in these stable placements, and make very good progress socially, educationally and in terms of their health needs. They are well safeguarded and feel part of their families. In practice this means that children and young people are safe, healthier, attend education, achieve well from their starting points, and enjoy family life and having fun with their friends. For some, this represents a huge positive change from their previous lives.

The agency assesses, prepares and generally supports foster carers well in their complex task. Some carers particularly those with specialist placements would value

additional professional support, and although much training is effective, some areas require more attention. Foster carers are strong in working with diverse needs and cultures, but there is insufficient cultural diversity amongst foster carers as a group. This limits the agency's ability to enable children and young people to receive a cultural match. Foster carer's skills are rightly respected by the agency, and they are very much part of the team around the child. This helps enable them to give children and young people warm and very effective care.

The participation of young people in particular, is a strength of this agency. Young people are involved in conferences, training and in media activities. Their views strongly influence agency developments. There is a very able and professional Registered Manager in post who is well supported by the wider leadership team. Relationships with partner organisations are effective. The high quality of service provision would be further enhanced by more effective panel minutes, and wider representation of views to inform staff appraisals.

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, where appropriate, foster carers have access to additional professional support to assist them in providing high quality care to the child (NMS 21.6)
- ensure that foster carers ongoing training and development is appropriate to their development needs and experience (NMS 20.5)
- ensure that the fostering service recruits sufficient foster carers to better meet the diverse cultural needs of children for whom they provide care (Volume 4 statutory guidance para 5.28)
- ensure that the written minutes of panel meetings clearly cover the key issues expressed by panel members and record reasons for the recommendations (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that where staff are working with children their views are taken into account in staff appraisals. (NMS 24.6)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency prioritises pre-placement introductions especially for particularly complex placements. Children and young people also benefit from attractively presented snapshot information about their prospective foster carers. This helps them understand how foster carers will look after them and reduces anxiety and uncertainty.

Once in placement, children and young people thrive because they are supported to stay with foster carers as long as they need that care and support. Some have been adopted by their carers, others have their placement status changed to long term, and some placements continue post 18. This means that children and young people have the maximum chances to both develop strong attachments and to successfully mature into adulthood. Some young people demonstrate that they are at ease with their foster carers because, 'they listen to my view'. Others have developed particularly close relationships with their carer saying, 'I call her Mum, and know she will always be by my side'.

Children and young people strongly benefit from a range of different opportunities to help them achieve the best possible outcomes. Some learn valuable social skills and can now have fun in inclusive activities, while others are making excellent progress through more specialist facilities. They are rightly proud of the progress they are making, and enjoy having friends and taking part in new opportunities. Some young people are now much more able to moderate their own behaviour and are no longer engaging in destructive behaviour or high risk activities. These achievements have greatly improved their self-esteem, and they now have more confidence about taking on other life challenges.

This agency has an excellent commitment to enabling children and young people to effectively participate. For example, older young people successfully co-planned and presented their stories to a large, mixed group of adults to great positive effect. Young people have also been involved in developing an application about protecting yourself from possible abuse, and some have had their stories and poems published in print media. This is not only a highly effective strategy to publicise young people's lives, but also gives young people invaluable opportunities to develop their skills and personal confidence.

Some young people's significant physical health needs have been diagnosed since being in their foster placement. This means they are much better placed to receive the correct treatment, and for some this has resulted in major improvements in their general health and well-being. Generally, young people's emotional health has improved as they feel secure and stable in their fostering placement. They are more able to 'talk out' issues rather than 'act them out'. This helps them to settle in education and get the full benefit of what is on offer. Young people generally have good attendance in education, and achieve well from their starting points. Some young people consistently make exceptional progress, including those for whom English is a second language and those who have previously been out of school. A small minority of young people do have to change school, but feel this is 'better' in that they can change patterns more easily.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Local authority colleagues praise the 'excellent' care provided by foster carers which

enables young people to make significant progress in all aspects of their lives. Some young people have made exceptional progress and the care children and young people are offered is described as, 'absolutely fantastic'.

Foster carers are skilled at helping young people feel part of their family. They enjoy learning about other cultures and reciprocate by helping young people gain a secure footing in this culture. This helps young people feel they 'belong' and gives them the confidence to succeed. Some foster carers also help young people to feel settled, by having positive working relationships with the child's family. This helps both to normalise contact arrangements, and helps the child to maintain crucial lifelong relationships.

Foster carers are usually well-prepared for their task, and start fostering with an appropriate understanding of their role. They are generally positive about the support they receive from the agency. They feel the agency, 'takes burdens off them' leaving them free to care. Some describe their supervising social worker as someone who, 'gives you time as if you are the only person being seen'. However, due to staff changes other carers have had a number of different link workers. This coupled with very demanding placements has left some carers missing additional, professional support.

Foster carers also have mixed views about training. Some are very positive about it and think it has been helpful in understanding children and young people placed with them. This is particularly true of those who have done specialist training. However, some other carers do not feel that they gain much from the more 'routine' courses. This means that they may not be getting the full benefits of these sessions.

Disruption rates in this agency are low, and generally matching is a strength of this agency. However, there is a mismatch between the ethnicity of most carers and their children in placement. Sensitive care practice means that there is little adverse impact on young people's placement experiences, but stronger cultural matches would enable young people to feel comfortable more quickly. Foster carers are fully involved in deciding about placements, and are confident in saying whether they think a possible placement is a good match or not. Generally, relationships with local authorities are very good and they think that communication with foster carers and the agency is 'excellent'.

The fostering panel is strongly led by a well-qualified panel chair who has substantial experience for this role. Panel members have a diverse range of qualifications and experience, and they are routinely appraised which helps ensure their continuing effectiveness. This combined experience and participation results in a robust panel that is able to make effective recommendations in relation to assessments and reviews of the suitability of carers. Generally, the administrative aspects of the panel function smoothly, but more recently staff shortages have resulted in some issues. Panel minutes do not provide sufficient overview and reasons for recommendations. This limits their effectiveness in decision making.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This agency has a very strong track record in working effectively with young people at risk of sexual exploitation or who have been trafficked. For some young people the agency is able to call on the expertise within the wider organisation, and carers and the agency have worked together effectively. Outcomes have greatly improved both for these young people and for others previously at high risk. They can now reflect on their previous experiences, no longer go missing and are able to have free time to enjoy standard social activities like other young people. These young people and others feel safe in their placement saying, 'of course I feel safe it is my own home'.

The agency helps maintain safe caring through appropriate, standard procedures which mean that safeguarding rightly underpins all agency practice. Fostering agency staff complete routine unannounced visits, and health and safety checks in addition. Sound recruitment checks are carried out, and safeguarding issues are a standard item on staff supervision agendas.

Carers receive face-to-face safeguarding training each year, and some aspects of this are presented by young people. This helps foster carers appreciate safeguarding issues from a young people's perspective. Carers also develop family safe caring strategies, and in some families these are detailed and regularly updated. Overall, this appropriate safeguarding practice is greatly strengthened by very experienced practitioners in the agency who encourage an open and sharing professional culture, which actively supports children being kept safe.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Leaders and managers have effective working relationships with local authority staff. This is particularly true about relationships with commissioners, who note that the agency will do all they can to maintain a successful placement. Usually, relationships with other local authority staff are also positive. However, on the rare occasions that the agency feels that children or foster carers are being disadvantaged, they do not hesitate to tenaciously challenge the local authority, usually to good effect.

The agency uses a standardised format for overseeing children and young people's progress on a regular basis. This systematic monitoring process enables leaders and managers to assess both the overall quality of service provided, and the experiences of children and young people. It also enables outcomes to be read across resulting in the sharing of best practice, although this is not yet entirely embedded. Nonetheless this is a strong system, which makes a major contribution to ensuring continuous improvement in service provision and outcomes.

There is a shortfall in the recruitment of foster carers, in relation to cultural matching between foster carers and young people. The agency has plans to address this, and independent assessors are newly in place to progress appropriate new applications.

The ethical leadership and management of the service is apparent across all aspects of the agency's operation. In addition the agency has a well-respected national presence which usefully enables the sharing of best practice across offices. Staff and panel members are appropriately qualified and experienced, and receive effective supervision and appraisals. However, staff appraisals do not take account of the views of children and young people. This would fully reflect the agency's open culture.

The Statement of Purpose and Children's Guide are accessible on the agency website, and clearly inform readers about the aims and objectives of the fostering agency. Notifiable events are thoroughly communicated, and effective action has been taken in relation to the requirement and recommendation at the last inspection.

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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.