

Barnardos Fostering North East

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Stella Henderson
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Registered manager	Angela Tatum
Responsible individual	Alison Rowland
Date of last inspection	01/03/2013

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Barnardos Fostering North East is a registered charity. It provides long-term, short-term, emergency and respite placements. The agency also offers specialist placements for children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation, large sibling groups and therapeutic placements. The service has 73 approved fostering households and there are 53 children and young people in placement. The agency recruited 17 fostering households in the last year.

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

Children and young people live in safe fostering households. They are suitably matched with foster carers who undergo thorough and timely assessments. Children and young people are made to feel welcome, loved and part of the fostering family. Stability and security are the key factors which enable children and young people to experience improved outcomes in all aspects of their lives.

Foster carers feel that they are respected as fellow professionals as part of 'the team around the child'. They feel that the support they receive gives them confidence to work with and where necessary challenge partner agencies on behalf of children and young people.

The manager effectively monitors the performance of the agency. She has clear plans for development to help improve the lives of children and young people. This,

together with an experienced and suitably qualified team, impacts favourably on outcomes for children and young people.

Requirements and recommendations are raised to address a number of procedural shortfalls. None of these have an impact on safety or quality of care for children and young people.

Areas for 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, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
4	keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children's guide and notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision with 28 days (Regulation 4 (a)(b))	07/07/2015
13	prepare and implement a policy which is agreed with the local police, setting out the measures to be followed to prevent children placed with foster parents from going missing from their placement (Regulation 13 (3)(a))	07/07/2015
17	ensure that the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations (Regulation 17 (3))	07/07/2015
23	review the list of persons who are considered by them to be suitable to be members of a fostering panel ("the central list") (Regulation 23 (1))	07/07/2015
24 (2011)	ensure the record of the fostering panel proceedings specifically records the reasons for its recommendations (Regulation 24)(2))	07/07/2015

*These requirements are subject to a statutory requirement notice.

Recommendations

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

- devise and implement a written policy that clarifies the content of information to be kept on fostering services files (NMS 26.1) This is with specific reference to improving electronic recording systems that track children and young people's progress
- ensure that fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files and managing confidential information. (NMS 26.2)

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

Judgement outcome: Good

The agency's Statement of Purpose says that they will, 'provide foster placements where each child and young person has a stable, secure and caring environment where they can reach their potential'. This objective is fulfilled and the impact of this is evident in their improved emotional and physical health, educational outcomes and ability to enjoy life.

Children and young people are carefully matched with foster carers who warmly welcome them and fully integrate them into their families. Placement breakdowns are rare; only one in the past year which is well below the national average. This means the overwhelming majority of children and young people, once placed, have a very high chance of remaining with just one foster family throughout childhood to adolescence.

All of the young people who reached the age of 18 last year remained with their foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements. This compares to only 54% in all independent fostering agencies. Others who may have gone to college or university can still return to their foster homes during vacations.

Children and young people respond positively to this stability. They develop a sense of belonging to their foster families. They build trust in adults and become willing to be soothed and accept help from them. These are examples of the improved emotional attachment that allows children and young people to get on with their lives.

Children and young people are making good progress at school and college. They are achieving, and on occasion exceeding educational expectations. They enjoy life and get the chance to develop their interests and explore new activities.

This has a positive impact at many levels. By attending youth clubs, sports clubs, taking up horse riding, playing in bands and going swimming for example, children and young people become more integrated into their local communities and extend their friendship groups and gain a sense of achievement. For some, this has led to significant career opportunities.

Health outcomes improve for children and young people. Long-standing health problems are addressed, they receive their inoculations promptly, dental health is monitored and healthy lifestyles are encouraged.

Children with a disability get the services and resources they need to manage their health needs. This means that their disability does not become a barrier to success and enjoyment of life. Progress for some of these individuals is measured in small but nonetheless significant achievements. For example, one independent reviewing officer noted that a young person's, 'self-care skills are developing. He is able to put his shoes

on and also put clothes on; he will sort his own clothing for washing and is able to clean his teeth.'

Diversity in terms of background, ability and heritage is recognised in ways that celebrate and value this uniqueness. Maintaining contact between children and young people and their families helps them to stay connected to their familial and cultural heritage; placing brothers and sisters together also helps to reinforce family bonds.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: Good

The agency recruits carers from every walk of life. This inclusive approach helps them to meet the diverse needs of the children and young people who need placements with loving, understanding and caring foster carers.

Children and young people, and their families, can be reassured that all foster carers have been through a stringent process of vetting, preparation and assessment. For example, over the last year only a third of initial applicants were successful in obtaining approval.

The process concentrates entirely on the needs and safety of children. Existing foster carers are also fully re-assessed following any significant changes in their fostering status or circumstances.

Each application, review or re-assessment is fully scrutinised by a very effective fostering panel. The minutes from their meetings do not always record the reasons for the approval of foster carer, or signify who is the social work representative. This makes it difficult to determine whether the panel is quorate.

The central list of panel members is sufficient for panel to always be quorate. However it includes individuals who act in an advisory capacity, such as the legal advisor, and some who work for the agency and so are not independent.

These minor shortfalls have no impact on the care and safety of children and young people, but a review of the central list would help to clarify who may sit on panel and who are the independent members.

When foster carers are approved, they have access to a wealth of training, focused supervision and well-informed support. Foster carers find this useful in extending their knowledge and understanding of the needs of children and young people they care for. Supervising social workers are described as, 'always going the extra mile.'

This gives foster carers confidence in being pro-active members of the fostering agency. They participate in planning and making decisions about the children and young people in their care and act as strong advocates. Foster carers can see the difference their efforts make to children's lives, in helping them fulfil their expectations and feel safe and valued. They work closely with health, educational professionals and social workers to meet the care and emotional needs of those young people who are fostered.

As a result there is a high level of satisfaction among foster carers about their work and they are proud to distinguish themselves as 'Barnardos' foster carers. This impacts favourably on children and young people's experience, progress and outcomes.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Good

Young people's welfare is strongly promoted and safeguarded. Young people confirm that they feel safe in their foster homes. They know who to turn to if they feel vulnerable or have concerns about anything and confirm that they know who to speak to if they want to make a complaint.

Despite this, some young people continue to place themselves at risk against the advice of adults who care for them. In the rare instances where young people go missing from their foster homes, the agency works closely with other agencies to reduce the risk of harm.

Young people who are at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE) are quickly identified. These cases are rigorously monitored by the agency and clear protocols are adhered to. The agency's 'missing from home' policy requires amendment to reflect changes in the Fostering Services regulations, in particular agreement with the police on measures that will be taken to prevent such occurrences.

Foster carers understand that they have a significant role in keeping children and young people safe and protecting them from harm. They are properly trained in safeguarding matters. This gives them confidence in their ability to work with others to reduce risk. Supervising social workers attend and contribute effectively to risk management meetings.

The agency has a reputation and track record for looking after children and young people who are 'hard to place'. The behaviour of children and young people is managed well with foster carers setting clear expectations and establishing good routines. The dogged perseverance of foster carers helps children and young people to manage their behaviour better and shows them that, in the words of one foster carer, 'we won't give up on you.'

The agency ensures that foster carers are properly trained in their safeguarding responsibilities. This equips them with the competence and skills they need to care effectively for children and young people who have experienced or are at risk of abuse.

The number of allegations against foster carers is very low. Young people feel confident about raising complaints and have first-hand experience of these matters being thoroughly and promptly investigated. This gives them reassurance that their concerns are listened to and acted upon.

Children and young people are protected by a range of practical measures. This includes extensive vetting of staff, foster carers and panel members and spot checks to foster carer homes. Visits to foster carers could be improved by checking that foster carers are keeping all information about children and young people securely locked away.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: good

The Registered Manager has been registered to manage the agency for just over a year. She has suitable management and social work qualifications and extensive experience of work with vulnerable children and young people.

The Registered Manager continually monitors the experience of children and young people through annual reviews, supervisory visits to foster carers, speaking to young people and through progress noted in 'looked after' children's reviews. Local authority commissioner reports confirm that the agency is delivering a safe quality service to children and young people.

The electronic system used to capture this information is not fully functional. This means that impact of the vast amount of individual work undertaken with children and young people and the huge progress they have made because of that work, is not easily extracted.

The Registered Manager has sound and effective working relationships with a range of associated professionals. She challenges other agencies when there are shortfalls in the service they provide, or for example where placing authorities fail to provide essential information in a timely way.

This has meant that on occasion, foster carers have not always had the child's most up to date care plan. This has not impacted on young people as the level of dialogue, planning and consultation with placing authorities ensures foster carers know exactly what the child needs. Again, an improved electronic system for capturing information would help to highlight this more immediately.

The Registered Manager ensures that work with children and young people is informed by research. For example, the agency was involved in a pilot project for finding placements for young people who had been trafficked or who had been sexually exploited. As a result two specialist placements for young people, who had been sexually exploited, were made available and foster carers offered additional training and support in this area.

Supervising social workers operate to high professional standards. Foster carers appreciate the support they get from this confident, experienced and skilled staff team. Underpinning a clear sense of effective teamwork is the shared understanding, as outlined in the agency's Statement of Purpose, that their task is to 'provide the highest quality of substitute family care for children and young people who cannot live with their birth families'.

This and other elements of the Statement of Purpose has been met but a requirement is set to ensure that this document is reviewed annually and sent to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector.

The Registered Manager has met the recommendations from the last inspection which related to improvements in children's health plans and the children's guide, training for foster carers and information gathering.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 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. inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.