

Barnardo's Adoption Midlands

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Sue Young
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Setting address	Barnardo's, Brooklands, Great Cornbow, West Midlands, B63 3AB
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Registered person	Barnardo's
Registered manager	Vacant
Responsible individual	Matthew Horton
Date of last inspection	05/07/2012

Service information

Brief description of the service

Barnardo's is a well-established voluntary adoption agency, of which Adoption Midlands is a branch. It has 12 approved adoptive families; two of who have children currently placed with them. The branch provides adoption support, both post placement and post adoption, to adoptive families approved by Barnardo's, and the children placed with them.

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**

This is a good adoption agency. It was re-launched in 2013 and now operates out of two offices covering both the West and East Midlands. Recent changes to the market nationally has challenged the service and this has had an effect on its growth. The agency, however, is responding and changing its focus to cater for harder to place children, including those with disabilities and sibling groups. There is strong leadership and an experienced and stable staff team, who are committed to providing a high level of service to children and adopters. The level of monitoring and scrutiny by managers is extremely strong and demonstrates continuous improvement and development of the service. There are no breaches of regulation made as a result of this inspection.

Children are well matched to their adoptive families which ensures good placement stability. Although they have all been placed quite recently with their adoptive

families they are making good progress and settling well. As a result, the agency has had no placement disruptions.

Robust procedures in the recruitment of staff and panel members and in the assessment of adopters, mean that children are safe. All receive a good level of training to ensure they understand the importance of safe care practice.

Adopters express a high level of satisfaction with the service. In particular, the welcoming nature of staff and managers. Adopters generally feel very positive about the assessment process. One adopter stated, 'we have felt like part of a community.' Another commented, 'our adoption journey has been fantastic, emotional, thought provoking but overall a wonderful experience.'

Four recommendations have been made following this inspection none of which have an impact on children's experiences, outcomes or progress. These are in relation to gaining the views of children placed with adopters, written plans for the placement of children and adoption support and the children's guide.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

ensure the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account by the adoption agency in monitoring and developing its service (NMS 1.6)

ensure the prospective adopters are given a copy of the placement plan for the introduction of children (NMS 13.9)

ensure the commissioning arrangements for adoption support are underpinned by a written agreement (NMS 15.1)

ensure the children's guide is appropriate to the child's age and understanding. (NMS 18.5)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Since the last inspection the agency has undergone considerable reorganisation and has recently re-launched its services. As a result, at the time of the inspection only two families have children placed with them pre adoption order. Although children have only been living with their adoptive families for very short periods of time they

are having good experiences and are making progress from their starting point. Children are settled and there have not been any disruption to placements.

Children develop strong attachments to their adoptive families and are demonstrating good progress within limited timescales. This is because there is careful matching to ensure children are placed with adoptive families who can meet their needs. As a result, children's confidence are increasing and they are making good progress in school. For example, one child since his placement with his adoptive family is developing better coordination and is now achieving academically above his chronological age. Another child's confidence has increased so much she is now able to enjoy several after school activities, including dancing, archery and gymnastics.

Children enjoy good health, and feel safe and secure. Adopters ensure they are registered with healthcare professionals and access any specialist services as required. As a result, children are engaging well in therapy and are beginning to be able to reflect on behaviours and understand what is happening. One professional working with adopters stated they have made a 'massive difference' to the children placed with them.

Children's development is further promoted by the agency who continue to support adopters after placement. For example, during a period of crisis, the manager offered direct support to a family in the assessing social workers absence. This was highly valued and avoided disruption of the placement. The adopter commented, 'Barnardo's were brilliant.'

The agency promotes the placements of brothers and sisters together. Children have contact with birth families and other who are significant to them through 'letterbox' contact. The agency promotes the completion of later life letters and life story work. This helps children to maintain a positive sense of identity and have an understanding of their background.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Prospective adopters receive clear and timely information about the adoption process and what to expect. They feel highly valued and welcomed. Many consider the agency to have 'family feel'. One adopter stated, 'everybody we have spoken to from our initial contact to our allocated social worker have been very polite, non-judgemental, supportive and caring. They are all respectful regardless of ethnicity, colour and status.' This is a strength of the agency.

The preparation, assessment and support of prospective adopters are effective. Prospective adopters generally feel the preparation training is good and informative and consider Barnardo's to be flexible and accommodating. The agency has taken adopter's feedback into consideration. They have developed training to further reflect the difficulties encountered by some approved adopters waiting for a child and plan

to offer training to extended families regarding attachment and behaviour issues.

The Prospective adopter reports (PARs) are on the whole clear and analytical and support the matching process. The assessment of prospective adopters are timely. If there is any delay in the assessment process there are good reasons for this. For instance, stage one checks are undertaken as soon as possible but there are some delays in their completion which are out of the control of the agency. Assessments are completed within timescales for stage two unless there is an adopter-led reason for delay.

The adoption panel is robust and will challenge the agency appropriately. For example, panel deferred making a recommendation about suitability of a prospective adopter where they considered further information was required. There is an experienced panel chair who has a six monthly oversight of the panel. Analysis of feedback from prospective adopters are taken into account to drive improvement. There is a good skill mix among panel members. They receive induction training and appraisals are taking place annually. The agency decision maker (ADM) makes considered decisions about adopters' suitability to adopt within appropriate timescales. Prospective adopter's experience and feedback of the assessment process and the adoption panel are positive. Comments include, 'we have felt well prepared by our social worker and well prepared for what to expect'; 'panel was a good experience...not as scary as we thought' and 'our adoption journey has been a fantastic, emotional, thought provoking but overall a wonderful experience.'

Adopters are given sufficient information able to make informed decisions about children. Social workers from Barnardo's attend meetings to support the matching process and to ensure appropriate matches are made. Although all are aware and clear of the plan when introducing children to their adoptive families a written plan of introductions are not always in place to reinforce this.

Adopters express a mixed response regarding post placement and post adoption support provided by the agency. The agency has access to a therapist to provide adoption support to children placement with adopters. This is largely welcomed by adopters but feel this could be extended to provide support to the children placed with them. One adopter commented, 'we know we will be supported by Barnardo's and that we are never on our own.' The agency currently commission a therapist to provide adoption support to adopters. Adopters receiving this, however, do not have a written plan of the adoption support to be provided. As a result, there is the potential for a lack of clarity about the level of support they are to receive. Without a written plan the agency is also unable to fully review and evaluate the effectiveness of the support provided. The agency has listened to the views of adopters and have developed their adoption support service as a result. For example, they have created a buddying system for new adopters and developed regular support groups for adopters to meet and discuss common issues.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Good

The agency has a strong focus on safeguarding. Assessments of prospective adopters are robust with all required checks and references taken up. The service will not progress prospective adopters assessments until all checks are in place. The completion of health and safety assessments of prospective adopter's homes helps ensure children's safety.

The agency has a clear process for complaints. There has been one complaint made by prospective adopters since the last inspection. The complaint was dealt with in a timely fashion and the outcome was clearly recorded. Managers have learnt from this complaint and have improved their service as result.

All staff and panel members receive training in safeguarding to develop their knowledge and ensure they have a clear understanding of effective and safe practice. There is also good and effective partnership between adopters, Barnardo's social workers and local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Prospective adopters understand the importance of safeguarding and the actions to take to safeguard children in their care. They are also aware of the impact of abuse and neglect on children. This is fully discussed during their assessment and in their preparation training. As a result, prospective adopters respond appropriately to safeguarding issues. Since the last inspection there has been one safeguarding concern against foster carers not employed by the service. Staff acted appropriately and shared these concerns with the relevant local authority. The prospective adopters raised significant safeguarding concerns which ensured that the appropriate investigation and subsequent support was provided to children in their care.

Recruitment is robust for all staff and panel members. This ensures all are suitable to work with children and prevents unsuitable people having access to children, service users and their information.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Good

The agency has strong leadership. Managers have a clear vision to develop the agency. Since the last inspection there has been considerable change and reorganisation which has resulted in Barnardo's re-launching its adoption service in 2013. In October 2014 the agency opened an office in the East Midlands to run alongside the office in the West Midlands, managed by one overall operational manager for the Midlands. During the inspection, as part of a planned move the operational manager left the agency and interim management arrangements are currently in place.

Barnardo's have both national and regional strategic plans to recruit adopters. The majority of interest is through the agency's national website and through social media. The West Midlands branch targets prospective adopters within a 50 mile radius of the office and has adopted various recruitment strategies, such as,

attending community fairs and setting up stalls in shopping malls. The agency secured an adoption expansion grant which has enabled it to grow. Reduction in potential adopters enquiring, however, means there is some concern they may not hit the targets required of this grant. During 2013-14 the agency reported that they received 236 initial enquiries to become adopters. This led to 18 applications/registration of interest to adopt. Between March 2015 and September 2015 there has been 323 initial enquires to become adopters which has led to two approved adopters with placements, one adoptive family with an adoption order recently made and one with a match. There are eight approved adopters waiting for a match.

Managers are aware of the changing market in adoption and the significant impact of the creation of regional adoption services. They are also fully aware of the significant drop in the number of referrals nationally. As a result, they are changing their focus to the adoption of harder to place children, such as, those with disabilities and sibling groups. The agency is also developing adoption support to make it more visible to adopters.

The agency has developed strong quality assurance systems to manage and monitor service delivery. This helps ensure they meet the needs of adopters and those children waiting for adoption. Feedback from adopters and assessing social workers have been successful in improving service delivery, such as, improving the support and training for adopters. These are evaluated and the agency has developed as a result. Staff and managers engage with children to seek their views but have not formalised this in order to take their views into account in the development of the agency.

There is a statement of purpose which is clear and accessible on the website for all service users and stakeholders. There is one children's guide, however, which is generic for all age groups. This is not available in different formats to cater for individual ages and communication needs. As a result, this cannot be easily accessed by all children who are involved and placed by the service.

Assessing social workers have developed effective working relationships with various local authorities and placing social workers. This helps meet children's needs without any delay to ensure the effective matching and supporting of placements. Children's social workers are positive about their involvement with the agency. One placing social worker commented that they have a, 'very positive experience of working with Barnardo's, they support adopters well... (and are)... proactive in working in partnership.' Another social worker stated that the service was, 'absolutely brilliant.'

Staff and managers are qualified and experienced. Staff feel well supported and valued by their manager. One social worker stated, 'I feel that we are listened to and can influence the way we work.' Staff consider training to be useful and relevant to their work. They are regularly supervised and receive up to date training which is based on recent research. For instance, they have received training on supporting placements of children with foetal alcohol symptoms and sibling placements.

The adoption agency share offices with their fostering teams. There is effective

administration systems to support the work conducted by the agency. They have secure electronic records which ensure accessibility and confidentiality.

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 voluntary adoption agencies.