

Barnardo's Brighton & Hove Link Plus

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number SC045651
Inspection date 30/11/2015
Inspector Sophie Wood
Type of inspection Full
Provision subtype

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Barnardo's Brighton and Hove Link Plus independent fostering agency is a jointly funded project between Brighton and Hove City Council and Barnardo's. The service provides short-break foster care to children and young people with disabilities. There are 25 carers with 23 children and young people receiving a service. Placements include overnight stays, weekend/week breaks and for a few children, full-time foster care. A small number of fostering households are dual registered with the adult shared lives scheme. As some young people become adults, they are able to continue to stay with their existing foster carers.

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: **Outstanding**

This small agency specialises in the provision of short-break and occasional full-time placements for disabled children and young people. Its successful history of long lasting placements is testament to excellent matching, strong parental influence and the commitment of a highly experienced staff team.

Foster carers stay with the agency; this is a stable service. Through excellent supervision and on-going training, foster carers hone and maintain their skills to provide bespoke, high quality packages of care. Parents said, 'our foster carer supports the whole family; we would be lost without her.'

Multi-disciplinary working is a strength. Care plans and behaviour management strategies are borne out of wide consultation and where necessary, independent

specialist guidance and advice. The Registered Manager maintains strong and effective links with the schools and other services attended by the children and young people. These valuable partnerships have a particularly positive impact upon transition planning. Young people routinely move to adult services in a seamless and easy manner.

Innovative and creative consultation mechanisms ensure the views and opinions of children, young people, foster carers and parents are influential in the continuing development of the service. There is a very real sense of ownership by all who are involved with the agency. This is further demonstrated through the reference to the agency as a good practice example in a 2014 publication on dignity and inclusion by the National Children's Bureau.

The weaknesses in relation to the statement of purpose, development plans and safe care guidance are concerned with administrative constraints and the formats in use. These shortfalls do not do sufficient justice to the actual practices of the agency but they have no negative consequence for the safety or welfare of the children and young people.

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 fostering service has a clear statement of purpose, which is available to, and understood by, foster carers, staff and children and is reflected in any policies, procedures and guidance. Specifically, ensure this document more accurately describes and reflects the services it provides (NMS 16.1)

Ensure that individual safer-care policies and guidance are explicitly recorded as being reviewed at foster carer supervision visits (NMS 4.6)

Review the current formats in place to better record foster carers' personal and professional development plans (NMS 21.8)

Ensure that the agency's development plan contains clear and measurable performance indicators (NMS 25.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people are thriving in their placements because they are highly valued and very well understood by committed and loving foster carers. During this inspection, children and young people were seen to settle into their short-break placements as easily as if they were in their own homes. One young person had the radio set to Radio 2 and was excitedly awaiting sausages for tea while playing with their favourite toys. Another young person, placed in a long-term arrangement, proudly showed off their newly refurbished bedroom before settling down for a cuddle with the foster carer's daughter, who they referred to as 'big sister.' Such relationships and warm, inviting surroundings promote an atmosphere of safety, nurture and value.

Parents commend this aspect and said, 'it is like having a family member looking after your child who you trust completely' and 'I know they always have a great time and get to do things we can't always do at home.'

Foster carers are able to describe the needs of the children and young people in great detail. Beyond written care plans and behaviour management guidance, many foster carers have regular, informal meetings with parents to maintain excellent contact and communication. One parent described how, 'we meet regularly for a coffee to talk about him, to compare notes and plan our strategies. Consistency is the key to the progress he is making.'

Foster carers fully understand the difficulties and limitations experienced by those they look after. Consequently, there is a heightened awareness of the safeguarding issues which can and do arise. Foster carers' thinking is embedded in terms of providing a safe yet non-restrictive physical environment which promotes measured risk taking. Children and young people develop their skills and independence as much as their disabilities allow. Strong consultation mechanisms, diligent unannounced visits and a heavy focus on individual communication styles provides children and young people with the ability to feedback about the safety and quality of the care they receive.

Children and young people do not go missing from their placements. Neither are they engaging in harmful behaviours such as substance or alcohol misuse. Some young people do have specific health needs which bring a different type of risk to their health and well-being. Some of these are complex and require medication or therapeutic interventions. In such cases, their foster carers receive bespoke training and guidance which enables them to provide the high standards of care required. Children and young people maximise and enjoy their time with minimal disruption as a result. Similarly, some children engage in other behaviours which can affect their well-being. Examples include self-injuring behaviours. Foster carers understand the rationale for these which is commonly about communication. They follow prescribed guidance and successfully intervene in ways that make sense to the child or young person. Such episodes are swiftly reported, analysed and reviewed in an open and

transparent manner.

All of the children and young people are attending school or other appropriate provision, full time. Their continuing attendance is assured while staying with their foster carers. Strong relationships exist between foster carers and school personnel; this is demonstrated by their sharing of behaviour management strategies and joint goals and targets. Annual review meetings are effectively used to measure progress and foster carers' homes provide toys, meaningful activities and resources which aid children's growth and development.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people join their foster carers based upon excellent assessment and matching processes. New referrals are meticulously reviewed against the skills and experiences of the available foster carers. One parent said, 'we had to wait a little while for the right match but it was absolutely perfect so well worth the wait.'

The agency maintains an on-going foster carer recruitment campaign which includes input and direction from the parent/carer consultation group. Its total number of approved fostering households remains the same as the last inspection; a small number have left and joined and there has been no cause for the Independent Review Mechanism to be involved. Existing foster carers are actively included and provide a valuable element of new carers' introduction and initial training. Robust early processes effectively identify the potential suitability of new applicants. New carers said, 'we really enjoyed the whole process; it was very thorough and prompted a lot of discussion and thinking for us as a family.'

Agency staff typically conduct foster carer assessments; independent social workers are rarely used. Rigorous and searching questions are fully explored prior to recommendations being made. Late information receives the same robust approach; no stone is unturned throughout this process. The same diligent approach is applied by the panel which is shared with the local authority. A well-qualified, experienced independent Chair leads a team of suitably experienced professionals from a range of relevant backgrounds, including a care leaver. All panel members receive panel training and have their performance appraised annually. Explicit, clear feedback forms and detailed minutes reliably inform the agency decision maker who said, 'there are sometimes occasions where I ask for more information or note that a recommendation has been a challenge but this demonstrates that we are all asking the questions that need to be asked.'

Foster carers speak of excellent support which enhances the quality of the care they provide. All foster carers have completed, or are nearing completion of the training, support and development standards within the prescribed timescales. Beyond their mandatory training, foster carers attend and speak very highly of additional courses, seminars and in some cases, professional training they are being supported to achieve. Bespoke arrangements include specific behaviour management guidance

which is individually tailored and delivered by a suitably qualified consultant. A recent addition is end of life training which has been sourced following a request from foster carers.

This active and vocal group of foster carers is an example of excellence. Their drive, compassion and pride in the work they do is further demonstrated by their long service and passion about the agency. Quotes from foster carers include, 'I am treated as an equal professional' and 'my biggest reward is the children; I enjoy every minute of what I do.'

Supervising social workers conduct visits monthly, or more frequently if needed and at least two unannounced visits each year. Foster carers speak of highly valued, professional relationships which do not become overly familiar or 'too friendly.' One foster carer said, 'it's a unique relationship. We have challenging discussions, a lot of blue-sky thinking and good debates. We work in partnership.' Foster carers say they are fully supported and encouraged to develop professionally but this growth is not always fully captured within their written supervision records or personal development plans. The Registered Manager is working on developing new formats to better capture their progress and the positive impact training has on their practice. Other family members are equally positive about their experience. Birth children said, 'I am always asked about how I'm getting on at school and if there is anything they can do for me. When [child's name] has a difficult patch with their behaviours, our social worker and the manager come out to see what else they can do for us.'

The agency achieves excellent levels of permanence for children and young people; only one placement disruption has occurred since the last inspection. A number of foster carers are dually registered with the shared lives scheme. This has enabled one young person to remain with the same short-break foster carer for twenty years. Other examples find children remaining with their short-break foster carers when their legal status changes to being 'looked after' and this minimises the impact of such a difficult period in their lives. One foster carer said 'I already had a really positive relationship with the family and this has helped them all to cope with this significant change of circumstances.'

Examples of the positive impact of partnership working and the additional support provided by the agency are commonplace. One foster carer who has a permanent, long-term placement said, 'the occupational therapy input led to the agency funding a complete refurbishment of the young person's bedroom; the impact has been immense and has transformed my ability to provide the care they need.'

Two new supervising social workers have joined the agency from local authority disabled children's teams. Their working knowledge of the locality, wider services and some of the families who access the agency, provides invaluable experience and insight into supporting the foster carers, parents and the wider service. This is particularly beneficial in recognising the different types of placements provided, from short-breaks to long-term permanence. Foster carers receive the type of support they need because the staff team has the collective skills and experience needed to provide it. The local authority commissioner talked about 'a long-standing partnership which we value hugely' and went on to describe, 'a real menu of services is provided

which is invaluable to the families.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The safety and well-being of the children and young people is central to the ethos and day-to-day running of the agency. Regularly refreshed safeguarding training incorporates the roles and responsibilities of wider key agencies. Foster carers know what and how to report all levels of concerns.

Written policy and procedural guidance is kept under review. The wider organisation's increased awareness of the potential risks of sexual exploitation and radicalisation is currently being used to update guidance and training for staff and foster carers. This is eagerly anticipated by some foster carers who say the topic of child protection can become dry and repetitive over time. The Registered Manager remains focused upon ensuring the agency's own interpretation of wider Barnardo's guidance maintains a clear focus on the safety and welfare issues pertinent to the children and young people served by the agency. There is a strong culture of awareness in terms of the specific vulnerabilities of the young people, including their often-limited cognitive understanding and communication hurdles. In this regard, the Registered Manager is using the findings of research into 'over protected' in the agency's training and policy guidance. The agency strives to educate all stakeholders about the risks of potential over protection, for example, through the use of restrictive measures, such as locking doors and positive handling.

Individual safer care policies and strategies provide foster carers with the detailed guidance they need to follow. This practice keeps everyone safe. A multi-disciplinary approach includes training and advice from a behaviour management consultant. This ensures the use of any resulting physical intervention strategies are strictly monitored, only used in the very best interests of the young person and are consistent with the behaviour management policies of the agency. Although such guidance and progress is routinely monitored at foster carer supervision visits, the written records do not always fully capture sufficient details of the dialogue or the action for the foster carer to take. This compromises the agency's ability to fully monitor the progress made or to clearly evidence how and why certain decisions and changes are made.

Parents rate the safeguarding practices of the agency as 'second to none.' One parent said, 'we could never conduct all the checks the agency does so thoroughly if we used other support schemes to look after our child. We would always choose this agency.' Robust recruitment vetting and checks are rigorously completed for all staff and foster carers. Health and safety audits of fostering households are routinely maintained, ensuring that households continue to provide optimum levels of safety and security.

The agency maintains excellent links with partner safeguarding agencies. There is a very close working relationship with the local safeguarding children board (LSCB)

which currently includes joint working on a number of training courses. Safeguarding referrals are rare but made in children's best interests. One Section 47 enquiry has occurred since the last inspection and one complaint from a parent was upheld by the agency. Written records of these events are detailed, thorough and demonstrate that the welfare and safety of children is the agency's top priority.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

This stable agency is expertly managed and led by a suitably qualified, experienced Registered Manager. She has been in post since 2007, assisted by an equally long serving and very experienced team leader. Foster carers appreciate the committed approach of senior leaders, which is forward thinking and creative, yet stable and constant. As a result new staff, including a responsible individual, have joined without causing upheaval or disruption for foster carers. The skills and impact of senior leaders and managers are particularly commended as they continue to steer the agency through a re-tendering processes and times of uncertainty. Commissioners report confidence in the agency by stating, 'our own stringent monitoring demonstrates we receive absolute value for money.'

The Registered Manager maintains a critical oversight of budgets and expenditure; the agency is financially viable. Excellent creative use of the expertise of team members enhances the foster carer training programme while reducing expenditure. All team members hold specific additional roles and responsibilities which enhances the quality of service provision and makes optimum use of their time and abilities; for example, as leads on 'inclusion' and 'training and development.' There is a distinct team ethic and collaborative mind set about this agency.

The Registered Manager responds positively to the inspection process. One requirement from the previous inspection, concerned with a specific example of recruitment practice, has been comprehensively addressed. A further monitoring visited, conducted in November 2014 in response to a serious notification, resulted in a safeguarding requirement and five recommendations being made. Strong evidence that the resulting actions taken in response have become embedded in practice were found at this inspection. The agency continues to make appropriate notifications to Ofsted and other safeguarding agencies in a timely manner. This transparent agency learns and improves.

The agency's statement of purpose and children's guide contains all of the required elements but they do not do sufficient justice to the incredible work and outcomes achieved by the agency. Children and young people are routinely rooted within the wider community through a wide range of activities and events. Foster carers and agency staff ensure they access and enjoy all that local services and resources have to offer. Such outcomes are not sufficiently shown. Prospective service users and parents may not appreciate such elements because current documents fail to sufficiently reflect the excellent work that current users value so highly. A timely review of these documents is strongly recommended.

Regular team meetings are used to effectively check and explore the outcomes of the children and young people in placement. Professional challenge is commonplace. This maintains a momentum of continuing development and forward thinking. The Registered Manager is described by staff as 'supportive and inclusive whilst delivering clear decisions when these are needed.' There is a mutual professional respect demonstrated by all of the agency's stakeholders.

Leaders and managers are explicitly clear about the direction of development for the agency. The recruitment of more foster carers is a current focus as well as updating core policies and procedural guidance, including behaviour management and safeguarding. Strategic development plans expertly incorporate the needs of the agency as well as the wider organisation. However, some of the targets identified are not explicitly clear as to how success will be measured.

Overwhelmingly, parents, foster carers, social workers and commissioners commend this agency. Its key component is its drive and focus to promote the rights and well-being of children, young people and their families. Its impact is captured by one parent who said, 'our family functions because of this agency; it has changed our lives for the better.'

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.