

# Barnardo's - Making Connections

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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**Setting address** 140 Balaam Street, Plaistow, London, E13 8RD

**Telephone number** 02085521004  
**Email** [kate.roach@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:kate.roach@barnardos.org.uk)  
**Registered person** Barnardo's  
**Registered manager** Catherine Roach  
**Responsible individual** Brenda Farrell  
**Date of last inspection** 19/06/2012

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Making Connections is a branch of Barnardo's, a voluntary adoption agency. It provides a national service, managed by the national head office of Barnardo's.

The branch provides adoption support services to adults only; it does not recruit, assess or approve adopters, nor does it work with children. Staff provide advice and support to adults who have been in Barnardo's care or affected by adoption, whether as birth family members, descendants or as adopted children, and help service users to access their records. The branch provides independent counselling, intermediary and tracing services in addition.

The branch holds 6,000 records for all adoptions made by Barnardo's since 1947, 390 records for adoptions made by the Children's Aid Society and a large number of records for children not placed for adoption.

### 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**

The overall effectiveness of this service is outstanding.

The branch achieves good outcomes for adult service users. The majority speak very positively about the service. Some have had to cope with unavoidable disappointment; knowledgeable and experienced staff manage their disappointment

and expectations well.

Intended outcomes are clearly set out with service users. For example, staff agree clear parameters from the start of pieces of work on specific areas such as access to records, intermediary or tracing. If service users want to move on from accessing files to other services, then further arrangements are agreed. Feedback at the end of the involvement informs the progress of the service.

The evidence from feedback helps to inform and drive change. For example. In relation to waiting times, this information triggered a pilot scheme for sending different information at the outset, with different choices and options. This reduced additional letters and waiting times for responses. This is proving to make a more efficient and productive service.

Experienced and empathic staff understand the emotional impact and implications of adoption and carefully and sensitively manage this. The average length of service for staff is 14 years, with the longest serving 23 years. Staff say they really enjoy working in this field of work: 'It's a lovely job; we see people's history here.'

Staff maintain effective and continuous learning to improve their understanding and knowledge of practice. There is a transition in how training services are organised for staff due to budgetary limitations. Staff access online training and sources of training outside of the organisation, such as from the local safeguarding children's board. Staff feel training supports them to do their jobs, ensuring new ideas and learning is cascaded to all colleagues in team meetings.

Leadership and management remains strong, with regular reviews of the service which helps to see trends and patterns and allows the service to improve. There are no breaches of regulations and only one good practice recommendation made in respect of making the statement of purpose more widely available to potential service users.

## **Areas of improvement**

### **Recommendations**

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

- Ensure the adoption agency and adoption support agency has a clear statement of purpose which is available to and understood by staff, volunteers, children, birth parents and guardians, prospective adopters and adopters, and is reflected in policies, procedures and guidance. (NMS 18.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

This branch offers work with adult service users only, who receive adoption support, intermediary and tracing services. People using this service feel listened to and supported by highly experienced and professional staff. Consistency of service is very evident, for example, one service user who contacted the service twice with a ten-year gap in between, says, 'I had the same person the whole ten years. The same 'human' who has been incredibly supportive; someone there with consistency and experience is fantastic.'

Adult service users are all very positive about the service they receive; they feel treated with dignity and respect during what is a vulnerable and sensitive time for them. Adult service users say they felt helped to understand their backgrounds better or to accept disappointments, still having learnt more about their past and history. For example, one adults service user says, 'She (worker) has been very sensitive, empathic and grooming me with potential outcomes.'

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This agency is very responsive to initial enquiry, making people feel respected and personally welcomed. All adult service users receive the same prompt, welcoming response regardless of their individual needs. Additional support needs established at the point of contact inform how work will progress, for example, service users' age, health needs and any other special needs are taken into account for how to plan and prioritise the service.

Careful risk assessments ensure the right support. For example, staff will travel to meet service users who have difficulty accessing public transport or will seek to establish where support is available or if vulnerability identifies specific needs. The organisation is committed to equality in practice and works hard to ensure that all service users receive equitable treatments regardless of race, religion, sex, sexuality or disability. Staff frequently use a signing interpreter and one is working on presenting records as a taped book. The building is accessible for wheelchair users, has disabled facilities and a lift.

Waiting times has been an issue for the agency, but working together and with support from project workers whose focus is preparation of records, waiting times have reduced to two months and there is an overall plan to continue to reduce this time. Adult service users do not all feel this to be problematic, for example, one service users says, 'The response was quick, they advised me of the waiting list and kept me informed.' Another says, 'They contacted within one working day, the waiting list was always realistic, they never committed to an absolute date. The whole process

took four months. Although at the time I felt frustrated, on reflection I felt happy to have that time, the balance was right.'

Staff and managers are extremely experienced and up to date on adoption issues. The service manager and workers have access to online training and attend some training events. Staff and managers say they can make a case to attend further training and regularly receive course information; however, the staff accept the budget restrictions and seek innovative ways to ensure continued staff development.

The sensitivity and highly professional response to service users makes a difference to their lives and helps them to understand their past, background and learn about important issues and characteristics or discover family members they did not know existed. For example, comments from adult service users include: 'found out I had brothers and sisters', 'found out my brother was still alive', 'lots of similarities' and 'found relatives I didn't know I had'.

Staff sensitively help service users to understand the impact and effect that adoption has on them, their family and history and what potential outcomes tracing may bring. For example, helping service users to understand if birth relatives do not want to meet up, preparing service users for possible deaths, breaking news of death sensitively, advising of restrictions on sharing information without consent and carefully advising of family difficulties. It is clear how well service users are prepared for every potential outcome. A service user says, 'I would be ecstatic if he wants to meet but understand if he doesn't.'

The agency has clear and helpful policies and procedures that are available on request. Those using services receive information on their rights to make representations and complaints and there is support should they wish to do so. The organisation's statement of purpose is clear and sets out objectives; however, it is not easily accessible to those using the service.

The agency does not hold contracts with local authorities as it previously did but does still work closely with them. For example when service users choose to use them as agents or approach them directly for their records. Several workers acting as agents give positive feedback on the services offered, for example, 'inordinately quick service', 'very impressed' and 'felt confident', 'very positive and flexible'.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency shows comprehensive knowledge of child protection and is clear what actions it should take where there are concerns about safeguarding. The responsible individual, service manager and staff hold extensive knowledge of safeguarding matters.

Clear knowledge of historical abuse is evident. File analysis considers potential cases for evidence of historical abuse. Reviews take place whenever new information emerges to ensure they do not miss evidence. The agency is clear in its responsibility towards historical abuse and tirelessly considers this. All staff understand the impact of historic abuse and the agency embraces these issues. Careful collation and recording of all historic allegations takes place. Sensitive handling in accordance with the agency policy is evident. The agency holds a wealth of expertise in this area and the team show good awareness of their role to support and understand service users' experiences.

Staff deal competently with current safeguarding issues and report to the appropriate agencies as they arise. All social workers receive regular update training and share their own knowledge as well as seeking out information from designated officers and others within local authority if needed.

There is a detailed policy on safeguarding, including a separate policy on historic allegations. Service users advise they are aware of the complaint's procedure, although at the time of inspection they had made no complaints.

The agency networks well and thus enjoys good links with the local safeguarding children's board and various London boroughs' designated officers. The agency understands the value of effective liaison and is currently involved in several historical abuse cases by providing valuable evidence.

The recruitment of staff and volunteers is thorough and effective to ensure as far as possible, safe and responsible workers.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **Good**

A suitably experienced and qualified service manager runs this service with the close support of the responsible individual. The service manager has over 30 years of post-qualification experience and holds a National Vocational Qualification at level four in management. All of the social work staff hold professional qualifications in social work and register with the Health and Social Care Council.

Senior managers, leaders and trustees show exceptional commitment to support services and deliver an improving service nationally. There are helpful and effective relationships with partner agencies, commissioning workers and other adoption agencies. This all serves to improve the experience and progress of service users. The team offers a flexible and responsive service, where service users feel listened to, valued and respected.

The performance and delivery of 'Making Connections' has a standards and quality assurance plan and is making better than expected progress on targets set. Service

users' views provide valuable insight and help improve the service, for example, improving timescales raised in feedback. Managers show awareness, and steps to alleviate and improve practice are in place. New project workers and a volunteer coordinator will help share workloads and free up social workers to respond to new referrals.

The leaders and managers use the resources available to meet the needs and targets of the service, for example organising a duty system, which provides an excellent first response and template letters that make information clearer and alleviate the need for further letters, which saves time. These systems improve services and targets, thus allowing more time to support service users to understand their situation and the effect on their lives.

The statement of purpose reflects the work of the agency and advises people of what service they can expect to receive. As this statement of purpose is not readily accessible on the Barnardo's website, nor is there information stating how to request this, a good practice recommendation is made.

Staff and managers are well qualified and have a wealth of experience. They say they feel supported and there is evidence of extremely detailed and comprehensive supervision notes. Staff and managers can access necessary training, which is sufficient to the task and helps them work effectively. Appraisals, which link to staff performance ensure prompt attention to practice issues and staff development plans exist.

Case records of current work are clear, up to date and stored securely. Barnardo's 'Making Connections' holds historical archives and thousands of adoption and care records. Efficient systems record, update constantly and retain a massive volume and depth of information. Experienced workers understand what is important. File storage is under constant temperature, with dehumidifiers, air conditioning and a fire suppressant unit to ensure they remain in as good condition as possible. Recent trust funds obtained will appoint a conservator and archivist to do a full assessment of the records and condition of the library to ensure records remain in peak condition.

There were no requirements or recommendations at the last inspection; however, the agency effectively progresses and improves.

## **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.