

Barnardo's Adoption North East

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Setting address 1 Lumley Court, Drum Industrial Estate, Chester-le-Street, County Durham DH2 1AN

Telephone number 0191 492 9000
Email angela.tatum@barnardos.org.uk
Registered person Barnardo's
Registered manager Angela Tatum
Responsible individual Brenda Farrell
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Barnardo's is a national children's charity which is also registered as a voluntary adoption agency. It operates in England, Scotland and Wales. Barnardo's Adoption North East is one of the English branches and also provides a fostering service. This inspection covered the adoption service only. Barnardo's Adoption North East recruits, prepares, assesses and approves prospective adopters. It offers a variety of support services to its children and families, both prior to and after the making of an adoption order.

The agency comprises the operations manager, the adoption manager and six social workers, some of whom work on a part-time basis, as well as support and administrative staff. In the year 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015, it approved about 15 adoptive families and placed about the same number of children.

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 branch of Barnardo's Adoption Agency is outstanding. Its management is innovative and extremely effective. This helps the agency to provide an outstanding service to adopters, children and placing local authorities, which helps to provide excellent outcomes for children.

The agency is managed and operated by very experienced and motivated people.

They understand adoption thoroughly and develop highly effective relationships with children and families to ensure that children experience and benefit from stable family lives. One adopter said that a worker's support and commitment to their family 'takes it to another level entirely'.

The agency is rigorous, timely and thorough in its preparation and assessment of adopters. Recruitment is based on a detailed knowledge of the placements needed by local authorities. Support is of a very high standard throughout the process, and adopters are very confident in their social workers. Family-finding is undertaken in a collaborative manner with prospective adopters who are very well supported through this process. This helps them to feel involved and ensures that the correct match is made. An approved adopter said, 'I feel really supported, really well informed and feel that they will get us the right match at the right time.' Matching is careful but undertaken with a creative approach which is ambitious for children. This means that the agency is able to find loving and well-supported families for some of the most complex children, including those who are older, have more complex past experiences, have a disability or are part of a large group of brother and sisters. Ongoing support is of a very high standard. Consequently, the agency achieves excellent placement stability, which helps children to thrive.

Support to adoptive families includes access to psychological and therapeutic parenting consultation and support, therapeutic support for children and families, post-approval training, support groups and social activities. Day-to-day individual support to prospective adopters and adoptive families is of the highest quality and is greatly appreciated. One adopter said that their social worker 'just gets us, knows what we need and is planning to help us before we even recognise it ourselves'.

Management is highly effective at both strategic and operational levels. Monitoring of practice is effective and helps to support ongoing development. The agency's electronic record-keeping system is effective in ensuring that key records are maintained, but does not support the monitoring of the adoption process well enough. Data entry and selection are not always consistent and, as such, reporting systems do not always provide the information they should.

The agency works very well with local authorities and other agencies. The managers of the branch are fully engaged in the local adoption consortia, and are involved in helping to shape and influence future practice and developments in adoption. For example, the branch is taking a lead locally in helping local authorities to develop their work in terms of early permanence and foster-to-adopt placements.

The agency's practice is underpinned by sound safeguarding practices and procedures. However, practice in verifying the qualifications of independent panel members is not as well developed or clearly recorded as it should be.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that checks to confirm qualifications which are a requirement and others which are considered by the agency to be relevant for independent panel members are undertaken reliably and clearly recorded (NMS 21.3c)
- ensure that there is a robust and efficient IT system. Specifically, that the current electronic recording system is developed to support fully the effective monitoring of the agency's work (NMS 28.1).

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**

Children benefit from, and thrive in, stable placements in families who are very well matched to their needs and very well supported to care for them. The agency is highly effective in recruiting, preparing and approving a diverse range of adoptive families. For example, the agency is particularly successful in recruiting adopters from ethnic backgrounds other than White British, same-sex couples and single adopters. The agency's adopters are extremely well prepared and supported to care for children with a range of complex needs or those who are harder to place. For example, recent placements include two brother and sister groups of three children, older children, those with an uncertain diagnosis or with a more complex history, and children with a disability. The agency's diverse range of adoptive families helps to ensure that children with a wide range of needs are able to find a family that is suitable for them.

The agency has not experienced a disruption to an adoptive placement for nearly three years. Given the complexity of the children placed, this demonstrates the agency's excellent practice when matches are considered and the high level of ongoing support that is provided. This means that children are able to thrive and experience a stable and happy family life. One adopter said that the agency helped match them with children who are 'just right for us, they're the best match they could be'.

After placements are made, the ongoing support to adoptive families is highly valued by them and helps to ensure that children settle into their new families. Where difficulties occur, the agency responds positively and pro-actively to help. In one

situation, difficulties in a placement required prompt and complex therapeutic support, which was provided by the agency. An independent reviewing officer said of this situation, 'Without this extremely high level of support the placement would have disrupted with the consequent impact on the children.' Adopters are extremely well supported by workers who know them well, understand them and provide the support they need. One said of this support for children, 'They get to know our child so know how to help him, and us, best. They are so child-focused and warm, I don't really know how to describe how good they are with him.'

As children settle into placements, they make excellent progress. One child, with a history of being excluded from school, has settled into school life, attends full time and is making very good progress since his placement with his adoptive family. In another case, there has been marked progress made by a child with an unclear medical diagnosis and complex difficulties. The social worker said, 'I can't believe how well the child is doing.' Another social worker simply said, 'The children are doing so well.'

Children are enabled to access appropriate educational and leisure services. Their health needs are well provided for through their access to primary health services and the provision of any specialist service they need.

Adopters understand the importance of children being able to understand their life story and to maintain their heritage. Where contact is appropriate, adopters are highly sensitive to its importance. Some adopters support children to maintain complex arrangements with their brothers and sisters. Indirect contact is supported sensitively.

The agency's emphasis on developing early permanence for children is a significant help in providing excellent outcomes for them. It works positively and innovatively with local authorities to help them to develop a focus on fostering for adoption. It provides carefully and robustly assessed adopters who are able to take placements of this nature. This reduces the disruption that children face from placement moves and helps children to develop more positive future attachments with their families.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: Outstanding

This branch of the agency is highly efficient and robust in its work. At the same time, it presents as warm, approachable and friendly. This approach is apparent throughout the recruitment assessment and approval process. Enquirers are made to feel welcome and valued, and many people say this was the reason for choosing

Barnardo's. People enquiring about adopting are given very good information at an early stage to allow them to decide whether they want to continue to pursue their enquiry. Home visits are rigorously undertaken and clear decisions made by the agency regarding whether enquirers should be invited to submit an application for assessment.

The agency's work to assess, prepare and approve prospective adopters is similarly thorough. Assessments are rigorous in exploring people's suitability, attitudes and aptitude to adopt, yet are undertaken in an approachable manner. One adopter said, 'We didn't have a clue when the process started; it really opened our eyes.' Another said, 'Although it was very thorough it felt a good experience and the report really captured what we are like.' Adopters feel well prepared by the process. One said it 'made us question about what sort of parents we would be and learn how effective we could be.'

Assessments are carried out in a timely manner, with a clear separation of stage one and stage two. They are rigorous and are highly analytical. Assessments provide additional focus on relevant matters, depending upon the people being assessed or the nature of the child being considered. For example, assessments of people considering fostering to adopt have a detailed focus on the additional challenges and risks that this can bring, and the ability of the applicants and their support networks to deal with these. Throughout the assessment process, a high priority is placed on preparing prospective adopters for the varying and complex needs likely to be present in the children who they go on to adopt. Good information is provided during the assessment, in training and through contact with the agency's therapeutic service or psychologist. This helps adopters to make good decisions about their matching criteria. This preparation is invaluable in promoting the success that the agency has in finding nurturing families for complex and 'harder to place' children. For example, straightforward and clear training is provided on attachment, how attachment difficulties might present at different ages, and some examples of management strategies.

The agency is very successful in attracting and recruiting a diverse range of adopters. Same-sex couples, single adopters and adopters from a range of ethnic backgrounds are welcomed. Assessments are carried out in a non-discriminatory way, while still giving robust and safe consideration to any issues that might relate to the parenting of children.

Assessment reports contain a clear evaluation of applicants' suitability to adopt. This helps the panel and the agency decision maker to understand the assessing social worker's recommendation regarding the applicants. The robust nature of assessments means that people who decide that adoption might not be for them

make this decision at as early a stage as possible. In the last two years, no applicants have withdrawn at stage two and no applicants have had their approval refused at panel. As well as being fair to prospective adopters who decide not to continue their application, this is helpful in managing the agency's resources effectively. Completed prospective adopters' reports are of excellent quality. They are a highly effective balance between evidence and evaluation, and clearly describe applicants' suitability, skills and attitudes in relation to the adoption of children. Their narrative style is compelling and, as well as giving excellent information to panel, they are of outstanding value to the family-finding and matching process.

The agency's adoption panel is comprised of people with good personal and professional experience of adoption. The panel chair is highly experienced and ensures that the panel operates very effectively. Applicants attending panel, who are understandably very nervous, are put at ease despite the thoroughness that panel brings to its role. Panel administration is very effective, with the necessary information reaching members and the decision maker in ample time. Panel minutes are of good quality, and recommendations and the reason for these are clear. The agency's decision maker is fully qualified for the role and makes clear, well-informed decisions after reading all the information presented to panel.

The adoption panel provides a robust quality assurance function. It gives feedback to the agency about the individual cases presented to it, and also in its regular reports to the agency. The panel chair works very effectively with the agency and the decision maker so that panel provides a very good positive challenge to the branch's practice.

The agency branch's work to match its adopters with children needing families is highly effective. Family-finding is done in partnership with approved adopters. Excellent and sensitive support and guidance is given to adopters throughout the process. Very well-written prospective adopters' reports are supplied to local authorities, and adopters are helped to consider information that is supplied about children. Where adopters take a more proactive role in finding children, agency workers challenge and support them in this to ensure that they give matters full consideration. One adopter described how her social worker 'reined me in'. She described being tempted by every child she learned about, but the worker assured her that she should not rush and that 'the right child would come along'. Other people echoed this. Ongoing training and support helps to prepare adopters for the children they might adopt. Work with adopters is realistic, and addresses potential difficulties and how they might be addressed. One adopter, currently waiting to be linked with a child, said 'I feel really supported, really well informed and feel that they will get us the right match at the right time.' When adopters wait a long time for a placement, the agency recognises how difficult it is for people and provides them

with very good support. One worker said, 'it's awful going to someone's home with no news of a child for them'. One adopter with limited matching criteria, who was waiting to have their second annual review since their approval, said they are 'really happy that the agency is still family-finding for us and that there have been some possible links'.

This care in family-finding, matching and planning ensures that placements commence on the best possible footing, and contributes to the agency's excellent levels of placement stability. This is enhanced further by the provision of a number of 'settling in' visits, over and above the agency's normal support visits, and also by post-approval training. These elements help to equip new adopters with advice and guidance regarding the parenting skills and techniques appropriate for their child.

Adopters have access to, and appreciate, the out-of-hours help line. They also have access to consultation and advice from the agency's independent psychologist and, where needed, access to therapeutic support from a specialist service within Barnardo's. Adopters have support groups and are able to join training events provided by the agency's fostering service.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Good

The assessment of adopters is rigorous. Assessments include full suitability checks and references to ensure that they are suitable people to care for children. Assessments also risk-assess prospective adopters' home environments to help keep children safe. The preparation and training of prospective adopters focuses on promoting children's physical and emotional well-being, safety and security.

Preparation training covers issues such as neglect, damaged attachments and previous abuse, and how these can impact on children's care needs. Training and individualised support is provided to help adopters to care for children in a way that keeps them safe and heals previous harm.

When matching takes place and placements are planned, the agency ensures that full information is shared and explored to ensure that risks are clearly identified and planned for. Adopters are helped to consider carefully the types of needs that they feel able to manage. They are supported to make good decisions. When placements are made, therapeutic and psychological advice and support are available to help them to parent children in a therapeutic and healing manner.

The agency as a whole has a strong commitment to safeguarding children. Monitoring of practice is highly effective, and there are strong supervision processes

for prospective adopters and staff. Comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures are in place which are easily accessible to staff. These include information about the action to take to respond to historical abuse, sexual exploitation and the risks from radicalisation. There is good information for adopters on how to manage children's online safety and the risks from their use of social media. All staff have annual safeguarding training to ensure that they are up to date with any new developments. A senior manager in the agency takes lead responsibility for safeguarding. This ensures that incidents are reported and monitored at a senior level in the agency and can be monitored by the trustees. There have been no allegations made about any of the agency's adopters or staff.

The agency's complaints procedure is readily available to all parties who may need this. There have been no complaints made directly to the agency. One issue was raised with Ofsted in a survey form returned by an adopter. This was raised with the agency, and was appropriately investigated and addressed.

Staff and panel member recruitment is generally robust. However, the agency does not always verify and record the relevant qualifications of some of its independent panel members to ensure that they possess the necessary qualifications for their role.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Outstanding

This branch of the adoption agency benefits from outstanding leadership and management. Managers work highly effectively with local authorities and other agencies. The agency works positively within the local consortia and with national bodies involved in adoption and its development. This means that they are able to influence and help to shape the future of adoption, particularly in terms of regionalisation, and the promotion of early permanence and fostering for adoption. For example, the agency has developed training packs, tools and processes for local authorities regarding the development of fostering for adoption. It has undertaken innovative joint work with local authorities and is continuing to work in partnership with them. This proactive and influential work is focused on helping to improve the experiences of children who may have adoption plans and is driving improvements in adoption practice.

The commitment of leaders and managers to providing a high-quality adoption service is reflected in the agency's extremely high standard of practice. The excellent quality of relationships between agency social workers and their local authority counterparts means that they work well together. Agency social workers help to share post-placement visiting to ease the work of placing socially workers, and

information sharing is very good. One local authority social worker said, 'they are in touch any time I need them and share information well'. Another commented that the agency is 'proactive' in its work with local authorities, ensuring that needs are identified and addressed. This excellent information sharing through the family-finding and placement process results in well-matched, nurturing placements for children that are made in a timely manner, and subsequent high levels of stability in these families.

The agency continues to develop its focus on providing adoptive families who are able to offer placements for children who are deemed 'harder to place'. The agency uses its excellent local knowledge, as well as its reputation and experience, to recruit such families successfully. It is also effective in recruiting a diverse range of adopters. Its work to develop its post-placement support service shows its continuing development and its intention to provide the highest quality placements for children. These placements are then provided with the proactive and responsive support they need.

The monitoring of the standard of work undertaken by the agency is of very high quality, from the detailed operational level to the strategic performance of the branch. Monitoring is systematic and integrated, so that reporting of day-to-day practice feeds into the reports made to senior managers and trustees who, in turn, give close scrutiny to the branch's work. The responsible individual understands adoption, and the rapid changes and developments in the field. She knows the branch well and the local context in which it works, as well as being part of a wider organisation.

The agency has clear and detailed plans in place for its development and improvement. These recognise the challenges faced by adoption agencies, as well as the key to its current and future financial viability. On an operational level, there is regular scrutiny of all aspects of service delivery through supervision and reporting systems. These ensure that the branch manager and senior leaders and managers are able to assure the quality of work carried out.

Since the last inspection, a new manager has taken up post and the branch has restructured its staff team into separate fostering and adoption teams. This, and the highly skilled management of the adoption service, has supported the development and continued improvement of the agency. Staff members spoke highly of the managers of the branch. For example, one said of the branch manager, 'she really knows adoption and always has an eye on where we can improve.' Another described the branch's adoption team manager as 'fresh, driven and focused on improvement'.

The staff team is very experienced and committed to providing a high-quality service. Supervision and appraisal mechanisms are effective, and support staff to reflect on their practice. Staff have good access to training, which helps them to maintain and develop their expertise.

The agency uses an electronic record-keeping system and is working to develop this further. The implementation of this system has presented some challenges in terms of where information is entered and what information is extracted for monitoring purposes. As a consequence, reports on the adoption process produced by this system are not always complete. For example, records may show the date on which an application was made, but not the date on which the outcome was decided. Others might not record the date of panel or the commencement of stage two of the assessment. In every case, full information is available within the individual file, but managers' monitoring is made more complex and time consuming than it should be to access this.

The statement of purpose is easily accessible on the agency's website. This provides anyone who wishes to use the service with accurate information about what to expect. The agency has an appropriate children's guide in place.

The branch's premises are spacious, accessible and support the operation of the agency well. There are appropriate facilities for record keeping, storage, administration and meetings. The branch has appropriate insurance cover and a business continuity plan in place. This sets out how the service will continue to operate in the event of an unforeseen crisis.

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.