

Barnardo's Fostering North East

Barnardo's

1 Lumley Court, Drum Industrial Estate, Chester-le-Street, County Durham DH2 1AN
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Barnardo's 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 who have disabilities and life-limiting conditions, and sexualised behaviour, and for large sibling groups and therapeutic placements. The service has 49 approved fostering households and there are 53 children and young people in placement.

It has been registered since 2003.

Inspection dates: 10 to 14 September 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 1 June 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- It provides fostered children with good support through its supervising social workers. They get to know children and advocate strongly on their behalf to ensure that they receive the services that they need.
- The children's safety is well assured by the agency's rigorous practices.
- Safeguarding incidents are thoroughly investigated, analysed, evaluated and recorded. Learning outcomes lead to safer care practices.
- The agency's management is highly visible and effective at both strategic and operational levels. Monitoring practices are thorough, the agency identifies areas of improvement and suitable plans are put in place.
- It provides foster carers with good levels of support, supervision, guidance and management. This enables carers to provide nurturing and stable homes for children.
- The agency works effectively with placing authorities and partner agencies. It challenges decisions and working practices of other agencies effectively, with a focus on improving outcomes for children.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Foster carers' training is provided on a regular basis. However, it does not provide mandatory training on current high-profile vulnerabilities for children.
- The recommendation on the suitability of prospective carers is not always decided on by the fostering panel within an eight-month period from the date of an application being accepted.
- Foster carers do not receive a copy of the placement plan from the respective local authority prior to placement or within five working days of the placement beginning.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons of bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36 (1))	30/09/2018

Recommendations

- Ensure that foster carers are trained in appropriate safer-care practice. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 4.6) Specifically, ensure that foster carers access specialist face-to-face training in current high-profile areas of concern in terms of harm to children and young people.
- Ensure the fostering panel makes its recommendation on the suitability of a prospective foster carer within eight months of receipt of the prospective foster carer's application to be assessed. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 14.4)
- Ensure the foster carer is given a copy of the child's placement plan as soon as this is provided to them by the responsible authority. If the provision of the care plan by the responsible authority is delayed, the fostering service follows this up with the responsible authority. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 31.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

This agency provides children and their foster carers with good support. Children are carefully matched with their foster carers and fully integrated into their families. Placement stability is good. Many children placed are in secure, long-term placements. Children and sibling groups make exceptional progress in their education, health and employment opportunities, which helps them to develop as young adults to support future independence.

The agency focuses on ensuring that foster carers get full information about children prior to placement being made through their own template. However, the respective local authorities do not routinely forward the local authority care plan in such a timely manner. The agency challenges the child's social worker and escalates the concern appropriately.

The agency supports and provides for placements of children who have life-limiting conditions and additional needs. The warmth and dedication shown by carers in such placements is exceptional. The agency ensures that support is individualised to enable the foster carers to provide the best possible care, inclusive of respite where appropriate. Close collaboration with respective health and social care professionals in local authorities maintains good nurturing and highly efficient placements.

The agency is very good at communicating with children and accessing their views and opinions. The agency's social workers routinely speak to children to ensure that they are happy and safe in placement. They provide children with written guidance on the fostering service, inclusive of how to make a complaint and what extra support can be expected. This means that the agency's social workers know the children's needs well. Good levels of practical and emotional support are provided to children by the agency. One child said, 'I love it where I am; it is good to be part of a family where I feel fully supported. My carers are always there for me to talk to and to help me.'

The agency supports seasonal activities, such as Halloween parties and trips to the theatre for pantomimes. These trips and activities are offered to all children, their foster carers and families. Where appropriate, birth families are also encouraged to attend specific activities in accordance with the children's care plans. This supports relationships and develops children's resilience, identity and well-being.

The agency's staff and foster carers fully support children to maintain contact with their families. This helps them to stay in touch with significant people in their lives. Some children have been subject to special guardianship and some have stayed with their carers beyond the age of 18, although currently those numbers are low, and recruitment of new foster families is limited. This is a national issue, but the agency is proactive and creative in its continued engagement with local authorities to meet the needs of children.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

The children are safeguarded well by their foster carers, who are supported by individualised risk management plans. Incidents of concern are rigorously reviewed, analysed and evaluated by the agency's social worker, manager and senior management team. Discussions take place with relevant safeguarding professionals in respective local authorities, and where necessary appropriate challenges are made by the agency. This level of professional challenge ensures that the service is doing all that is expected, and their voice is heard to ensure that children are safeguarded.

As a result of the last inspection, a thorough response was made in the implementation of a missing-from-care policy. A guest speaker from a regional police force attended a focus group to raise awareness and to reinforce the responsibilities for all in responding to episodes of children going missing. Additionally, foster carers were provided with access to the respective policies from the agency, local police and children's placing local authority. Although there was a temporary increase in incidents, this was isolated to a few children who were closely monitored, and the response was thorough. Missing behaviours have reduced, supported by individual child's safety plans. As with all incidents of concern, they are well monitored and reviewed by the agency's internal safeguarding, evaluating and recording systems.

The use of physical restraint with children is rarely required. When it occurs, carers are mindful of accurate and clear recording. Foster carers are trained in de-escalation strategies to manage incidents of problematic behaviour. The agency social worker works closely with the foster carer and the child's social worker to ensure that only strategies agreed by all are used.

The foster carers are well trained in meeting the needs of children who are placed. However, specialist areas of vulnerabilities are not specifically covered as standalone mandatory training sessions, such as child sexual exploitation and self-harm. This is especially noticeable when the agency has provided training in radicalisation and online safety. This means that the agency focuses on known behaviours when preparing carers for placement rather than being mindful of triggers and subtle changes, which may indicate that harm is taking place. This potentially limits their awareness and overall safe care.

The agency's recruitment practice for staff and panel members, as well as foster carers, is robust and thorough. This includes regular monitoring of vetting checks carried out on individuals, as well as unannounced health and safety checks, which are undertaken at carers' homes twice per year. These measures ensure that children live in homes that are safe.

The agency failed to notify HMCI with regard to a safeguarding notification. This is an isolated incident that was addressed immediately by the agency during the inspection.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager has been registered to manage the agency since January 2018. She has suitable management and social work qualifications and has a wealth of experience in working with vulnerable children, young people and their families.

The agency is fully staffed and adequately resourced to meet the needs of foster carers and children. The agency has both full-time and part-time staff, and care is taken to ensure that foster carers and children can access support at any time. A team meeting was observed during inspection and avenues of support between the team members was noted. The team works well together and endeavours to share knowledge and case discussion on a daily basis. A supervising social worker stated, 'The team and management are very accommodating and flexible.' Another said, 'I feel that the team is very supportive of one another.' The morale is good, and the team shows commitment to positive outcomes for children.

Training needs of the staff team are met, and guest speakers are often invited to the service to generate knowledge and understanding, which further supports foster carers and the children placed. On inspection, professionals from a supported lodgings provider attended to discuss its roles and the avenues of transition available. This supports supervision of placements by identifying possible alternatives for children when 'staying put' with their foster carer is not an option. This also recognises the different needs and wishes of children placed for their long-term future.

The agency's management and leadership team focuses on improving outcomes for children. Its members continually examine their own practice and that of partner agencies, and challenges are made where appropriate to ensure that there is a robustness to decision-making.

The agency's panel is chaired by a vastly experienced professional and is supported by a small group of highly knowledgeable panel members. It is known by the agency that the diversity of the central list of panel members requires appropriate recruitment. Interviews have taken place to enhance this, but further work is required in terms of ethnicity, gender balance and the voice of someone with a background of being in the care system. At present, these limits partly impair their ability to cover the diverse needs of foster carers and the children placed.

The agency has responded to a shortfall in the service's oversight of foster carers' applications to foster. An appointment of an individual from the management team will ensure that recommendations to approve a foster carer applicant are heard at the panel within the timeframes expected. This will improve placement availability for children and generate trust in the organisation for future applicants.

The agency is fully committed to improving the service that it provides and values its foster carers. The agency's independent reviewing officer said, 'I really enjoy working with them. I find them very keen to learn and improve. They support and value their staff and foster carers. They have implemented a lot of changes since

their last inspection, and their attention to detail is impressive.' Feedback is obtained from foster carers. Children and a range of professionals reference the quality of care provided to children in placement. This quality mechanism enhances the quality of action-planning gathered through thorough monitoring systems.

The agency uses an electronic recording system effectively. Foster carers receive training and support to develop consistent levels of recording using this system, which enables records to be stored securely. Additionally, children's progress and outcomes are assessed and evaluated using this system, which supports care planning and review. The management team is visible operationally and strategically in the oversight of the service. Communication is thorough and proactive with placing local authorities to ensure that the needs of children are met by the agency's skilled foster carers.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC042759

Registered provider: Barnardo's

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Responsible individual: Alison Rowland

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Inspector

Michael Dack, social care inspector



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