

Barnardo's Fostering South East

Barnardo's

128 London Road, Southborough, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN4 0PL

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Barnardo's Fostering South East is an independent fostering agency providing emergency, short-term and long-term placements for children and young people referred by local authorities. There is currently no registered manager in place. At the time of the inspection, the agency supports 21 fostering households caring for 18 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 13 to 17 May 2019

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account

requires improvement to be good

How well children and young people are helped and protected

requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

requires improvement to be good

The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 21 March 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

This agency currently has significant staffing shortfalls and no registered manager. Clearly, this has had a negative impact on all aspects of the agency's business, but there are still examples of positive practice and children and young people making progress in their lives.

Children and young people who are in long-term placements usually receive personalised care that meets their needs and enables them to make good progress. They are happy with their carers and are thriving. These long-term placements rarely disrupt, but there has been more than the average number of disruptions in short-term and emergency placements. The agency is aware of this and encourages all parties to reflect on these situations to learn from them.

Generally, matching children and young people into placements is sound, but there is no formalised process for matching children and young people into their regular short-break placements. Many, but not all, children and young people have very positive short-break placements, but the lack of a standardised process makes understanding and repeating best practice difficult.

Foster carers and social workers reported that children and young people who are settled in placement make clear improvements in key areas such as educational attendance and attainment and in their emotional well-being and confidence. However, this is not clearly reflected in the agency's use of outcome trackers. These trackers are not always regularly used, do not actively involve children and young people and do not contain sufficiently nuanced information to demonstrate progress. The wider organisation does have developed plans to replace these trackers, but this has not happened yet.

The agency does involve children and young people in activities such as fun days, and invites them to participate in some staff recruitment. Their views on their own care are routinely sought at foster care review time, but this is not always successful. There is also scope for them to be more involved in the recruitment and training of foster carers and in the panel process. The agency is aware of all these potential areas of development, but currently lacks the staffing to deliver this.

Supervising social workers have a good knowledge of their children's and young people's educational levels and attainment, and foster carers are appropriately involved with both school and college education providers. Foster carers encourage children and young people to do well in their education and vocational courses, and one young person has successfully made the move from a special school to a grammar school. Another young person is succeeding in his plumbing course, and enjoying it, while developing valuable life skills.

A foster carer sensitively reduced a child's anxieties about her end-of-key-stage tests

by explaining that they were a test of how well the teachers had taught them. This approach clearly worked well for the child, who commented, 'I am doing SATs this week. I really like them. It's good.' These positive and active approaches to education will help to improve children's and young people's life chances.

Children and young people who are settled with their foster carers enjoy a stable family life. One young person said, 'I like it best that I am part of a family.' Children and young people are encouraged to develop their confidence and self-esteem by taking part in new activities, such as gymnastics and swimming, and even writing their own fantasy novel. A foster carer said, 'Her confidence has developed so much she will now try new things.'

There are currently no 'staying put' arrangements in place, even though young people who have left the service were of an appropriate age. The agency does monitor this outcome and has appropriately tracked the alternative arrangements for these young people. Some, but not all, were positive outcomes. However, 'staying put' arrangements are very much on the agency's agenda for action, and plans are currently being formulated with local authorities for individual young people.

Managers have made a conscious decision to put the recruitment of new carers almost on hold. Numbers of carers have, therefore, gradually declined as existing carers have left or retired. This approach to recruitment is a sensible solution, given the current staffing and management arrangements.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Safeguarding practice is generally sound and local authority social workers do not have concerns about it. There have been some improvements since the last inspection, both in terms of staff training and knowledge, and in tighter internal communication processes following serious incidents.

However, there is still a basic, and sometimes muddled, approach to assessing risk. For example, young people's risk assessments are not always updated following an incident, and routine assessments are not always completed in a timely fashion. In addition, when they are updated, staff record the risk but do not include strategies to minimise the risk. This means that risk assessments are primarily a paper exercise, rather than a working tool to help review and manage behaviour. This significantly limits their effectiveness.

Despite these shortfalls, there are some young people whose risky behaviour is reduced, for example in self-harming behaviour. These young people have benefited from consistent efforts and understanding from their foster carers, and effective support from their agency and local authority social worker.

There is an appropriate range of safeguarding training available for both staff and carers. This includes focused input on specific areas of safeguarding such as county lines and radicalisation. A significant majority of foster carers, but not all, have attended this mandatory training in a timely fashion.

Few children and young people in settled placements go missing from them, but there have been a small number of missing-from-care incidents in the last year. There is an appropriate process in place, and foster carers do follow this. If the local authority fails to complete a return home interview, then the agency will step in to do them. This ensures that any learning from the missing-from-care incident is not lost.

Some foster carers are clear that their supervising social worker has helped them think through and manage complex behaviour effectively. One carer said, 'I feel supported with good and sound advice.' However, other carers are clear that they miss the previously regular input from non-social work staff in the agency who had a practical, hands-on approach. They feel that this has limited their abilities to deal with behavioural complexity.

Generally, behavioural challenges are dealt with by the strength of relationships between the foster carer and the young person. On occasion this is not enough, and if the behaviour poses a serious risk, then foster carers will use a physical intervention. These are appropriately rare, used only when necessary and soundly recorded.

Staff recruitment practice is generally sound, but significant shortfalls were found with a key member of staff who was recruited through an agency. Overall, there was not enough information considered to make a safe recruitment decision and, specifically, insufficient detail was considered about why key employment ended. During the inspection, the registered individual promptly discussed amendments to agency employment practice with the organisation's human resources department.

Barnardo's social work staff usually complete home risk assessments appropriately, and generally in a timely way. Because of staffing gaps, the social work staff have also taken on unannounced visits to foster carers. Their other commitments mean that they are not usually managing the organisational target of twice-yearly but are managing annual visits satisfactorily.

Allegations are uncommon but are soundly dealt with and there are appropriate links with local authority safeguarding staff.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

In the last five years this service has had four managers, and currently has a further interim manager in post. There appears to be no overriding factor for this excessive management churn, other than a combination of personal circumstances and ill-health. However, overall, the staffing position in this agency is substantially worse than it was at the last inspection in 2018. There is no longer a registered manager in place and, in addition, over the last year this small service has lost further key people in administration, in direct support to foster carers and in placement matching arrangements.

This has left a small, dedicated pool of workers who, between them, have done their best to absorb the additional tasks. This has meant that the service has, overall, been thinly stretched. Senior management has been proactive in trying to shore up this situation by using temporary staff, but this has not always been successful, and some scarce management energies have had to be used on addressing performance shortfalls. Senior management is actively monitoring the recruiting to all the vacant posts.

This staffing crisis has had an impact on foster carers, and this has been particularly negative for some who have lost trusted workers and managers. Regular support groups have not taken place, and carers are unfamiliar with the current manager. Some carers have had repeated changes of supervising social worker and feel that the agency does not know them, or their children in placement, well enough. Because of this one carer commented, 'Management has had the biggest lot of changes. I have never met them; they don't know my kids. So when I had a problem a few weeks ago, and my social worker was away, I didn't bother ringing the office because what's the point?' Another foster carer commented that the agency was no longer something that they felt 'attached to'.

However, generally, most carers are at least satisfied with their supervising social worker but miss the currently vacant support roles and are puzzled and confused about the many changes to management. Fortunately, these views do not affect their commitment to the children and young people living with them. During this inspection, a known internal candidate was successfully appointed to the manager role and will be starting in post soon. This is, of course, very positive news, but there is a significant task to do in regaining some carers' trust and confidence in the agency.

In addition to the staffing shortfalls, this service has also had a demanding improvement agenda following the inspection in March 18. Progress has been made, for example in monitoring the service and in the recording of positive interventions, but some areas still need focused attention. Although some foster carers have improved their attendance at mandatory training, there remains a significant shortfall in attendance by a large number of carers. In addition, a small minority of carers have still not completed their training and development standards.

Staff generally feel supported by the agency and are encouraged to attend training that may be useful for their work. There is an effective fostering panel in place, and foster care reviews are routinely completed by an independent reviewing officer. Notifications of significant events are appropriately completed in a timely manner.

It is positive for the significant number of successful long-term placements that senior management has made it very clear that it is committed to this agency, and is optimistic about its potential for improvement.

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
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>This specifically relates to ensuring that risk assessments are reliably completed and contain strategies to minimise risk.</p>	31/07/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so. (Regulation 20 (1)(a))</p> <p>This particularly relates to ensuring that the fostering service provider strives to obtain full and satisfactory information as to why an applicant's previous post ended, if it involved working with children or vulnerable adults.</p>	31/07/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))</p> <p>This specifically relates to ensuring that foster carers complete both their mandatory training, and the Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care within appropriate timescales.</p>	31/07/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to the size of the fostering service, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by it. (Regulation 19 (a))</p> <p>This specifically relates to ensuring that vacant posts are filled.</p>	31/07/2019

Recommendations

- Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. (National Minimum Standard 1.7)
This specifically relates to ensuring that children's voices are routinely heard at foster care reviews, and in foster care recruitment and training.
- Ensure that children are carefully matched to a foster placement and that foster carers have full information about the child. (National Minimum Standard 11.2)
This specifically relates to ensuring that children going into short-break placements also undergo a matching process.
- The fostering service should ensure that foster carers understand the nature and level of support which will be provided to them by the fostering service. (National Minimum Standard 21.2)
This specifically relates to ensuring that carers are encouraged to contact alternative workers when the supervising social worker is not available.
- Ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. (National Minimum Standard 26.6)
This specifically relates to ensuring that children's progress is regularly and clearly detailed using the outcome trackers or some other method.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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: SC043552

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Inspector

Bridget Goddard, social care inspector



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