

## Barnardo's – Yorkshire

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Barnardo's is a well-established children's charity which is also registered as a voluntary adoption agency. It operates in England, Scotland and Wales. Barnardo's Yorkshire is one of the six English branches, one of which provides adoption support services only. Barnardo's Yorkshire recruits, prepares, assesses and approves prospective adopters and offers a variety of support services to children and families, both prior to and after the making of an adoption order. It does not offer an intercountry adoption service or a service to adopted adults and their birth relatives. The latter service is provided by the branch offering adoption support services only.

In the year 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015, it approved 25 adoptive families and placed 21 children. At the time of the inspection, nine families did not have any children placed with them.

### 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: **Good**

This branch offers a good adoption service overall. Because some aspects of the service are outstanding, children make exceptional progress and achieve excellent outcomes. It is led and managed well by people who are passionate and are committed to adoption and to improving the service. They are supported in this by staff who are enthusiastic and dedicated to ensuring that children have positive outcomes in stable and safe adoptive families. An adopter said: 'I can't praise them

enough.'

The key strengths which promote positive outcomes include the placement of children who have the most complex needs, sibling placements and early permanence. This is enhanced by excellent placement stability. The branch provides a safe service to children because of its emphasis on safeguarding and its structures and systems which underpin all its work.

Effective and timely recruitment, and the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters ensure the availability of adoptive families to meet the needs of local authorities requiring placements. This has been enhanced by training and information which enable prospective adopters to consider children with a variety of complex needs in order to make the right match.

Support to adoptive families has been recently developed and enhanced to include therapeutic parenting packages of support, post-approval training, consultation and support groups as well as social activities. This is in addition to the support provided by the branch's social workers, which adopters consider to be excellent. One adopter said: 'Barnardo's are superb. You always get an answer.' Another commented: 'You get good support. They are always at the end of the phone. They are fantastic.'

There is good partnership working, both at a strategic and operational level. This is another area where improvement has been noted, as the branch is now more proactive in finding out what local authorities need from them and in working flexibly to support them. The branch welcomes feedback from adopters and service users and has used this to influence the service, for example, in relation to adoption support and in staff appraisals. It plans to develop children's participation further as it sees this as an area for improvement.

One breach of regulation has been identified in this inspection, which relates to the timeliness of some adopter reviews. Another shortfall relates to the telephone verification of references for independent social workers. Neither of these shortfalls has had an impact on children's outcomes and experiences and both are easily remedied.

## Areas of improvement

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure that the adoption agency reviews the approval of each prospective adopter in accordance with these regulations, not more than one year after approval, and thereafter at intervals of no more than a year, unless a child is placed with the prospective adopters. (Regulation 29 (1) (b) (2))	31/03/2016

### Recommendations

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

Ensure all people working in or for the purposes of the agency have their references checked to assess suitability before taking up their duties, and that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references. (NMS 21.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children's experiences, progress and outcomes are outstanding because placement stability is excellent, and adopters provide stable families for children, however complex their needs. Of the 18 children placed this year, 16 are deemed 'harder to place' due to their age, ethnicity, complexity of need or because they are part of a sibling group. For example, children as old as nine, children with uncertain medical diagnoses and disabled children have been successfully placed in adoptive families this year. Consequently, they have the opportunity to experience a stable and happy family life when this may not otherwise have been possible. Another positive development is early permanence, which provides babies with a potential adoptive family, also approved as foster carers, while legal arrangements are finalised. Babies therefore experience the best possible start to life with minimal disruption, and thus their sense of security and attachment improves.

There have been no pre-order disruptions of adoption placements for two-and-a-half years, which, given the complexities and challenges, is testament to good matching and the support which the branch provides. One adopter commented 'I wouldn't have done as well without Barnardo's.'

Children gradually settle, begin to form attachments and become part of the family. Given their previous experiences in many cases, the progress is excellent. Children's social workers' comments include: 'The children are doing amazingly well'; 'The adopters have really turned him around'; 'The child is doing absolutely fantastic and better than expected'; and, 'They are flourishing, I am really impressed.' Children have their needs well met and their interests are fully supported. They enjoy leisure pursuits such as swimming, the gym and football. They make friends, develop new skills and increase their confidence and self-esteem as they become part of a family and a community.

Children's health needs are well met. They are registered with universal services, and any specialist services are accessed as necessary. This is monitored through reviews as well as visits by the branch's social workers and the children's social workers. Some health needs improve remarkably as they were the result of emotional insecurity, and once placed, settled and happy, the progress is excellent.

Children do well educationally. Adopters choose schools wisely, often with the input of the branch's social workers, who are happy to support adopters. Although adopters are excellent advocates for their children, if they need additional support, the branch provides this through attendance at meetings, contact with relevant professionals and appropriate challenge. The social workers also provide training for schools to increase their understanding of the needs of adopted children.

Children are able to maintain their heritage and understanding of their life history at an appropriate level. Adopters demonstrate great understanding, sensitivity and

empathy about the importance of contact with birth family members and other significant people, such as previous foster carers. They support both direct and indirect contact as appropriate to the needs of the child. They are assisted in this by the branch's social workers, for example, by providing help with writing the first letter.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Adopters are full of praise for this branch and the service that they have received. This starts from the very first contact. Adopters say that they receive a positive and prompt response from warm, friendly, approachable staff, and they are made to feel valued and welcome. In many cases, this is why they chose Barnardo's rather than other agencies. The written information is comprehensive and clear. It is sent out promptly following an enquiry. This is supplemented by monthly information meetings and an initial interview, which provide further opportunities to explore whether adoption is the right choice.

Adopters are very well prepared and assessed to become adoptive parents. They speak very highly of the process, and feel it has really prepared them as much as possible and been realistic. One adopter said: 'It was really good. We got lots of information and got a lot out of it. They were very open from the beginning. Nothing is glossed over.' Another said: 'The preparation was second to none. It was spot-on. It addressed misconceptions.' Adopters say that the training is good and that they have used the information and strategies once they have children placed with them. A recent addition is the involvement of birth mothers whose children have been adopted. This has had a real impact on the adopters and increased their empathy, understanding and commitment to support contact arrangements for the benefit of the children.

The assessment process is timely. There are occasional delays in both stage one and two; however, these are out of the control of the service, adopter led or justifiable in terms of the complexity of the assessment. Timescales are monitored and reported upon, and any assessment which may go out of time is subject to an extension request which has to be agreed by the manager.

Assessments are rigorous, analytical yet sensitive, supported by the development of really positive relationships. Adopters commented of their assessing social worker 'they really got us', and, 'they built well with us'. This enables applicants to be honest, open and trusting of what will happen to the personal information they are sharing. One described the process of adoption as 'brilliant' and 'a process of growth'. Social workers have developed tools to work with birth or additional children in potential adoptive families, to ensure that their views are known and are taken account of. This enhances the assessment by fully exploring the potential vulnerabilities of these families.

The adoption panel provides a robust quality assurance function, which contributes

to safe placements by recommending approval of suitable adopters. The membership is diverse and includes people with personal and professional experience of adoption. The panel chair is very experienced and makes attendees feel welcome and at ease. He has a positive working relationship with the agency and is able to raise any issues at an appropriate level. Panel administration is effective and the minutes are of a good quality to aid effective decision making. Agency decision making is robust and timely. An appropriately suitable and qualified agency decision maker takes the role very seriously and makes well-informed decisions based on full information.

An area in which this branch excels is enabling prospective adopters to consider a wide range of children and to expand their initial criteria. This has been the focus of recruitment, preparation and assessment. Prospective adopters have been provided with information and training to enable them to make an informed decision based on facts. For example, experts in foetal alcohol syndrome have provided training, and there are a number of information sheets for adopters on many of the complex needs which children may present. As most of the children placed this year are those who are harder to place, this has been very effective.

Matching is another area of strength. Well-written prospective adopter reports and high-quality profiles provide local authority family finders and social workers with good information to pursue a potential link. Branch social workers ensure that adopters are fully aware of the needs of the children being considered, the impact on the family and whether they can meet those needs. An adopter commented: 'They were good at helping us talk about worse case scenarios and how we would manage.' Adopters are encouraged to complete their own matching matrix, which helps them really consider the child's needs, their own capacity and think things through objectively and realistically.

The branch's social workers help adopters consider questions they want to ask of the child's social worker in their initial meeting to ensure that they have as much information as possible. They are well supported throughout: in matching meetings, matching panels and introductions. An adopter said: 'We couldn't have had more care from them.' Similarly a child's social worker commented: 'I was really impressed with how they supported the adopters.' This provides a stable basis for the placement and gives it every chance of success.

The effectiveness of adopters' preparation, training and support is recognised by local authority social workers. One said: 'The family was so well prepared. The training and input were superb. The adopters demonstrated everything they had learned and such thoughtfulness. I was really impressed.'

Placement stability is enhanced by the availability of additional training post-approval and either pre-, or in the early stages of, placement. This includes eight sessions of early placement therapy and access to relevant training on, for example, the impact of sexual abuse and therapeutic parenting. Adopters also comment on the commitment of their social worker in supporting them. One said: 'I'm not sure if we would have made it through without her. We could tell her our biggest fears.' Another said: 'She pulled out all the stops.' Adopters universally talk about their social worker 'going the extra mile', 'going over and above' and 'being there for us.'

The branch has recently developed its adoption support. It has formalised its assessment processes so that needs are clearly identified and a plan put in place to address those needs. Adopters have access to, and appreciate, the out-of-hours help line. The close links with the fostering service provide enhanced access to more training including the therapeutic parenting courses. Online training is also available to make it more accessible. One adopter said: 'They are good at training.' Other recent initiatives are the development of the support groups, and consultation sessions with an independent social worker/psychological therapist. A formal buddy scheme is also being developed, as the informal linking of people with similar families was found to be really useful. The social events are well received and are a good opportunity for adopters to socialise with each other and for their children to meet each other. One adopter said 'I can't speak highly enough of my social worker. She made sure I was supported at a difficult time.'

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Barnardo's as an agency has a strong commitment to promoting a safe service. It does this through reporting mechanisms at a senior level, with a senior manager having lead responsibility for all safeguarding matters. This ensures that any incident is reported and monitored at the highest level, as this information also forms part of the reporting to the trustees. The agency as a whole has comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures, which include historical abuse, sexual exploitation and the risks of extremism and radicalisation. These are readily available to staff and form part of their induction training. All staff have annual safeguarding training to ensure that they are up to date with any new developments. Staff demonstrate a strong awareness of safeguarding and understand what to do in the event of any allegations. This includes the role of the local authority designated officer. There have been no allegations, but two minor concerns were appropriately reported to the local authority.

Adopters are made aware of safeguarding in all its forms throughout their engagement with the service. The preparation and assessment have a strong focus on this, particularly emphasising how children's previous experiences of abuse and neglect affect their behaviour and attachments. This level of understanding promotes safe care, as adopters are able to respond more appropriately, providing a more therapeutic parenting approach. This is reinforced through post-approval additional training and access to psychotherapeutic consultations. The risks posed by social media are also well addressed: written information and training are provided, and reinforced through articles in the newsletter. This is particularly relevant for any risks in contacts with birth family members.

Children's safety is further promoted because the assessment of adopters is rigorous and includes full checks and references to ensure that they are suitable people to care for children who may have complex needs. The environment is also risk assessed to prevent harm from preventable accidents as far as possible.

The complaints procedure is readily available in all documentation as well as on the website. There have been no complaints, but adopters feel able to raise anything informally with either their social worker or the manager before it gets to that level. Children have information about how to complain and have contact numbers of other services within their children's guide, to give them a variety of sources of support.

Staff and panel member recruitment is generally robust. However, not all independent social workers have had their references verified by telephone, which is best practice and provides an additional level of security.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Leaders and managers at all levels demonstrate a strong commitment and passion to providing an adoption service of the highest quality. They are active participants, both locally and nationally, in shaping the adoption agenda, particularly in relation to regionalisation, and are members of the local consortium. Working relationships between children's social workers and staff of this branch are very positive. This has led to good matches and sustained placements. One children's social worker commented: 'I couldn't ask for anything more.' Another said: 'They provide a good package of care and are very supportive; I am very impressed.' All say it was, 'a positive experience', and comment on the good quality and timeliness of documentation and prompt communication. This prevents delay for children, and ensures that the right support for children and families is available.

Monitoring at all levels is generally good. There is a systematic approach to reporting, which ensures that senior managers and trustees are fully informed of all aspects of the operation, including complaints, safeguarding issues, timeliness, approval of adopters and placement numbers. The responsible individual has a detailed understanding of any issues which arise and keeps herself fully informed through supervision, management meetings and visits to the branch. There are clear and detailed plans for development and improvement to ensure the financial viability of the service, as well as the quality. On a more operational level, there is regular scrutiny of all aspects of service delivery through supervision and reporting systems. However, the oversight of the timelines of adopter reviews has not been as robust as it should have been, which has led to occasional delays. Consequently, the assessment of the continued suitability of adopters has not always been carried out in a timely way.

This branch has significantly improved its operation since the previous inspection in 2012. It has benefited from an expansion grant provided by the Department for Education, which enabled it to increase its staffing levels to provide a better focus on facilitating the placements of children who are deemed 'harder to place'. It has done this very effectively through more targeted recruitment of adopters, improved training, the addition of a specific family finder role, and an increased range of support services. A local authority stakeholder recognised this and commented 'I have seen an increased impetus to work with the local authority collaboratively. We

are asked what we want, as they want to meet our needs. That is a big change.' The family finder has developed very good local relationships through organising informal family finding events to share profiles and discussing the needs of the local authorities. This information exchange has led to good matches.

The branch manager, appointed in April 2015, is very experienced in all aspects of adoption work, both in the local authority and voluntary sector, and is appropriately qualified. He has provided leadership and direction, assisted by two team managers, which have enabled him to take on a more strategic role in developing the service. The one requirement and the four recommendations from the previous inspection have been fully addressed. Staffing levels have increased, there is a better focus on adopter recruitment, the range of adoption support has improved, and there is a more systematic approach to assessing the need for adoption support, which is shared with the families. The branch manager is also the panel adviser and assures the quality of the reports, as do the team managers, and has improved monitoring systems. This has led to a more effective service.

The staff are very passionate and committed to the work they do with families and children. They are relatively new to the service and bring a wealth and range of child-focused experiences to enhance their practice. For example, they have developed tools to work with birth and additional children in adoptive families. They are keen to learn from research and any developments. This is assisted by peer supervision, practice meetings and access to resources, which they share with each other and with the adoptive families. They receive regular supervision from experienced team managers, which enables them to reflect on and improve their practice. Their training opportunities have improved in the last year, and the branch manager is very keen to promote staff development. Appraisals now include the views of adopters, which is a positive means to promote their development. Stakeholders and adopters comment very positively about them, saying, 'the knowledge base is phenomenal.'

The statement of purpose and children's guide are easily accessible on the agency's website. This provides anyone who wishes to use the service with accurate information about what to expect.

The branch has relocated to its current premises since the last inspection. These are accessible and offer appropriate facilities for the storage of records, administration, accommodation for staff and meeting rooms. There is appropriate insurance cover and a business continuity plan so that the service can operate without too much disruption in the event of an unforeseen crisis.

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## 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.