

Could it be you

A national survey of Barnardo's adopters,
foster carers and short break carers

Executive summary

Introduction

Barnardo's is the largest adoption agency in the voluntary sector and currently has over 1,400 families that foster for the charity. In 1947, Barnardo's became one of the earliest adoption agencies and has earned an enviable reputation for innovative practice in placing children with complex problems. These problems include: sexual abuse, parental alcohol and substance misuse, multiple disabilities and domestic violence etc.

Despite an already impressive commitment to vulnerable children, Barnardo's needs to increase its recruitment of foster carers and adopters. Some 70,000 children in the UK are still looked after by their local authorities, and about 8,000 of these children cannot return home and need placement in another family on a permanent basis.

Barnardo's has developed a diverse range of fostering and adoption services to meet the needs of children who are waiting for families. These are:

- short break foster carers who support families with a disabled child by sharing their care
- foster carers who take children into their families for periods of a few weeks to several years
- specialist foster care services that work with unaccompanied minors, sexually exploited children and children with attachment issues
- adopters who make a life time commitment to children needing a permanent family and who become their legal parents.

Survey aims

Barnardo's commissioned the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies (University of Bristol) to undertake this research to develop a profile of existing carers and to help improve the organisation's recruitment of further foster carers and adopters.

The main aims of the survey were to:

- understand more about the profile of current Barnardo's carers
- understand more about how the reputation of the agency might attract carers.

The Hadley Centre, in collaboration with Barnardo's, designed the self-completion questionnaire for the study. These were completed anonymously.

In the nine UK regions identified by Barnardo's, a total of 1,478 questionnaires were mailed out to all those who had adopted within the last five years and to all current carers. In total, 447 completed questionnaires were used in the final analysis. The overall response rate was 30.24 per cent.



'We found Barnardo's (the) most approachable and friendly ... as opposed to other agencies where we felt we were a nuisance if we asked questions. We felt we were treated ... as a possible resource and not as a problem.'

Barnardo's carer



Key findings

Why we wanted to adopt or foster

- ‘We wanted to have children and become a family, but were unsuccessful at conceiving.’
- ‘I could remain single and wouldn’t need to go through artificial methods to have my own child.’
- ‘I have a son with cerebral palsy...he is now grown up, so I thought I could help someone who needed a break.’

There were many different reasons why respondents applied to Barnardo’s to adopt a child. Many wrote that they were at the ‘right point’ in their lives. This often meant:

- learning to live with infertility
- being older and financially secure
- their own children being old enough to express their views.

For others the catalyst was a major life event, such as a death in the family.

For foster carers, the ‘right time’ often meant their own child had grown up and left home and feeling there was an ‘empty nest’.

Giving love and feeling they had contributed something to society were factors that influenced the majority of carers.

Recruitment

Advertising campaigns run by Barnardo’s were a key source of recruitment:

43 per cent of foster carers, 33 per cent of short break carers and 21 per cent of adopters were recruited this way.

Word of mouth was another source: foster carers (30 per cent), foster and short break carers (28 per cent).

Having friends or family members who were involved with fostering and adoption services was also given as a reason: foster carers (22 per cent), short break carers (21 per cent) and adopters (18 per cent).

Just over a third of adopters (35 per cent) also approached social services and 15 per cent of short break carers and 18 per cent of foster carers had previously worked as carers for the local authority and decided to change to Barnardo’s.



Satisfaction

- ‘Barnardo’s acts in the interest of every child in every situation. They see the whole picture and help/advise where they can, but they never lose focus on the child. I would not go to another group or organisation.’
- ‘So many foster agencies seem to be arising, but their motivation appears to be financial. I think Barnardo’s as an organisation is a step above that and is truly motivated to give children the best life possible.’

The vast majority of carers were satisfied or very satisfied with the support Barnardo’s provided: foster carers (95 per cent), short break carers (98.9 per cent) and adopters (94 per cent). Most (90 per cent) thought they would still be caring in five years’ time. The main reasons for ceasing in the future were concerns about age, ill-health, wanting children of their own or wishing to travel.

Many described the rewards of fostering as: feeling useful, satisfaction, self-fulfilment, being less selfish and contributing to society. There were no negative comments about the task of fostering.

Ten respondents (2 per cent) were entirely negative. These were mainly negative perceptions of increasing bureaucracy and paperwork or of individuals’ disappointment with the service provided.

Why we chose Barnardo’s?

- ‘We went to Jigsaw (Barnardo’s adoption service) because we are a mixed heritage couple and Jigsaw has lots of experience of placing black and mixed heritage children.’
- ‘Specialist service providers (at Barnardo’s) worked exclusively with disabled children. They had high standards and respect for the carers.’
- ‘Barnardo’s were better payers (in comparison with the local authority)...they suited our lifestyle...the fact that I could keep my part time job...and the service was local.’
- ‘They are often caring in areas that others shun. They have been very supportive of us as carers.’

The majority of carers stated it had been a conscious decision to choose Barnardo’s. Friendliness and speed were the main reasons cited.

Meeting needs

- ‘We were told Barnardo’s deals with all religions.’
- ‘(They) looked at you as people – thought what you could offer rather than what you couldn’t.’
- ‘At the time of applying, (they were) the only one who would accept single parents.’

Barnardo’s was seen as championing all children’s welfare, including some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged



groups. Many carers (120) also commented on the fact that Barnardo’s did its best to meet the needs of carers and children with particular characteristics.

Support

- ‘Superb support, caring staff, joint aim and goal, child inclusive. Trustworthy, respecting and caring.’
- ‘The one to one contact: small groups of workers who were all up to speed on progress and ready to talk about concerns. Always one worker available at any time. Support and back up is one phone call away. Very thorough procedure, but not too intrusive.’

Eleven respondents said they chose Barnardo’s because they had an unsatisfactory experience applying to their social services department or working for them. Some also indicated that they expected to have an unsatisfactory response from social services, so did not bother applying to them.

Respondents were also influenced by the quality of support offered and one foster carer has looked after 145 children.

Recommendation

- ‘Barnardo’s was personally recommended to us by another carer. The local authority turned us away as we were both working. When we approached Barnardo’s, they snapped us up.’

Seventy seven respondents (17 per cent) chose Barnardo’s as a result of recommendation. The majority of these had come from family and friends who were already connected with Barnardo’s in some way.

Only a few (nine respondents) chose Barnardo’s by chance. Some had looked through the Yellow Pages or passed a Barnardo’s office.

Profile of Barnardo’s carers

Most of the respondents (71 per cent) were experienced female carers who offered one main type of care. The remainder had multiple roles – 12 were adopters and also foster carers; six adopters were also short break carers; and a further six households were adopters, foster carers and short break carers.

A profile of the carers – identified by their main role – was:

26 per cent (116) - adopters

34.5 per cent (155) - foster carers

39.5 per cent (178) - short break carers

The majority of adopters (65 per cent) had adopted one child; 24 per cent had adopted two children; and 11 per cent had adopted three or more children. Most of the singly adopted children (60 per cent) were boys.

Households

Over half (58 per cent) of the adopters had no birth or step children. Nor did a quarter of short break carers and almost a fifth of foster carers.

Relationships

Most of the respondents (approximately 70 per cent) were married. Fourteen per cent of short break carers, 8 per cent of foster carers and 7 per cent of adopters were single or had never married. Twelve per cent of foster carers were divorced in comparison with 5 per cent of short break carers and only one adopter. Seven couples were in same sex relationships.

Age

Carers are generally older than birth parents. The average age of the short break and foster carers was 47 years with a range from 23 to 71 years old. The average age for adopters was 45 years with a slightly narrower age range (26 to 69 years).

Income

Income levels varied considerably. Some 39 per cent of short break carers, 28 per cent of adopters and 20 per cent of foster carers had incomes below £20,000 per year. While at the top end, more than a third of adopters (36 per cent), 21 per cent of short break carers and 19 per cent of foster carers earned £40-£60,000 per year. Foster carers were least likely to have paid employment outside the home.

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Summary findings

Education and employment

Education levels also varied considerably with a minority having no qualifications: 15 per cent of foster carers, 10 per cent of adopters and 9 per cent of short break carers. However a much larger percentage of households had formal qualifications in teaching, nursing or social work: 44 per cent of foster carers, 58 per cent of short break carers and 33 per cent of adopters.

Ethnicity

The majority of carers described themselves as being of white ethnicity. However almost 17 per cent of adopters were from a minority ethnic background (compared with 7.9 per cent of the UK population). Eleven per cent of foster carers and 2.5 per cent of short break carers were also from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Voluntary work

Almost half (45 per cent) of short break carers, 32 per cent of foster carers and over 25 per cent of adopters did voluntary work.

Disability

One in ten adopters, 6 per cent of short break carers and 3 per cent of foster carers had a disability.

Support groups

The vast majority of carers (84 per cent of foster carers, 74 per cent of adopters and 68 per cent of short break carers) were in touch with other carers through Barnardo's support groups and had developed new friendships as a result:

Leisure

The majority of carers (84 per cent) had a least one computer and used the internet and email. Over 70 per cent of all carers enjoyed reading books. Almost two thirds (65 per cent) of adopters, 59 per cent of foster carers and 10 per cent of short break carers read national newspapers; and 86 per cent of short break carers, 84 per cent of foster carers and 42 per cent of adopters read local newspapers. Almost three quarters of foster carers and adopters and 60 per cent of short break carers had pets. Foster carers were the keenest gardeners, while adopters like going to the cinema and taking part in sports.

- Almost 99 per cent of short break carers and 94 per cent of adopters and foster carers were very happy with the support they received from Barnardo's.
- The main source of recruitment for foster and short break carers was advertising. The main source for adopters was word of mouth.
- More than a third (38 per cent) of adopters were aged 40 to 49 years and a quarter of foster carers are aged over 53 years.
- Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of foster carers are single.
- More than a quarter (28 per cent) of adopters reported a total household income of less than £20,000 per year. Four per cent of these carers had a family income of less than £10,000. Thirty nine per cent reported an income of less than £20,000.
- Three quarters (nearly 75 per cent) of adopters were in contact with other adopters.
- Forty five per cent of short break carers and a quarter (25 per cent) of adopters gave their time doing voluntary work.
- One in 10 adopters have a disability.
- 17 per cent of adopters and 11 per cent of foster carers are from black and minority ethnic communities, compared with 7.9 per cent of the general population¹
- Almost three quarters of adopters and foster carers have pets. This compares to 48 per cent of British households nationally² (Mintel).
- 15 per cent of foster carers have no formal qualifications.
- 32 per cent of foster carers and 25 per cent of adopters did voluntary work.
- 86 per cent of short break carers, 84 per cent of foster carers and 42 per cent of adopters read local newspapers.
- One Barnardo's foster carer has looked after 145 children.

