

Parents and Children Together – Reading Office

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosie Dancer and Jacqueline Georghiou
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	Voluntary organisation placing children

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Date of last inspection	17/01/2014

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Parents and Children Together (PACT) is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. The agency has offices in Reading, London and Brighton. PACT has been an adoption agency for over sixty years. PACT no longer offers a service to people wishing to adopt children from overseas, but continues to provide support to help maintain placements made through its inter-country adoption service.

The current provision of services relating to adoption include: the recruitment and assessment of adoptive parents for children in the care system; family finding services for children waiting in local authority care; a range of support services, including multi-disciplinary therapeutic services to children and their adoptive families via the Family and Children Therapeutic Support (FACTS) service; and the provision of support to adults accessing information about their birth histories.

For the 12 months leading up to 28 February 2017, the agency had 86 children placed in 58 prospective adoptive families, and 23 prospective adoptive families were approved and waiting for a placement. Of the 86 children living in adoptive families, 47 of these have been placed with their brothers and sisters. There were also four children placed under foster care for adoption arrangements. In addition to mainstream social work support, the agency supported 77 families through its strengthening family's team and were working with 86 families through its FACTS service. There were 87 adoption orders made during this period.

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 agency provides an impressive service to children and their adoptive families. Its main strengths are of note and worthy of dissemination across the sector. These are, in particular: the quality of the preparation of prospective adopters; the excellent family finding and matching processes; the close and effective support to placements pre and post order; the passion, commitment and ability of leaders, managers and staff to provide the highest quality of service; and the ability of the leaders and managers to develop and diversify in an uncertain economic climate, which has enabled them to develop adoption delivery and practice across the country.

Children placed with PACT adopters are deemed the 'harder to place' children, who may have been waiting for some time for a family. When considering the complexity of children's needs, placements are highly successful with a relatively low pre-order disruption rate. Children, despite their complex needs, live in safe, stable and secure homes with parents who are totally committed to supporting them throughout their lives.

The experience and progress most of these children make is impressive and demonstrates the agency's exceptional quality of practice.

Managers and staff are held in high regard by adopters and the professionals and agencies they work with. Staff are very well supported by their managers and, as a consequence, a highly competent service is provided.

Joint working is exceptionally strong. Through this placement, stability is achieved and PACT placements and other services are widened out to children across the country.

Three minor shortfalls were found that have not had an impact on the safety, experience or progress of children or young people. The quality of some case records needs improvement, the guidance about when to seek overseas checks for applicants needs to be clear, and statutory guidance in relation to applicants' progression to stage two of the adoption process needs to be adhered to consistently.

Areas of improvement

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Recommendations

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

- Prospective adopters must not formally commence to stage two of the process until they have successfully completed stage one and have notified their agency that they wish to proceed with the assessment process within six months of the agency decision. ('Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2014', paragraph 2.44, page 39)
- Where an agency will not learn the full history by conducting a criminal record check and other background checks on the prospective adopter, for example, where they have lived abroad for an extended period, it should decide whether it should carry out any other checks or take up additional references. The agency should ensure that it has sufficient information to justify continuing with stage one, but not delay the approval process. If it decides not to proceed, it should provide the prospective adopter with a written explanation of the reasons.

In particular, provide managers and staff with clear written guidance about the circumstances under which checks with police forces overseas should be carried out. ('Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2014', paragraph 2.22, page 35)

- Ensure that the written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the agency's files, on the child's and prospective adopters' case records, is implemented. (NMS 27.1)

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

Judgement outcome: Outstanding

Children are exceptionally well matched with their prospective adoptive families and this helps them to settle very well. Children develop trusting relationships with the adults caring for them. Children's ability to form healthier attachments to adults improves and they develop a strong sense of belonging with their adoptive family. A social worker said of a placement she had made, 'The family has loving secure relationships... they (the children) have made significant progress in developing secure attachments.' One adopter said, 'Our little one has settled quickly.'

Prospective adopters are extremely well equipped to deal with the emotional turmoil that is often displayed through their child's behaviour. They are highly attuned to their child's needs and feelings and understand how children's past experiences have impacted on their emotional well-being and behaviour. Children learn about what has happened to them and understand that their past experiences are not their fault. A social worker said, 'The adopters provide the children with explanations that help them develop their reasoning skills.' Children are supported to come to terms with their disruptive backgrounds and the losses they have experienced in their lives. A social worker said, 'They (the adopters) adapt their parenting style in accordance with the children's presentation and have sought advice and support and embraced it. They have shown a strong capacity to parent traumatised children and the children are now confident and talkative and engage well.'

Adopters have an excellent understanding about the importance of children developing a positive sense of identity. Children learn about and value aspects of their ethnic and cultural identity. For example, one child had been supported by her adopters to learn about the area where she was born. When talking about the things that make her home area unique, such as the dialect and local customs, she became highly animated and showed real pride in her origins. Children's self-image improves and their social, emotional and identity needs are met to a high standard.

When children do not make progress in their emotional well-being, despite the support provided to them by the agency and their adoptive parents, the commitment that adoptive parents continue to show to their child throughout their lives is impressive.

Children are healthy because adopters are fully informed and aware of their physical health needs and are supported to cater for them exceptionally well. Routine and more complex needs are met to a very high standard. For example, where additional support is required to meet a child's complex physical needs, this is provided.

Prospective adopters are highly committed to their child and develop the confidence to administer complex health procedures competently. This benefits their child significantly and, as a result, children make excellent progress and develop beyond expectations. Adopters praised the support they had received from the agency and health professionals to help them understand children's specific health needs. They commented on how the agency had been good advocates for them and their child in getting the health services needed when these had not been forthcoming.

Children achieve very well in their learning and some do so beyond expected standards. A social worker said of the children she works with that they are 'thriving in education now'. The beneficial effects of the improvements in children's emotional well-being and mental health lead to improvements in their cognitive skills and they are more focused in their learning and their ability to learn increases. Children's abilities are recognised and catered for and they are provided with the additional support and mentoring needed to nurture and develop their skills. Children's self-esteem, self-awareness and confidence develops exceptionally well as a result of them experiencing success in their education.

There is a small volume of work carried out with adults wishing to know about the circumstances of their adoption. A highly skilled and experienced worker, who is sensitive to people's needs and fears, carries out this work to a high standard. She supports people to understand and come to terms with their past histories.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: Outstanding

The agency is inclusive in its recruitment criteria and this ensures that there is a diverse range of prospective adoptive families. People enquiring about adoption feel highly valued and welcomed. Enquirers are supported extremely well to develop their understanding of the adoption process and also to consider the diverse and complex needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement. This is achieved through the provision of clear and comprehensive information and opportunities for them to have open and frank discussions with skilled and experienced social workers. An adopter said, 'We had visited other agencies and felt unwelcome. However, from the outset, PACT made us feel at ease while explaining the process fully.'

Preparation training is extremely well thought through and planned and is of the highest quality. Prospective adopters develop a clear and in-depth understanding of the needs of the children waiting for a placement. An adopter said, 'The preparation course was very useful to reinforce our decision to adopt and also to start new

friendships with couples going through the process.'

The agency has successfully widened the pool of adopters available nationally to children waiting for a placement. This has been achieved through the support people have to become more inclusive in their thinking about the sorts of needs they could cater for. Prospective adopters with children placed reported how valuable their preparation had been. They have reflected back on their training when experiencing difficulties and this has helped them understand why their child is behaving in a certain way. An adopter said, 'Preparation prepared us for all eventualities without scaremongering.'

For a few prospective adopters in stage one of the process, there had been significant delays in getting the results of various checks, such as police checks and health information. To minimise delays and limit the possibility of strong applicants giving up on the process, the agency progressed some of these applicants through to stage two before these checks had been returned. This is not in line with statutory guidance and meant that the applicants would not have had access to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism should the agency have been minded not to progress their application. There has, however, been no impact on the safety or well-being of children.

Home assessments and home study reports are of a very high quality overall. Social workers' assessments of applicants are evidence based and reports are analytical. Applicants' strengths and areas for development are clearly set out in the reports. Any areas highlighted for development are addressed through training and support. The quality of these reports aid the panel, decision making and matching processes.

In the early summer of 2016, the panel chair left and it took some months to replace her. During this period, the panel was chaired by the vice chairs and continued to function effectively. However, during the interim period there was no panel report provided to the agency. New members have recently been appointed to the panel, including a new chair. These appointments have expanded the diversity of the panel. The new panel chair has plans to produce a panel report in April 2017 when she has gathered enough data to form a meaningful view about these matters. Decision making is undertaken with due rigour following full consideration of all available information about an applicant. Decisions are made in a very timely way so that people suitable to adopt become available to children without delay.

The agency recognises that successful linking, matching and introductions are key to the success of placements. The excellent arrangements for family finding ensure that children across the country, including brothers and sisters and harder to place children, may secure adoptive placements with PACT adopters. The efforts put into family finding are highly effective. Prospective adopters are extremely well supported in considering if they may have the skills to care for a specific child, or children, to a

high standard. Comments from adopters about this include, 'Excellent family finding service – great links with placing authorities', 'We were able to be honest, without judgement about children we'd have concerns about adopting', 'I have high praise for our family finder', and 'My social worker was excellent in being able to guide me into understanding what sort of children would be suitable for me to manage. It helped manage my expectations.'

Matching is another real strength of the agency. The agency provides comprehensive and individualised training around the specific needs of the child being placed. This ensures that the prospective adopters have a comprehensive understanding about the child, his needs and the strategies required to help him settle, grow and progress well. Adopters' comments about the matching process include, 'They made additional medical enquiries that we didn't realise we would need at the time', 'I cannot fault the matching process. From the moment someone first mentioned the child we were matched with, we felt well understood as a family, and very well supported through this part of the process', and 'PACT worked hard to find a good match with our birth daughter – this has helped promote attachments in our new family.'

Exceptionally well-thought through arrangements for introductions of children to their prospective families ensure that placements are successfully made. Excellent support in the early days and on an ongoing basis ensure that children settle well and prospective adopters become and remain confident and competent in caring for their child or children, irrespective of the difficulties they experience. Adopters commented, 'Everyone worked hard to arrange placement once a match had been made. We had excellent support from the family finding social worker,' and 'Without their support and advice, the road would have been a lot bumpier and our children would not have settled so quickly.'

The agency has a small number of placements made under fostering for adoption arrangements. These arrangements benefit the child significantly as they reduce the number of placement moves and allow the child the opportunity to form strong attachments to their adoptive parents. They also afford prospective adoptive parents the opportunity to adopt a younger child.

The arrangements for supporting placements are of the highest quality and there is an impressive range of informal and formal support services available on an individual and group basis. Support has stabilised placements and prevented family breakdowns. A representative from a local authority placing children with PACT adopters said, 'PACT support is excellent, they provide wraparound support services that prevent disruptions... PACT provides levels of support we cannot provide, it's a holistic package that is value for money.'

The agency's social work team continues to support families after placement for as long as is needed. An adopter said, 'We were at our wits' end with several

behaviours, but after implementing the advice of a post-adoption worker the behaviour stopped virtually straightaway.' There is a 24-hour duty service that families can access in an emergency and family fun days are held as an opportunity for adoptive families to spend time with others in similar situations to them. A series of innovative activity workshops for the whole family support the development of relationships and promote children's feelings of security and belonging. An adopter said of the sessions, 'These have helped us understand our son's feelings and reactions as he has grown up. We have discussed strategies and there is always follow-up and further advice.' Of particular note is the work that experienced adopters (adoption champions) undertake for the agency. The support from them is highly valued by adopters because they take comfort in talking to others who have faced similar dilemmas.

Post approval training sessions consolidate and expand people's learning about issues that may arise for their family; these include parenting courses covering building attachments, supporting children in school, and parenting adopted adolescents. There is also an information session for the friends and family of prospective adopters. An adopter said of the parenting course training, 'PACT attachment-focused parenting course was excellent. Lots of specific advice directed towards our own child and their needs. New phrases to use and ideas to try to manage stress/anxiety and promote attachment.'

More focused therapeutic support is available through the strengthening families' team and from clinical psychologists and therapists from the FACTS service. Some of this formal therapeutic work is accessed through application to the adoption support fund, or in defined circumstances via a FACTS Bursary. An adopter who has used this service said, 'The access to the psychologist through the FACTS service and Adoption Support Fund has been invaluable and much needed.' Another adopter said, 'They (the therapists) actually understand the needs of adopted children, they also are prepared to advocate on my behalf and have committed to be available to us for the rest of my children's lives. We still receive therapy sessions four years on.'

Families also have access to an innovative 'virtual support clinic' accessed online, which provides parents with support and guidance.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Good

The recruitment, assessment and training process for prospective adopters ensures that unsuitable people do not care for children. A minor shortfall found was a lack of

clarity for staff about when to undertake a check with police forces overseas.

Adopters are aware of and minimise the impact past abuse and neglect have on the needs of their child. Many children placed with the agency's carers are of a younger age and, therefore, not currently directly exposed to risks from being exploited, going missing or not using the internet safely. However, the agency does support adopters to develop their awareness about these issues as the child grows and develops. One adopter commented that they had been provided with very clear advice about what to do if safeguarding issues arose. Staff and adopters are aware of more immediate risks to a young child in placement, such as the risks of a child's placement details being disclosed through social networking sites. Adoptive parents demonstrated that they were aware of these risks, and an example was noted in which a parent had addressed this issue effectively.

When there are concerns about a child's behaviour or emotional well-being, for example due to self-harming, these incidents are understood in the context of the child's past experiences. Children are listened to and support is provided where required to help children develop more appropriate coping strategies. An adopter said, 'The agency staff have been invaluable in helping us understand and deal with some of the children's behaviours.' Another said, 'The play therapist provided us with invaluable tools and technics to help my daughter deal with attachment issues.' While this work is not successful for every child or young person, the adoptive parents and the agency show a high level of commitment to supporting the young person throughout their life, whatever their behaviour.

The agency has a quality assurance framework system in place to monitor the effectiveness of its responsibilities in relation to any concerns about a child. These systems ensure that concerns are taken seriously and are referred to relevant professionals.

Overall, people using the service feel that their views and concerns are listened to and addressed and that the agency deals with complaints effectively. The agency demonstrates that it learns lessons from complaints to improve practice and the services provided.

There is a strong ethos and open culture in relation to safeguarding children and adults. The agency's policies and procedures underpin safeguarding practice. Safeguarding training for staff is planned for and monitored to ensure the development of safe practice. Where the agency is aware of potentially abusive situations, or receives allegations against an adopter or another adult, these are referred in a timely way to the agencies and professionals charged with safeguarding vulnerable people. This ensures that children, and vulnerable adults, are protected and their well-being is promoted.

Staff recruitment processes ensure that people working for the agency, including panel members and volunteers, are suitable people who are fully committed to the safeguarding ethos of the agency.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Outstanding

Leadership and management are of an exceptionally high standard. Leaders and managers demonstrated that they continue to maintain an exceptional commitment to adoption. They are ambitious and successful at achieving continual development. PACT has been influential in developments in adoption nationally.

Leaders and managers have a well-developed sense of the needs of the local authorities they work with. Extensive partnership working with a wide number of local authorities and other agencies and professionals has enabled them to achieve outstanding outcomes for children, whose needs otherwise would not be fully met. For example, in one local authority, 22 children who had been waiting for some time for an adoptive placement were found placements with PACT adopters. A representative from the authority said that working with PACT had sped up the process for the children.

Monitoring and review of the service delivery and practice are undertaken at the required frequencies. These systems are highly effective. The findings of monitoring and review are used to develop practice and service delivery. A representative from a local authority said that the leaders and managers are very receptive to constructive criticism.

Despite a fall in the number of children waiting for adoption and the financial implications of this, the agency has not been afraid to be involved in innovative projects that are aimed at securing the agency's future and benefiting adoptive families nationally. The leaders and managers have a clear vision for the continued development of the services.

Partnership working with local authorities enables the agency to develop a well informed and up-to-date recruitment strategy for adopters, which is reflective of the needs of children who are waiting nationally. The agency is selective about the adopters it progresses to increase the likelihood of placements being made with PACT adopters. For example, the agency focuses on people who are open to considering giving a home to a large sibling group, or to children with additional needs who may otherwise not be provided with permanency through adoption.

The statement of purpose is clear, well written, informative and accurate and underpins the work of the agency. The children's guides are accessible, child friendly and informative. In response to a previous recommendation made at the last inspection, the agency ensures that adopters receive a copy of the guide to use to help their child understand about adoption and adoption support.

Despite recent necessary restructuring, the staff team is stable and consist of highly experienced, knowledgeable, committed and skilled staff. Feedback about the skills, knowledge and passion of staff and adoption champions is overwhelmingly positive. One adopter said, 'Our social worker was amazing and we couldn't have gone through the process without her help and support.'

Training and supervision are of an outstanding quality and underpin staff practices. It is clear that there is a strong culture of continued learning. An adopter said 'PACT staff are professional and have up-to-date relevant training which means they understand the needs of adopted children.' Staff feel exceptionally well supported by the managers of the agency.

Adopters who have used the agency say that they would and have recommended them to other people interested in adoption. One adopter said, 'PACT are a fantastic organisation and our social worker made the whole process seamless and so much easier to follow and participate in.'

Another adopter said 'PACT were so good the first time round that we returned to them and were not disappointed.'

Records are stored securely. Some records were not signed and dated by the writer and not all information had been recorded on the system in line with the organisation's policy. While there has been an audit of some files, action is needed to ensure that all files are of the quality expected by the agency on an ongoing basis.

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.