

Parents and Children Together

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Dancer
Type of Inspection	Key

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Registered person	Parents and Children Together (PACT)
Registered manager	Sarah Pepys
Responsible individual	Yvette Jean Gayford
Date of last inspection	8 March 2005

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Parents and Children Together (PACT) is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. PACT has been an adoption agency for fifty years. The current provision of services include: the recruitment and assessment of adoptive parents for children in the care system, support services to these families, an inter-country service under contract with many local authorities across England, the provision of information, advice and support to adoptees, support to birth relatives whose children were adopted through the agency (charges may apply), post-adoption information and general advice and support to all parties to adoption which includes letterbox services between adopted children and their birth families.

Summary

The agency shows a strong commitment to achieving good outcomes for children. Applicants go through a formal preparation, assessment and approval processes which prepares them well for the parenting role. The agency has access to good quality multi-disciplinary specialist advice which enables sound placements to be made and maintained. The agency has established good working relationships with other agencies and this provides a seamless service and ensures good outcomes for children are achieved. The services in relation to support to adoptive placements are of an excellent quality. The support services are organised and delivered in a flexible way to ensure that a full range of needs can be met. This agency does not have a remit to work directly with birth parents in the planning for their child. The management of the agency is of a good quality. Staff are led by competent managers and the management style is supportive. There is a strong commitment to ensuring staff are well supported in carrying out their respective roles and there are clear lines of accountability and good levels of communication across the agency and with other agencies and professionals. Where shortfalls are identified they are addressed promptly and where lessons need to be learnt they are. The agency demonstrated a child centred approach is taken to its work at a strategic and operational level.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last key inspection there were four actions and 11 recommendations made in the report. All of the actions and all but one of the recommendations have been addressed. There have been improvements made in the disciplinary and complaints procedures and the staff recruitment processes have been tightened up. Since the last inspection a permanent manager has been appointed and she is well established in her role.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards mapped to this outcome area.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency does not actively seek adopters for inter-country adoptions as the services provided are under contract with a number of local authorities and in liaison with the Department of Children, Schools and Families. The agency has a recruitment strategy in place in respect of the recruitment of adopters for children in the care system. While there is a steady stream of enquirers the approach to recruitment is not particularly well co-ordinated and does not target people most likely to be able to meet the needs of the children waiting for a placement. Inter-country and domestic adopters reported that the agency was welcoming and took an inclusive approach to their enquiries and in many cases this was what had led to them choosing to make their application to PACT. There are formal processes in place in respect to the assessment, preparation and approval of prospective adopters. Initial assessment visits to all applicants are carried to explain the process to the adopters and to assess the viability of accepting an application from them. The agency provides two preparation courses for applicants, one for people hoping to adopt a child from overseas and one for those hoping to adopt from this country. The agency also runs a course specifically for people looking to adopt a second child which is geared to meet their needs. The feedback from adopters about these courses was very positive and a placing social worker stated of PACT, "They prepare families well for adoption." A full range of checks are undertaken in respect to the assessment of adopter's suitability. A health and safety checklist is used but it does not include an assessment of risk to children from hanging cords on blinds. Applicant's employment histories do not always include the months people commenced and left the job, this means that the social worker is unable to identify and explore gaps in applicant's employment histories. The quality of the assessments of adopters is variable. Some assessments are evidence based and analytical, these assessments provide a clear view about the applicant's parenting capacity and identify their strengths and any areas for development. Other assessment reports are overly dependant on applicant's descriptive accounts of their life histories and do not provide a clear view about the suitability of the applicants to take on the lifelong and often challenging task of adoption. This agency does not have a role in the matching procedures for inter-country adoptions. In domestic adoptions the agency is reliant on the local authority to provide adequate information about the child being considered and is proactive in obtaining this. The practice in respect to inter-agency working is good and adopters are well supported in considering if they would be able to meet a specific child's needs. The agency has a specialist team, the Fostering and Adoption Consultation and Therapy Service (FACTS) who will meet with prospective adopters to help them consider the child's likely needs and behaviours and help them develop strategies to manage difficult behaviours. Although it is the role of the placing agency to prepare children to move to their adoptive home PACT adopters prepare some information about themselves so that this can be shared with children before they move. This information can be prepared in different formats depending on the child's age and level of understanding. The panel policy and procedure documents do not provide sufficient detail about how the PACT panel should operate. The panel observed as part of the inspection is well chaired and takes a well-considered approach to its work. The members of this panel demonstrate a sound understanding about their respective roles and responsibilities and it is clear that a child-focused approach is taken. Adopters are invited to attend the panel at which their application is being heard and this is dealt with by the chair and panel members in a sensitive way. Panel dates are set well in advance and the frequency is geared to ensure that delays are kept to a minimum. The administration of the panel is efficient. Minutes are taken and these are accurate, informative and clearly state the panel's discussion, reasons for conclusions reached and all of the recommendations made. The minutes are made available to feed into the decision making process. The decision making process is made without delay and with all information surrounding the case having been

considered. There are efficient systems in place to convey the decision to all appropriate people. The manager is a suitable person to manage the agency and has a satisfactory Criminal Records Bureau check. The general recruitment policy and process in respect to staff and panel members is comprehensive. It is not clearly evidenced that gaps in applicant's employment history are explored as a part of the interview process. There is a detailed complaints procedure that is made readily available. Complaints are dealt with appropriately in a timely way.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The support services provided to people touched by adoption are a strength of this agency. The inter-country or domestic adopters, all of whom have been well prepared to be able to support children placed with them, have available to them a range of services which can be accessed in a timely and flexible way. The support provided includes advice and access to services which will help children and their adoptive parents to develop secure attachments. The support services are available free to PACT families who have adopted children from within the care system and for a fee to inter-country adopters and others. In the sad event that a placement breaks down the agency works with the placing authority to support the child and the adopters and fully cooperates in the disruption meeting required to be held. The agency uses findings from disruption meetings to inform future practice. The agency has good access to specialist advice including medical and legal advice. The medical adviser is proactive in seeking out information when it has not been forthcoming. The medical adviser scrutinises medical information about children, including those from overseas, and offers advice and support to adopters in deciding if they feel able to meet the child's medical needs. The FACTS team offers ongoing support to families through supporting them in developing strategies to cope with difficulties. The FACTS team also work within schools to provide educational staff with information about the complex needs an adopted child may have. There is also a homeopathy service and access to art therapy. This agency offers an excellent quality service to adoptive families which is essentially child focused. Where the agency is not able to meet the presenting need it has good systems in place to ensure that support can be accessed from elsewhere.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

PACT does not work directly with birth parents whose children are being placed for adoption, this is the responsibility of the placing agency. PACT does however carry out some work with people who were adopted through the agency and their relatives in offering birth records counselling, an intermediary service and managing letterbox contact arrangements. The quality of this work is good and people using these services are provided with appropriate advice and support.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards mapped to this outcome area.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The work of the agency is underpinned by a statement of purpose which clearly outlines the aims and objectives of the agency. The agency's policies and procedures accurately reflect the

statement of purpose. The agency has produced two guides to inform children about adoption. These are useful tools to use in preparing children for adoption. The information provided to domestic and inter-country adopters is of a good standard and provides appropriate information to adopters about both types of adoptions. The manager of the agency is suitably qualified and experienced in adoption matters. The incoming executive is likewise suitably qualified and experienced in adoption matters. The agency is overall well managed and offers a professional service to those affected by adoption. The arrangements in place in respect to monitoring the work of the agency at a strategic level are good but for some aspects of the agency's work the monitoring systems are not so well established. The staff team are suitably qualified and experienced in adoption matters and are highly thought of by adopters and external professionals. One adopter said of their social worker, "We couldn't have asked for a better social worker....she has been a rock throughout the whole process....very professional, very supportive, very understanding and we would not be where we are today without her....she is invaluable." A placing social worker talking about the social work team talked about the workers' good knowledge and expertise. Staff are confident in their management arrangements and generally feel well supported by them. One area where staff are not feeling so confident is what is perceived as a decrease in opportunities for professional development. The agency has a robust complaints procedure and complaints are used as a learning process. There are case records kept in respect to adopters and children and in the main these hold all required information and are reasonably well ordered. There are arrangements for access to records in place which are supported by appropriate policies and procedures. Personnel records for staff and panel members are, in the main, well ordered and comprehensive. The premises are located centrally in Reading town centre and provide a good working environment for staff. Administrative processes are well managed and the arrangements for secure storage and retrieval of records are suitably organised. There are properly operated systems in place in respect to financial matters and these are subject to appropriate scrutiny by internal and external bodies.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
11	Ensure that no business is conducted by the adoption panel unless at least five of its members, including the person appointed to chair the panel or the vice chair and at least one of the social workers and one of the independent members, meet as the panel. (The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 Regulation 5)	10 March 2008

Recommendations

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

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- develop a recruitment plan for domestic adopters which targets resources at those people most likely to meet the needs of children waiting for a placement (National Minimum Standard 2)
 - ensure that all assessment reports provide clear evidence about the applicant's suitability to parent a child not born to them (National Minimum Standard 4)
 - develop further the health and safety questionnaire (National Minimum Standard 4)
 - develop panel policy and procedure documents which are relevant to the operation of the PACT panels (National Minimum Standard 10)
 - retain evidence that gaps in applicant's employment history have been explored as a part of the interview process (National Minimum Standard 19)
 - further develop the safeguarding procedures to include clear timescales, contact numbers and names for service managers, and details of actions to be taken in respect to allegations of historical abuse (National Minimum Standard 1)
 - ensure that clear systems are in place in respect to monitoring each aspect of the work (National Minimum Standard 17)
 - ensure that each member of staff is supported in continual professional development (National Minimum Standard 23)

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for voluntary adoption agency