

The Adolescent and Childrens Trust

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Margaret Lynes
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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

The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT) is a voluntary adoption agency set up in 2004. In 2007 it merged with another voluntary adoption agency - the Independent Adoption Service (IAS), and is now known as TACT IAS. The adoption service is part of a larger organisation (TACT) which provides fostering services from a number of offices around the country. The adoption agency was formed in response to a perceived need for permanency services for looked after children, both those already in fostering placements and those who may be referred for services in the future.

The adoption agency operates from just one office in South London. Its stated aim is to find secure adoption placements for looked after children for whom local authorities throughout England and Wales have been unable to make provisions.

Summary

At this announced key inspection all key standards were inspected. Being healthy and economic wellbeing were not inspected. This is a satisfactory service with some good features.

The agency's recent restructuring has resulted in the formation of an experienced management team, able to work together well. Staff feel valued, well supported and safe. They have access to regular and appropriate training. There is a commitment to an agenda of continuous improvement and the service is well placed to ensure that prompt and suitable permanency solutions are found.

The agency recognises that some small areas of improvement are needed in relation to quality assurance; recording and assessment; recruitment; dealing with complaints; timescales and policies and procedures. It is taking steps to achieve this.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of this agency by Ofsted.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has procedures in place to recruit adopters to meet the needs of the Local Authorities who approach it with children waiting to be matched. Part of its strategy is to specifically focus on recruiting adopters from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, and it has recently appointed a senior practitioner who will lead on this. While it does not have direct responsibility for the children themselves, it seeks to liaise as much as possible with the children's social workers so as to find the best possible match available from its pool of adopters. It has a number of ways in which to seek the views of the children it works with including holding social events,

the introduction of a new children's guide, and the production of a bi-annual newsletter. The agency's trustees have recently agreed to adopt a young people's charter.

Prospective adopters are involved in a formal assessment, preparation and approval process. At present the agency accepts formal applications after applicants have completed a preparation course, which is contrary to national guidance. Adopters indicated that they found the preparation course to be helpful and constructive. The Forms F are generally satisfactorily completed, although not as comprehensive as they could be. Some issues relating to lack of detail had been noted by the adoption panel. Informative leaflets and an information pack are available for prospective adopters. The agency does not meet the national guidance with regard to the time it takes to process an application. In a number of cases this timeframe exceeded two years. Unnecessary delays were also experienced by applicants due to the agency failing to seek updated Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosures and health checks until they had expired.

Post approval, adopters are given a leaflet entitled Approved to Adopt, which explains what happens next. The agency has also produced leaflets relating to entitlements and the adoption register. Adopters commented that they had been given sufficient information about children prior to matching.

Policies and procedures are in place regarding the function of the adoption panel. There is also a helpful leaflet for would be adopters explaining the purpose of the panel, and a profile sheet detailing the panel members. Prospective adopters are given the opportunity to attend the panel, although one couple did comment that they were only made aware of this the day before their panel took place.

The panel is properly constituted. Panel members come from diverse backgrounds with a variety of experiences. New panel members are enabled to observe a panel before taking up their position on it. Each panel member has a specific recruitment file. The majority of these did not contain the expected, required vetting information, albeit the agency gave assurances that all the necessary checks had been carried out. Members receive an annual appraisal and are enabled to undergo joint training with the adoption team.

The panel observed was efficiently organised and conducted. Members receive all of the necessary information in advance of the date the panel will consider the cases. The minutes are scrutinised for their accuracy at each subsequent panel meeting. Several small errors were noted in the minutes checked at the panel observed by the inspector nevertheless they were informative and stated the panel's discussion and the reasons for the conclusions reached. It was not easy to determine if each panel was quorate from reading the minutes, as there was no indication as to the role of each attendee. The panel chair confirmed that all panels had been quorate and the agency immediately took steps to ensure future minutes clearly stated the role of each person in attendance.

The agency decision maker has held this position for only three months. He confirmed that he receives the panel recommendation promptly, and that he is provided with sufficient information so as to be able to make an informed decision. The panel administrator confirmed that once the decision has been made this is conveyed in writing to the applicant within seven days.

The agency has a recruitment policy and procedure in place. The files examined contained the required vetting information, although the agency does not, as a matter of routine, seek from applicants the reason why they left any previous employment where they worked with children. It does however verify by telephone all references. All social workers are appropriately qualified, with adoption experience. Over 20% have achieved a post qualifying child care award.

The agency has a complaints procedure in place. It maintains a log of complaints which indicated that there had been nine complaints made since December 2007. Eight of these complain about various delays in the adopter recruitment process. It was difficult to evidence how some of these complaints were being dealt with as the log does not indicate the outcome of complaint investigations or the date complaints were resolved. Some of the applicants' files had a specific section for complaints however in spite of this a number of these, where applicants had made a complaint, were empty. One complaint had been investigated independently under stage two of the agency's procedure. The complaints process was thorough and the independent report indicated that the agency had given an undertaking to use the resulting recommendations to improve the service. Eight of these recommendations related to assessment practice, including adhering to timescales.

The agency has a written child protection procedure in place, and has produced two guides - one for staff and one for carers. By carers the guide makes it clear that it is referring to both foster carers and adopters. The guides are informative and up to date. Staff were last enabled to attend child protection training in 2007.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Adoptive parents are helped and supported to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them. Feedback from adopters who received post adoption support was unanimously positive, particularly in a crisis situation where immediate support was requested. This support can include therapeutic services for adopted children, counselling, information and advice, mediation services, groups for children, adopters and birth parents, training for adopters and financial support.

Adopters can assess the agency's training programme. Courses in 2008 included attachment, separation and loss; contact; life history and child protection. Adopters are also provided with a number of useful leaflets including information for adopted adults (intermediary services) and Adoption Support for Adoptive Families. A number of these leaflets have been recently revised and are easy to read and informative. There are two specifically for children.

The agency has a skills for life course for teenagers over the age of 16 who are in the care of TACT. The programme is adjusted where necessary so that adopted teenagers can also take part. The course covers health, social skills, job seeking, financial guidance, moving on and managing your home.

The adoption support social worker currently works alone, however the agency management team has recognised that it needs to develop expertise in this area amongst other members of the staff team. To achieve this aim team members are shadowing the support social worker so as to increase their knowledge and skills in this area.

People affected by adoption receive a service from the agency that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need. Where the agency does not provide the service requested, or it is not able to meet the service users' particular need, it will refer that person to a more appropriate agency or service. At present the agency takes few steps to obtain feedback from service users about their views of the service provided.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Feedback from birth relatives with regard to both the pre and post adoption process was mixed. Some felt that the agency provided a good service and involved them in the matching process, but others felt that the views of birth relatives were discounted, and they were largely pushed out of involvement in the adoption. The majority however gave very positive feedback, and one described the post adoption support social worker as someone who demonstrated professionalism at its highest.

Although not responsible directly for the children the agency still endeavours to promote the children's interests, including chasing placing authorities for life story work and later life letters.

The agency has appropriate policies and procedures in place and has clear strategies for working with birth relatives, including the provision of information about local and national support groups. The manager is informed of the current level of service provision and has clear views as to how the service can be extended. At present there are no waiting lists for adoption support services from this agency.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The agency has a clearly written statement of purpose which contains its aims and objectives, details of the responsible individual and the manager, the organisational structure, the systems in place to monitor and evaluate the service, the procedures for recruiting adopters, the services offered by the agency, the complaints procedure, the contact details for Ofsted and the qualifications and experience of the staff team.

Seniors staff have identified a potential need for additional adopters from black and minority ethnic communities and are prioritising recruitment from these areas. Potential adopters are provided with an information pack however feedback through the Ofsted questionnaires indicated that a notable number felt that the agency was misleading about the time it took to go through the assessment process up to the point of the panel.

The agency has recently rearranged its management structure and appointed a new adoption manager. Staff commented that they felt supported by this new structure. There is a lengthy and detailed business plan in place, and appropriate policies and procedures are provided. These include equal opportunities, matching and making placements, safe caring, service to birth parents at the time of adoption planning, the adoption panel, recording files and access to information, health care and development, and working with adult adopted people and their

birth relatives. There is not a policy or procedure relating to dealing with allegations or disclosures of historical abuse.

The agency's chief executive commented that they feel that the adoption service is integral to the ethos of the agency as a whole, which focuses on providing services to looked after children – be that fostering, adoption or guardianship. Their expectation is that over next year the service will further develop up towards the good/excellent range.

The new manager is in the process of taking over the day to day running of the agency from the assistant director, who plans to take on a more strategic role. The manager is of the view that the issues that arose out of the merger of TACT with another independent adoption provider have largely been resolved. She is of the view that she receives the support she needs, has a good rapport with her line manager, and that they both share the same vision for the future development of the agency. She also wants to develop the skills of the staff team and target specific communities for new adopters.

Senior staff commented that they considered quality assurance to be an integral part of the service, and they have appointed a director specifically for this role. This director has recently conducted an audit of some of the adoption files and made a number of recommendations. Senior staff also use a variety of other systems and methods to monitor the performance of the agency, including a bi annual report from the responsible individual to the Board of Trustees, carrying out spot checks, direct observation of practice, feedback from service users at social events arranged by the agency, team meetings, observation of the panel and monitoring of complaints. This inspection indicated that the agency has room for improvement in this area, particularly regarding the recording of complaints.

Feedback from service users was mixed. Negative comments included 'we were misled on many points – it was a much lengthier process than it should have been'; 'we were given totally inaccurate timescales'; 'the feelings of potential adopters were not taken into account and their views were not listened to'; 'it took over three years to get to the point of the adoption approval panel'; 'there was a lack of communication'; 'we were not told about the Adoption Register'; 'we were not asked for our views of the service'; 'there is a lack of consistent staff'. Positive comments included 'we were kept informed'; 'the preparation group was very helpful'; 'there were no delays'; 'the social events are good'; 'TACT reacted quickly when we needed support in a crisis'; 'we were given clear information, everything was well explained'; 'we were provided with regular updates regarding the merger'; 'the administrative staff are sensitive and helpful'. It is acknowledged that the 2007 merger of TACT with another adoption agency resulted in a number of unanticipated problems, some of which have led to the negative comments received at this inspection.

Once the vacant social worker post has been recruited to, there should be an adequate number of qualified staff to meet the current needs of the agency. The agency also has a pool of sessional staff who have worked for TACT for a number of years. They meet regularly and are invited to staff training.

Staff stated that they felt that they were well managed and supervised, and that the workload at present is manageable. There is also good peer support. A number of staff supervision files were examined. Supervision does happen on a regular basis, albeit not as frequently as stated in the agency's own agreement.

Staff also stated they are able to access relevant training courses. In 2008 individuals were enabled to attend training in areas such as anti-bullying, adolescence and adoption, managing performance, data protection, helping children speak about adoption, first aid, health and safety, equality and diversity, shorthand, panel administration and minute taking.

The agency is not responsible for children as such, but where it is working with them and their adoptive families they will keep a file. These appeared to be well ordered. Files for adopters and for service users receiving post adoption support were in most cases satisfactorily maintained. The recent file audit carried out internally has highlighted a number of areas where improvement is needed. This was borne out on this inspection, as a number of errors, including one child's name, and another child's age were noted. Some correspondence had been wrongly dated, while some documentation had not been signed. Some documentation was also missing.

The agency's archives are stored by an external company. The agency has recently been to the archives to conduct own audit as it had some concerns that the company could not produce some files relating to the agency TACT had merged with. After a full audit, the concerns were allayed and the administrative manager stated that she is now satisfied with the archive system.

The assistant director stated that the agency is financially stable and that it has adequate resources, including a small reserve fund ring fenced for adoption if needed. Board members kept up to date with regular reports regarding the finances of the agency, and its accounts are appropriately maintained and audited.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The staff team and the panel is made up of individuals from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. The agency has a support group for gay and lesbian staff and also provides time for staff to attend black worker group meetings. In its self assessment the agency states that it has policies and procedures in place to promote equality and diversity, and also that it has open discussions with enquirers and applicants about race, gender, sexuality, health and age and how this might affect their application and range of children they could be considered for. These discussions take place through information meetings, initial visits, the preparation course, and through the assessment itself. Current adverts and literature for recruitment and use within the agency reflect the diverse families they seek to recruit, especially the current drive for BME families.

Recent improvements include the introduction of a harassment and bullying policy. Core training is being provided for all staff and the adoption panel on diversity. Staff can access counselling and advice through an external provider. Training is also provided on assessing same sex couples. The agency has a working group to consider the recruitment of Muslim adopters, and it offers courses on disability awareness for adopters.

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
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4	ensure that the assessment of prospective adopters is comprehensively and accurately documented (Adoption Agencies Regulations part 4)	16 February 2009
11	ensure there is a clear audit trail with regard to the vetting of panel members (Regulation 14)	16 February 2009
19	ensure that where a person has previously been employed in a position working with children the reason why the employment ended is verified (Regulation 14)	16 February 2009
16	ensure that there is a specific procedure in place for dealing with allegations of historical abuse (Regulation 10).	16 February 2009
24	ensure that a written record is made of any complaint, including details of the investigation made, the outcome and any action taken as a consequence (Regulation 12)	16 February 2009
17	ensure that there are robust quality assurance systems in place (Adoption Agency Regulations 7)	16 February 2009
25	ensure case records are comprehensive and accurate (Adoption Agency Regulations 7)	16 February 2009

Recommendations

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

- applications to become adopters should be taken before the preparation course
- take a more proactive approach to the renewal of CRB's and health checks
- reduce the length of the assessment process so that it falls within the nationally accepted eight month timeframe
- make more effort to seek feedback from service users during and after the service provided