

Parents and Children Together

Inspection report for Voluntary Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC049093
Inspection date	16/03/2011
Inspector	Rosemary Dancer
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Pact, 7 Southern Court, South Street, READING, RG1 4QS
------------------------	--

Telephone number	0118 938 7600
Email	
Registered person	Parents and Children Together (PACT)
Registered manager	Satwinder Sandu
Responsible individual	Janet Fishwick
Date of last inspection	06/03/2008

© Crown copyright 2011

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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. The agency has recently amalgamated with another adoption agency and now has offices in Reading and London. PACT has been an adoption agency for over fifty years. The current provision of services relating to adoption include: the recruitment and assessment of adoptive parents for children in the care system; an inter-country service under contract with many local authorities across England; support services to adoptive families; the provision of information, advice and support to adoptees; support to birth relatives whose children were adopted through the agency and under contract with a local authority; general advice, information and support to all parties to adoption which include letterbox services between adopted children and their birth families.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The was an announced key inspection which looked at the Every Child Matters outcome areas of: staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution and assessed the effectiveness of the organisation.

The agency shows a commitment to ensuring that only people suitable to meet the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement are approved. It maintains a focus on the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement, whether preparing, assessing and approving people for domestic or inter-country adoption.

The arrangements for support to adoptive families are a real strength of this agency and these excellent arrangements help to make and maintain safe, stable and secure placements for children throughout their childhood and beyond.

Work with adults affected by adoption is of a good quality and is undertaken by skilled workers who take a sensitive approach to this complex area of work.

Organisational changes, over the past few months, have been well managed and staff are very well supported by a competent manager. This is a forward thinking agency that has a clear focus on improvement. Staff are skilled and experienced in their respective roles and well thought of by adopters.

There are two actions and three recommendations made as a result of this inspection. None have a significant impact on the safety or well-being of children.

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection there was one requirement made which was to ensure that no business is conducted by the adoption panel unless all the people required by legislation were present. The agency has addressed this requirement and ensures that each panel held is quorate.

The agency was also recommended to: develop a recruitment plan for domestic adopters, this has been addressed and further developments to the recruitment strategy are in progress; ensure that all assessment reports provide clear evidence about the applicant's suitability to parent a child not born to them, this has been addressed and assessments are of a good quality and analytical; develop further the health and safety questionnaire, this has been further developed to ensure children are not exposed to hazards in adopters' homes; develop the panel policy and procedure documents which are relevant to the operation of the PACT panels, this has been addressed and the information provides a clear basis for the functioning of the panel; retain evidence that gaps in applicants' employment histories have been explored as a part of the interview process, this has been addressed and means now gaps are explored as a part of the staff recruitment process; further develop the safeguarding procedures, this has been addressed but staff have not got access to, and have not received training in, what to do in the event of a disclosure relating to historical abuse; ensure that clear systems are in place in respect to monitoring each aspect of the work, the monitoring systems have been strengthened and the agency is now more effectively monitored; ensure that each member of staff is supported in continual professional development, while staff feel well supported in this area the formal system is not being fully utilised.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency does not actively recruit people who wish to adopt a child from another country. The services to people wishing to be inter-country adopters are provided under contract with a number of local authorities across the country. The agency takes a more co-ordinated approach, when compared to the last inspection, to the recruitment of adopters for children waiting for adoption in England. It has appointed a communications officer whose focus is on the recruitment of carers for children needing permanent care. While the focus has been predominately on the recruitment of foster carers the campaign is being developed to better target those who may want to offer permanent care through adoption.

There are formal processes for the preparation of inter-country and domestic

prospective adopters. There are separate preparation courses run for each category of adopter. Both courses are of a good quality and ensure that people are as well prepared as they can be to parent a child who has had adverse early experiences. Comments from adopters about the inter-country preparation course include, 'extremely good-very informative, very supportive but also very challenging.' Comments about the domestic preparation course include, 'Very informative they really helped us to understand the adoption process and what children go through...a great foundation.' The longer term benefits of the course were highlighted by one adopter who said 'we often think back to what we learned when deciding how to best deal with situations arising with our children.' The agency provides preparation for prospective adopters prior to taking an application from them. This is not in line with the legislation that requires an application to have been made prior to preparation. This means that people not progressed after the preparation course do not have the right to a formal appeal.

The assessment of adopters is overall of a good quality. Statutory checks are undertaken, information is gathered and analysed and a good view about the applicants' suitability to adopt a child needing an adoptive placement is clearly stated. There is a shortfall in some of the assessments as employers' references have not always been taken up before the case is presented to panel. In these cases this means that the panel recommendation has been made without the benefit of this relevant information. Both categories of adopters felt that the assessment process was probing and intrusive but that their social worker had carried out the assessment in a sensitive way.

The agency does not place children with their adopters, local authorities place children with PACT adopters. However, the agency takes a child-centred approach to its work. This is most clearly seen in the family finding and matching processes. Wherever possible children's wishes are obtained and family finding and matching take these views into account. PACT's prospective adopters are helped to fully consider the needs of the child and are supported to reach a decision about the viability of any proposed placement. One adopter said that the professionals working for PACT had been 'very informative and provided a well rounded picture of the children.' Another stated that although the local authority had been inefficient 'PACT and the wonderful foster carer (local authority carer) made up for this and overall the placement was smooth.' Yet another adopter said their child had, 'been with us for a year! And he is amazing. He has been through such a lot in his life...he has lots of friends and is doing really well at school...he is great!' These comments show the positive outcomes achieved through the attention paid to matching and the thoughtful support provided to families.

The agency's panel is governed by policies and procedures; these are currently being updated and panel members have been asked for their comments. Applicants are invited to attend the panel at which their case is being heard and are supported in this by their social workers. The panel is properly constituted, issues arising around equality and diversity are fully addressed and challenged when necessary. Panel members fully consider all the information surrounding each case and devise appropriate questions to clarify any issues arising.

Decision making is carried out with due rigour. This ensures that prospective adopters who are approved are suitable people to care for children with a range of diverse needs.

Staff and panel members are recruited in line with safe recruitment procedures. However, not all of the panel members' files contain their photograph as required by regulations. While panel members are well supported in their role as a panel member and training is provided, the system for annual appraisals has broken down. This means as they are not being appraised, on a routine basis, their performance is not formally monitored.

Safeguarding practice is good. Incidents that present a risk to children are recognised as a safeguarding issue and there is a balanced approach to ensuring the well-being of the child is paramount but also ensuring the adopters are adequately supported during investigations. While shortfalls in the safeguarding procedures identified at the last inspection have been addressed, staff have not had access to the historical abuse procedure. Complaints are dealt with appropriately and used to inform future practice.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency continues to provide high quality support to adoptive families. The support services provided by PACT are available to domestic and inter-country adopters. There is an impressive range of support available, which ranges from informal arrangements, such as an annual day during which adoptive families meet other adoptive families, to more formal and focused work carried out by the PACT team. This team has a range of professionals from various disciplines who offer a therapeutic service prior, during and post placement. The aim of this work is to help parents develop a good understanding about the difficulties children with adverse early lives experience and support them to develop strategies appropriate to their individual needs. One adopter who has used these support services said, 'The PACT play therapist supported us very well during the early stages of our placement.' Another adopter said that PACT has an 'excellent range of additional professionals to support post-placement.' This excellent service helps parents to support and care for their child effectively into adulthood.

There are various workshops and training days which are a good source of information and advice and these include a session for adopters' friends and families. This very good as adopters' friends and family members are the key supports for adopters. They can help a placement to be maintained when difficulties occur.

Placement breakdowns are rare in this agency and this is a good indication that there is a high level of very good support provided to families. When a placement does breakdown the agency provides support to all involved and works hard to minimise the impact on the child concerned. Any case of disruption is presented to the panel

and any lessons to be learnt from a disruption are discussed.

There is good access to specialist advice including medical and legal advice. The medical adviser takes a very proactive approach to ensure that the impact of any medical issues for adopters and/or children are minimised. The access to legal advice is very good and this ensures that legal matters can be clarified in a timely way.

This agency continues to provide an outstanding level of support to adoptive families. One adopter summed it up well by saying, 'PACT provided a reassuring shoulder to lean on and a sounding board. Our social worker has been excellent.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

PACT does not have the responsibility for counselling birth parents of the children placed with its adopters as it does not place children. It does, however, have a contract with a local authority to provide counselling to its residents. Through this contract PACT works directly with birth parents whose children are being placed for adoption, birth relatives wanting to trace adoptees and adoptees wanting to trace birth family members. This work is carried out very sensitively and is of a good quality. One person using this service commented 'the worker was amazingly kind and helpful and helped me so much. I think she did more than the service really offered-she was great.' Another pointed out that even though his or her relative had not been found some important questions had been answered for them.

PACT also works with people who were adopted through the agency, or the agency it has taken over, and their relatives. It offers birth records counselling, an intermediary service and manages letterbox contact arrangements. The quality of this work is also good. The workers involved are skilled and experienced in these very sensitive areas of work. Sound advice is given and people are supported in achieving their aims which range from finding out more information to having a reunion with a birth family member.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The work of the agency is underpinned by a comprehensive Statement of Purpose. There are clear procedures that guide staff in the various aspects of the work. The recent amalgamation of two agencies has meant that there are some minor differences in the ways of working. However, the manager and social workers have

begun to identify the best practice from each agency and are incorporating these across the service. There is good quality information for prospective adopters and current adopters. Comments about the quality of the information include, 'Comprehensive information, highly informative and covered all main aspects of adoption.' The agency has also developed guides for children about adoption and these are useful tools to help adults to explain adoption to the children.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Equality and diversity issues are at the forefront of practice and service development and any discriminatory behaviour is challenged. The agency takes an inclusive approach to enquirers and while the focus remains on the needs of children waiting for a placement it does not discriminate on any basis.

This agency has been through an uncertain time since the last inspection. The previous manager left, a new manager was appointed and there has been the acquisition of a voluntary adoption agency based in London which is now the branch office of PACT. Throughout this disruption the work of the agency has been little effected and this is to the credit of the manager, chief executive and a supportive board of trustees. One adopter said, 'we have noted that provision has gone from strength to strength since amalgamation, long may it continue.'

A new management structure has been developed to provide a much stronger management team. While this is not fully in place the early identification of the need for this means that personnel have been appointed to the new structure and are about to take up their posts.

The social work teams across the service have very quickly built up good communication between each other. There is a strong commitment to establish the best working practice from each of the former agencies. The social and other workers working for the agency are suitably qualified and experienced and enthusiastic in their work. An adopter commented, 'Staff have always been approachable, supportive and professional.'

While there is a clear focus on the child in all practice prospective and current adopters all feel well supported by their individual worker. Adopters' comments about the positive aspects of the service include, 'Everything! Organised, efficient, informative and friendly, oh and experienced!' and other stated, 'I am very happy, I would recommend them, although they are now PACT they are the same people and very very supportive, tell them to keep up the good work.'

Staff are supported well by the manager, their contributions are recognised and valued and there is a clear focus on improvement. Staff are provided with regular supervision and training opportunities are good. The appraisal system for staff has currently fallen behind and while this has not impacted on practice yet it means that performance management is currently not as strong as it could be.

The board of trustees monitor the work. It ensures that the agency operates effectively and efficiently and when shortfalls arise, such as the weakness in the

management structure, it enables these to be addressed. The financial committee oversees the financial arrangements for PACT as an organisation and accounts are externally monitored.

Good attention is paid to ensuring that case records are comprehensively maintained and files are well ordered, securely stored and access to them restricted to those authorised to see them.

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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
4	take the formal application to be considered as an adoptive parent prior to the preparation training (National Minimum Standard 4 and Guidance on the Adoption and Children Act 2002)	01/04/2011
28	ensure that all information required is available in respect to each panel member; this is with particular reference to maintaining on personnel files a photo of the member (The Voluntary Adoption Agency and the Adoption Agency (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003 Regulation (14 (3) (d))	01/04/2011

Recommendations

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

- ensure that all enquiries are undertaken before panel considers the suitability of adopters. This is with particular reference to obtaining references, in every case, from each applicant's employer prior to presentation of the case to the adoption panel (NMS 4.8)
- ensure that staff have access to, and training in, the use of the written procedures for dealing with allegations of historical abuse. (NMS 32.4)
- ensure that the annual appraisal system is implemented for all staff and panel members. (NMS 23.3)