

# TACT Adoption

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Paul Clark
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<b>Registered manager</b>	Elizabeth Webb
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Mary Elizabeth Griffith-Jones
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	05/01/2009

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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 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**

The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT) is a registered charity whose work is overseen by a board of trustees. The voluntary adoption agency within TACT was set up in 2004. In 2007 it merged with another voluntary adoption agency - the Independent Adoption Service (IAS) and in 2009 it took as an acquisition another voluntary adoption agency and independent fostering agency, Parents for Children. The adoption service is part of the larger TACT organisation which provides fostering services from a number of offices around the country and in Scotland and Wales. 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 and its adopter recruitment operation covers the Greater London area. Its stated aim is to find secure adoption placements for looked after children for whom local authorities throughout England, Scotland and Wales have been unable to make provisions. The agency has specialist expertise in supporting children affected by foetal alcohol syndrome. The agency is a member of the South London Adoption Consortium and the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This small voluntary adoption agency provides a satisfactory level of service for children who are otherwise difficult to place within local authority provision. Many elements of the service are good or outstanding. Social workers are experienced and well trained, supervised and managed. The agency has made numerous improvements to the service following the acquisition of two voluntary adoption agencies and the findings of the previous inspection report. The agency must ensure that children benefit from stable placements and that adopters' assessments are undertaken within recommended timescales.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The agency now keeps a dated records of any complaints received and details the actions taken in response. Adopters now make their formal application to adopt before attending preparation courses. There are now systems in place to ensure that quality assurance of the service is much more rigorous than was previously the case. The quality assurance systems include ensuring that case records are now comprehensive and accurate and that the same is true of adopters' assessments. Panel members are now appropriately recruited and vetted and these details are contained in individual case files on panel members. Sessional workers now have to

disclose the reason for leaving their previous employment. The safeguarding children policy now contains a specific procedure for dealing with allegations of historical abuse. There is now a system in place to ensure that there is a more proactive approach to the renewal of Criminal Record Bureau and health checks

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not inspected in adoption inspections.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

Children are helped to feel safe through the provision of a range of information documents explaining the adoption service and where they might go for help if they do not feel safe. There are properly formatted, age appropriate children's guides. These contain the contact details of the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted.

The agency are sent children's permanency records by placing authorities. These detail how children's needs will best be met by adoption. Social workers within the agency link children with adopters who will be able to best meet their needs. Children are consulted about their feelings of proposed placements at various stages of the adoption process. If they are of an appropriate age, children are seen alone by their placing authority social worker and the agency social worker during the early weeks of placement and asked if they feel safe and are happy in the placement. An independent reviewing officer will consider children's feelings about their placement at review meetings. Children generally enjoy stable placements with adopters who can meet most of their needs. However, the placements of four children in two adoption households were disrupted. Both of these have involved sibling pairs. Analysis by the service has followed each disruption and although some learning points about the assessment of adopters have been identified and made known to managers and practitioners there are areas that require further analysis. On one occasion these were not clearly identified in the panel review of the disruption. Careful analysis and the implementation of measures necessary for the improvement of practice helps to reduce the likelihood that such disruptions will occur in the future. There have also been two safeguarding children referrals within the past 12 months. One of which was connected to one of the disruptions and which the strategy meeting determined that it would not be in the best interests of the children involved to proceed with the enquiry.

Children are kept safe by the appropriate counselling out of unsuitable applicants. There are new management monitoring systems of assessment quality in place. Potential adopters receive full information on how they may make complaints about the service if they feel they have been unfairly assessed. There is a clear system for recording complaints and the actions taken in response to them. Actions taken by the service to address complaints are appropriate.

Potential adoption households are appropriately checked to ensure that they do not present any health and safety risks to children. The adoption service has a number of written policies to further protect children. These include policies on pet assessments and on adopters who smoke. Adopters who smoke cannot adopt a child under 5 and the policy takes further steps to discourage adopters from smoking and to promote a healthy lifestyle. Adopters receive training, advice and guidance on promoting children's healthy lifestyles.

The adoption service has a medical advisor who adopters can consult for advice and guidance on children's health and related issues. The medical advisor has a particular expertise in caring for children affected by foetal alcohol syndrome and oversees the agency project related to this area of work; this provides a high level of care to the children affected. The service will refer children to the child and adolescent and mental health services team for psychiatric or psychological assessments if there are concerns about children's mental health or related behaviour. Additionally, the agency has a psychologist who has specialist skills in adoption work and who provides a wealth of support to all areas of the service. These various sources of support and intervention help to ensure that adopted children receive an excellent level of physical, emotional and psychological health care.

Social workers in the adoption team and potential adopters receive regular training on safeguarding children and are familiar with the relevant policies and procedures. All social workers have access to the safeguarding children procedures produced by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Potential adopters are introduced to the safeguarding policies and procedures during their preparation groups. There are systems in place which ensure that all necessary authorities will be notified of significant events relating to the protection of children should they arise.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Children's educational needs are well identified and supported. Adopters experiencing problems in dealing with children's educational development in school are well supported by the service in accessing educational support. They can consult the agency educational advisor who will liaise with schools on their behalf and offer means of support. They will also ensure that individual educational plans are in place for adopted children in difficulty with education and that these plans are appropriately reviewed at regular intervals. The advisor will also contact schools to inform them about the particular educational needs of adopted children. Families may also be referred to, and can consult professionals within the local child and adolescent mental health services teams. These various levels of involvement provide a good level of educational and behavioural support for adopted children.

The adoption team social workers actively work with placing authority social workers to plan the support that children and adopters will need following an adoption placement being agreed. Adoption team social workers meet with adopters on a

frequent basis at the early stage of placement to monitor how the support plan is being applied and to gain an awareness of any potential difficulties that might be arising and how to deal with them. These will also be raised and dealt with at the review meetings chaired by the independent reviewing officer. There is a well qualified and experienced post adoption support worker in place. Adopters benefit from a good range of ongoing support services which are not time limited and which may be identified in a new adoption support plan. These plans may be constructed several years after an adoption order has been made. This ongoing assessment of children's needs, and the delivery of services to meet them is indicative of a good service provision.

Foster carers who go on to adopt children who are placed with them will receive an adoption allowance for two years following the adoption order being made. These levels of financial support will help to ensure that children will live in homes that provide adequate facilities and resources.

The service has a resource library of adoption material which adopters are encouraged to access. Adopters have access to a range of information materials and events which inform them about national and local developments in adoption. The service circulates regular information newsletters and arranges forum meetings for adopters which are both recreational and informative. The agency will support adopters to get membership of a registered adoption support agency if they have financial difficulties. There is a clearly laid out website where adopters can access further information about adoption. The service organises occasional social or leisure events for adopted children and adopters which gives them the opportunity to discuss aspects of adoption with their peers.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

Children of an appropriate age are informed about their rights and where they can go to get help. They receive useful written advice about adoption and their rights as adopted children. There are properly formatted, age appropriate children's guides.

The agency ensures that placing authorities provide adopters and children with life story books and later in life letters. Adoption team workers receive training in this area of work to ensure that these items are of an acceptable quality. The agency provides workshops for adopters to give them guidance and skills on the best ways of telling children that they are adopted.

Birth parents are consulted by the placing authorities about their views of the proposed matching of their child with the prospective adopters. Adopters are encouraged to meet with birth parents unless this will negatively impact on the wellbeing of the child involved or is otherwise thought inappropriate. This support for birth parents helps to maintain positive links between birth children and their adopted children.

Prospective adopters are informed in their preparation training about the importance of maintaining birth family contact and the importance that this has for giving children an awareness of their personal history.

Contact arrangements between birth family members and adopted children are established at an early stage of planning and agreed by the court. The adoption service has an effective letterbox system in place to facilitate written contact between birth families and their adopted children. The arrangements in place at TACT are historical and letterbox contact is now largely supervised and undertaken by placing authorities.

Adopted adults are well supported in accessing their birth records by an experienced and well-qualified social worker within the team. This worker will conduct tracing searches of birth family members and consequent intermediary contact work. This latter service is also provided for birth family members tracing their adult relatives who were adopted as children and with whom they have lost contact. Adopted adults and birth family members who have used this service have a high regard for the agency provision.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not inspected in adoption inspections.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The way that the service promotes equality and diversity is good. Social workers and panel members come from a wide range of cultural and racial backgrounds. There is a gender imbalance both within the social work team and within the adoption panel. However, the service consults with managers and practitioners within the agency for advice about gender issues when required.

All publications and online materials display the promotion of a diverse range of adopters both in terms of race and ethnicity and in single or married status. The service makes special efforts in their recruitment strategy to attract adopters from black and minority ethnic groups in order to meet the needs of the children presented. The agency hosts the consortium's Black Adopters' Forum. The adoption service has approved several applications from single and same sex adopters. Two members of the adoption panel have personal experience of adoption. There is a corporate policy on Equality and Diversity which describes the agency's position on dealing with sex, race, religious, disability and age discrimination. This range of measures helps to ensure that the promotion of equality and diversity is foremost in the practice of the service.

Adopters are well informed about the practicalities of adoption and the impact that it



will have on their lives from the outset. Potential adopters expressing an interest in adoption are sent an information pack within five days and are invited to attend an information morning where they receive further information. They are then visited at home by a social worker who will give further information. Interested applicants submit a formal application to be considered for adoption to enable Criminal Record Bureau, references and medical checks to be carried out. Potential adopters are invited to attend preparation groups at an early stage of the assessment process. Assessments are rigorous and comprehensive. Of the adopters approved within the last 12 months a large majority waited longer than eight months to be approved. Several adopters waited longer than three months to be seen by panel after their assessments had been completed.

Children, adopters and other stakeholders benefit from a comprehensive statement of purpose which clearly sets out the aims, objective and priorities of the service and which details the composition of the management and workers within the adoption team. This statement is reviewed annually. The service do not undertake inter-county adoptions but will refer prospective adopters to an appropriate agency. Providing potential adopters with a full range of information at an early stage of the adoption process enables them to be clear about their commitment and helps children to be linked with adopters who are informed about their general needs.

Adopters are assessed by the social workers in the adoption team. The quality of these assessments is now effectively monitored. Second opinion visits are conducted by managers or senior social workers. The service arranges four preparation groups a year for adopters and adopters can access groups held by other members of the consortium to avoid delay. There are also two preparation groups each year for second time adopters. These groups introduce potential adopters to the key areas and realities of adoption. Adopters undertake further appropriate training to prepare them for aspects of adoption. Adoption support plans are constructed to identify areas of support needed and provided. The agency have recently constructed a format for these plans. These plans now clearly identify the help that adopters will need in providing and sustaining the best care for children.

The manager of the adoption service is a professionally qualified social worker who is registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). They have many years experience in child care management and practice, and have an appropriate management qualification. Social workers in the adoption team are all professionally qualified and are members of the GSCC. The social workers within the adoption team have an extensive range of additional qualifications specific to adoption work, including counselling qualifications. The agency also provides social workers with an ongoing training programme which looks at key elements of the assessment process and this brings a high level of skill to the members of the adoption team.

Social workers receive monthly supervision and there are fortnightly team meetings. All management, practitioners and panel members undertake an annual performance appraisal which identifies their training and development needs. The vetting and recruitment practice for staff, panel members and potential adopters is appropriate and this reduces the likelihood that children will be cared for by inappropriate people

who may present a risk.

An independently chaired panel meets each month and makes recommendations to the agency decision maker about adopters' approvals. The panels are properly constituted from a central list of members. It is well administered and the recommendations and decisions are made in a timely manner both by the panel and the agency decision maker.

Case records of adopters and adopted children are comprehensive, up to date and clearly written and are stored in a manner which ensures their confidentiality. Effective file auditing ensures that files are extremely well ordered and up to date. Archive files of adoption records are securely stored by a specialist archive agency and in a manner which ensures their security and longevity. A disaster recovery plan is in place to support the storage of important case records.

A business continuity plan is in place. The service conducts a report of the adoption service every six months which details its effectiveness in meeting its service aims and objectives and identifies necessary areas of development. This report is presented to the board of trustees. The service actively promotes self-analysis and there are numerous developmental programmes and questionnaire survey systems in place which aim to improve the service provided for children and adopters. Ongoing internal review of service provision helps to improve the quality of children's care.

## **What must be done to secure future improvement?**

### **Recommendations**

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

- ensure that the adoption panel make a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of the adopter's formal application to be assessed (NMS 17.7)
- ensure that prospective adopters are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way; with specific reference to ensuring that all prospective adopters have opportunities to care for children as a part of the preparation and assessment processes. NMS 10.10