

Parents and Children Together - Reading Office

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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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, Oxford and London. PACT has been an adoption agency for over sixty years.

From 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013 the agency approved 85 families and during the same period 76 children, from the care system, were placed by various local authorities with PACT approved adopters.

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, including using a social impact bond for children who are considered harder to place; simultaneous approval of people to foster and adopt; an inter-country service under contract with many local authorities across England; multi disciplinary therapeutic support services to children and their adoptive families via the Fostering and Adoption Consultation and Therapeutic Support (FACTS) service; a range of more mainstream support services to 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 a small number of letterbox exchanges between adopted children and their birth families.

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**.

The agency has a very good track record of ensuring that adoptive families provide homes for children with complex needs and who are harder to place. For example, there has been an increase over the last financial year in successfully placing groups of brothers and sisters. For the financial year from 31 March 2012 to 1 April 2013 the agency placed a total of 76 children with their brothers and sisters, during the period from 1 April 2013 until 31 December 2013 the agency had already placed 85 brothers and sisters together.

The arrangements for the recruitment of adopters are excellent and ensure that a diverse range of prospective adopters are prepared, assessed and approved. The agency has embraced the recently introduced two stage process for the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters. Although the agency's timescales for moving people on from the first to the second stage are not always in line with the required timescales all of the delays have been caused by external issues beyond the control of the agency.

The proactive, innovative and high quality arrangements for: the assessment and preparation of prospective adopters; on-going training for prospective and actual adopters and the multi-disciplinary support provided to placements, are grounded in research. The adopters are very well assessed, prepared and supported and this ensures that placements are successfully made, sustained and are successful over time. An adopter said of the training 'The preparation is very good, its hard but it prepares you, gives you good tools and gets you thinking.' Children progress very well, some children progress far better than had been anticipated. Children feel safe, cared for and cared about.

The leadership and management of the agency and the social workers, have developed excellent working relationships with local authorities, other agencies and professionals involved in children's lives. They have a clear understanding about the strengths of the agency and areas they want to develop further. There has been considerable financial investment made to the growth and improvement of the services which have improved the lives of children and young people. For example, the growth in the FACTS service means that a wider range of therapeutic support is available to more children and the opening of additional offices in Oxford and London means the agency is accessible to people living in those areas.

The leadership and management are ambitious in the development of the services and inspire and encourage their staff and adopters to work in innovative ways that suit each family's individuality. An adopter who adopted a child from overseas said that the agency is 'child focused, we are not a case number we are a family.'

The leadership and management strongly promote the continuous learning of its staff and as a result staff carry out work with children and families to a very high standard. This has meant that, for some children, their progress has been

exceptional. The culture of the agency is one that is open to ideas, from staff or others, on how services can be improved; the leaders and managers use their staff to good effect to improve and develop the services available.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- disseminate the updated children's guide to all relevant children and people. (NMS 18.6)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people whatever their needs, and regardless of if they have been placed from within the UK or from overseas, feel valued and are valued as individuals. Their individual, and often complex needs, are met exceptionally well in a way that they are able fully engage in; many have exceeded expected expectations. A local Authority social worker who has placed a number of children with PACT adopters said of children she has placed that they are 'all doing exceptionally well.'

Children and young people are physically healthily because health needs are identified and they get the support or services they need to stay well and healthy. Their psychological and emotional health improves because they develop secure attachments to their parents who use therapeutic parenting techniques with them on a day-to-day basis. They also form strong bonds with other family members. Children and young people feel safe and are safe living in secure and stable families; they develop trust in their adoptive family. This means many are able to access, from a secure base, the more formal therapeutic services they need to help them to understand their backgrounds and what has happened to them. They begin to understand their situation, develop a positive self-view and establish their identity within their family and within the wider community, regardless of their country of origin.

Children and young people progress well in their learning. Some progress exceptionally well because barriers to learning are identified and addressed. Young people develop high aspirations and want to achieve and do well in their education because they understand the positive impact a good education can have on their future lives.

The agency is highly effective in finding placements that keep brothers and sisters together. Within their adoptive families they are loved for being the individuals they are. This means that they develop confidence, a sound sense of self and learn to value their uniqueness and respect the uniqueness of their brothers and sisters.

Children and young people retain a sound sense of their heritage. This is achieved through the careful support their adoptive families provide to help them keep contact with birth family members and people who have been significant in their lives. This also reassures them about the well-being of their birth family and keeps them informed about any significant developments. Children from overseas develop a good sense of and understanding about their country of origin; their heritage is celebrated within their adoptive families.

Adults who have been affected by adoption are helped to find out about their past in a sensitive, informative, professional and flexible way. This means they develop a sound understanding about their past histories and those of their birth family. A person who used the service said, 'It worked out better than we hoped, the social worker was very good, did not rush us, we are sure that is why it turned out so well, she really geared us up to take things gently, it could have gone so wrong if it had been rushed.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency is inclusive in its approach to the recruitment of prospective adopters. People who have had less than helpful experiences when approaching other agencies have found that PACT welcomes them, identifies their strengths and areas for development and supports their development exceptionally well. An adopter said, 'it was a joy to talk to them, a friendly person on the phone, a can do attitude and excellent support to break down any barriers identified by other agencies.'

The extensive information provided by the agency, via its website, through information evenings and interviews and through mailings, informs prospective adopters about all aspects of adoption. An adopter said 'Excellent information, adopters' talks very useful, open and honest, professional and very well-delivered.' Another said 'The information was fantastic.'

For people who wish to adopt a child from overseas the agency supports them well in understanding the complexities of doing this. The agency also helps them to consider if they could adopt a child from the care system in the UK. The agency has a commitment to finding families for children, whatever their country of origin. However, the work carried out with potential inter country adopters has meant that, for some children in the UK care system, loving parents have been found in a timely way. People who go on to adopt from another country they are very well supported by their social worker, especially when spending time in the child's country of origin. One adopter said of their social worker during this period that she was 'Very supportive, I know support is there whenever we need it.' Likewise another said 'They care and go over and above... they did more work than the fee we paid.'

The preparation and assessment of prospective adopters are very effective and lead to achieving and sustaining excellent outcomes for children and young people. The

preparation of prospective adopters as parents is grounded in research and teaches them therapeutic parenting skills. The preparation caters for individual needs and is valued by adopters who refer back to it when parenting their children. Adopters have an excellent understanding, gained through their preparation and assessment, about the impact children's early lives have had on their development. They are attuned to their children's needs and help them to overcome their past experiences and deal with their feelings of loss. A local authority placing social worker said, 'The adopters are fantastic, perfect adopters.'

The assessments of prospective adopters are analytical and provide an excellent view about the strengths of the application and the areas for development. These inform the matching processes and areas that require development are identified and addressed.

The panel has responded effectively an increase in business and now sits at least two times a month. The panel membership is diverse, it makes well considered recommendations, provides advice to the agency and reports on the quality of the assessments on an on-going basis. The agency decision making is robust. The decision maker considers all information when making her decision and prioritises cases where a match is being considered so that there are no delays in making placements. Overall, the agency adheres to the required timescales for the assessment and approval of prospective adopters; when it has not this is due to circumstances beyond the agency's control. The agency uses the adoption register for approved adopters who have not been linked or matched to a child within three months of approval. However, the agency's success at family finding means that approved adopters are usually linked and matched within the three month timescale.

The arrangements for finding families for children are impressive. The agency has an excellent awareness about children waiting for placements nationally and often make tentative links to prospective adopters that are coming through their system; this means that children can be placed quickly. An adopter said that the family finder was, 'tireless in her family finding efforts.' Another said, 'The family finder was on the case all the time... she did over and above.'

The agency is involved in an innovative family finding project. It's All About Me, is a scheme that encourages UK businesses to invest in finding families for harder to place children and supporting those families via a social impact bond. This is a project that has been set up by and run by the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies of which PACT is a member. PACT has also developed a dual approval scheme that is targeted at older children in care who have very complex needs and may need extensive therapeutic parenting before adoption or permanency can be considered. PACT targets people likely to be able to help children with very complex needs, approves them as foster carers and adopters with the aim that in the future the child will become a permanent member of their family through adoption.

The range of support services available are impressive; the agency is responsive to requests for support and adopters are confident that support will be available at any stage that they require it. One adopter said, 'There is an extensive range of post

adoption support on offer which we are able to access at any point in our children's lives; this is very comforting to know.' A professional involved with a family said 'There are an impressive range of (support) services offered post adoption which are invaluable, and include inter country children.'

In addition to the usual support provided by agencies, such as family days and various groups, the agency provides a 24-hour duty system and targeted therapeutic work with families via the FACTS service. The FACTS service provides an impressive range of targeted therapy services and won a national award in November 2014. If finances are needed to access this service there is bursary funding available. This means that support can be provided when required and the family does not have to wait for local authority agreement to funding. These services support children exceptionally well in overcoming difficulties right through to early adulthood and mean that the service significantly decreases the risk of disruption. A 12-week parenting course is also available to all families. This is firmly based in attachment theory and compliments and builds on the therapeutic parenting sessions on the preparation course. A parent said that the course was 'very good...helped to support my child in school who had difficulties settling, the 12-week course focuses on the individual.'

Adopted adults who request a service, including adoptees and birth relatives, are very satisfied with the service the agency provides. Some go on to have successful reunions and they value highly the re-establishment of relationships with people connected to them by birth. One user who has been supported in meeting their birth family said 'My life is complete.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency places safeguarding children and promoting their well-being at the centre of all it does. The high priority given to all aspects of its work ensures that children are safe and feel safe. The agency has clear safeguarding procedures that detail the role of the agency and local authorities in safeguarding children and young people. Safeguarding issues or issues that are potentially of concern are dealt with effectively by the agency. Where the concerns are about an adopter the agency supports the adopter while the issues are being considered.

The agency has a robust approach to the recruitment of staff and people wanting to adopt and this ensures that unsuitable people do not work with or care for children. It has a well-established system for risk assessing applications from people who, for example, have a criminal record.

There is a firm focus, in the preparation of prospective adopters and subsequent training, about the impact abuse has on children's behaviour and the impact it has on children's attachment styles. This means that adopters recognise and understand how these are interlinked and understand the impact abuse has on children and young people's emotional well-being and behaviour. Adoptive parents displayed a

high level of understanding about these issues and take timely action to ensure that situations do not escalate. Additionally, there is good attention paid to ensuring adoptive parents understand and can support their children in the safe use of the internet. This means that adoptive parents support children and young people to use social networking sites, for example, safely.

Staff are extremely experienced in all areas of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. The staff are of a high calibre and their commitment to ensuring that safe and secure adoptive placements are made and maintained for children is impressive. The commitment of staff is driven by the supportive and open culture of the leadership and management who continually strive to ensure the safety of children.

Children and young people develop their understanding of and ability to make decisions about taking risks in an age appropriate way. For example, a young person has begun to use a push bike to travel to and from school and does this safely and responsibly; they have also developed strategies to deal with any issues that may arise on the way to school.

Adoptive parents are excellent advocates for their children and ensure that they get the services they need. For example, parents are confident in asking for the help of the agency. For some children adoptive parents have advocated with schools to get them the support they need or to ensure that any barriers to their education are removed.

This agency has a low level of complaints, with only three having been made over the past 12 months. The agency takes complaints and comments as an opportunity to reflect on areas of practice and have made changes as a result. For example, an adopter noted that the waiting room for the panel hearing was not sound proof and the discussion in the meeting could be overheard. The agency soundproofed the room so that confidentiality is now better assured.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The leadership and management of the agency are exceptionally committed to providing a high class service to all affected by adoption and the agency has a very good capacity for improvement. Leaders and managers demonstrate that they are ambitious in their approach to developing the service. They have developed some innovative projects and services that are supporting adoptive families at whatever stage of the process they are. They are not adverse to trying new and ground-breaking ideas to improve the lives of children.

The agency has grown and developed hugely since the last inspection and this growth has not been at the expense of quality. The agency is more geographically diverse in the service it can offer to people wanting to adopt. A person who adopted a child from overseas and has been involved with the agency for a number of years

said, 'The organisation has changed for the better since last inspection, the management arrangements are sound, they have can do attitude.' Another adopter said, 'I have previously dealt with a local authority for adoption and PACT are in another league - for the better.'

The agency has taken action to address the relevant requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection. As a result the panel members' personnel files meet regulations, the panel now has all required information to base its recommendation on, the panel member appraisal process has been strengthened and the arrangements for dealing with allegations of a historical nature are known and understood by staff.

The agency has sophisticated and effective monitoring systems that have supported the growth and development of the agency since the last inspection. The agency shows that it values the views of people using its services and of its staff and use these to develop services. It also shows that it is up to date with national developments. This is demonstrated through the developments in its services and its involvement in national initiatives to shape the future of adoption in the UK. It has seen growth from the 2012 to 2013 financial year in all areas of its work. For example from 1 April until the 10 January 2014 the agency had already reached 118% for domestic adoption placements made when compared with the previous full year.

The arrangements for the recruitment of prospective adopters is very well planned for and ensures that a diverse range of people are approved for children who are waiting nationally. The recruitment strategy is informed by national and local research. Good use is made of a wide range of media and events to breakdown the myths about who can adopt and to inform the public about the needs of children waiting.

Partnership working with other professionals, agencies, organisations and adopters is excellent. The development of the FACTS service, using professionals from a range of disciplines, shows an effective use of their skills. Work with local authorities in placing children demonstrates the agency works effectively with them. A social worker said, 'PACT is one of the much better organisations.' A family finder from a local authority said that he was impressed with the work PACT did, he said, 'PACT is very good, child focused.' Developments in the It's All About Me scheme demonstrate the effective use of private sector funds to improve the lives of children and families. Work with adopters is grounded in partnership working to improve the lives of children. Some adopters have become involved in delivering services and training to others.

The work of the agency is underpinned by a clear and informative Statement of Purpose that is available to all interested parties. The agency has developed guides for children about adoption and support and while these contained an out of date address for Ofsted this was rectified during the inspection. Arrangements were being made to ensure that the updated guide was distributed to all relevant people.

The leadership and management inspire the people who work for them. The calibre of staff working for the agency is excellent. Staff are very well trained, kept up to date with developments in adoption and committed to, and experienced in, their respective roles. An adopter said, 'Wonderful social worker, organised and efficient.' A member of staff said the support from the administrative team was invaluable, she said they 'are brilliant.' The management arrangements for supporting staff are excellent and this extends to the leadership. A member of staff talked about the value that PACT places on the views of the staff and their ideas they said, 'PACT has never said you cannot do something, money is never an issue.' Another member of staff said that support from the managers was 'excellent'.

The agency has recently moved towards an electronic recording system. This provides children and other interested parties with clear information about each child and young person. The system is beginning to bed down and staff said they find it easy to use and navigate.

The offices that the agency operates from are accessible and suitable for purpose. A very positive development is the investment in a therapy room in Reading which provides a relaxed and comfortable environment in which children can engage with the work.

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.