

TACT Adoption

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Heather Chaplin
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	Domestic and inter-country adoption

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Date of last inspection	30/03/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT) is a registered charity whose work encompasses fostering and adoption in England, Scotland and Wales. The charity is managed by a board of trustees. The adoption agency operates from a single office in South London, and recruits prospective adopters from the Greater London area.

The voluntary adoption agency within TACT was set up in 2004. In 2007, TACT merged with another voluntary adoption agency; the Independent Adoption Service (IAS). In addition, the service safeguards personal file records from a number of other adoption services that are no longer operational.

The adoption agency, which is part of the South London Adoption Consortium, was formed to provide permanency looked-after children who may be challenging to place within local authority provision. The agency has specialist expertise in supporting children affected by foetal alcohol syndrome.

The agency's annual return shows that they placed 16 children in 2013-14. There were 31 approved adoptive families on 31 March 2014. 11 adoption orders were granted in this reporting period.

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: **good**.

The service is good because it provides high quality, stable, child-centred care to children and young people. Adults affected by adoption receive sensitive, skilled counselling and support, leading to positive outcomes. Although there are two regulatory shortfalls, these do not impact directly on the welfare and safety of adults or children.

The inspection found numerous examples of children who have made very significant progress in their adoptive families. Children and young people seen were all relatively recently placed, but settling very well and developing good attachments.

In the year 2013 to 2014, the ethnic diversity of the children placed by this service was significantly higher than national comparators. For example, 66% of children placed were from Black minority backgrounds, compared with 50% the previous year. The average percentage for all voluntary adoption agencies in England in 2013, the last year for which figures are available, was 25%.

Recruitment of adopters is focused on areas of most need, which at present is in the Black minority ethnic communities. The recruitment process is supported by a highly effective media service. Assessments are conducted in a professional and timely manner.

Although some families reported delays in the past, which was the subject of a recommendation at the last inspection, the service has improved. Adopters who have been assessed and approved since the last inspection are generally happy with the agency's welcoming, inclusive approach and the pace and conduct of the assessment process. One couple said, 'we are and have always been very happy with our choice of TACT. As a male couple we have never felt we are treated any differently from anyone else and have found TACT very open, warm and efficient.'

The agency is proactively involved in research and its expertise is highly valued. For example, a member of staff sits on parliamentary committees to further the interests of children and young people who are being adopted. Participation in policy making and legislative development is an exceptional strength of the agency.

Children placed for adoption are kept safe through careful prospective adopters' assessments. This helps to ensure that they are suitably matched and benefit from stable and secure placements. The service operates robust staff recruitment processes to ensure that only suitable people are employed to work with children and adults affected by adoption.

The service is very well managed by an experienced, qualified Registered Manager. She is well supported by the senior management team and the wider organisation. Although there have been staffing changes over the past year, the situation is now stable and the social work team is fully staffed. Staff are highly motivated and well supervised. They receive good quality training in order to continue their professional development.

Leaders and managers work effectively with other agencies in order to promote good outcomes for children and young people. The service actively seeks the views of children, young people and adopters to inform every aspect of its work.

There are is a regulatory shortfall in terms of written communication with prospective adopters, which is the subject of a new requirement. In one isolated example, there was an issue with the short timeframe provided for adopters to read and comment on their prospective adopters' reports. This situation had been resolved prior to the inspection.

There is a current shortfall in the recruitment information retained for panel members. Although the information was obtained initially, it is not all kept on file, as required by regulation. A further requirement has been made.

The service does submit notifications of significant events to Ofsted, but in one example, this had not been done in a timely manner. A recommendation has been made. The identified shortfalls in the service do not impact directly on children and young people.

Areas for 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 person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
25 (2005No389)	notify the prospective adopter that his application is to be referred to the adoption panel and give him a copy of the prospective adopter's report, inviting him to send any observations in writing to the agency within 10 working days, beginning with the date on which the notification is sent (Regulation 25 (8) Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)	15/11/2014
14 (2003No367)	ensure that a person working for the agency is fit to do so and that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to him in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 2. (Regulation 14 (3) and Schedule 2, Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies Miscellaneous Amendments Regulations 2003)	15/11/2014

Recommendations

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

- notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation. (NMS 29.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency specialises in finding appropriate placements for difficult to place children, and consequently, is not in control over the length of delay that some children may have experienced before referral. Children referred for placement often have highly complex physical, emotional or behavioural needs. The agency has a good track record of finding permanent placements for these children. For example, there has been only one disruption in the last 12 months, which is a low rate considering the complexity of the children's needs. The reasons for this disrupted placement are still under investigation, so it would not be appropriate to comment at this stage.

Children and young people of all ethnicities and backgrounds benefit from suitable placements, including some large sibling groups. For example, the agency recruited prospective adopters who took on a family group of five children. Through excellent collaborative work with the placing authority, these children have now been successfully adopted. Recently, the whole family were able to go on holiday to Florida, which shows that the children have made exceptional progress from their starting points.

Children who have had multiple previous foster placements or significant attachment issues are settling in their adoptive families. Some children who have serious developmental delay have flourished with their new families and have made extraordinary progress. For example, a four year old child, who until recently was unable to walk, has developed at a rapid rate since her placement and was happily showing the inspector how she performs somersaults.

Children feel safe and secure, which helps them to develop attachments to members of their new family. They receive all the help they need from healthcare professionals and social workers to promote their development in all areas. For example, one child has received therapeutic parenting sessions to help sustain the placement and enable them to attend mainstream school. Children benefit from the agency's ability to work closely with other agencies, such as child and adolescent mental health services.

Children have memory boxes and have life story material provided by the social worker from their own local authority. This helps to provide important historical information that will assist them in understanding their identity as they grow up.

Children benefit from clear contact arrangements with their siblings and other family members. They can access the service's contact suite and receive effective support to promote positive relationships with their birth families, when appropriate.

Children and adults who are seeking information to help them understand their history receive a responsive and sensitive service from skilled and experienced staff. Adults seeking information about birth family members receive very good support. Even when their searches do not reveal the information they are seeking, they receive sensitive counselling and advice to prepare them for all eventualities.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This service provides good quality, child-centred care to children and young people and a high standard of professional support to adults affected by adoption. Some elements of the agency's work are exceptionally strong; for example, their success in marketing the service and recruiting a diverse range of prospective adopters, and the service's involvement in research and legislative changes.

Social workers, and consequently children, benefit from high quality information from colleagues who specialise in interpreting legislation and developing practical policies. The agency is proactive in helping to shape future policy and legislation. The agency also takes part in national consultations which will impact on adopters and children. For example, in 2013, the service participated in the consultation on the fostering-for-adoption proposals and the introduction of the two-stage process for the assessment of prospective adopters.

The agency has achieved an excellence in customer service award over several successive years. Customer service has also been rated very highly on the agency's own questionnaire for post adoption support; this was rated 8.6 out of 10 over the parameters assessed. Adopters interviewed said that they had been welcomed to the agency and had received information in a timely manner. This view was reflected in the majority of the surveys received. One adopter said that 'the agency was friendly and welcoming.' Another commented; 'they have explained every step of the process very clearly and are very supportive.'

The service has a very effective marketing strategy. For example, there are skilled marketing personnel who use their abilities to advise and support the recruitment and communication needs of the service. The recruitment is targeted and managed in a professional manner.

Adopters varied in their perceptions of the assessment process. Most adopters were very happy with the service they received. One commented, 'we had an amazing social worker who was professional and stuck to her word, always following up, and ensuring we were comfortable with the process.'

Other adopters commented that the agency is 'open, caring, efficient, reliable, knowledgeable'; 'a very professional, speedy, caring, focused and dedicated service'; and 'the staff are very helpful and willing to share good practice'.

Prospective adopter reports (PARs) are very good, with clear evaluation. Social workers show great skill and sensitivity in drawing out areas for further discussion. The vast majority of adopters were happy with the contents of their report.

A small number of adopters found that their social workers did not always manage their time effectively. This led to one adoptive family having very little time to read their PAR and to write the adopters' submission to the matching panel. The agency is aware of the issues in this case and has addressed them, but there were, for a time, inconsistencies in the quality of service received by individual adopters. The manager explained that adopters do now receive their PARs in good time, but that they do not receive a letter with their report inviting them to send in their observations within 10 working days, in line with regulation. A requirement has been made.

Adopters said that the panel process was fair, business-like and well managed, with incisive and appropriate questions. There is effective, prompt feedback and timely decision-making. The agency decision maker confirms decisions within the required time scales.

The agency maintains a central list of panel members and holds two panel meetings per month. The panel chair confirmed that the assessment and panel processes, including social workers' reports and the meeting minutes, are clear and robust. She added that the agency is driving additional recruitment and striving to promote increasing diversity among adopters. For example, between October 2013 and March 2014, two single applicants, three heterosexual couples and two male same-sex couples were presented to the panel. Two prospective adopters were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The agency decision maker is a vastly experienced adoption practitioner. She has accepted all the panel's recommendations to date. All participants in the panel process, including prospective adopters, are routinely asked for feedback to help further improve the service.

The panel members receive regular training, held jointly with the social work team. For example, because the agency placed a large sibling group, one of the training days focused on the issues arising from this area of work. Panel members and social workers said that they found this day to be extremely instructive.

The adoption panel chair prepares good quality, incisive reports every six months to describe the work of the panel over that time period. Reports include statistical information and an assessment of panel's effectiveness. This enables the agency's managers to monitor and evaluate the panel's work and to act on any issues raised.

Adopters are advised during the preparation process that support is available to them after placement. The service has a good quality information leaflet which makes this service clear.

The agency passes onto adopters all the information received about children being placed for adoption. This ensures that adopters have all the knowledge they need on

which to abase an informed decision. A small minority of adopters did not feel that they received as much support as they would have liked in making a decision about a child, but the agency does provide all the information it receives.

The agency provides consultation meetings and training sessions as part of the preparation for adoption training. All families are now offered three play-based therapy sessions in the early stages of the placement.

Adopters and their children have access to post-adoption support. A member of the social work team assesses requests for a service. Adopters may be signposted to other services; for example, the South London Counselling Service and the Post Adoption Centre. Sometimes the adoption support worker provides individual sessions to help support the family. Adopters also have access to training which may help them to work through various stages in their child's life. For example, the adoption support service runs workshops on adolescence and on how to explain to children about their adoption.

Life story work is usually done by the placing authority social worker, but there are times when this is insufficient, particularly as the child grows and their need for information changes. The service trains adopters to equip them with many of the skills required for this complex area of work. If a situation were to arise when it was not appropriate or possible for the adopters to undertake this work, it would be done by a member of staff from the adoption team.

Any direct therapy required is provided by the agency's professional therapeutic parenting service. A qualified and experienced play therapist works with families at specific points during their adoption journey, to show parents how to play in a therapeutic manner. This empowers parents to provide increasingly skilled help to their own child and helps the whole family to make the necessary adjustments to home life. The service, which is funded by the BBC's Children in Need charity, is currently available for two days per week, but this will soon to be increased to three days. This will allow greater flexibility and ensure that all families receive some input. When adopters live a long distance from the service's offices, they may, after an assessment for their support needs, be offered a therapeutic service from another voluntary adoption agency, which is in closer proximity to their home.

Adopted adults and birth relatives also receive a sensitive, flexible service that responds to their unique individual needs. Many adults who were adopted as children refer themselves to the agency. There is effective information on the TACT website which shows all the former adoption agencies whose records are now managed by TACT. Most adults who request a service receive three sessions, which is usually sufficient to meet their needs.

An external, affiliated family researcher is used to trace information, for which there is a professional fee. Adult service users may be eligible for financial support under certain circumstances, to help ensure that the service is accessible to all. The service has achieved very beneficial results and has been able to set up reunion meetings to enable those affected by adoption to meet birth family members.

Adults who responded to the inspection survey said that they were happy with the outcome of their quest for information. One commented, 'fantastic in all respects!' Another service user said, 'TACT have been proactive about helping me obtain my adoption records and have contacted me to find out about how my enquiries are progressing and offer their help.' A third person praised the adoption support social worker, saying 'X...has been amazing. She has been very sensitive, helpful and supportive.' Other comments remarked on the service's prompt responses, and full replies to requests for information.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The service has had very few safeguarding issues and practice is generally good, but this outcome area has been rated as requiring improvement, due to shortfalls in panel members' recruitment information.

Adopters and staff confirm that they receive good quality training in child protection and wider safeguarding issues. This includes how to reduce the risks posed by electronic forms of communication and social networking.

Adopters are well prepared for the role, including how to protect children in their care. Children visited during the inspection are all settling in their placements and their interactions with prospective adopters showed that they feel safe in their family homes. Adopters receive good quality training on safe care practice, to help reduce the risks to children. They are aware of the issues around unsolicited contact through the internet and were clear how this would be managed if it were to arise.

The agency employs psychology and play therapy professionals who have considerable expertise in the impact of neglect and abuse on children's development and wellbeing; in particular, in the field of foetal alcohol syndrome and attachment. This professional advice and support is available to adopters to help them address the continuing physical and behavioural effects of trauma and abuse, which may change as children develop and begin to form attachments.

When children have contact with birth relatives, the agency ensures that there is a structure around these arrangements to help children remain safe. Adopters understand the need for children to be allowed to explore their developing physical skills through play and that sometimes, this will involve taking age-appropriate risks. This enables children to learn about their physical strengths and limitations, which ultimately increases their personal safety.

Children and young people know how to raise a concern with the agency and other organisations if they need to do so. Adopters are highly motivated to advocate for their children to ensure that their rights are respected and their needs are met. Adopters consider that their views are listened to and acted upon when appropriate.

There is a diverse staff team with minority ethnic representatives and employees from other countries of the world, although there are currently no male staff. The service is happy to recruit male staff, but has not received many applications from men. The agency has a good reputation for recruiting adopters from a wide range of ethnic minority groups, same sex couples and single people.

The service ensures that recruitment and selection of staff is a robust and effective process. Staff files seen were well managed and some minor issues were resolved during the inspection. Panel members' files do not meet regulatory requirements. For example, although all panel members had a Disclosure and Barring Service check, they had not been asked to complete an application form, but had submitted curriculum vitae (CVs). Some of the CVs recorded employment history in whole years, rather than months and years, which means that there is the potential to conceal substantial gaps.

Some panel members' files had no identity information on them, and some had references missing. Although the panel role does not involve direct contact with children, members have access to highly confidential information, so it is important that they are subject to the same rigorous checks as staff. The current process is insufficiently robust, so a requirement has been made.

The agency has demonstrated a strong commitment to children's safety through open, transparent and reflective practice. Staff are very well aware of child protection issues and understand the impact on children of historical abuse and neglect. On the rare occasions when safeguarding concerns have arisen, these have been responded to robustly, but with sensitivity in order to ensure that children are not moved precipitately.

The agency is responsive to children and adults who may disclose historical abuse, and ensures that any issues are managed correctly, in line with regulations. Staff involved in birth records counselling are well aware of the potential risks to service users and those with whom they seek contact. Safety of all parties is paramount in the delivery of any intermediary services.

The service has effective links with local authority safeguarding professionals, including the Local Authority Designated Officer, and other agencies who work together to deliver child protection services. When concerns about children have arisen, prompt liaison has helped to ensure that safeguarding measures are put in place quickly to help protect children.

This adoption service is a learning organisation that listens to any concerns raised by adopters, adult service users and children. Any issues raised are responded to and if necessary, changes are made to accommodate learning points.

There has been one disrupted placement in the last 12 months. This has been fully investigated and the service is aware of some issues arising from the case, but the report has not yet been issued. This means that when this inspection took place, the agency had not had the opportunity to respond to the conclusions and learning

points from this situation.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This service is very effectively managed by skilled, experienced people who have led the agency successfully through a long period of change and development. The service prides itself on developing positive relationships with other agencies in order to promote and maintain children's welfare and safety.

Senior managers and social workers interviewed confirmed that the service is constantly striving for improvement. Examples were given of how the agency has modified the structure of the preparation training in response to feedback from prospective adopters. There are effective systems in place for managers to monitor the conduct of the service. For example, managers oversee the progress of assessments, regularity of supervision and changing outcomes for children. The service has submitted its annual quality assurance data to Ofsted as required.

Senior leaders and managers make themselves available to staff and to adoptive families. One senior officer conducts annual surveys and also attends the summer picnic to speak in person with families.

Managers have identified the need to extend the scope of the adoption support service. They have obtained a grant from the Department for Education and have used some of the money to increase therapeutic service to three days per week, which will enable more families to benefit. The service also has plans to increase the number of minority ethnic adopters recruited, to meet the needs of a wider group of children.

The service is sufficiently well resourced to provide skilled and qualified social work support to adopters and adults affected by adoption. Although there have been some staffing changes since the last inspection, the service has recruited successfully and is now fully staffed. Newly-qualified staff are welcomed and effectively supported, and student placements are provided. This shows that the service plays a key role in developing a professional workforce.

The agency is exceptionally well managed to ensure that there are sufficient financial resources to support its work. There is currently a healthy budget and the service is managed creatively to support the adoption work with the fostering side of the agency.

The service has a clear and detailed Statement of Purpose, which covers all the areas required by regulation. Children have access to their own guide to adoption, which is available in different formats to suit individual young people's communication needs.

Staff confirmed that they receive good quality training and that their professional development is well supported. They receive regular, effective supervision from the

deputy team manager, according to their level of experience. There are arrangements in place for the manager to receive regular supervision from the responsible individual. Staff confirm that senior managers are very accessible and supportive to the team.

The service has very clear, detailed, secure records to ensure appropriately accessibility and confidentiality. The electronic system now in use is designed for adoption work and provides high quality management data to promote effective oversight of the services provided.

Notifications have been received from the service, but not always in a timely manner. One notification not submitted promptly involved a safeguarding situation that did not exactly match the wording of the regulatory schedule, which had led to a lack of clarity on the part of the service about whether or not it should be notified. This situation was discussed and remedied during the inspection. A recommendation has been made.

There were two recommendations at the last inspection, both of which have been addressed. Assessments of prospective adopters are now taking between three and four months to complete, which is a significant improvement on the situation at the last inspection. Prospective adopters are now encouraged to work in a child care capacity as part of the assessment process, to ensure that they have appropriate practical experience of looking after children.

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.