

TACT Adoption

The Adolescent and Children's Trust

T A C T, 1st Floor, Bayard Place, Broadway, Peterborough PE1 1FB

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT) is a registered charity whose work encompasses fostering and adoption in England, Scotland and Wales. A board of trustees manages the charity.

The voluntary adoption agency within TACT was established 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.

On 1 April 2017, TACT was chosen to operate Peterborough's permanency services (including adoption and fostering services) and moved its main offices to Peterborough. This partnership is a 10-year contract with a possible 10-year extension. The contract covers a range of permanency services, including family group conferencing services, placement-matching services, support services to children returning to their families, post-adoption and special guardianship order (SGO) support and SGO carer assessments. Peterborough already has a well-developed fostering for adoption service established, which TACT Peterborough continues to develop.

Geographically, the adoption agency still has offices in south and east London and remains part of the South London Adoption Consortium. The agency continues to recruit prospective adopters from the Greater London area, as well as within a 35-mile radius of Peterborough. The agency has specialist expertise in supporting children affected by foetal alcohol syndrome, and seeks to find permanency for children who are considered more difficult to place in families.

In the past year from 31 January 2017, TACT and TACT Peterborough have placed 29 children for adoption.

Inspection dates: 29 January to 2 February 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and parents are helped and protected good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers good

The voluntary adoption agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of previous inspection: 11 August 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is good because:

- Prospective adopters feel welcomed by this agency and say they receive a personal and individualised approach at the first contact and throughout their preparation, assessment and training. This helps adopters to feel valued, and often to return for second or even third time adoptions.
- The preparation and assessment of prospective adopters are consistently good and thorough. Adopters feel well prepared for the adoption or foster-for-adoption tasks, and children benefit from families who understand how their previous experiences can affect behaviours.
- Leaders and managers have a vision and a great passion for improving services to provide permanent placements for all children who are looked after. The current partnership between TACT and Peterborough shows their commitment to this service through a range of possible placements.
- Staff are experienced, committed and knowledgeable. They are passionate about the work they do and are well supported by regular supervision, psychological consultation and high-quality training.
- Children consistently make good progress in their adoptive families. Their health, educational and emotional needs are well met, and they receive prompt and targeted services when required.
- The adoption support offered is excellent. There is access to a range of services, which the agency puts into place immediately to support families when they face challenges. This approach helps to ensure that placement breakdown is rare.
- The work with adult service users is of high quality. These users include adopted

adults and their birth family members, as well as other birth relatives, through a commissioned arrangement with other agencies.

- Safeguarding is at the centre of practice. Staff understand their roles and responsibilities and take a collaborative approach to ensuring children's safety.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- The agency is finding different ways of seeking children's views. An area of development for the agency is to expand how children's views are collated and how they are used to develop and improve the service.

What does the voluntary adoption agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Ensure the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account by the adoption agency in monitoring and developing its service. ('Adoption: national minimum standards', 2014, page 11, paragraph 1.6)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The overall experiences and progress for all service users is good, and in some cases outstanding. Children placed for early permanence have a very positive experience that helps them to build early attachments and reduces the number of moves they may have to make. Adoption support packages are agreed and put in place very quickly, enabling families to have support when it is needed and not have to wait for services. Birth parents receive extremely good and sensitive support that helps them understand processes and have the best possible outcomes.

Children make good progress in stable and secure permanent placements. A big contributing factor to this is the competence and experience of the staff at the agency. In most cases, prospective adopters have the same workers throughout their adoption process, from assessment, through to family finding and the offering of post-adoption support. Social workers have specialist training in techniques such as Theraplay and Video-feedback intervention to promote positive parenting and sensitive discipline. These two approaches are preventative interventions, based on attachment theory, and have an excellent evidence base for preventing or reducing behavioural difficulties in children. Commissioned therapists and support workers offer a range of creative work with adopters and their children. Examples include therapeutic life-story work, filial therapy (training the adopter to be the play therapist) and therapeutic parenting in the home setting. This helps adopters to understand their children's emotional needs and manage presenting behaviours. Adopters feel supported to build and nurture strong and secure attachments with their children. All adopters spoken to were very positive about the support they received, making comments such as 'very accessible' and 'really positive'.

Managers and staff demonstrate a strong commitment to all service users. The sharing and learning from the partnership are strengthening the service, with different experiences and expertise coming together from both TACT and Peterborough. The agency advocates well with various professionals, on behalf of its service users. The partnership between TACT and Peterborough is helping in knowledge and planning for early permanence. The agency has access to information directly from Peterborough, to assist in early intervention and planning. Outside professionals report very positively on the partnership, which they say feels 'safer' and 'well organised'. The agency is involved in some creative and innovative practice, such as offering regular team and individual consultation sessions with a psychologist. The psychologist said that the agency feels like a 'good psychologically thinking service'. Further collaboration with the virtual school headteacher has seen two experienced adopters working on the steering group to support Peterborough schools to understand the needs of children who have early attachment and trauma difficulties. Partner agencies, other professionals and adopters all spoke very highly of the quality of the agency's work.

The agency recruits, assesses and prepares adopters extremely well for the adoption task. Adopters receive a good understanding of the needs of vulnerable children who have a high level of complex needs. Prospective adopter reports are comprehensive, well written and of a high quality. Adoption workers attend regular multi-professional family finding

meetings where the progress of children and adopters is discussed. This enables early and successful matching of children with adopters who can meet their needs. Fostering for adoption is a well-developed service, which allows children to move quickly, minimises multiple moves, helps early attachments and is child focused. The confidence, knowledge and experience of staff are supporting adopters to choose this service in the best interests of younger children.

Children benefit from many positive life experiences in their adoptive families, enjoying a range of activities and after-school clubs. Children develop new skills, gain confidence and learn social skills, as well as physically growing and developing. In addition, the agency provides quarterly annual events where adopters come together to socialise with their children. The agency runs a 'Stay and Play' group and adoption support groups, which help adopters build networks and prevent them from feeling isolated. Children learn to develop key relationships and build social support networks in the community.

Children's progress is regularly reviewed through the ongoing statutory supervision of placements. The agency works well with placing authorities, prospective adopters, foster carers and other professionals to ensure that children's views are ascertained and recorded. Although children's wishes and feelings are reflected through paperwork and are recorded in this way, it is less obvious how they are influencing practice and decision-making in the agency.

There are good arrangements in place for birth record counselling work, and although the agency does not generally offer intermediary services, it signposts service users to agencies who support this work. The agency commissions a counselling service for birth relatives, and the feedback on this service is overwhelmingly positive. For example, some service users stated that the counselling helped to 'reduce anxiety' and made them feel 'more confident' and that they can 'change behaviours'. Overall, they felt that the process had 'increased their understanding', and they report that the referral process is 'easy to use' and the outcomes are good.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

The agency puts a high emphasis on protecting children and safeguarding them from harm in their adoptive/permanence placements. Adopters are helped to understand the types of neglect and abuse that children may have suffered in the past, and how this may manifest in their present behaviours.

The agency's social workers are experienced and knowledgeable, and have a high level of understanding about the behaviours children may present. They also have good information about children's backgrounds that helps them to advise prospective adopters about what they might expect. Access to this information also helps ensure good matching with carers' capabilities.

Social workers offer high levels of support throughout the planning, matching and introduction of children into their adoptive families. This allows the provision of early adoption support to help prospective adopters to understand their children's needs further,

and provides them with strategies to cope.

Because supporting social workers are experienced, they recognise when prospective adopters are struggling to cope and can quickly offer additional support, help or monitoring to prevent placements from being disrupted.

Prospective adopters receive extensive carer training through the usual information evenings, discussions, reading and a preparation course. In addition, they are able to access specific and additional training, such as on foetal alcohol syndrome, around the risks of child sexual exploitation and on attachment and trauma training.

Children are protected through the safe recruitment practice of the agency when it employs social workers, therapists, panel members and prospective adopters. Staff recruitment processes are robust and all checks are undertaken prior to people having any access to children. These checks include enhanced disclosure and barring checks, identity checks, and health and reference checks.

The agency has a comprehensive safeguarding policy for children and for vulnerable adults. It is a clear and comprehensive document, which covers all aspects of safeguarding processes. It indicates responsibilities within the agency and includes a whistle-blowing policy for staff in the event that they have concerns about any practice. There are helpful flow charts that help to guide staff through the process, depending on what scenario they are dealing with. There are close links between the agency and the designated officer for safeguarding in Peterborough, and with the child protection services and the Peterborough safeguarding children board. Social work staff spoken to were aware of their roles and responsibilities in safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, and knew the process if they had concerns about children or vulnerable adults outside of the area.

The agency operates a 24/7 duty service for all prospective adopters and carers. This system is set up to offer advice and support on all issues faced by carers, including safeguarding issues. Leaders and managers as well as Peterborough's out-of-hours emergency duty service are available as back-up support to the staff operating this system.

The agency has a clear and comprehensive complaints policy and procedure in place, which are available on the agency website. Adopters report in a survey that the agency listens to their concerns, although complaints to the agency are minimal.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency has strong and progressive leaders and managers who are suitably qualified and very experienced in adoption practice. Leaders and managers have an ambitious vision for children and expect them to achieve. They are clear that this vision is only achievable through good work preparing, training and supporting carers, who they view as their most valuable asset.

Leaders and managers place high priority on meeting the needs of children who require

permanent placements. Their ambition and drive to support this is evident through a number of initiatives. These include the current partnership between TACT and Peterborough, developing the fostering for adoption service, developing staff to provide excellent adoption support services and commissioning other agencies to provide counselling for birth relatives.

TACT and Peterborough have both been through a major transition. This model of partnership is innovative practice and the first of its kind. TACT and Peterborough have committed to a 10-year contract with a positive initiative to protect and develop children's permanency services. The overview is to develop wider services for permanency, regardless of the order in which children's care is provided. This inspection is focused on the adoption aspect of permanence, but acknowledges the broader approach which staff, along with leaders and managers, are currently developing.

Staff have been through many changes in the past year; however, the changes and subsequent transition have been managed well. Staff surveys and views expressed through this inspection have reflected anxiety about the changes and the transition. Despite this, staff feel that leaders and managers managed this transition well and listened to workers' views. The workforce has remained relatively stable in terms of workers, managers and practitioners. Staff spoken to felt well supported through supervision, training and appraisal. Many staff expressed a higher level of respect, nurture and care through working in a voluntary, charitable organisation, and this has raised feelings of being valued and cared for. Staff have also seen the positives of the partnership for their own training and learning opportunities, but mainly for the sharing of professional knowledge and the improvements they anticipate for practice going forwards. One staff member said, 'The last year has been tough, but I now feel optimistic and excited about the future.'

London staff recognise that there is more impact on them in terms of travel, for panel, family-finding meetings and alternating supervisions. Some staff left prior to the transition, which did leave the London operations short-staffed. The main concern was losing support, expertise and identity. The ethos, values and identity of TACT remain strong, however. Second-time adopters are returning, and some adopters spoken to on this inspection confirmed that they had been recommended to use TACT, or were returning adopters. New referrals from London are picking up again, which helps widen the pool of adopters in terms of diversity and geography. Historically, TACT's brand has been to place sibling groups, children with more specialist needs and children who are considered harder to place.

Managers feel that senior managers are supportive. Management development is good, with the offer of reflective supervision training. The operations manager is very well respected and knowledgeable in the field of adoption/permanency work. She and some other workers have specialist knowledge of inter-country adoption and can support those referrals which come into the agency. All the leaders and managers are well qualified and experienced. Some of the managers feel they are having to upskill quickly to respond to the new team structure and approach, but feel well supported in this through training, mentoring and supervision.

Monitoring of the service is good. There are two systems in place. Peterborough continues to audit adoption cases on a small inspection basis. Aspects of this work inform the agency action plan. The other system is via supervision and audits on files, where quality is considered on a monthly basis. The panel also gives feedback on the quality of reports via the agency adviser.

Despite the upheaval of the partnership and transition process, there have been 29 placements made since 1 April 2017. Although it is hard to say where TACT and Peterborough start and finish, overall, leaders and managers feel that although recruitment dropped, particularly in London, they exceeded targets for placements. Leaders and managers state that now the partnership is established, they are developing recruitment in London and ensuring that they keep second-time adopters and widen placement opportunities for all children. The agency is still part of the South London Consortium and continues to train and hold regular events for adopters in London.

Multi-agency working is good and networks are strong. This was evident at a launch event during the inspection, where many partners came to hear about the services the partnership could offer. Staff say that it has become easier to put resources in place earlier and to get agreements on funding quicker. Experienced workers can think more progressively and are confident to try new approaches. There are also good links with other adoption and adoption-support agencies, where specialist training (non-violent resistance) and birth relative work is commissioned. Where more specialist help is required, the links with Peterborough ensure prompt referrals and assessment for services via the adoption support fund.

The agency has updated its statement of purpose to reflect the changes with the partnership, and this is available on the website. There is also a children's guide, accessible in different formats for different ages, which explains to children the work of the agency.

Leaders and managers value difference and actively promote diversity and equality in placements for children. TACT has historically placed many children who are considered hard to place, and has specialised in seeking families for children from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, and where children come from large sibling groups or have quite specialised needs. The agency approves many same-sex and single carers and values the diversity of placement options this brings for children.

The agency's panel works effectively and promotes safe, secure and stable placements. The panel provides excellent feedback to the agency, and is another safety net and quality assurance tool. The panel members are diverse, committed and very experienced. They also receive regular training, support and appraisals.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children, young people and adults. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children, young people and adults. They watched how professional staff work

with children, young people, adults and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families, and adult service users. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the voluntary adoption agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children, young people and adults whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards.

Voluntary adoption agency details

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