

PAC-UK

Inspection report for adoption support agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman
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Date of last inspection	15/01/2015

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Service information

Brief description of the service

PAC-UK Ltd is a charitable company limited by guarantee. It is a recently merged adoption support agency, formerly PAC and After Adoption Yorkshire, with offices in London and Leeds and outreach bases in a number of local authorities. It is registered to provide adoption support services to both adults and children, including birth records counselling and intermediary services. The range of services offered include a telephone help and advice line, counselling, therapeutic work, training, and education support. Some aspects of the service do not require to be registered under adoption support legislation, for example, viability assessments for the court, and are therefore not part of this inspection.

The agency employs 47 staff, 32 of whom are part time, 20 sessional staff and 14 volunteers. During the year January to December 2014 the agency provided 1529 packages of adoption support, 1364 of which were funded by local authorities. Additionally it provided a telephone advice service to 2653 service users and 65 training sessions to professionals and adopted adults/adoptive parents.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **outstanding**.

This is an outstanding adoption support agency overall. Many of its service users, particularly children and families, experience exceptionally positive outcomes, over and above what could be expected, given their complex circumstances. There is a high level of user satisfaction with the service, and any dissatisfaction is promptly addressed. One service user commented: 'I cannot underestimate how important this agency has been to our family.' An adopter commented: 'The support we have received over a number of years has been consistently brilliant.' Exceptionally knowledgeable, committed and experienced staff are well led by a strong and effective leadership team, who in turn are governed by a board of trustees who provide good challenge to all aspects of the service.

The agency provides a safe service because it is committed to ensuring staff are well

versed in safeguarding procedures and have regular training to keep their knowledge and skills up to date in this area. Robust monitoring of safeguarding concerns ensures issues are dealt with promptly and appropriately. Good working relationships with relevant partner agencies further support safe practice.

Effective monitoring and evaluation take place at every level to ensure that the service is constantly reviewed to drive improvement. There is excellent partnership working with local authorities, who comment on the agency's flexibility and responsiveness to need. It is keen to develop services to meet the needs of those whose lives have been touched by adoption. This is particularly evident in the education project, the work with birth parents, the young people's forum and the extensive training programme. One adopter commented: 'The training has made a substantial difference to my understanding of my child.'

Leaders and managers are innovative, flexible and passionate about delivering a service of high quality. The agency is committed to service user involvement in influencing service delivery at all levels, be that directly or through commissioning arrangements.

Outcomes for service users

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

Service users are very clear about the purpose of the service which they are receiving. There is good, comprehensive written information in a variety of leaflets, supplemented by ongoing discussion throughout the intervention. Comments from adopters include: 'our views were integral to the whole process'; 'they listened to what we had to say and understood the issues very well'; 'it was everything we wanted'; 'they were non-judgemental'; and, 'they did it very much at our pace.' If children and young people are reluctant to take part, the very skilful therapists usually manage to engage and work with them by creatively using their interests as starting points.

Most service users are extremely positive about the service they receive. The training programme is very highly regarded, as is the advice line, the outreach service and the therapeutic support with families. They use words like 'fantastic', 'amazing', and 'invaluable'. The impact of the high quality support is outstanding in most cases. The intervention is instrumental in keeping families together, many of whom are at real risk of experiencing a disruption and are at breaking point. Some families commented, 'they saved us', 'they made a massive difference', and, 'they have enabled us to start again as a family.' Adopters comment about significant improvements for their children in areas such as concentration, educational engagement and achievement, self-regulation, behaviour and calmness. One young person said, 'they made me normal.' Another, when asked to give the service marks out of 10 said, 'a million. A ten is too low.' Most adult service users feel they have had beneficial outcomes through being listened to and understood, helping them at a very vulnerable time. One commented, 'life-changing support was received', and another said, 'my counsellor has a wealth of experience and I have benefited from

this.'

The agency is also involved with non-consenting birth parents, some of whom are serving prison sentences. The outcomes of the work undertaken with these service users, particularly in relation to assistance with contact arrangements, are extremely positive. Birth parents have been enabled to write appropriate letters, in some cases for the first time, and have been supported in face-to-face contacts, all of which have had beneficial outcomes, particularly for the children, as it enables them to have an understanding of their heritage and maintain a realistic sense of their family of origin.

The agency has recently taken over a project involving adopted teenagers to further enhance their contribution to influencing the delivery of adoption support services. This includes an online chat room and 'rant line', supported by a project worker. A stakeholder commented: 'The ease with which the agency understood what we wanted and worked with it was very helpful.'

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **outstanding**.

All ongoing adoption support work is based on a very thorough assessment. This informs a clear plan which is shared with the service user and family at the outset. The needs of everyone are fully taken into account, for example, if there are birth children in the family, or if the adoptive parents are identified as needing some individual therapeutic work. Technology is also used in a creative way to meet the needs of some service users who may not easily be able to access the service otherwise.

The service is delivered by extremely knowledgeable, professional and skilful staff who bring a range of experience and therapeutic approaches to the interventions. The service is promptly delivered, and where this has not been possible due to funding or commissioning arrangements, the agency has adopted a proactive approach to bring about change. For example, the number of outreach surgeries has been increased in one location due to increased demand which was bringing about delay. Comprehensive reports are written for local authorities, clearly outlining why particular work is needed and the outcomes it is hoped to achieve. Service users have commented that staff try to accommodate their wishes as to timing and venue, although it is not always possible. Feedback from commissioners is positive; they comment that the agency tries to fit people in to outreach surgeries as soon as possible in urgent situations and that they respond quickly.

The agency is committed to using up-to-date research, as well as service user views, to inform its practice. This is particularly evident in its training programme which is delivered to local authority practitioners as well as adopters. It has recently developed training in non-violent resistance following research on child-to-adult violence in adoptive families. Its work with birth parents is similarly informed by recent research in the field. The agency has also responded to service user demand

in establishing groups, for example, for those families who no longer have their adopted children living with them.

The agency has also been involved in delivering an education project, as a result of research on educational outcomes for looked after and post-looked-after children. This was also driven by adopters, most of whom consider educational difficulties in their adopted children's lives to be a particularly significant issue. The feedback from adopters and schools has been dramatic; for example, one headteacher commented, 'It completely changed our practice and how we view the needs of adopted children.' Another stakeholder commented: 'It was a brilliant project, we are thrilled to bits. They were wonderful to work with and exceeded our expectations.' The agency has also established a telephone education advice line and developed a good practice guide for schools as a result of feedback from this project.

Safeguarding

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The agency provides a safe service for all who are involved with or use its services. Prior to receiving a service, all service users receive written information about the limits of confidentiality and the agency's approach to safeguarding concerns, both current and historic, so they are clear about what to expect. Children and young people are given the guide to adoption support at the start of the work so they have information about other agencies they can contact if they have any concerns, as well as how to make a complaint.

Understanding the impact of early abuse, neglect and trauma is a fundamental part of the work undertaken with families and underpins the whole ethos. One adopter commented: 'It has made a huge difference to understanding what is going on and why.'

Safeguarding is central to the work of the agency. A senior member of staff is the named lead for safeguarding and monitors any complaints, concerns or allegations to ensure the correct procedures are followed to protect service users, children and young people. They are also the link with local statutory bodies such as the Local Safeguarding Children Board, which has approved the safeguarding procedures. Safeguarding is seen in its broadest sense and includes issues such as potential self-harm, historical abuse and concern about mental health issues. Good liaison with relevant partners ensures service users, children and young people are protected.

The agency uses rigorous recruitment procedures to ensure all staff are safe and competent to work with vulnerable people, children and young people. This includes mandatory registration with their relevant professional bodies. Staff are guided by clear, comprehensive and accessible policies and procedures and on-going training to keep them abreast of recent developments and support their knowledge and competence. They demonstrate a robust knowledge of the issues and their roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the adoption support agency are **outstanding**.

The agency is led and managed by people with a passion to deliver the best service possible through continual reflection, evaluation and improvement. They are responsive to the needs of the sector, strive to be innovative and creative, and keep fully abreast of all the developments in the field of adoption through membership of national bodies such as the Adoption Leadership Board and the Consortium of Adoption Support Agencies. The recent merger with another existing adoption support agency was driven by the desire to share best practice, respond to demands and develop new projects. This is already having an impact, for example, with improved training in the north and a more effective database in the south. Staff comment that the agency is 'well steered' and that senior managers have 'energy and vision'.

The staff are similarly committed and passionate about the work they do. One member of staff commented: 'I feel privileged to work in this field.' They are highly skilled, knowledgeable, reflective and professional, and come from a range of disciplines such as social work, counselling and psychotherapy. They are committed to their own professional development and are keen to undertake advanced training to improve their knowledge, skills and competence. The staff feel fully supported by the agency through formal regular supervision as well as group and clinical supervision of a very high quality. This gives them a real insight into their work, enables honest reflection and provides alternative strategies to use when considering complex cases. Good administrative support and improved procedures further enhance the service delivery.

Three recommendations were raised at the last inspection of the service, all of which have been fully addressed. There is now a children's guide for two different age ranges which makes the information more accessible for younger children. Management arrangements have been improved and the policies have been reviewed and amended to give better guidance to staff. The agency has also developed its services in many other ways. It has improved its administrative and recording systems significantly by developing its electronic database. This makes booking of outreach appointments far more effective which has addressed some of the feedback raised regarding this. It also results in information being far more accessible, such as data on outcomes, feedback, and a whole range of other areas, to improve monitoring. The range of training has been extended and is of a very high quality, covering very recent developments and research. The education project has been very positive and innovative, delivering excellent outcomes, and has now been extended due to its success.

The agency has comprehensive and robust quality assurance processes which drive improvement. Everyone using its services is asked for feedback, and anything that suggests dissatisfaction, even if it is not a formal complaint, is followed up. Feedback has led to changes of venue for outreach appointments, improvements in the advice line telephone system, increased opening hours for the advice line and more

consistency through the employment of fewer sessional staff. Leaders and managers demonstrate a genuine desire to improve and develop the service so it delivers outstanding outcomes with a high level of user satisfaction.

Another area of improvement is the governance which is now more robust and able to provide more challenge to the agency. The new board of trustees, as well as having a wide range of personal experience of adoption, also offers skills such as accountancy and professional experience of working in social care. Reporting arrangements have been well thought out so that the practice subgroup will consider outcomes in detail and feed this into the full board meeting. Its financial viability is also regularly monitored by the resources subgroup, so that the agency continues to be financially viable, to ensure service users experience continuity of service.

The agency has excellent and effective relationships with the local authorities who commission its services. Commissioners comment about its flexibility, its 'can do' attitude, its responsiveness and transparency. Comments include: 'it works incredibly well'; 'it makes a helpful and active contribution to the consortium'; 'they listen to us'; 'we are really pleased with the service and it delivered over and above what was asked for'; 'they make the best use of resources for the benefit of the service users'; and 'the reports deliver exactly what we want.'

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 and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

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 adoption support agencies.