

Post-Adoption Centre

Inspection report for Adoption Support Agency

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| Unique reference number | SC066981 |
| Inspection date | 03/02/2011 |
| Inspector | Rossella Volpi / Wilfried Maxfield |
| Type of inspection | Key |

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

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| Outstanding: | this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality |
| Good: | this aspect of the provision is strong |
| Satisfactory: | this aspect of the provision is sound |
| Inadequate: | this aspect of the provision is not good enough |

Service information

Brief description of the service

PAC was established in 1986 to provide an adoption support service to all those touched by adoption. It operates from the main premises in Kentish Town in London. PAC has service level agreements with 30 local authorities across the South East of England, 13 of which have locally based counselling surgeries.

The three main areas of the service, which are the adult service, the child and family service and the training service, are each led by a manager, responsible to the chief executive officer, who is also the Registered Manager. The functioning of PAC is overseen by a board of seven trustees. The chairperson of the board is the representative of the Registered Provider.

Over the last twenty five years the service has grown and developed to offer the following range of specialised services:

- Comprehensive children and families therapeutic services which include: parent consultations; family consultations; comprehensive family assessments, including assessment and mediation of complex contact arrangements; intensive therapeutic family work, with specific expertise in working with black and multiracial families; intensive therapeutic parent work; contact and mediation work.
- A telephone help and advice line open to the public and professionals in the UK or overseas.
- Advice and practical support to those who are searching for family members.
- Intermediary services to assist birth relatives and adopted adults.
- Independent support and advice for birth relatives where there is a plan for adoption.
- Counselling for those who are suffering the trauma of having lost a child to adoption.
- Independent counselling, support and advice for adopted adults.
- The opportunity for young people to enter into direct work.
- Training events relating to all aspects of permanency.
- Groups for all parties to adoption.
- Schedule 2 services.
- Counselling to women in HMP Holloway whose children have been lost to adoption or other permanent placements.
- Counselling to those seeking to find information about their adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is not judged.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is not judged.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is not judged.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection. This was a key, announced inspection that assessed all the outcome areas relevant to adoption support agencies. Service users and referral agencies participated in the inspection by means of verbal and written feedback.

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What the service does well

The service is conducted to the great satisfaction of service users and commissioning authorities. There is huge respect for the staff, including management and trustees, with some local authorities referring to PAC as the experts in their field.

There is an excellent training strategy and delivery of courses for service users, staff and professionals.

There is thorough, realistic and honest appraisal of all aspects of the service. Management, including trustees, are involved in the development of a highly effective service and are always looking at ways to improve, based on research, evaluation and, from more recently, feed-back from service users.

Staff are highly loyal and dedicated to the service and praise the level of formal and informal support and guidance from management and peers.

There is a culture of caring and sensitivity and also provision of a safe environment for service users.

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What has been improved since the last inspection

The previous inspection report, of June 2006, details one action and six recommendations, which have all been acted upon. A number of these relate to personnel files, which have been reviewed and the records of vetting and recruitment of staff are now excellent, thus demonstrating sound practices. Other recommendations relate to policies and procedures. Since the previous inspection all policies and procedures have been reviewed more than once and a number of services changed or expanded. Overall PAC is guided by sound written policies, although a new recommendation is made following this inspection.

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What they could do better

Recommendations raised from this inspection relate to record keeping, policies and prompt recruiting into a management vacancy.

Additionally, both staff and commissioning authorities consider that administrative support is no longer sufficient; this is being addressed by management.

Service users spoke about the difficulties experienced in getting through the advice lines and the waiting time for accessing services at the locally held surgeries. PAC is addressing the issues regarding the advice lines with an extended service starting imminently. Management is prompt in bringing to the attention of the local authorities difficulties encountered by users when the services commissioned are not enough to meet their needs well.

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Statement of purpose

The provision is good.

Service users and commissioning agencies are informed of the service that is provided because there is a clear Statement of Purpose that describes this. It outlines PAC's mission, its corporate objectives and how these are achieved or will be achieved.

The board of trustees approves the statement on an annual basis or when it has been updated.

All those working in the adoption support agency are aware of the content of the statement, which is linked to a five year strategic development plan, recently completed and to which all staff and board members have contributed.

There is a comprehensive range of policies and written guidance for staff, consistent with the Statement of Purpose. Not all policies are written in a way that is consistently clear; for example, the complaints policy's reference to the role of Ofsted is ambiguous, while the safeguarding policy is not always explicit regarding what is required of staff and what is discretionary. However, this has not affected staff's understanding of their responsibilities; furthermore the policies are being reviewed and the language amended when needed.

There is an informative children's guide, to help them understand what the service offers, that has been completed in consultation with children and young people. In developing the guide, the intention was that it would be a basis for discussion with the children, mainly by the family and then by the agency and the family together, rather than just handing it out. The guide, however, is not particularly geared to younger children, who may also use the service.

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Safeguarding and promoting welfare
 The provision is outstanding.

PAC makes an excellent contribution to safeguarding people affected by adoption who use the agency and to promoting their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. There has continued to be a high level of commitment, knowledge and skills amongst the staff group regarding all relevant areas of safeguarding. PAC ensures that staff are confident and competent to manage safeguarding issues by guiding them well with appropriate policies for responding to suspicion or allegations of abuse, training and management supervision.

Service users report a very high degree of feeling safe with PAC, confident of the skills of their workers and at ease with the environment

Commissioning authorities praise PAC for their ability to work in partnership with them, the transparency of their work and the quality of communication on any safeguarding matter. They mention staff's excellent knowledge of procedural questions with specific needs of families and children in mind. They say that they are completely satisfied on how individual cases have being handled.

Additionally, in a context of very good practice generally, there is evidence that the service has made an excellent contribution to render situations safer for a significant number of users. For example: it has prevented disruptions; supported all parties through allegations; contributed to enable women to parent successfully babies from subsequent pregnancies; it has successfully engaged users with a long history of distrust of professionals, thus enabling support through change, enhancing self-esteem and confidence.

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User focused services

The provision is outstanding

PAC has continued to provide an excellent service that is appropriate, tailored and sensitive to the needs of all its users. The feedback received from users, as well as the professional documentation, demonstrate the excellent outcomes from the intervention, which are also confirmed by the commissioning authorities.

PAC welcomes all prospective service users and shows active interest and respect for ethnic origin, culture, language, sexuality or disability. PAC has developed a specific interest and expertise in offering services to black and minority ethnic families. Users from a range of different backgrounds consider that they have been treated with respect, welcomed without prejudice and that 'the level of warmth was extraordinary'.

They report on the quality of the service and the effectiveness with comments such as: 'the professionals are outstanding'; 'the advice was life saving'. Overall users strongly convey their satisfaction with the service and the high esteem they hold both for the agency as a whole and for their individual workers. For example, they said: 'It is the place to get really professional help'; 'the level of counselling is unparalleled; 'they have an invaluable insight into the issues'.

PAC aims to offer services to users as promptly as possible. Where there are waiting lists, PAC informs service users of these. Generally waiting happens because of the level of provision that commissioning authorities are able to fund; PAC is active in advocating on behalf of users who may need more or different services.

All users who access face-to-face services and training events are asked to give feedback. PAC has a number of specific evaluation questionnaires that are being used to appraise and review the service.

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Service delivery

The provision is outstanding.

PAC has continued to deliver an excellent service to all users, which is professional and is based on their assessed needs. The highly specialised therapeutic service for adopted children and their families has resulted in some measurable changes in

families, as discussed above in the report, in the section entitled: 'User-Focused Services'.

Users are well informed about what is available because PAC has an extensive collection of publicity leaflets to advertise its various services. Service users are also made aware of their right to request an adoption support assessment from their local authority and PAC advocates on their behalf when needed. Furthermore, due to the extensive number of contracts that PAC has with local authorities, PAC can offer an initial, free of charge consultation session to many people who use their advice line. This benefits users as they receive an initial assessment of need, as well as being able to explore service provision in a face to face session.

The service is delivered by very experienced and highly skilled counselling staff, led by competent management. The diversity of service provision allows for exchanges between staff members that increase awareness of the complexities involved in adoption placements. This, in turn, enhances staff's expertise and sensitivity towards specific service users, as well as flexibility with regard to counselling various groups.

Commissioning authorities have great respect for the way the agency delivers its services, referring to PAC as very established, reputable and doing excellent work. They commented, for example, that PAC gives excellent value for money and that they receive good feedback from users, especially on how skilled and nurturing they have found individual workers. Authorities report that the surgery sessions have a positive and high impact on service users; they say also that intensive family intervention work is excellent, has helped with severe family crisis and prevented placement breakdown. The work with schools and different teachers was rated as 'absolutely outstanding'. Commissioning authorities' social workers praise the training courses provided by PAC, that they have attended.

Commissioning authorities confirm that they receive the feedback they request about service delivery from PAC, but it is not always given in a way that they find useful.

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Fitness to provide or manage an adoption support agency
The provision is outstanding.

The arrangements for the recruitment of managers are robust and well geared to ensure that those appointed are suitable people to be delivering adoption support services.

The agency is managed, provided and monitored by professionals who are skilled and qualified for their position; they are highly knowledgeable, with some being well known and authoritative figures on a wide range of adoption matters. This is attested by the commissioning authorities and some referred to PAC as the experts in their field.

Overall the leadership and management of the agency have remained excellent, with the chief executive and the trustees having continued to deliver a service that is

highly rated by users and commissioners.

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Management of the adoption support agency
The provision is outstanding.

The management of the agency is excellent and well contributes to the provision of an outstanding, innovative and professional service to children, adults and families. There is a five year strategic plan with a range of ambitious initiatives for development, thus demonstrating the trustees and senior management's commitment to an agenda of continuous review and improvement, consistent with the changing needs of users and the findings from new research.

There are well established and strong means to monitor all aspects of the agency's work. The trustees have ultimate control, but the day to day management is delegated to the chief executive. The level of delegation to all staff is clear as are the lines of accountability, including in the absence of the chief executive and of the chair of the board. Policies and procedures clearly identify how all aspects of PAC's work are controlled, including the performance criteria.

All with a legitimate interest are informed of charges for services and receive itemised accounts. Board members are kept informed and satisfy themselves that PAC remains compliant with all requirements of registration. Arrangements with commissioning agencies are clear. There are arrangements in place in respect to all staff, managers, trustees and volunteers to declare conflict of interests.

PAC has recently involved an external specialist organisation in the development of governance and leadership across the board and the senior management team.

There is consensus amongst staff that the appointments of the chief executive and of the chair of the board have brought a heightened level of stability to PAC; while the appointments of a treasurer and sub groups of the board have strengthened its governance.

Staff also made comments, in relation to senior management, such as, for example: 'The agency is in very capable hands, we are well guided and it is a good feeling'. 'PAC does some of the best training I have come across'. 'Senior management has the energy and the drive to reassure us that we will continue to excel, despite the insecurities brought by the present financial market'.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. There is very good attention to equalities in all aspects of service delivery and recruitment. For example, PAC provides training to staff, professionals working in post-adoption and service users on equality and diversity relating to adoption support matters. They subscribe to a range of newsletters from organisations that represent minority groups in order to keep abreast of developments and new initiatives. Initiatives such as the counselling to women in prison, now to be expanded, are geared at empowering a socially

excluded group and at supporting women to achieve the confidence and strengths which would be essential for them to successfully parent children from subsequent pregnancies. Pac has led in providing services to black and minority ethnic adopted children and their families and their training pack continues to be purchased by professionals.

An issue was raised in relation to training and specifically that the session was not well geared to the needs of single adopters, gay or lesbian people. PAC is considering this. It has revised its user evaluation forms for workshops and training, to incorporate more appropriate questions regarding equality and diversity.

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Employment and management of staff and volunteers
The provision is outstanding.

There are good recruitment practices to ensure both suitability to work with vulnerable groups and competency for the tasks. The records of vetting procedures are clear and kept very well, thus aiding safeguarding as ensuring that the risk of important information being overlooked is minimal.

Thorough performance management ensures the right degree of challenge and review so that performance is properly and objectively assessed.

The agency encourages retention by providing excellent support and training opportunities. Staff have access to flexible working conditions and regular supervision. Workloads are carefully monitored.

Overall staff, managers and trustees are highly qualified and experienced, with some exceptionally skilled personnel, involved in research and in pioneering ways of delivering services and measuring effectiveness.

The level of commitment, enthusiasm and professionalism conveyed by all staff is impressive. This has been echoed by service users and commissioning authorities, all pointing out to the excellence of the quality of work.

The shortfalls in the way supervision sessions or other work conducted are recorded are being addressed, as discussed below in the area entitled: 'Records'.

There are proper contingency plans in place regarding the management vacancy for head of adult services. However, there have been some delays in successfully recruiting to the post permanently and, if this continues, it would impact on the ability of PAC to drive some of the excellent strategies in place for change and improvement.

Staff consider that the quality of the work by individual administrators supporting them is good and there are some efficient systems in place to aid management of information. However, with the expansion of work the level of administrative support is no longer considered enough and there is a risk of this impacting on service

delivery. PAC has now employed one more administrative staff, although the person has not yet started.

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Complaints and representations

The provision is good.

PAC acknowledges complaints and comments to be an important means to learn and improve and the small number of complaints received was handled sensitively and thoroughly. All complaints are monitored by the chief executive and the trustees to consider emerging trends, if any.

The agency has a clear and easily accessible complaints and representations policy that is implemented in practice.

Overall, service users are confident in raising issues and the fact that they have not complained indicates that they are generally satisfied, as opposed to not feeling able to raise concerns. However, PAC is reviewing leaflets and information and alerting users to this, to ensure that all users, but particularly the ones who have started receiving a service a long time ago, remain aware and confident about their rights of raising concerns or dissatisfactions. The agency is also exploring ways to better enable children to complain.

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Records

The provision is good.

Records are stored appropriately, they are maintained and retained mostly in accordance with the expectations of the law and good practice guidelines. This continues to ensure that sensitive information about service users is kept confidential and records reflect the work that has been undertaken by the agency.

There are written policies and procedures on case recording that are clear to staff about the expectations of content, confidentiality and storage.

Personnel files are maintained for each member of staff; files were audited in the last year and the records kept are now excellent. There are also good records kept of matters such as complaints, compliments or comments, thus aiding the gathering of service users' feedback.

There are good letters to local authorities informing them of service users' presenting problems; of PAC service offered to date; of additional services that PAC, or where appropriate another agency, could offer and of the fees for these services.

All referrals and subsequent contacts with service users are entered into a database for monitoring purposes and to feedback to local authorities.

Managers know that records must be fit for purpose and there has been auditing and much discussion recently on how to improve records to ensure that all are consistently good. PAC is aware that having such a complex performance management system requires a level of recording that they are still working towards achieving, in some areas. For example, case discussion notes are increasingly being put on the client's file following supervision, but the recording of sessions at times is too brief and some recent hand-written entries remain that are not clearly legible. Some other hand-written supervision and case records are not easily legible also, although this is partly mitigated by clear and typed summaries and typed staff appraisals.

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Premises

The provision is good.

The premises used by PAC are suitable for providing the range of services as set out in their Statement of Purpose. The premises have recently been added to and now meet the needs of staff and service users well.

The work of staff is well supported by appropriate equipment and an information technology system, which is operated with due regard to confidentiality and the need for the secure retention of records.

PAC also uses outreach premises in a number of authorities which commission local surgeries, so as to make services easier to get to for people living in those locations. Additionally, as part of their commitment to equality of opportunities, PAC explores alternatives, when needed, to ensure accessibility for all, including those with restricted mobility.

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Financial requirements

The provision is good.

PAC takes a robust approach to monitoring its financial processes and systems and carrying out the service in a manner likely to ensure it has sufficient funds to fulfil its obligations.

The agency has accounting systems in place to maintain good scrutiny of finance and to make senior management clear of financial viability. For example, the accounts are scrutinised by the trustees and are audited externally on an annual basis.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- review the children's guide, policies and procedures to ensure that all are unambiguous and the guide is suitable for all children using the service (NMS 1).
- ensure prompt recruitment into the management vacancy (NMS 11).
- ensure that all records are consistently fit for purpose and that all entries in records are legible (NMS 17 and NMS 20)