

Coram Adoption East Midlands

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Coram Adoption East Midlands is a branch of Coram, a voluntary adoption agency whose main office is based in central London. It recruits, prepares and approves adopters for domestic adoption only, within approximately one hour's travelling distance of the office base in Shepshed, Leicestershire. It supports adoptive families once a child is placed with them and also provides post adoption support to families and children. As well as local support, families have access to a range of specialist services provided by Coram.

The branch also provides counselling and assistance with information and contact, including tracing and intermediary services, to adult adoptees and birth relatives.

Between 1 April 2012 and 31 March 2013 the service placed 15 children. As of 31 March 2013, the agency had 23 approved adoptive families, of whom 17 were either matched or had children in placement and six families were available and waiting to be matched to children.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

This branch clearly demonstrates that the work it does has a significant impact on improving the life chances, experiences and progress which children and young people make once they are placed with their adoptive families.

The adopters approved by Coram provide stable family lives for children who otherwise may not easily have that experience because they are older, disabled, come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds or need to live with brothers and sisters. This therefore improves their life chances significantly. Adopter preparation, assessment and approval are timely, child-centred and thorough, resulting in families who have an extremely good understanding of the needs of children requiring adoptive placements.

The data provided last year indicates that this branch is above national comparators in approving families within eight months of their application, which was the target at that time. It is also above national comparators when it comes to the timeliness of matching adopters to children waiting. This is not at the expense of good and appropriate matches, however. Once children are placed for adoption, Coram adoptive families provide stability and security as there have been no disruptions of adoptive placements, prior to an adoption order being made, for five years. This again compares very favourably with national comparators. Outcomes across all aspects of a child's development are extremely positive as a result, and often above that which is expected.

A significant strength of this branch is the high quality direct work it undertakes with adopted children and young people, which continues into adulthood. Children and young people feel extremely well engaged and supported by Coram, and their participation in sharing their experience and knowledge of being adopted is exceptional. Their outcomes and progress improve significantly as a result of their engagement with Coram, particularly in relation to their self-confidence and self-esteem, as they feel valued and listened to. To quote a young person: 'Coram go the extra mile and are pretty special.'

A further significant strength is adoption support, which is prompt, responsive and creative. This supports families to remain together and for children and young people to continue to make good and exceptional progress. Adopters express an exceptionally high degree of satisfaction with the service they receive from Coram, which they know is lifelong. Adopters commented that the support was 'incredible', 'I would have been lost without them', and that the support had 'made things so much better'. The knowledge and commitment of staff in delivering these services result in children and young people being kept safe and secure. An adopter said: 'My child is safer because Coram is there.'

Leaders and managers throughout the agency as a whole are exceptionally committed and passionate about adoption, which results in a service which is managed and monitored very effectively. Staff are inspired by their leaders and supported by on-going learning to provide a service of exceptionally high quality and innovative practice. No shortfalls have been identified as a result of this inspection, although the manager is committed to developing and improving the service further.

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

Judgement outcome: outstanding.

Children and young people make exceptional progress; they have extremely positive experiences during their involvement with Coram, and as a result their outcomes are outstanding, particularly considering the very poor start in life which many have experienced.

Children and young people develop in self-confidence, to the extent that some are able to speak authoritatively at national conferences about their experiences of being adopted. Young people feel listened to and valued. Their views and feedback are regularly canvassed and acted upon, and as a result they know they can influence what is happening to them, which improves their self-esteem. They have a significant understanding of their situation and are able to help adopters and professional staff develop their understanding and practice in relation to issues such as contact. This is a remarkable achievement.

Children and young people experience a significant level of stability in their family lives, as the pre-order disruption rate is very low. No pre-order placement has disrupted for five years. As a result, they develop their attachments, have a positive view of themselves and achieve significantly improved outcomes in terms of social and emotional development and education.

Children, whatever their individual characteristics, are placed with Coram adopters and thus have the opportunity to experience the family life which they may not otherwise have had the opportunity to do. They make significant progress in their families. They develop secure attachments and become part of the wider adoptive family. Children who were significantly delayed in their development catch up and exceed their milestones. One adopter commented that their child has made 'huge progress', and a social worker said a child has made 'fantastic progress'.

Children of school age attend school and achieve well, often over and above what is anticipated for them. Their educational, social and health needs are well met by adopters who are strong advocates for their children. Children engage with the usual age-appropriate leisure pursuits, such as sport, and thus become engaged in wider local communities, make friends and further their social development.

Children and young people continue to make progress once they are adopted. Children are significantly safer as a result of their prompt and easy access to the post adoption services provided by Coram. This is particularly the case in relation to unplanned contact. Their lives are made better by access to creative therapies such as music and art therapy and equine-assisted learning. Young people say they are much calmer and more confident as a result, and their anger is managed more effectively. Evaluations show they improve in empathy, concentration and the ability to share.

Children and young people have a positive and strong sense of their own identity because they are well matched with adoptive parents who can meet their assessed needs in relation to culture, ethnicity and religion. They maintain a strong sense of

their heritage because adopters understand the importance of this and positively promote contact in the best interests of their adopted children. Coram staff assist in this by providing direct work with children, for example, doing further life story work and providing improved life story books. Children and young people have a very positive view of themselves as adopted people because they have frequent opportunities to engage with other adoptive children through the regular groups, camps and family social events. A young person commented: 'I know I am not the only one.' Another young person said: 'The groups are good as you just fit in; you don't need to explain and can say anything.'

The branch undertakes a limited amount of work with adopted adults. However, those who have received a service feel they have a better understanding of their histories and acceptance of their situation, even if the outcome was not what they hoped for. They comment that they feel helped and supported. One person said: 'My social worker has done a very good job; she was brilliant.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

There is an exceptionally high level of satisfaction with the service. Adopters speak incredibly positively about the service they have received, from the initial contact with the branch to many years down the line. They speak about the warm, friendly yet professional initial response, clarity of information, both verbal and written, and the reliable, honest and open approach to them. Many adopters said, 'I cannot fault them', and, 'I cannot speak highly enough of the staff, they are wonderful.' Written material is inclusive and informative. Timescales are consistently met, unless there is an adopter-led reason for a delay, such as a house move or bereavement. Initial visits are well considered and there is a very consistent approach to decision making.

The preparation and assessment of adopters are highly effective as demonstrated by the wide range of children's needs which adopters are prepared to consider, the improved outcomes and the very low disruption rate. Adopters are very confident that their social workers help them understand their capacity and capabilities and have a high level of trust that they will not let them commit to a child whose needs they will not realistically be able to meet. The adopters willingly take children with a whole range of needs, such as disability, as well as larger sibling groups and older children, and are thus a valuable national resource for children needing an adoptive family.

The preparation and assessment process is also effective in developing successful adoptive parents. They can relate back to things they have learnt during their preparation and assessment, particularly in relation to attachment, managing behaviour and contact. The use of young adopted adults in the preparation training is a very powerful tool in helping adopters consider the wider issues of contact and the significance of the birth family from the point of view of a child. Adopters demonstrate a high degree of empathy for the birth family and are supportive of one-off meetings, contact arrangements and having memorabilia for the child to

readily access.

The prospective adopter reports are thorough, analytical and a good reflection of the adopters, which means they are effective tools for successfully informing the matching process. The assessments cover all the required checks, so that as far as possible, adopters' suitability to care for vulnerable children is assured.

The adoption panel takes its responsibilities seriously, thus providing an additional layer of robust scrutiny. Members are well prepared, appropriately trained and appraised, and provide a good range of experiences, both personal and professional to support effective and informed challenge. The adoption panel administration is excellent, which ensures members receive all the papers in good time to allow them to give them their full consideration. The panel minutes are thorough and accurately reflect the discussions and support decision making. Decision making is also very professional, timely and well considered.

Adopters do not generally wait long for a suitable match. They are always referred to the National Adoption Register promptly, and this has been effective in bringing about some matches. Other effective mechanisms include adoption activity days and local authority profiling events, which Coram social workers fully support by their attendance. Adopters are very well supported when considering matches because their social workers attend all relevant meetings with them, they interrogate all the reports thoroughly and ask lots of relevant questions. Social workers are very tenacious in chasing up local authorities for information and challenging practice where necessary. At all stages, adopters are encouraged to think realistically about whether they have the capacity to meet the needs of the child they are considering, and to say no if there are doubts about this. This results in families who stay together and children whose progress and outcomes are positive.

A particular area of significant strength and outstanding practice is adoption support. This is very well embedded and provides a whole raft of different services to families and children. Adopters express a great deal of confidence that Coram is always there for them, responsive and helpful. Adopters feel Coram is proactive in its response to prevent problems escalating, for example, by providing a creative therapy to address issues of anger which are not yet at a level to warrant a statutory service. One adopter commented that the social worker goes 'above and beyond'. Another said, 'I don't know how I would have coped without them.'

Coram provides a wide range of innovative activities and therapies which are highly effective in promoting positive outcomes for children. Despite the already high level of intervention, Coram continues to develop the range of adoption support, clearly based on informed scoping and research to inform its practice. For example, it has developed a mentoring system for adopted children which is about to be implemented. This was based on feedback from children and young people about what they felt would be helpful as well as national and international research about the effectiveness of this type of service. The branch has also implemented a toddler group for adoptive parents, uses local equine-assisted learning and has access to the services of an art therapist, appointed as part of a two year Department for

Education grant-funded project administered centrally by Coram.

Young people are similarly positive about Coram. They say that Coram is their second family, the only service that was there for them when they needed it, and that it provides someone to talk to outside of the family. Children and young people really value the groups and camps, which are highly effective in helping them discuss their issues in a safe environment with people who fully understand. The groups use inclusive games and activities so that disabled children and young people can take part more easily. The long-standing commitment of young people to remain in contact with Coram is impressive and indicative of the support they feel they get from the branch. Likewise, adopters really appreciate the recently implemented toddler groups as they feel they can relax and be themselves with other adoptive parents and children who understand the issues.

There are excellent examples of work being done on an individual basis with schools and to support unplanned contact arrangements. The commitment and sensitivity demonstrated are enormous and much appreciated by the families. This work has also resulted in significant improvements in children's educational experiences and emotional well-being. Adoption support is underpinned by written assessments and support plans so that it can be more formally evaluated for its success.

Although a more limited service, when needed, the access to records and intermediary work is sensitively done and in a safe way. This is made all the more positive because the adopted adults are younger and their situations are generally as a result of a non-consensual adoption, with difficult circumstances to understand and come to terms with.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Safeguarding is at the centre of all the work carried out by this branch. Staff demonstrate a strong understanding of their roles and responsibilities. They have ready access to the relevant policies and procedures, which are currently being updated to reflect the revised statutory guidance. All staff have appropriate and recent training in safeguarding which is planned to be further enhanced by training on the new procedures in January 2014.

All safeguarding issues have been dealt with promptly and appropriately and there is clear evidence of strong and effective partnership working to safeguard children. Safeguarding practice locally is further supported by Coram as a wider agency as senior managers monitor, evaluate and report on all allegations on a regular basis to the trustees. The role of the newly appointed safeguarding officer further strengthens this as an added layer of independent scrutiny and support. This has proved very useful in terms of providing learning points for future practice which are currently being implemented.

Safeguarding is given a high priority in adopters' preparation and assessment,

including understanding the impact of abuse and neglect on children's behaviour and managing this appropriately. Health and safety issues are comprehensively addressed to ensure children are safe from accidents in the home. As their children's needs change, adopters are aware they can ring and ask for help and advice at any time, and do so; they feel this is a better approach than organised workshops on topics.

There is a very prompt and effective response to concerns raised about contact such as inappropriate letters or supporting increased and altered arrangements to meet children's identified needs. Staff demonstrate a really robust awareness of the safety issues in relation to social media, which they pass on to adopters to increase their knowledge and understanding so they can safeguard their children. Staff are also very responsive when dealing with the consequences of unplanned contact, demonstrating a high degree of commitment and skill in order to ensure that any arrangements promote the safety and well-being of the young people.

A real strength of this branch is that young people really feel able to speak to the staff at Coram. They are happy to call in to the office if they live locally, and cite Coram staff as people they would speak to if they wanted to talk to someone outside of the family. This supports young people's on-going safety and well-being. All activities and camps are underpinned by thorough risk assessments so that young people are as safe as possible away from home.

Staff demonstrate a good understanding of the need to consider the welfare of all parties when undertaking reunions and are active in obtaining support for everyone so that the reunion is as well supported as possible to give it the best chance of success.

The agency demonstrates a desire to learn from any feedback, including complaints, and responds in a positive way to improve the service. Coram as an organisation collates all complaints and adopters' survey responses so that it can identify any emerging themes, learn lessons and provide appropriate resources to improve practices.

Staff and panel members' recruitment and vetting processes are robust and well recorded, demonstrating a robust approach so that only those people who are suitable and safe have access to vulnerable adults and children.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Coram as an agency is fully committed to improving outcomes for children through adoption. Leaders and managers at all levels are passionate, inspirational, ambitious and innovative in wanting to develop the services it provides throughout the organisation. Innovative services, such as creative therapies and parenting skills training, are underpinned by the research which the wider organisation carries out and have proven successful in significantly improving placement stability and thus

the experiences, progress and outcomes for children and young people.

This branch has established very positive effective working relationships with partner agencies which also lead to improved services and improved outcomes for children and families. Children's placing social workers describe the workers as being 'on the ball', they say they have had 'a very good experience', and put Coram at the 'top of their list'. Social workers comment on good communication and collaboration between Coram staff and themselves, so that adopters are well supported to care for the children in placement.

Other local statutory agencies and voluntary adoption agencies are also extremely positive about the working relationships which have helped them to develop their services for the benefit of adopted children. Partnership working with local authorities in relation to the parenting skills group is very positive and further demonstrates good collaborative working. The branch is well established within the local consortium and is on the steering group for the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) adoption activity days, which is reinforced by active participation in those days. This ensures the manager is fully aware of the current issues which local authorities face and which may impact on placing children for adoption or supporting these placements. Coram is therefore in a strong position to tailor its services accordingly and provide an effective and relevant response.

The branch demonstrates a willingness to share its expertise and experience in a number of ways, but particularly through the young people who contribute extremely effectively to national adoption practice. It is extremely impressive that they contribute their views on both the local and national stage to improve social workers' and adopters' understanding of the issues that impact on young people. For example, young people have recently worked with a neighbouring local authority, a local consortium and BAAF. They were involved in a consultation about how to implement the adoption activity days, as well as an evaluation of how these were experienced by the children. This is a real strength of the service.

Strong and robust governance underpinned by regular reporting systems ensure senior managers and trustees maintain a close awareness of how services are being delivered and the impact these have. There is effective monitoring and evaluation at all levels, such as monitoring of complaints, allegations and accidents centrally to draw out themes and improve practice. The manager has effective data collection processes to enable her to monitor the timeliness of the service. Qualitatively, she regularly reads all the written records, making evaluative comments on their content so that social workers are able to reflect on and improve their practice.

The branch (and Coram as an organisation) constantly elicits feedback from service users and uses this to develop the service. Adopters feel their views are actively sought and taken seriously and they feel happy to contribute. One adopter commented that she felt 'empowered' by Coram. Children and young people's participation is a particularly strong aspect of the service and they are regularly consulted and influence the way the service operates.

The branch demonstrates a strong desire to continue to improve its services. Having achieved an outstanding judgement at the last inspection, with no requirements or recommendations set, there is clear evidence that it has continued to develop and improve. Recent developments include the family and friends day, which supports families by ensuring their own supporters understand the needs of adoptive children, creative therapies, mentoring, and increased staffing numbers. Further developments are planned in relation to adoption support.

The recruitment of adopters is increasing significantly; between April and October of this year the branch reports an upward trend of enquirers and a 34% increase in the number of applications on last year's figures. The branch approves a diverse range of adopters, which reflects the ethnicity of the children placed. The timeliness of assessments is quicker than the comparator groups and families approved are well able to meet the needs of children waiting. They do not wait long for placements; 88% were matched within six months of being approved compared with 55% of the comparator group.

The branch has a very competent, committed, experienced staff team who deliver a highly effective service to adopters and children. They are supported by access to a good level of high quality training which keeps them up to date with current thinking, developments and research initiatives, which they put into practice. They are able to reflect and develop their practice and the services provided by the branch through team days as well as more regular team meetings. All staff are regularly supervised and have annual appraisals. They are well supported by the manager and each other, reflecting that they are 'a strong team'. They comment that the manager is passionate to drive the project forward, encourages creativity and takes their ideas forward. This results in a staff team who feel valued, take ownership of the work they do and are motivated to provide a service to adopters and children of an exceptionally high standard.

Extremely efficient, committed and competent administrative staff provide further support to the service. Adopters and placing social workers commented that the administration is 'excellent' and 'very slick'.

This is a well-resourced and developing service which has taken into account the workloads and increased numbers of assessments and placements. It is a financially viable service, supported by the wider agency if necessary, but a productive team in its own right. For example, it has increased the numbers of children placed this year by almost 100%, which is of obvious benefit for the children needing an adoptive family but also good business.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides have recently been updated to reflect the recent changes and have been submitted to Ofsted as required. These are useful and accessible documents which ensure that anyone using the service has clear information about what to expect.

The branch has recently moved into new premises, which are eminently suitable for the purposes of the services provided. The premises are accessible, secure and

provide good facilities for groups, private meetings and interviews. There is relevant insurance cover and appropriate security of electronic systems and case files, including daily central backup so electronic records are preserved in an emergency. The business continuity plan appropriately addresses how the branch will continue to operate in the event of an emergency, thus ensuring continuity of service to adoptive families.

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.