

Kent Case Study

What was the problem?

In February 2012, Coram partnered with Kent County Council to improve the LA's Adoption Service. Kent County Council's Children's Services had just been rated inadequate across the board by Ofsted and Coram's task was to improve the service so that it provided a high quality service to children in the authority's care with a plan of adoption. Coram was directly commissioned as a result of the improvement work undertaken with Harrow Council's adoption service. The contract was initially for two years but has since been renewed twice, and will now end in January 2016.

What we did?

The service provided is based on embedded partnership working, with Coram staff working alongside Kent staff to deliver the adoption service - the first of its kind in the country. In line with Coram's ethos of placing the child at the heart of everything we do, Coram Improvement Services used a problem solving approach wherein operational work informed strategy development.

Working culture and strong relationships: Coram began by remodelling the culture of the service by securing buy-in from all areas: senior managers, political leadership, foster carers, staff in child care, as well as the staff in the adoption service. In particular, Coram brought in new managers and embedded staff into the existing workforce so they could better work towards shared aims and tackle problems together, rather than directing from afar. Integral to this process was the deployment of a multi-professional team, whose varied expertise also helped establish strong working relationships with other stakeholders.

Performance management framework: Coram introduced a performance management framework and tools, giving greater transparency to performance. Areas needing improvement could be easily identified at individual, team or service level. Combined with real-time management information, Coram was able to track every case and ensure there were no delays in decisions or actions; celebrate achievements; support informed problem solving; and write regular reports to stakeholders, reinforcing their confidence in the progress being made. Adoption services do not historically work in this manner, but this new approach allowed Coram to focus on both the child's and the adopter's journeys.

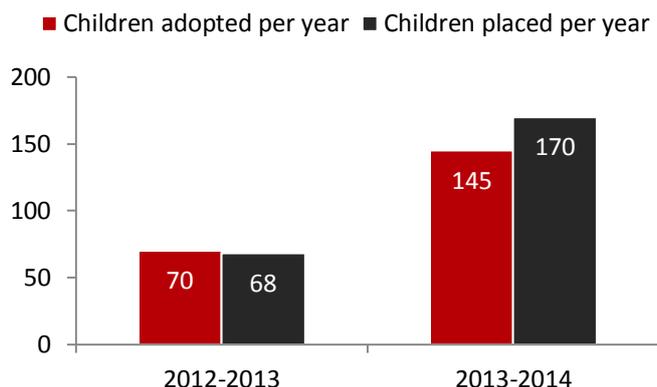
Feedback: Coram set up mechanisms for getting regular feedback from key stakeholders and adopters, including an Adoption Advisory Board, at key points in their journey and continuously developed the service based on the feedback received. Coram has employed several innovative approaches in the service – adoption activity days, family finding profiling events, using Adoption Link (<https://www.adoptionlink.co.uk/>) to involve adopters, involving adopters at information events.

What was the outcome?

In the first two years the partnership delivered an increase of 107.1% in the number of children adopted per year and 150% in the number of children placed per year – the figures for 2013/14 were the highest of all local authorities in England. Children with plans for adoption are now spending an average of three months less in care, meaning they have improved chances of having better outcomes in their life as adopted children.

For families looking to adopt, we have also reduced the average time it takes for them to adopt a child by a few years, through eliminating delays and setting up robust processes for tracking the recruitment and assessment of adopters. There has also been an increase in the number of approvals of new adoptive families per annum from 67 in 2011/12 to 87 in 2012/13 and 167 in 2013/14. Of the feedback collected from families at key points in their journey:

- 98% of enquirers rated their first contact with Kent as good or excellent
- 98% of enquirers felt the information events met or exceeded their expectations
- 95% of applicants felt the preparation groups met their needs and the course's aims
- 88% of applicants reported that their overall experience at adoption panel was good or excellent



These improvements have not only given Kent a much better reputation, with many more households expressing an interest in adoption, but have also resulted in £500k+ in avoided expenditure for Kent over those two years (methodology validated by the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University and agreed by Kent County Council). This is observable in the increased confidence from Ofsted, resulting in the winding down of the Adoption Improvement Board that was set up as a result of the inadequate inspection judgement. Staff commented at the last Ofsted inspection in March 2013 that *“management systems are massively different now. Poor decisions were made in the past; that’s why we were failing; we feel things are far better now. The partnership with Coram has been extremely positive.”*