

Thomas Coram Foundation for Children

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Thomas Coram Foundation is a voluntary adoption agency, registered to provide domestic adoption services and adoption support services, including birth records counselling and intermediary work.

The London office comprises an adoption placement and support team serving adopters within a 35 mile radius of central London. The London team includes a sub-office in South London and since April 2014 a North London office. The team recruits, prepares, assesses and approves applicants who wish to adopt children from this country. It works in partnership with local authorities to place looked after children with adopters approved by Coram.

The team provides a range of post adoption support to adoptive families, and others affected by adoption, where the agency was originally involved in the adoption. This includes access to information, intermediary services, and counselling to adopted adults and birth relatives seeking information about, or contact with, their adopted relative.

The agency has a concurrent planning project, which is also subject to inspection as a fostering service, and service level agreements with the London Borough of Harrow, the London Borough of Redbridge, Cambridgeshire and Kent to improve permanence planning and reduce delay in placing children for whom an adoption placement is sought. At the time of this inspection the London office has placed 51 children with approved adopters. There have been 49 adoption orders made since April 2014.

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**.

The Thomas Coram Foundation for Children is an outstanding agency in all areas. This is because the agency has strong and ambitious leadership with clear visions to improve the lives of children. The agency is innovative and creative and demonstrates development which is both child and adopter led. There are no breaches of regulation or recommendations made as a result of this inspection.

Partnerships developed with several local authorities are very successful and provide excellent outcomes for the children placed in those authorities. These partnerships have resulted in an improvement to the services provided to children. Children are waiting significantly less time for adoptive placements. Similarly, the concurrency project is also extremely effective in reducing delay and is providing excellent stability for younger children. This enables children to move to adoptive families at an earlier age so they build strong attachments and enjoy family life in stable and safe homes.

Children are very well matched to their adoptive families which ensure excellent placement stability. As a result, the agency has an extremely low placement disruption rate. The quality of the adoption support provided to adopters and their children is exceptional and lifelong. The range and provision of adoption support is a significant strength of the agency. The agency has access to resources which ensures a range of therapeutic support can be accessed without delay. Staff develop close working arrangements with partner agencies, such as, specialist health services and schools. As a result, children receive excellent support to meet their educational and health needs and make significant progress. One adopter stated, 'Support has been exceptional.'

Post adoption training programmes and support groups enable adopters to extend their knowledge and understanding of children's complex emotional needs at various stages of their development. High quality, robust assessments and training ensure adoptive parents are very well prepared and are suitable to care for children. Assessments and training are supported by up-to-date research to develop adopters understanding of child care practices and ensure children's safety and welfare are protected. Studies demonstrate that the post adoption support and training programmes are highly effective in keeping families together. In one study, 90% of adoptive parents reported that their children's difficulties had improved since starting therapy. Adoptive parents also felt that their confidence to manage behaviour problems increased from 30% to 83% after attending parenting programmes. One adopter stated, 'Coram are very good at giving good training for adopters. Coram really helped us to understand the importance of attachment.'

There is a strong culture of continuous development and learning within the agency.

Feedback from research and peer led 'journal days' inform best practice. Case discussions form part of the internal supervisory element of prospective adopter assessments. This ensures professional practice constantly strives for improvement to better meet adopters and children's needs. One adopter commented, 'Excellent leadership; excellent staff; at the cutting edge of new developments in the field. Would highly recommend.'

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children's experiences and those of their families are outstanding. Children thrive in stable, safe homes and make excellent progress in their adopted families. They are very well matched with adopters who meet all their assessed needs. Without exception, families have said that the service they have received has been a fantastic support. Children and young people's health needs including their emotional and psychological health are very effectively identified and met. Children of school age attend school and progress very well in their learning. This is supported by parents and agency social workers who work closely with schools to help teachers develop an understanding of the needs of the adopted child. One child's social worker stated, 'She has done really well over past year. I was so amazed to see how much she has changed, she looks so different it's unbelievable.' Children enjoy a variety of activities in their adoptive families, for example, swimming, drama and ballet lessons. This improves their self-confidence and social skills. One adopter commented, 'He has come a long way over the time he has been with us.'

Placement stability is excellent. This is reflected in the very low disruption rate within the agency. There are been only one disruption over the last three years and this was not a placement originally made by Coram. This is well below the national average. Children make strong attachments with their adopters despite sometimes having had very difficult previous experiences. Children and families are supported by excellent help and advice from the agency's social workers. Therapists employed by Coram use art, music and play to provide a safe environment and support children to communicate and express their feelings. Adopters highly praise the quality of adoption support they receive. One adopter commented, 'My son was offered art therapy which has helped us all enormously, without the help of Coram I feel we would all have struggled to cope with some of the difficulties we were experiencing.'

Children are benefitting from timely placements. Overall, the agency's adoption timescale are substantially shorter than the national average. Coram's partnership with Harrow Council to promote permanency through adoption has been very successful. Of those children placed for adoption, 94% waited less than the national target between entering care and moving in with adoptive families.

Children also benefit from early placements through the agency's concurrent planning programme. This ensures children are placed with foster carers who will become their adoptive parents if rehabilitation to their birth family does not occur. This means that children do not have the unsettling experience of moving and re-

attaching to permanent carers. This results in a lower risk of placement breakdown and lower rates of emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Children and young people have a positive 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. The agency strongly promotes the placements of brothers and sisters together and staff are proactive in ensuring life story books and later life letters are completed. This enables children and young people to understand their backgrounds and maintain a positive sense of identity.

Young people who are adopted speak positively about their experiences. They feel they receive very good post adoption support. They speak fondly of activities they have enjoyed which have been organised by the agency. Young people have a platform to express their views about the adoption process and their experiences as adopted children through the recent development of a group called 'The Adoptables'. This group has been set up following a three year grant from the Queen's Trust to develop a peer network of adopted young people. It is a national programme across Coram with workshops running in Cambridgeshire, London and the East Midlands.

The experiences of adult adoptees and their birth relatives are also excellent. Agency social workers help and support adults and their descendants who have been affected by adoption find out about their past in a sensitive and very professional way. This means adult adoptees and their birth relatives are able to develop a sound understanding about their past histories and those of their birth family. One adult adoptee commented, 'Coram provided a supportive, professional and encouraging but not solution based service... I would recommend them. I felt 100% in control. I am a huge fan of Coram.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The preparation, assessment and support of adopters are extremely effective. These result in children being placed in safe and stable families and lead to excellent outcomes being achieved for children and young people. There is a high level of satisfaction with the service. All those using the agency feel very welcomed and valued by staff. One adopter commented: 'We are so grateful for all they have done for us. We are so incredibly happy and feel so lucky. We could call our social worker or the agency any time we needed them (weekends and nights included) and they helped and supported us in every way they could. They are truly amazing.'

There is a rigorous recruitment process which ensures that prospective adopters are fully informed, prepared and assessed. The prospective adopters' reports are of a very high quality. They are reflective, thorough and analytical. All adopter assessments are subject to a peer review and audit process through social work case discussions which are managed independently. This is excellent practice and gives a high level of independence and scrutiny to assessments. Prospective adopters receive a fast and helpful response to initial enquiries. The timescales for

assessments are met and any which are out of time are because to adopter-led reasons. This has been a great improvement and demonstrates that the agency has fully embraced the two-stage assessment process.

Preparation and training for prospective adopters are of the highest quality. Adopters feel preparation training is of an excellent standard and has provided them with the necessary knowledge and understanding they have needed to successfully care for their children. One adopter states, 'Great preparation. Genuinely supportive of diversity.' Prospective adopters who are applying to be concurrent planning carers also receive training sessions specifically for concurrent planning. This help people assess their own capacity and motivation to adopt or care for a child where concurrent planning is considered. In addition the agency has recently introduced a sibling group training programme for those considering adopting brothers and sisters together. This gives applicants opportunities to learn more about children in sibling relationships who have experienced loss, separation, abuse and neglect.

The agency's panel is robust and the membership diverse and experienced. There is a very experienced effective and independent panel chair. The administration of the panel is strong. Minutes are extremely thorough and there is prompt and effective decision making. The panel provides an additional level of scrutiny to the work undertaken by the agency, commenting on reports and on the quality and timeliness of assessments.

Children experience careful and well planned introductions to their families. The agency social workers provide intensive support to adopters during this period, offering advice and guidance to ensure a smooth, well-planned transition for the child during the introductory period and early weeks of placement. A clear strength of the agency is the continuity of support which is provided to adopters throughout the assessment process through to final order. Wherever possible, families keep the same social worker.

Coram's concurrent planning project is firmly embedded within the agency. The agency made ten placements with concurrent planning carers. This included a relinquished baby and early adoption of vulnerable young children who all achieved early permanence over the last 12 months. The concurrent planning team provide excellent support to birth families through supervising contact and developing their parenting skills. This is highly valued by birth parents who speak very positively about the support and relationship they have built up with Coram. Coram has also established a subscription scheme to support local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies to develop concurrent planning programmes.

The range and provision of post adoption support is impressive and a significant strength of the agency. A lifetime of post adoption support is offered for adoptive families. One parent stated, 'We always received the support we needed, long after the adoption process was over.' The agency delivers support to parents and for their adopted children. The agency run two parenting programmes for adopters, including one which is specifically designed to support parents with teenagers. The agency also run a 'Stay and Play' group for adopters with children under four years of age.

This group has the benefit of the support from a family support worker and a child psychotherapist. Music and art therapy is offered to adopted children through the agency's creative therapies team. The agency has also developed links with specialist services, such as, community mental health services and the Tavistock Clinic. In addition, the agency run study days and activities for families and their children as well as support groups for friends and extended family members of concurrent planning carers.

It is clear that this support is extremely effective in enabling families to keep together. For example, in an evaluation of the service in October 2014, 92% of children receiving music therapy showed improvement. After attending the teenage parenting programme parents confidence in dealing with teenagers went up from 31% to 86%.

Coram social workers manage letter box contact for birth relatives and an intermediary service for adopted adult and their descendants. The agency also provides access to information and counselling to adults who grew up in Coram's care and were placed in foster care or residential care. Adult adoptees and descendants highly praise the service and support they have received in the understanding their backgrounds and in making contact with birth families. This is a real strength of the agency.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency has a strong focus on safeguarding. Safeguarding is robust and underpinned by comprehensive policies and procedural guidance. All staff and managers are fully aware and experienced in child protection and wider safeguarding issues. There is excellent partnership work with local authorities to safeguard children and young people. The recruitment processes of staff and panel members are robust. This ensures that unsuitable people do not work with or care for children and young people.

The agency has systems for monitoring allegations, complaints and accidents. A robust quality assurance framework has been developed to monitor effectiveness in meeting safeguarding responsibilities. There are established mechanisms for sharing about safeguarding and quality assurance findings with senior managers on a six monthly basis. These assess practice against standards. As a result, the senior management team monitor trends, identify learning and develop safe practice. There have been no safeguarding issues or allegations against adopters or staff in the last 12 months.

Safeguarding is given a high priority in adopters' preparation, assessment and training. Assessments and training is informed by research and is of a high quality. The assessment of prospective adopters is robust and includes all appropriate checks and references. This includes health and safety environmental checks and pet assessments. All concerns are fully explored. Adopters are supported to understand

the impact of abuse and neglect on children's emotional well-being and behaviour. Training includes the safe use of internet to ensure adopters are very aware of the risks posed by social media.

Excellent on-going adoption support in the form of parenting groups and individual support ensures that adopters are able to manage children behaviour as they continue to grow. As a result, adopters are well prepared to support children even in the most challenging circumstances. One child's social worker commented the child she placed, 'Now feels safe and happy in a way impossible last year.'

There is a clear process for complaints. Adopters and children are fully aware of how to make a complaint. There have been two complaints made by prospective adopters in the last 12 months. Complaints are taken seriously and outcomes are clearly recorded. The agency responds appropriately and learns from complaints. For example, following one complaint the agency developed their understanding around adoption and Islam to develop their practice and ensure cultural sensitivity.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Leadership and management are outstanding... Managers are extremely committed to adoption and provide a service of a very high quality. They have a clear vision for the agency, based on the national adoption agenda and have an excellent understanding of the needs of children and families. The agency is successful in significantly improving placement stability and the experiences and outcomes for children and young people. At the last inspection the agency was judged as outstanding. It has continued to develop and improve. For example, the agency has further developed its training to adopters and post adoption support by introducing new parenting groups for those adopting teenagers, siblings and younger children. The agency has also extended it's a partnership working with local authorities. The recommendation made at the last inspection to improve the timeliness of adopters assessments has been addressed.

The agency has developed excellent working arrangements with local authorities and other partners to provide outstanding outcomes for children. The agency has service level agreements with the London Borough of Harrow, London Borough of Redbridge and with Kent County Council. This has led to improved services and outcomes for children and families. Coram's long-standing partnership with Harrow Council has ensured the successful placement of every child needing adoption in the first year of analysis and has been cost effective. The partnership with Kent County Council has increased the number of placements by more than 100%. One local authority service manager commented, 'We use their wide pool of adopters to get good choice for children...quality is excellent...no breakdowns. Post adoption support is excellent.'

Recently Coram has been commissioned to work in London Borough of Hillingdon to provide a 'managed service' to assess a cohort of 29 prospective adopters, foster carers and special guardians who have been waiting for assessment.

The agency has a high calibre staff team. They are extremely experienced, knowledgeable and skilled. Staff receive regular supervision and appraisals. They have access to high quality training based on research and are able to use each other to reflect upon and develop their practice. For example, staff can attend a journal club which is peer led and disseminates research across the team. This promotes continuous learning. Staff are fully aware of up-to-date research and are able to reflect on their practice and share insights appropriately with the families they assess.

Coram has a communications and marketing department which has a good understanding of the work of the adoption service and meets regularly with adoption managers to help make recruitment of prospective adopters more effective. The team also works closely with local communities reaching diverse audiences. In the last 12 months this has included advertising in various community magazines and an adoption event run at a mosque to attract prospective adopters from the Muslim community. The department has also developed the agency's website content which has resulted in significant interest.

There are clear arrangements for monitoring the activities of the agency. These include regular reporting to the trustees. There are rigorous monitoring processes involving feedback from service users which inform developments to the agency. Adopters are asked for feedback following any involvement with the agency which is monitored and evaluated by senior managers and is used to drive improvement. For example, afternoon panels were set up following prospective adopters' feedback.

The agency has a clear Statement of Purpose which is detailed and ensures service users are clear about what the agency hopes to achieve. There are two children's guides which covers older and younger children. These can be customised to reflect the child's situation and the composition of their adoptive family. This means the children's guides are accessible and in an appropriate form so that children using the service know what to expect.

The agency's records are secure and well managed by an experienced administration team. Files are well ordered and easy to navigate. The agency is currently in the process of implementing an electronic records system.

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.