

Coram Anglia Adoption

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC051917
Inspection date	08/11/2013
Inspector	Rosemary Chapman
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Date of last inspection	18/02/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Adopt Anglia, located in Cambridge, 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 a 50 mile radius of Cambridge. It supports adoptive families once a child is placed with them and also provides post adoption support to families and children. The agency provides counselling and assistance with information and contact, including tracing and intermediary services, to adult adoptees and birth relatives in cases where the agency, or its predecessors, was involved in making the original placement.

Between 1 April 2012 and 31 March 2013 the service placed 13 children within 10 families. As of 31 March 2013, the agency had 14 approved adoptive families, of which 10 were either matched or had children in placement and four 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: **good**.

This is a good service with many strengths. The level of satisfaction from stakeholders and service users is high. Comments include: 'I can't praise the social worker enough, particularly in relation to information and support'; 'they have been fantastic whenever I have asked for support'; and, 'they are there for us'. Children

make good progress in all aspects of their lives as a result of living in stable, safe and secure adoptive families who have been well prepared, assessed and supported by the social workers of this branch. Adopted adults receive a service of a very high quality which results in good outcomes for them also.

The promptness and quality of the service are good. Adopters do not experience delay when being prepared and assessed. They describe their social workers as efficient and reliable. Support both post placement and post adoption is readily available in a range of forms, including social events, groups for children and adults and individual work. The quality of assessment, matching and support results in a low disruption rate, the last disruption occurring almost two years ago, which compares favourably with national figures. Children's safety is assured by good procedures and training which underpin staff knowledge and understanding.

Social workers, leaders and managers at all levels are passionate about adoption and committed to providing a service of high quality. Staff are assisted in this commitment by high quality training, reflective practice discussions and regular supervision. They are innovative in their approach and responsive to any areas of concern. Rigorous monitoring and evaluation ensure improved practice across the whole agency, underpinned by the research it carries out. Collaborative working with other agencies and local authorities ensures that the service embraces the needs of children nationally as well as locally. A local collaborative arrangement has resulted in improved outcomes for the children of that local authority by significantly increasing the number of adoptive placements made and implementing concurrent planning.

The one area for improvement identified as a result of this inspection is to ensure that written records underpin the good practice in relation to adoption support.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure the service user knows, and receives written information about, the services they are to receive; what the service is designed to achieve; what is involved in the particular service provision and how the service will be monitored to ensure that it is delivering the intended outcomes. (NMS 15.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children, regardless of their characteristics, are living in well-matched families with adoptive parents who meet their needs effectively. They develop good attachments, as far as possible, depending on their previous experiences, and progress emotionally, physically, educationally and socially throughout their childhoods. One

adopter commented: 'After many years, my child is starting to flourish.' Sometimes children settle very quickly, and one social worker said: 'It is like he has been there forever. He was content and now he is happy.' Adopters and social workers remark on how children have improved their speech, walking, motor skills, reading and emotional well-being. Adopters clearly love their children, who seek reassurance from them, showing appropriate wariness of strangers.

Adopters demonstrate a child-centred approach to meeting their children's needs. For example, they have lots of toys, and stickers on the clock to aid with telling the time. Children's health needs are well met because adopters pursue appropriate medical help, including specialist intervention where necessary. Children's educational needs are met because adopters liaise effectively with schools and work in partnership with them, for example, in personal education plan meetings. One adopter commented that her child was now doing 'fantastically well' at school. Children develop socially because they go to play groups and engage in a variety of leisure pursuits, such as sports and dancing, depending on their age and interests. The older children have aspirations for their futures, such as choice of career. Children really benefit from the young people's groups; not only do they enjoy the varied activities, they like meeting other adopted children and making friends with each other. This helps develop their self-esteem and confidence and the realisation that they are not the only children to be brought up in adoptive families.

Children develop a realistic understanding of their identity through well-supported indirect and direct contact arrangements with brothers and sisters, birth parents and other birth relatives. Adopters demonstrate a strong understanding of why this is important, including a significant amount of empathy, which drives them to be committed to ensuring these arrangements are maintained in a positive way. Children's cultural identity is promoted through being placed with families who are well matched to their needs, for example, by speaking the language of a birth parent, or who are committed to promote an understanding of their heritage.

Adopted adults are very positive about the service they receive and feel well supported, even if they do not achieve the desired outcome. Because they are well prepared, they understand and cope with the disappointments that may arise from a desire to be reunited which is not reciprocated. One commented: 'I could not have asked for any more.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

People involved with the branch express a high degree of satisfaction with the services they have received. They comment particularly on the prompt response, personal service, and professionalism of staff. Enquirers are sent clear, comprehensive and inclusive written information within a day to enable them to make an informed decision about whether adoption is an avenue they want to pursue. This is supplemented by an informative and accessible website. Enquirers are then invited for an initial interview, usually with the branch manager, within 10

working days. The new arrangements for timescales are being implemented although no adopters have been approved since then as they only came into effect in July 2013. Although a challenge for a small service, staff are embracing the changes in a positive way and thinking how to respond creatively so that they are able to deliver a prompt service.

The preparation, assessment, approval and support of adopters are effective in ensuring children are cared for by safe and stable families who can meet their needs. The preparation training is well thought out and has a direct impact on how adopters think and behave. For example, a children's social worker commented that the adopters often referred to it when considering how they should respond to their child's behaviour. Adopters have commented that the therapeutic parenting aspects are particularly beneficial in helping them understand and respond appropriately to their children's needs. Another area where the impact of the training is particularly noticeable is in relation to contact and attitude towards birth families. Adopters demonstrate a strong understanding of the importance of this which translates into commitment and support for the arrangements which are made to meet children's needs to understand their history and identity. Adopters are empathetic, respectful and sensitive, and this is particularly noticeable with those adopters who are concurrent carers, which enables those placements to be effective.

The prospective adopter reports are thorough, analytical and give an accurate picture of the adopters. A social worker commented that the report she read was a really good reflection of the adopters who she subsequently met. This means they are an effective tool when considering matching children as they are accurate.

Panel and decision-making processes are thorough and timely. The adoption panel comprises a good mix of members from a variety of ethnic backgrounds with professional and personal experiences of adoption. The administration of the panel is also efficient so that members receive all the necessary documents in good time. This enables them to make considered and informed recommendations on the approval of applicants. There is a good, qualitative analysis of the panel's work every six months, which provides the branch and agency with feedback on the timeliness and quality of reports. The relationship between the adoption panel and the branch is effective while maintaining its independent role as critical friend.

The branch is involved in some innovative practice in relation to family finding and matching. For example, it, along with the wider agency, is instrumental in helping to develop a concurrency project in a neighbouring local authority so that very young children are placed without delay in families who will adopt them if a return home to birth parents is not possible. Staff also take part in activity days and profiling events so that the social workers of children who need families are able to consider Coram adopters at first hand.

Adopters are enabled and well supported to consider the range of needs and experiences children may have, to see if they can realistically be able to meet those needs, considering their own capacity and capabilities. The branch's social workers are very good at following up missing information so that adopters have everything

they need to make an informed decision about whether they can successfully parent a child. One social worker commented: 'They kept me on my toes.' An adopter said of her social worker: 'She was like a dog with a bone.' The branch's social workers attend all the meetings with adopters and take notes to ensure they are able to concentrate on asking questions and listen to responses without worrying about missing or forgetting anything. Where information is not up to standard, social workers are very good at challenging local authority social workers in a constructive way, so they retain their good working relationships but get the required documentation so that it is in a format that is beneficial for the child.

Adoption support is effective in ensuring that families stay together. This starts with giving information to families and friends to ensure they understand their role in supporting the adoptive family. This is a new development for this branch but one which it plans to carry on as the feedback was positive. The branch, in partnership with other local agencies, provides adoption support groups which enable adopters to meet together and share information. It also runs two groups for children of different age groups, so that they can have fun, develop their confidence and meet other adopted children. There is a social event once a year, at which adopters and children meet together and also get the opportunity to share any concerns with staff which they may not want to do more formally. Social workers provide support on an individual basis, for example, in relation to supporting families with educational issues. Although families are aware of what their social worker plans to deliver and achieve, this is not fully supported by a written assessment and plan which is shared with the family and reviewed regularly. Adopters express a high degree of confidence in believing the branch will support them whenever they need it. There are plans to build on the adoption support offered in the region by offering parenting skills courses and creative therapies, with the aim of improving placement stability and thus positive outcomes for adoptive children.

There is a very high degree of satisfaction with the service received by those who have birth records counselling or intermediary work. They comment on the prompt response and the sensitive and professional staff who deliver the service. One person said of the social worker: 'Absolutely brilliant, totally understanding'.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Staff demonstrate a good understanding of the different roles of the agencies involved in safeguarding children and thus work together effectively to ensure children live with families who meet their needs in a safe way. The agency as a whole has comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures, including those related to historic abuse, which are readily available to all staff to guide their practice. They receive regular information from the Local Safeguarding Children Board for the area in which the branch is situated, including training courses, which staff attend. Coram as an organisation has a designated safeguarding officer who is currently discussing the most effective way of providing updated safeguarding training for the adoption staff, taking account of recent national concerns about

missing and sexually exploited children.

Although there have been no safeguarding allegations against adopters or staff, the branch was able to demonstrate how it puts its knowledge into practice when faced with an incident of concern. There was appropriate and prompt liaison with children's social care and support for the people involved, which resulted in the necessary services being provided to protect children. Likewise, staff always assess the risks involved when undertaking intermediary work and ensure the welfare of all parties is considered so that services are delivered safely.

There is a strong focus on safeguarding children throughout the preparation and assessment of adopters. This includes safe care, the dangers of social media and how children's previous experiences of neglect, abuse and trauma may impact on their behaviour. This ensures that adopters embrace therapeutic parenting, understanding that some of the more usual methods of managing children's behaviour may bring back unhappy memories and be counterproductive in helping children feel safe and secure. Where issues arise in relation to contact, the branch is quick to act to provide the necessary support to adoptive families, for example, by liaising with the relevant local authority. This ensures that concerns are resolved to everyone's satisfaction and safe contact arrangements are maintained which meet the children's needs.

The branch is responsive to complaints or issues which are raised more informally or through the surveys they send out. This demonstrates that it wants to listen, learn and improve and is not averse to saying sorry if it feels it could have acted differently. Coram as an organisation collates all complaints, adopters' survey responses and safeguarding issues so that it can identify any emerging themes, learn lessons and provide appropriate resources to improve practices.

The agency demonstrates a robust approach to the recruitment and vetting of staff and panel members so that only those people who are suitable and safe have access to vulnerable adults and children.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Everyone involved in the management of the adoption agency, including senior managers and trustees, demonstrates an exceptional commitment to, and passion for, adoption as a positive choice for children. This translates into innovative and ambitious services for children underpinned by the research which the wider organisation carries out. Innovative practice, such as concurrent planning, creative therapies and parenting skills training, which is well established in another branch of Coram, is in the process of early implementation in Adopt Anglia.

Working relationships between the adoption social workers and children's placing social workers are extremely positive and highly effective. One social worker commented: 'They are a pleasure to work with. Although they are there to support

the adopters, they never lose sight of the child as their main focus.' A senior manager in a neighbouring local authority said: 'We have no concerns about their practice.'

In addition to the positive personal relationships which are established, the branch has developed a successful partnership with a neighbouring local authority's adoption service, which has been on-going for two years. The service level agreement is currently being renewed. The senior manager in that authority commented on the very positive impact the arrangement has had on outcomes for the children in her authority. For example, concurrency has become a placement choice for babies, and the number of children placed for adoption doubled from 2011/12 to 2012/13. An independent review of the arrangement concluded: 'What has been achieved so far would not have happened so well or so quickly without input from Coram.'

The branch also works well with other adoption agencies in the local consortium, the chair commenting, 'the manager contributes very positively and takes a lead role in training'. Although a small branch, it is very well integrated into the region and staff play an active part in joint working, such as attending adoption practitioner exchange days. This furthers the professional knowledge of all attendees by discussing practice issues but also contributes towards matching as the professionals share profiles of children and adopters. This benefits children as good matches are made and supported by professionals who know and trust each other and work well together. It also ensures there is an up-to-date awareness of the current issues facing local authorities so the branch can be responsive to the needs. Thus recruitment of adopters takes account of the needs of children requiring adoptive families. The branch works collaboratively with other agencies in recruitment and matching events, such as the Lesbian, Gay, Transgender and Bisexual events, adoption activity days organised by the British Association of Adoption and Fostering and profiling evenings arranged by local authorities.

There is effective monitoring and evaluation at all levels, particular in the wider agency, of which the branch is a part. This includes regular reporting to senior managers and trustees to ensure effective and accountable governance. Adopters' views are well established as part of this monitoring, and children's views from this branch have been more recently gathered with the re-establishment of the children's groups. How to capture the views of stakeholders in a more formal systematic way is currently under discussion. The manager monitors case recording very rigorously, ensuring she reflects on, and makes a written comment in, the case notes. This ensures that social workers receive prompt feedback on their work in order to improve practice and promotes accountability.

The branch is able to demonstrate improvements and developments since the last inspection. It has addressed the four recommendations made, thereby making documentation clearer and more accessible. However, it has also been responsive to feedback from adopters. For example, it has added an extra adopter-led session to the preparation training. It has also recommenced the children's group, improved the frequency and accessibility of the adoption support groups by working in partnership with other local agencies, and increased the staff complement so they can undertake

more adopter assessments and thus increase the pool of adopters available for looked after children. The branch is also planning to develop post adoption support in the region by providing parenting skills training, currently in its early stages. The aim is to improve placement stability by equipping adoptive parents with enhanced skills and thus prevent family disruption.

The branch is well resourced to provide an effective service to all, including adopted adults. There is no waiting list for birth records counselling or intermediary work, and users of this service commented on the prompt response. The branch is financially viable in its own right but also has the backup of the wider agency where necessary, ensuring continuity of the service.

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. This ensures that anyone using the service has clear information about what to expect.

The branch is staffed by well-qualified practitioners who have a good range of skills and experience, including recent local authority social work, to enable them to provide a good and effective service. They undertake a very good level of relevant training to keep them up to date with their practice. They are also well supported by regular and effective supervision, and reflective case discussions, practice and research updates in team meetings. As an organisation, Coram undertakes a wide range of research, and this branch benefits from the learning from this. It also contributes to other research by providing access, with permission, to its adoptive families, for example, in relation to both transracial placements and same sex adoptive families, thus demonstrating its commitment to improving adoption practice generally.

The premises are appropriate for the needs of the branch, and arrangements are made if they are not accessible to particular visitors, because of stepped access. There is relevant insurance cover and appropriate security of the building, computer systems and paper records, including central backup so records are preserved in an emergency.

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.