

Coram Adoption Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Sandra Jacobs-Walls
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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 outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

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

Coram Adoption and Permanent Family Service provides two specific fostering services. The concurrent planning project places nought to two-year-olds with foster carers who are also approved adopters. This enables security of placement should attempts to reunite the children with birth families fail. The service also offers long term foster placements for a very small number of older children. The service's previous HIV Project is no longer in operation. The offices of the fostering service are based in central London, within the London Borough of Camden. The office premises have good transport links and have designated space for the purposes of supervised contact.

Summary

The purpose of the announced inspection of Coram Adoption and Permanent Family Service is to assess the service against key National Minimum Standards and gauge improvements made to the service since the last inspection. The previous inspection was conducted 11 months ago. The inspection process was conducted over four days and was wide ranging in scope. Overall the service is judged to be outstanding. It offers well matched quality placements where objectives are clear and consistent with the needs of children. Carers are well supported and receive excellent training. Staff are very well qualified and experienced; their work is of a high quality. The service is well run by an established team of managers and quality assurance systems are sound. The service, however, is currently under review and the long term future of the concurrent placement project remains uncertain.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection had resulted in no requirements and three recommendations. Improvement have been made to the format of individual staff files, but the lack of staff vacancies in the last year has limited the service's opportunity to further diversify its staff group. The soundproofing of the concurrent planning project office space remains outstanding. The service continues to explore opportunities to attract carers from black and ethnic minority groups and is working with other Coram projects to assist in achieving this goal. Since the last inspection the service's Policy and Procedure Manual has been updated and its child protection policies have also been revised and updated. A new training policy for staff has been drawn up by the organisation's Human Resources Department and the fostering service's contact room has been refurbished.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Coram fostering services have excellent systems in place to ensure that children in placement live a healthy lifestyle and that their health care needs are well met. All children placed with Coram carers are registered with GP services promptly after placements are arranged. Children under the age of five have six monthly 'Looked After' medicals, while older children have medicals completed on an annual basis or when deemed necessary. Many of the babies seeking placements have existing medical conditions, for example, related to premature birth, or are babies who are hepatitis B and/or C positive. The fostering service has a good track record of

managing and providing guidance to carers about specialist health care issues. The fostering service also has good experience of caring for children who are living with complex medical needs and have multiple physical disability. The fostering service has good access to mental health services; referrals to psychological and mental health services are readily facilitated. The service also has access to medical expertise via the medical advisor who is also a member of the service's adoption and fostering panel. Reviewed children's case files evidence that good healthcare and medical information is sought by the fostering agency from the placing authority and carers indicate that this information is shared with them early in placement negotiations. Case files seen evidence discussion of children's health care issues between staff of the fostering service and carers as part of the placement decision making process. Carers are aware of their responsibilities to maintain and promote the healthy lifestyles of children placed with them. Excellent training focused on healthcare issues is mandatory for all carers and this is supported by detailed written guidance available to carers. One Coram carer said of the baby in placement, 'She attends six monthly LAC reviews, and immunisations and health visitor's checks have been carried out locally by our own GP surgery. We have excellent support from the health visitor. The induction book from Coram gives details of what is expected of carers. We were given access directly to specialists via Coram regarding health/development issues'. There have been no reported accidents to children in placement since the last inspection.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Coram fostering service keeps children safe while in placement with carers. The service's responsible individual and registered manager are both qualified social workers with expert knowledge and experience of the fostering and adoption task, child protection and team management at varying professional levels. The fostering service's staff group are also well qualified and experienced social workers, most with extensive knowledge and experience of fostering and adoption issues and work. Staff personnel files evidence that the service's recruitment and vetting practices are robust; full staff information as per the requirements of Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations was evidenced in every case reviewed. The fostering service provides suitable carers who in turn to provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment for children. The homes of carers undergo a health and safety check on an annual basis and this was well evidenced on file. The private bedrooms of children in placement are appropriately furnished and equipped and are comfortable. Where necessary carers' homes have been adapted to ensure the particular health and safety needs of young disabled people are adequately met via the placement. Carers are supported by staff and receive good relevant literature to ensure appropriate health and safety measures are in place. With regards to the matching process, this is an area of the fostering task in which Coram fostering service excels. Children are very carefully matched with carers that meet their short term and long term needs as many of the carers recruited via the concurrent planning project are identified to potentially become the children's permanent carers. Great effort is made by the service to ensure that the views and opinions of the placing authority, prospective carers and birth parents are taken into consideration as placements are being negotiated. Files reviewed evidence that all parties are keenly consulted with respect to the matching process. Placement decisions consider the child's racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic needs and match these as closely as possible with those of the prospective carers. The fostering service has significant success in providing well matched permanent placements for children. Files evidence carefully planned placement introductions that involve key personnel in the children's lives to encourage as far as is possible, smooth placement transition. The fostering service protects children from all forms of abuse

and neglect. The safety of children has high priority amongst the staff group and the assessment process of prospective carers keenly explores issues related to the safeguarding of children. There are robust child protection procedures in place which are well known to staff and carers. At the time of the inspection, the fostering service had recently revised its child protection policies and procedures. Written guidance and training focussed on keeping children safe is consistently provided to carers at differing levels. Carers confirm that they received such training and that information shared is clear and practicable. The safety of children in placement is a consistent feature of carers' supervision. There have been no allegations or reported instances of a child protection nature since the fostering service's previous annual inspection; all case files reviewed evidenced a documented safe caring policy. The fostering service has written policies that address bullying and young people who abscond from placement. Coram's fostering panel is efficiently and effectively organised. No fostering panel was observed during the inspection, however, the minutes of three previous fostering and adoption panel meetings were reviewed. These were satisfactory; panel discussion and decisions were clear, and records were sufficiently detailed. The fostering panel has appropriate membership, although it was noted that there was no representative from the field of education, nor did the panel include a current or former 'looked after' child. Panel members are appropriately vetted. The fostering panel is utilised as a quality assurance mechanism for presenting social workers. The service's fostering and adoption panel has good administrative support and foster carers have the opportunity to appear in person at the point of approval and annual review. Carers are positive about their experience of appearing at panel and are encouraged to provide written feedback of their experience. Panel members periodically receive training focussed on their role and the functioning of the panel.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children benefit from the fostering service's clear understanding and valuing of equality and diversity issues. The service's office premises openly display positive images of multi-cultural society, which acts to enhance the positive self image of children. Relevant policies are in place and these feature in practice documents such as the safe caring policies and the Foster Care Agreement. Issues of diversity and equality are well explored well via the assessment process and good training and information is provided by the service to support carers. Comprehensive information is maintained by the service of the cultural, religious, disability and gender needs and experiences of both children seeking placements and carers. However, the fostering service has been unable to attract an adequate number of carers from black and ethnic minority groups and so there is an imbalance in the range of ethnic backgrounds of available carers; the majority of the service's carers are white UK in origin. Managers and staff of the service are well aware of this discrepancy and continue to explore strategies to address the imbalance. At the time of the inspection the majority of placements involved children aged between nought and two years. Foster carers indicate that they have been advised about the educational and general development of children placed with them; this effort was further supported by written guidance. One carer, approved as a long term carer for an older child shared her commitment to ensuring the young person's educational needs were well met. The carer had selected a high achieving local primary school for the young person to attend and kept in close liaison with school personnel in order to encourage academic success.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service keenly promotes contact arrangements for children in accordance with established care plans drawn up by the placing authority and/or the courts. Carers are made explicitly aware of the expectation that they support and facilitate contact between children and their birth family members. Staff and carers acknowledge this practice as being a key objective of the fostering service particularly in light of the very young age of the majority of children in placement. One carer commented, 'The child's routine fits around contact - not the other way around'. Issues of contact are explored thoroughly with prospective carers throughout the assessment process and consistently thereafter. Core initial training available to prospective carers is also focussed on contact issues. Files reviewed illustrated very frequent and often complicated arrangements in place to ensure children maintained quality contact to their birth families. Offices located adjacent to the service's main office premises are used for the sole purpose of supervised contact. The service has specifically recruited a staff member responsible for the supervision of contact between children and their birth families. Documentation of the outcome of such sessions is evident on case files and these are shared with relevant external professionals. The majority of children in placement are aged between nought and two-years-old and so adults involved in their lives are responsible for the decision making. With regard to consultation, where children are older, there is good evidence to suggest that they are consistently visited by staff and their opinions are sought. Case files indicate that children are encouraged to participate in Looked After Children (LAC) reviews and foster carers' annual reviews so that their views and opinions about the placement are formally recorded. Children are generally visited by supervising social workers on a regular basis and files indicate that on these occasions, substantial discussions are held. Coram's fostering service is particularly successful in engaging with birth parents as plans for their children's futures are being considered. Staff and carers give serious consideration to the views and opinions of birth families and where possible follow through on their wishes. So, for example, consideration is given during the matching process to the expressed views of birth parents in relation to the religion of the prospective substitute family, the number of carers in the household etc. The liaison between staff, carers and birth families is carefully monitored and as a result, some birth families are significantly involved in the lives of their children, even in instances where adoption has resulted. A number of carers indicate that they are willing to consider maintaining some contact between birth families and children 'looked after' even after the placement arrangement becomes one of permanence. Birth families are encouraged to participate in outings and special events organised by Coram to support and encourage dialogue. One returned questionnaire from a carer states, 'Coram are outstanding in nurturing/locating/supporting members of birth families and ensuring contact can take place.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Coram's fostering service is primarily focussed on providing substitute families for children aged nought to two years. A smaller number of children are older; currently only one young person is teenaged. Carers support young people to develop age appropriate self-care skills. With regard to fostering allowances these are paid by the placing local authority; Coram negotiates with the local authority payment and fees to carers and will offer assistance if funding difficulties arise. Carers confirm that they are content with payment arrangements although some expressed some unhappiness with the limited funds available to them when no children are in placement. Managers of the fostering service acknowledge this as an ongoing concern and continue to work with carers in addressing this issue.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

There is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and of what facilities and services are provided. The service's Statement of Purpose complies fully with the National Minimum Standards and a children's guide is available to young people. Staff are organised and managed effectively and staff members work cohesively as a group. There is a clear management structure in place and clear lines of accountability. Staff are sufficient in numbers and are well supported, trained and supervised. One staff member commented, 'I wanted a higher level of expertise and I like Coram's focus on children. Every child really does matter here. Support is good and we're kept up to date with government initiatives'. All social work staff are qualified, very experienced and registered with the General Social Care Council. Training opportunities for staff are generally good; staff have access to both internal and external training. In particular staff are encouraged to participate in Post Qualifying social work awards. Some staff commented on the limited opportunity for career progression within the service and of their unease with the uncertainty of the service's future. Managers confirm that a review of the fostering service's operation is currently being conducted. The fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting foster carers. Carers who were interviewed comment that they feel well supported by staff of the fostering service and its managers. Staff are responsive to carers' enquiries and deal promptly with all matters. Carers feel valued by the Coram organisation and are appreciative of staff efforts. Carers have access to staff for advice on a 24 hour basis. One returned questionnaire states, 'We have an identified link worker who speaks to us directly or by phone 1-2 times a week. She also visits us at home approximately every six weeks. The team have a weekly meeting to discuss cases and so staff at the project are all aware of our circumstances and are able to offer support and advice. They invest well in training'. Another returned questionnaire states, 'The scheme is totally healthy for the child and Coram supplies excellent practical and emotional support both before and during the fostering process, providing practical help with advice and excellent support during contact sessions with birth parents. The fostering service has effective quality assurance systems in place. For example, as prospective carer assessments are being completed, staff members from differing teams review the work thus far and offer professional opinion and feedback. Equally, the service's fostering and adoption panel is crucial in ensuring carers' assessments and reviews are conducted to a high standard. Case records for children and administrative records are maintained as required.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

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

- consider recruiting to the adoption and fostering panel members whose field of expertise is education and a former 'looked after' child. (NMS 30)
- consider increasing the number of approved carers from black and ethnic minority communities.(NMS 7)

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.