

Coram Adoption East Midlands

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Vivien Slyfield / Rosemary Chapman
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Date of last inspection	

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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 East Midlands developed from an established adoption project run by the Children's Society. It became part of Coram just before the last inspection in November 2005. As part of Coram's adoption service the East Midlands branch recruits, prepares, assesses and supports domestic adopters. As well as local support they have access to a range of specialist services through Coram. The East Midlands branch has particular expertise and skills in the use of group work and direct work with adopted children. Skills have also been developed in recruitment and support of Black and Minority Ethnic groups (BME) over the past three years since Ebony Care was established as a new project. This work continues to develop in recruiting, assessing and supporting black adopters.

Summary

This was an announced inspection during which all the key standards were considered. The project continues to provide high quality, innovative work. It has maintained this despite financial constraints over the past two years as all agencies experienced a slow down in placements as placing authorities adjusted to the changes in regulation. Some issues need to be more fully addressed in assessments and in the information presented to the adoption panel. However, this is an effective service where staff and the manager retain a clear child focus. The work with children and young people's groups remains innovative. It imparts a vibrancy to all the work undertaken and staff use the children's views from the groups to inform the preparation of prospective adopters as well as continuing to look for ways of improving the services they offer.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

In the last inspection there was one recommendation that related specifically to Coram Adoption East Midlands. This recommended managers who were members of the adoption panel should not be in situations of conflict of interest in relation to their supervisory responsibilities. This has not changed and the team manager remains a member of the panel. In other areas the branch continues to make a significant contribution to children and young people's security and understanding of their life experiences. The young people's groups are an innovative and dynamic contribution to adoption work. At the time of the last inspection the Ebony Care project had just started. It is now well established and makes a substantial contribution to the range of placements available to children with black families.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The majority of recruitment of prospective adopters for Coram Adoption East Midlands is through 'word of mouth'. There is a wide range of diverse applicants, from all walks of life who come forward for assessment as adopters. None of the approved adopters have waited more than two years to be matched and most are matched much more quickly. A great deal of work

has been put into establishing Ebony Care, an effective recruitment and assessment project for black adopters. Over the past three years the project has been able to assess eight adoptive families and all of them have placements. The work is now developing into support for this particular group of adopters and has a secure foundation within the community. There is a clear and consistent process of initial visits, all of which are undertaken by the team manager. An initial visit report is completed and applications are taken before the start of the preparation group. All the information from adopters indicates they are positive about the preparation they receive. Their comments demonstrate that it had changed their thinking, provided them with useful information and given them a strong image of the child's view of adoption. One adopter described the training as a 'real eye opener' and another wrote, 'We thought our training and preparation was excellent, in fact we couldn't have done without it'. The training here is unusual in the way it can include young people's view from the various young people's events and groups run by the team. This gives an exceedingly clear focus on the voice of children at an early stage in the adoption process. In acknowledging this an adopter said, 'it made a real impact and showed the child's view'. In addition to the successful preparation of adopters Coram Adoption East Midlands also run groups for the 'Family and Friends' of prospective adopters. This provides valuable insight to those providing direct support to adopters. Assessments of adopters are detailed and undertaken with sensitivity. Adopters talk of social workers being empathic and of feeling they could raise any issue at all with them. Adopters said their workers are 'brilliant' and keep them fully informed about what is happening. The written assessments are well ordered, analytical and cover diversity comprehensively. However, there are some examples of issues not being fully explored prior to the presentation to the adoption panel, in some instances this led to the matter being deferred. All prospective adopters have Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks in place including with other countries where applicants have worked or lived abroad. On one file seen there is no evidence of contact being made with another agency who had previously been approached by the prospective adopters about adoption. Contact is made with employers and previous partners where there have been children. The health and safety checklist now includes guns, weapons and poisonous plants and a pet survey is undertaken where appropriate. A second opinion visit is always made by the team manager and a report completed and presented to the adoption panel. The operation of the adoption panel is supported by the Coram policies and procedures. However, the procedures in relation to conflicts of interest do not fully address the issue. In relation to the membership of the panel, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 state that at least three independent members are appointed to the panel but Coram has decided that there should be five independent members. All adopters are invited, but not expected to attend the panel. The membership is appropriate, although currently heavily weighted with social work experience. New panel members have an induction, observe a panel and there is an annual training day with the other Coram panel members. Those adopters who had attended found the panel welcoming, but daunting, however, they felt supported by their social worker. The observation of the panel showed an effective membership who are well prepared and made appropriate, informed contributions to the panel discussion. The panel is effectively chaired with sensitivity and attention to detail. However, there are times when the panel adviser oversteps the remit of the role, which is one of giving advice, rather than direct questioning of attendees. There is evidence that the panel made a recommendation contrary to Coram's policy in relation to applicants and their smoking. The agency decision is undertaken seriously and in a timely manner, having considered all the papers presented to the panel including the draft panel minutes. There are systems in place to allow the decision maker to consult with a senior manager within the organisation and for the decision to be made in the decision maker's absence. Despite

the geographical distance there are no delays in the current decision making process and staff identified that communication is effective. The current practice is that approved adopters are not re-presented to the panel if they withdraw and so the agency decision maker is unaware of the change in their circumstances. The matching between the child and adopters is the legal responsibility of the placing authority. However, workers take full responsibility for ensuring that adopters have all the information they need to make an informed decision about the match. They suggest and encourage life appreciation days and arrange for adopters to have face-to-face meetings with significant people from a child's early life. The views of prospective adopters are sought about on-going contract but not about notifying the agency in the event of the child's death. There are appropriate references and checks in place in relation to the manager and all the established staff. There is a deficiency in relation to a sessional worker, which is addressed in the inspection of Coram Head Office in London. Coram has an established complaints procedure, which is working effectively in practice. There is evidence of complaints being investigated and appropriate action taken. Information about how to complain is available to all those who use Coram's services. Safeguarding procedures are in place and there is evidence of clear and effective communication when safeguarding issues have arisen. The procedures include guidance on issues of historical abuse. There is mandatory training in place for all staff in relation to child protection and Coram's safeguarding procedures. .

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Adopters are usually supported by the worker who has undertaken their assessment. After approval social workers are aware that it can be a difficult time for adopters and ensure they are in contact and that adopters are aware of any possible links that have been made with children. Following the completion of one preparation group, which was mainly made up of prospective adopters for older children, Coram Adoption East Midlands ran a further group for the same prospective adopters called 'Ready and Waiting'. It provided further information and support. The members of the group have kept in touch with each other, providing additional informal support. This creative and flexible approach to the needs of adopters provides considerable support in maintaining the placements of older children. Adopters are confident of support from their individual worker and workers are committed to maintaining support for their adopters. The strategic development of support is limited due to the staffing constraints over the last two years. A worker now has designated time to develop adoption support and has established links with local authorities, with local welfare rights advice and is undertaking direct work with families. A newsletter is maintained, giving adopters valuable information, the annual Fun Day brings all adopters and their children together and a weekly telephone support line has been established for adopters and children on Wednesday afternoons. There is feeling that this is at the early stages of developing into a comprehensive and effective support strategy. In addition to this there is access to a range of specialist resources through Coram in London. This provides direct support for adopters and informs and develops the practice of the team. This branch in the East Midlands are among the first to establish a range of groups for working with adopted young people. This innovative work is now well established with four groups covering differing ages bands, that run four times per year. Accomplished staff also run residential camps for adopted young people four times per year, to which other agencies and local authorities refer young people they are working with. The groups developed as a flexible response to needs of young people and have grown to inform social work practice and to inform assessment of prospective adopters. The groups have also worked on producing a DVD about issues relating to adopted young people and are developing the information into a magazine

format. Workers undertake individual work with children and young people, who are members of the group. With the younger age range group, staff are available for the parents during the group sessions. Common issues such as contact are addressed in the groups but where appropriate matters are explored in individual sessions. Workers are involved in birth records counselling and support reunions and work on contact, as the need arises. This work has an unquestionable focus on the needs of adopted young people. Committed and well motivated staff work to support, empower and enable the young people they see. Coram has access to a range of specialist services some of which are innovative and creative. All the specialist advisers used are knowledgeable and well informed. There is effective use of legal and medical advisers both in assessment of prospective adopters and in consideration of children's details for matching. Staff found the advisers committed and enthusiastic. Direct advice is available from specialists in education, mental health, welfare rights and psychotherapeutic services from the Tavistock clinic in London.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

There is a clear and meaningful recognition of the lifelong implications of adoption and a strong commitment to providing support to all those involved at each stage of the adoption experience. Most of the responsibility for these standards rests with the relevant local authority. Adopters are aware of the importance of their children's heritage and work to maintain an understanding of it. Work is done by staff on children's understanding and life story work is revisited and if appropriate new life story books are completed. The work of the children's groups addresses the issues young people raise. These frequently relate to issue of birth family and contact. There is a commitment from staff to undertake birth records counselling with any children from the groups. Due to the nature of this branch and the work it undertakes there is limited evidence on the standards relating to this outcome.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a comprehensive Statement of Purpose in place, which relates to the whole of Coram's adoption service. It fully complies with the regulations and provides useful information for those considering using Coram's services. A children's guide is in place in line with the agency's responsibility as a provider of adoption support services. It is aimed at children who are able to read and make sense of written information. It does not include all the necessary information, lacking the contact details of the Children's Right's Director and an independent advocate. The children's guide can be made available in other formats and languages if needed. Coram acknowledge that there are shortfalls in the management qualification of the adoption manager for the agency. Due to the specific circumstances this is unlikely to be addressed in the short term. However, the adoption manager has a wealth of skills, knowledge and experience, which is an asset to the organisation. The manager of the East Midlands branch does have an appropriate management qualification. The East Midlands branch is managed effectively and efficiently. Staff are well supported, there are clear roles and responsibilities and lines of accountability. Supervision is planned and takes place regularly, although the managers is also accessible for consultation at other times when needed. Staff value supervision and find it

useful and effective. The team are supportive of each other and work well together. The administrative staff feel valued by the social workers and part of the team. They said they 'enjoyed working here'. One of the social work staff said, there is the 'best administrative support of anywhere I've worked. They have a real adoption awareness'. They understand the importance of passing on information and messages, including checking e-mails if a member of staff is absent. Adopters commented that they found administrative staff efficient and sensitive. All the staff work in providing an effective service and support each other in doing so. Staff are positive about the training they receive. They have a range of appropriate training, including about Theraplay, story stems and attachment. They have access to specialist consultations with a range of leading providers. Although based outside London, staff can access the range of specialist advice available to their colleagues there. Staff felt that high quality work is valued, Coram 'value a high standard of adoption work and do make research available.' They also feel valued 'by the project' and by the local and senior managers. They are not so clear that Coram as an organisation values their work. They cited posts being frozen and staff reducing their hours, although not their work, during a difficult time two years ago. The Ebony Care project is seen as a very effective project that provides a valuable resource for black children and is financially valuable, yet the worker for the project is a sessional worker rather than an established member of staff. The records of children and adopters are well organised and information is accessible. The records are monitored by the team manager, who signs the case recording and there is a front-sheet, which is used to check all the relevant information is stored correctly. There are no case summaries or closures on the files relating to withdrawal of prospective adopters. Panel member's files are held at the East Midlands branch and personnel files are held centrally. Most of the information required is on the panel member's files. The files seen lack a record of the telephone verification of references, which have been undertaken and a consistent record of references on all the files. The premises are clearly identifiable, accessible and suitable for the range of work undertaken there. Archived records are stored in fire-resistant cabinets in a locked room. Active files are stored in cabinets, but the rooms are not lockable. A disaster recovery plan is in place. The back-up of active files is undertaken manually on a monthly basis. This leaves the branch vulnerable to the loss of important information about children and adopters. There are sufficient financial funds to support the agency. There is regular reporting and scrutiny of finances to ensure financial viability, which works effectively. The wider Coram organisation is committed to supporting the work of the adoption agency and has done so when there have been difficulties. Adopters experience of Coram is of an organisation that values them and supports them in parenting their children. The management, finances and structure all have the clear aim of providing safe and secure families for children.

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, 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):

- ensure that prospective adopters are involved in a formal, thorough and comprehensive assessment, including contact with agencies previously contacted about adoption by the applicants (National Minimum Standard 4)
- ensure the policies and procedures in relation to the operation of the adoption panel comprehensively address how conflicts of interest are dealt with (National Minimum Standard 10)
- ensure a review takes place whenever the adoption agency considers it necessary, which includes when adopters withdraw from the adoption process (LAA Regs 2005) (National Minimum Standard 10)
- ensure that a system is in place to ask adoptive parents whether they are prepared to agree to notify the adoption agency if their adopted child dies during childhood or soon afterwards (National Minimum Standard 5)
- ensure the Children's Guide includes the information required by Standard 1.4A (National Minimum Standard 1)
- ensure that the manager of the adoption agency has a qualification at level 4 NVQ in management or another qualification which matches the competencies required by NVQ Level 4
- ensure that a comprehensive personnel file is maintained for each member of the adoption panel, including a record of telephone verification of references and a record of the references (National Minimum Standards 11 and 28)
- ensure there are facilities for the secure retention of records in a lockable room (National Minimum Standard 29)
- ensure changes to the computerised back-up of files are completed to safeguard the back-up of records. (National Minimum Standard 29).