

Coram Adoption East Midlands

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Ros Chapman
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Agency manager	Laura Payne
Responsible individual	Henriette Kaniuk
Date of last inspection	29/11/2013

Service information

Brief description of the service

Coram's Adoption and Permanent Families Service is a voluntary adoption agency, registered to provide domestic adoption services and adoption support services, including birth records counselling and intermediary work. It has two branches, one of which is based in London, and Coram Adoption East Midlands, the subject of this report, which is based in Shepshed, Leicestershire.

This branch recruits, prepares, assesses and approves applicants who wish to adopt children from this country. It works in partnership with local authorities to place children looked after with adopters approved by Coram. It also provides a range of post-adoption support to adoptive families, and others affected by adoption, where the agency, or its predecessor, was originally involved in the adoption. This includes access to information, intermediary services and counselling for adopted adults and birth relatives seeking information about, or contact with, their adopted relative.

Between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016 the service provided placements to 31 children and approved 16 adoptive families. At the time of the inspection, eight families had no children in placement.

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**

This is an outstanding adoption agency in all respects. Children and young people benefit significantly from the high quality services it delivers. In particular, their outcomes are significantly improved because the agency is able to place children who have the most complex needs with its approved adoptive families, thereby enabling them to experience a stable and secure family life. The support it provides to adoptive families, both pre- and post-adoption order, is extensive and of the highest quality. This ensures that, as far as possible, families remain together. A children's social worker confirmed this, saying: 'The agency has provided a great deal of additional support to adoptive placements in order to maintain them, including weekly visits.'

Of particular note is the high-quality, extensive direct work it undertakes with adopted children and young people. Their voices permeate throughout the agency and inform service delivery. Their identity as an adopted person is celebrated, and their levels of confidence and their self-esteem increase and flourish as a result. The agency delivers group activities, camps, and numerous social events. Some young people are part of a recently developed national group of adopted young people, 'The Adoptables', the purpose of which is to comment on national policy, meet with government ministers and develop leadership skills.

Safeguarding is at the centre of practice. Staff have a well-developed understanding of safety issues, particularly those which relate to adoption. Extremely robust monitoring systems ensure that senior managers within the agency consider, reflect and advise on all safeguarding matters, thus providing an additional layer of independent scrutiny that enhances safeguarding practice.

The agency benefits from aspirational and influential leadership at all levels. The agency is at the forefront of developments in adoption, both nationally and locally. Its partnership working is highly effective in improving outcomes and experiences. It has recently attracted funding for innovative projects, which it has used to good effect, working collaboratively with partners to improve outcomes for children and families.

Leaders, managers and staff are of the highest calibre. They demonstrate a wealth of knowledge and have significant experience in delivering services of the highest quality. This is recognised by partner agencies and adoptive families alike, all of whom speak very positively about the services they receive. It is a service which continues to learn and develop, sourcing research, implementing new ideas and reflecting on its practice.

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children's and young people's experiences, progress and outcomes are significantly improved because this agency is able to find adoptive families for children who are deemed 'harder to place'. In the last 18 months, all of the 46 children placed with this agency's adopters were 'harder to place' because of their age, ethnicity, significant health needs or because they required a family who could care for brothers and sisters together. Over half of the children placed (57%) were placed with their brother or sister, and almost one third were from a minority ethnic group. This gives children the opportunity to experience stable family life, when they otherwise may not have had that chance. In addition, the agency has developed early permanency placements. Consequently, babies can be placed before their legal status in relation to placement orders is finalised, and placement moves are minimised. This affords them the opportunity to start making positive, secure attachments as early as possible to the people who will care for them for the rest of their lives. They therefore have the best possible start in life.

Placement stability is good. Although there have been five disruptions in the last three years, no themes have been identified, and it is evident that the agency did all it could to support the placements. A number of current adopters comment that the only reason they are still together as a family is because of Coram's outstanding support, one saying: 'I could not have managed without them.' Having a stable and secure family life contributes significantly to outstanding progress and outcomes.

Some children and young people have made outstanding progress. One adopter commented that her son is, 'a different boy', and social workers have also commented on how well children have progressed, and have done better than expected. One social worker said: 'The children are unrecognisable in terms of their behaviour and appearance.' An independent reviewing officer said: 'The children are doing exceptionally well. They have improved in their (the adopters') care.'

All children and young people have their needs very well met by committed adopters who understand how to parent children in a therapeutic way. They gradually settle, form attachments and become part of the family. As many of the children have spent a long time in foster care prior to moving in to their adoptive family, and have experienced significant trauma in their early lives, the progress is excellent.

Children attend schools and gradually reach their milestones as their emotional needs are addressed. This is supported by the work the agency undertakes with schools, to help them understand attachment issues and how best to respond to the challenges this may bring in the school environment. Adopters are also excellent advocates to make sure that their children get the services they require and deserve.

Children have their healthcare needs fully met. This starts prior to placement, as the agency's medical adviser ensures that adopters have full information about medical

issues so that they understand them and are equipped to meet them. Children are registered with the universal services, and specialist services are accessed appropriately. Some children and young people make exceptional progress in terms of their emotional needs as a result of the intervention of Coram's therapists, as well as social work and other staff. Life story work, for example, enables children and young people to understand their backgrounds and make sense of their history. They become less distressed and they are then able to move on with their lives.

Children and young people have really positive experiences and develop their confidence and self-esteem. Adopters ensure that their adopted children are fully integrated into their family life and they do things that they may not otherwise have done, such as going swimming, playing rugby and going on holiday.

Coram also ensures that children and young people have fun and opportunities to mix together. This enables them to make friends who share similar experiences, it gives them access to people who they can talk to if they have any worries, and it also enables them to play a really important part in developing services, both locally and nationally. This significantly enhances their confidence, self-esteem and positive view of themselves as they feel listened to and valued.

Adopters clearly understand the importance of heritage and sustaining former important relationships, sometimes as a direct result of the training which Coram has provided. They facilitate appropriate contact, both indirect and direct, with previous foster carers, brothers and sisters, and other members of the birth family, so children and young people retain a strong understanding of their histories and a positive sense of self.

The agency carries out a very limited amount of work with adopted adults, but the work that has been done has been sensitive and at the pace and level that the service user wanted.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

An extremely high quality of work underpins the whole service provided by this agency. Adopters are overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of service provision. One adopter commented: 'Without Coram's support, care and ongoing training we would not have survived adoption, they are brilliant.' Other comments include: 'I am really impressed', 'I have learned so much', 'my social worker was amazing', and, 'the support is fantastic'.

Enquirers receive a very positive, welcoming and prompt response from their initial contact with the agency. This is followed up promptly by clear and comprehensive written information, which is supplemented by regular information meetings as well as initial visits so that enquirers are fully aware of the needs of the children, the

process and what they can expect.

Adopters speak highly of the preparation and assessment process and feel that it has really prepared them and been realistic. One adopter said: 'Excellent initial training and ongoing training. It has made a massive difference.' It gives adopters strategies and tools as well as an in-depth understanding of behaviour. An independent reviewing officer commented: 'The agency has trained them really well.' This was also acknowledged by a children's social worker who said: 'I was impressed with the calibre of the adopters and how well they were prepared for adoption.'

Assessments are analytical and of a good quality. The prospective adopter reports give an accurate reflection of the adopters' strengths and vulnerabilities, thereby providing an essential tool for effective matching. The work the agency completes with birth children to ensure that they are fully part of the assessment is excellent. It is exceptionally well planned, taking into account individual interests, so that birth children can be fully engaged from the start.

The preparation, assessment and approval process is timely. Any delays are either out of the control of the agency or due to complexities arising during the assessment which need exploration and are therefore justifiable. This is well monitored throughout the process, including at the adoption panel.

The adoption panel provides a robust quality assurance function, which contributes to safe placements by recommending the approval of suitable adopters. The membership is diverse and includes people with both a personal and professional experience of adoption. The panel chair is experienced and makes attendees feel welcome and at ease. Agency decision-making is also robust and timely. An appropriately suitable and qualified agency decision-maker takes the role very seriously and makes a well-informed decision based on full information. Panel administration is effective and the minutes are of a good quality. The panel also monitors quality and timeliness and provides regular feedback to the agency to enable it to make any improvements.

Matching is a significant strength, which contributes to stable placements. Social workers provide a lot of care and support to ensure that adopters are fully aware of the needs of the children being considered, the impact on the family and whether the adopters can meet those needs. This includes following up on missing information, and arranging meetings with relevant professionals. Managerial oversight, highlighting issues to be considered, adds further robustness to this process. Comments by Coram's own medical adviser are also useful in highlighting areas for social workers and adopters to explore further. Children's social workers have commented very positively about Coram's input into the matching process: 'It helped adopters reflect and understand the needs and go one step further.' This ensures that, as far as possible, adopters have the right skills and capacity to parent the children well, and through to adulthood. The addition of the home-finding role, a development since the last inspection, has further strengthened the promptness and effectiveness of matching.

Adoption support is another significant strength which contributes towards placement

stability, and one that has been further developed since the last inspection. It is wide-ranging and life-long and there is clear evidence that this has sustained placements and improved relationships. For example, one adopter said: 'Coram has remained at my side throughout, and while I had or needed no contact for some years, when I pressed the "panic button" they came running and have been with me again ever since.' A children's social worker also reflected that, saying: 'I am really impressed with the level of support and training. The social worker is a critical friend to the adopters and helps them reframe things in a supportive way. I have not seen that in other agencies.'

The children's groups and social activities are a very important part of this support. Children and young people meet regularly in groups which reflect different age ranges. They choose the name of the group and the activities they wish to partake in. Some have also been on a residential camp, which they loved. All speak very positively about the numerous and wide-ranging activities on offer. Ability is no barrier to participation, and all are risk-assessed to ensure that they are safe. Adopters and their children also benefit from high-quality training, adopter support groups and individual work, including the creative therapies, such as art and drama. The agency has been instrumental in assisting adopters access the adoption support fund by working proactively with the relevant local authorities to speed up the application process. One adopter commented: 'I wouldn't like to think what it would have been like without Coram. I don't know how I would have survived.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Safeguarding children and young people is at the heart of everything the agency does. It recognises the increased vulnerabilities of the children placed for adoption, and ensures that adopters are fully prepared to meet the challenges. The recruitment, preparation and assessment of potential adoptive parents is a robust and rigorous process to ensure that only safe and suitable people are approved as adopters. All the necessary checks and references are taken up, and any potential concerns are rigorously explored. Comprehensive health and safety assessments ensure that the environment is a safe and suitable place for the specific children being placed.

Adopters have an excellent and in-depth understanding of the impact that a troubled early life has on a child's future development and behaviour because of the preparation training and the emphasis on therapeutic parenting. This is consistently reinforced during the matching process. They therefore understand what lies behind situations which may be challenging, and know how to react and manage the ensuing behaviour in a safe and appropriate way. This is enhanced by the additional extensive parenting programmes and training which adopters are able to access, as well as consultation with therapists. This, together with responsive and effective support, enables them to be particularly resilient and to sustain placements which otherwise might fail.

Adopters are made fully aware of the risks from the use of social media and how to minimise those. Staff demonstrate an excellent knowledge of the risks surrounding contact arrangements, and in some cases they have had to put this into practice to challenge the local authority's proposals when they identify that these may present unnecessary risks.

When risks are identified, staff are quick to act to prevent any escalation. The post-adoption workers are particularly attuned to the risks from unsolicited or unsupervised contact with birth relatives, and have undertaken work of a very high quality to manage these situations and protect the young people as much as they can. This includes contact with local authorities, and negotiation and mediation with all parties concerned.

Comprehensive, up-to-date, written policies and procedures underpin all of the agency's work and provide staff with the necessary guidance to inform their practice. The agency ensures that staff continue to update their knowledge of safeguarding developments, such as the risks from radicalisation and extremism, by providing frequent safeguarding updates and training.

Children and young people have an additional layer of protection through the ongoing contact they have with the agency through the groups. They develop trusting relationships with the staff, and can and do raise issues that are worrying them, which may lead to further support being offered.

Well-developed, highly effective systems ensure that any safeguarding concerns are fully considered, discussed and reflected upon at a senior level. The reports are scrutinised by the manager, the designated safeguarding lead and the head of service, all of whom provide an impressive level of high-quality reflection about the appropriate actions to take. The reports are monitored until completion, and a collation sent to the trustees at regular intervals so that they are also fully aware of any concerns. This additional layer of scrutiny provides extra robustness and promotes a safer service.

Allegations are dealt with appropriately. Concerns are notified to the local authority in a timely way, and the agency fully cooperates with any investigation. The managers attend strategy meetings to share information and support local authorities in their decision-making about the next steps to take.

The recruitment of staff and panel members is thorough and in line with best practice to ensure that only people who are suitable and safe to work with children are appointed.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Leaders and managers are exceptionally committed to providing an adoption service of the highest quality which is fit for purpose in the current climate of change. At all levels, leaders and managers are involved in trying to shape the adoption agenda and work collaboratively with other adoption agencies so that regionally and nationally, it remains at the forefront of practice. The regionalisation agenda is currently a major issue, and this agency's representatives attend all meetings and provide practical assistance, such as the use of their building for meetings.

On a local level, leaders and managers take the initiative in engaging well with partners to share information, expertise and resources, for the benefit of adopters and adopted children and young people. Examples include regular meetings with adoption support partners, assisting a local authority with adoption support assessments and work with schools to further their understanding of how they can meet the needs of adopted children.

Relationships with local authorities are extremely positive and they speak of Coram in glowing terms. Comments include: 'The agency is very supportive, knowledgeable and helpful', 'communication is excellent', 'it has provided two excellent placements', and, 'I have been impressed with their professionalism and thoroughness. Nothing has been too much trouble', and, 'the local authority and Coram worked well together'.

There is extremely thorough monitoring at all levels. There is robust governance through systematic and comprehensive reporting to the board of trustees and associated committees. The responsible individual has an excellent oversight of the service, and the manager has an excellent understanding of the service through supervision and file audits. Both the adopters' voice and young people's voice are very strong throughout the agency. The bi-annual adopter survey is one mechanism which is used to highlight areas where improvements can be made. The agency welcomes comment and feedback and is reflective, rather than defensive, when things do not go to plan.

Despite being judged outstanding at the last inspection, leaders and managers have continued to develop and improve the service. The staff team and managerial capacity have been increased, there is now a designated post-adoption team, and post-adoption support has been further developed. The agency has also been involved in national developments, such as the formation of 'The Adoptables'. This is a three-year participation project funded by the Queen's Trust, which aims to give older adopted young people and young adopted adults a voice in the social and political arena. For example, 'The Adoptables' have worked with Coram Life Education to develop a tool for use within schools to expand understanding of adoption and remove the stigma and bullying faced by many adopted children. The agency applies for and uses Department for Education (DfE) strategic grants to good use. These have been instrumental in developing early permanence, an

ongoing programme of parenting skills groups in partnership with two local authorities, and the provision of an art therapist based on site.

The agency is an active member of the local consortium, which ensures that it knows and understands the needs of neighbouring local authorities. The agency maintains a steady stream of enquirers who want to be considered to be adoptive parents, and once approved, placements are usually made promptly, demonstrating that the right people are being recruited to meet the needs of children awaiting adoptive placements. The early permanence initiative is a response to demands for placements for babies to minimise drift and delay.

Coram as a children's charity is fully committed to supporting and maintaining the adoption service. There is regular financial reporting to ensure that the agency understands its financial commitments and its income, and remains financially viable.

The statement of purpose is readily accessible on the website and gives good information for anyone who wants to know about the service. There is a guide for children, written in appropriate language, which they can access to understand more about what Coram provides.

The staff team is a real strength of the service. One stakeholder said: 'The agency has skilled and knowledgeable workers who truly want to do their very best for children and their families.' They are all very committed, passionate, skilled, knowledgeable and child-focused. Adopters and other stakeholders speak really highly of them. Comments include: 'She has been fantastic, gone above and beyond', 'I don't know where I would be if it wasn't for my social worker', 'they have been brilliant', and, 'the social worker is awesome and very responsive'. They balance professionalism and an excellent knowledge-base with accessibility and strong personal relationships.

Staff keep up to date with developments through good quality training and supervision. They have access to relevant research findings and use this to enhance their work. For example, child-to-parent violence is one area which they are researching in order to increase their resources. They are really keen to develop their knowledge and to use it for the benefit of families they work with. Co-working with some of the therapists also enhances this.

Staff feel very well supported, and valued and in a safe pair of hands. Managers are visible and accessible and enable staff to reflect on their practice. They also appreciate excellent peer support and an excellent administration team.

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.