

Thomas Coram Foundation for Children

Thomas Coram Foundation for Children

49 Mecklenburgh Square, London WC1N 2QA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

The Thomas Coram Foundation for Children is both a registered voluntary adoption agency and a fostering service. The adoption agency is registered to provide domestic adoption services and adoption support services, including birth records, counselling and intermediary work. The fostering service is Coram's early permanence programme, which operates across London and other local authorities. The early permanence programme offers a specialist service for children aged 0–2 years who are the subject of care proceedings and where there is a likelihood that the children will need a permanent placement outside of the birth family. This inspection was an aligned inspection of both services.

The Thomas Coram Foundation for Children recruits, prepares and assesses fostering for adoption carers and adoptive families. Children are either placed with families approved as suitable to adopt by the agency, or with families who have dual-approved status by Coram Fostering Service. Following the fostering for adoption and adoption process, children and families have access to a wide range of services that provide long-term support.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had placed 41 children in the preceding year and supported 50 adoption orders being made.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 November 2021

Overall experiences and progress of service users, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The voluntary adoption agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the voluntary adoption agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children, young people and adults.

Date of previous inspection: 2 October 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

Adopted children and their families receive exceptional services from this agency. Highly skilled and professional staff prepare adopters and early permanence foster carers to understand the impact of developmental trauma in children's early life experiences. The progress that children and adopters make is excellent, considering their starting points. The agency is leading early permanence and adoption work in all its aspects.

Partnership working remains a real strength for this agency. The responsible individual has led Coram into becoming the host of a fifth regional adoption agency in London, Coram Ambitious for Adoption. The development of the regional agency in conjunction with other London boroughs and one council is impressive. The partnership working is leading to greater opportunities for embedding good practice more widely to a larger audience and this is increasing the pool of potential adopters for children. The adoption support offer is also being widened and adapted within the regional adoption agency.

Prospective adopters receive high-quality preparation, assessment and support which enables them to understand the needs of the children waiting for adoptive families. The agency is constantly thinking about how to improve and support adopters within this process. For example, new initiatives in the vetting and application stage of assessment help to ensure that the right people are selected to offer a child-focused service.

Despite the generally young age of children being adopted, children's views, wishes and feelings are understood and considered through observation and through therapeutic services offered. Older children have been encouraged to participate; for example, one child spoke to adults at National Adoption Week and made a speech encouraging families to adopt.

One of the key positive features of this agency is the relationship-based work that takes place. There are long-standing and positive relationships between staff and adopters. There is stability and consistency within the staff team, which means that adopters keep the same worker throughout the assessment and introductions. In addition, some adopters have returned for the second time and had the same worker. Adopters spoken to give overwhelmingly positive feedback about the services they received. For example, one adopter stated: 'I strongly recommend this agency; they are very different from other agencies, they don't forget us, we have lifelong support. This gives us peace of mind,' and several other adopters told inspectors that the agency is their lifeline.

The agency accesses specialist therapeutic support to strengthen attachment and life-story work. This helps children to make sense of their early life experiences before moving in with their adoptive families. In addition, adopters are well trained

to support children to learn how to regulate their emotions. Children are afforded good access to health and education services. There is strong evidence of good multi-agency work. In several cases, the adoption support social workers have supported schools to understand the developmental trauma of children who are adopted.

The adoption support offer is impressive and covers every aspect of the adoption process. Prospective adopters say that the support they receive is effective and comprehensive. Examples of this support include a range of evidence-based interventions, creative therapies, mentalisation-based therapies, child and family psychological interventions, therapeutically informed social work, parenting skills and parenting workshops. In addition, there is also access to birth records and specialist support and workshops for parents who are parenting Black, Asian and mixed-ethnicity children or Muslim children.

The practice at this agency is innovative and progressive. Children make excellent progress as a direct result of carefully planned assessments, introductions and support offered. As a learning and teaching environment, the agency supports good practice by disseminating early permanence training and through its continued involvement in developing services for the sector. One example of this is a pilot of a mindfulness programme for adoptive parents, 'Caring for Me, Caring for You.'

How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected: good

Children are protected from any potential or actual harm. The organisation has a specialist post overseeing safeguarding and quality assurance, in addition to the Head of Adoption Service, who is the agency safeguarding lead. This ensures regular review of safeguarding arrangements to determine any themes or areas of specific concern. Adopters are supported through preparation training which informs them about the needs of children who have been at risk of abuse or who have suffered any type of significant harm in their early years.

Adopters feel that their concerns are taken seriously, and they can make contact and discuss any aspects of their children's care and protection at any time. They are helped to understand how children can and will trigger uncomfortable reactions in them, which will often require professional help and support to manage.

The agency runs a series of Incredible Years® training programmes for adopters on all ages and stages of their children's development. These parenting groups help parents to understand triggers for behaviour, and they are given helpful strategies to manage behaviours and set clear and helpful boundaries for children.

The agency has taken on advice from a previous recommendation about thematic safeguarding risks and has included this in the preparation training and as part of the ongoing training offer. This helps parents to consider very real risks that social media brings, especially where children already have specific vulnerabilities.

The agency understands and follows the correct procedures to ensure that children are protected. Any concerns of abuse or neglect, either current or historical, are reported swiftly to the appropriate authority. Clear records of any child protection or safeguarding incidents are kept and updated. There is further oversight of any child protection issues by the safeguarding lead of the organisation to consistently pick out any emerging themes or training needs.

Although swift and appropriate actions are taken to ensure that children are protected, a shortfall has been identified in the agency's reporting to the regulator where allegations against foster carers/adopters have been made. It is clear, despite this potential shortfall, that no children have been placed at any risk as a result and appropriate arrangements have always been made for their safety first.

The agency has a clear system for safer recruitment of staff which is effective in preventing unsuitable adults from being allowed to work with children. A few minor shortfalls were identified in this system. This is in respect of ensuring that copies of relevant qualifications are seen, retained and recorded and in the verification of panel members references.

The agency has effective links with its host authority's designated officer and safeguarding teams. Staff members have benefited from the safeguarding partnership training on offer. The agency has ensured that it has knowledge of other safeguarding partners in areas where children are placed and wherever it has been necessary to discuss or report any concerns.

There is a strong emphasis on keeping children safe within the preparation and post-adoption support offer. A very experienced and consistent staff team manages any risk for children effectively and offers support and interventions to prevent placements disrupting. This is strong practice and has prevented children from suffering a placement breakdown and move.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers provided an outstanding service. The agency is led by an inspirational and forward-thinking responsible individual who is passionate about outcomes for children. In addition, there is a strong operational manager for adoption services and a recently registered manager for the early permanence service. The service is constructed with a clear child focus and an ambition to grow and develop a consistent offer to all children and their adoptive families.

As well as the senior leadership group, a strong and experienced group of managers lead and manage different parts of the operational services successfully. They know children and adopters extremely well and can demonstrate the impact the agency has on children's outcomes.

The agency has a consistent, committed and highly experienced workforce. Staff bring a resource collectively which is built on years of shared experience and

learning. The overarching focus of all the staff is the children and this shines through in the high-quality services and support they receive.

Staff and managers enjoy strong arrangements for supervision, training and support. Staff also benefit from reflective discussion groups to think about adopted children and families. There are processes for induction, progression and ongoing development which staff spoke about and have benefited from. All staff gave positive feedback about their experiences of working for the agency and hold a shared responsibility to keep the focus on improving outcomes for children.

This agency is a learning organisation, and welcomes challenge and uses feedback for reflection and improvement. Regular audits, supervision, complaints, feedback and panel quality assurance are all used to reflect and learn on how to improve practice and strengthen the offer for children and adoptive families.

Strong leadership has started addressing the diversity issues for children awaiting adoption. This ambition is being tirelessly taken forward in planning, training, recruitment, family finding and supporting adopted children and their families.

Leaders and managers have taken on board recommendations from the previous inspections and used these to develop and improve their service further. The training offer has considered thematic safeguarding issues. The diversity issues raised in the last fostering inspection have focused thinking and a working group was established to consider the agency response. Training for staff and support groups for Black, Asian and mixed-ethnicity and Muslim adopters and children have been established. Scrutiny of all the activities of the agency and a focus on thinking about unconscious bias and promoting more diversity in the recruitment of adopters have led to some excellent and positive changes. Recruitment rates for Black, Asian and mixed-ethnicity carers are up by 40% this year and the central list of the panel is more reflective of the community and the children and families it serves.

The agency continues to advocate for children and holds high expectations and aspirations for children. Staff work hard to fulfil this expectation and support adoptive families to support children. The agency uses an electronic recording system and records are clear and evaluative, and are written with children in mind.

The effectiveness of early permanence arrangements:

The agency fostering service innovatively leads the sector in its inspiring promotion of early permanence. The registered manager has highly specialist knowledge of early permanence which helps carers understand the process involved. She has developed and embedded early permanence thinking into the regional adoption agency, ensuring that children are placed with fostering for adoption carers at the earliest opportunity to achieve the best outcomes for them.

The agency is forward-thinking and wishes to embed early permanence work throughout the sector. The agency creates a culture of aspiration and positivity through established professional relationships with central government, local

authorities, partner agencies and the regional adoption agency. The registered manager has produced a wide range of good practice resources, which include guides, publications and training videos, some of which have been adopted by other agencies as well as nationally.

As part of the regional adoption agency, the agency has family finding social workers placed in local authorities. They identify and track children for early permanence placements. They are the first point of contact for local authorities and the link with the regional adoption agency. This ensures that stability and positive early life chances are maximised for children awaiting adoption.

The registered manager for early permanence works closely with the family finders. This strengthens collaborative work with local authorities. The registered manager provides specialist training and runs an early permanence reflection group. This gives staff and professionals opportunities to be creative and develop their understanding in relation to all elements of adoption.

Fostering for adoption carers have access to outstanding quality assessment, preparation, approval, matching and after-placement support. Fostering for adoption carers receive practical support as well as theory- and research-based solutions, which enables them to develop resilience and understanding. For example, specialist training and therapeutic support offered to fostering for adoption families help them to understand their children's behaviours and build stronger attachments.

Fostering for adoption carers are helped with comprehensive safer care planning which includes thinking about all aspect of childcare. Fostering for adoption carers are well prepared through carefully planned training to consider birth family contacts and the expectations about children potentially returning to birth families.

Children benefit from a culturally diverse, highly experienced panel, which dually approves fostering for adoption carers and adopters. Panel members have a thorough understanding of early permanence and the importance of making decisions in children's best interests. The panel is significantly influential, fulfilling its quality assurance and gatekeeping role for the agency. The agency decision-maker is highly effective in her role and promptly considers all applications.

What does the voluntary adoption agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 or any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
If, in relation to an agency, any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 4 takes place, the registered provider and the manager shall without delay notify the person indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of that table. Any notification made in accordance with this regulation which is given orally shall be confirmed in writing within 14 days. In the table— “approved by the agency” means approved by the agency as suitable to be an adoptive parent in accordance with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983. (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003). (Regulation 19 (1) (2) (3))	31 December 2021

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that the agency has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for staff, volunteers and persons on the central list which includes:
 - checks to confirm qualifications which are a requirement and others which are considered by the agency to be relevant
 - at least two references, preferably one from a current employer, and where possible a statement from each referee as to their opinion of the person’s suitability to work with children.

(National minimum standards for adoption, page 61, paragraph 21.3)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people, using the 'Social care common inspection framework'. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards.

This voluntary adoption agency is also registered as an independent fostering agency to provide early permanence services (for example, Fostering for Adoption/concurrent planning) as their only fostering activity. We have undertaken the inspections of these agencies at the same time and published a combined inspection report.

Voluntary adoption agency details

Unique reference number: SC048496

Registered provider: Thomas Coram Foundation for Children

Registered provider address: 49 Mecklenburgh Square, London WC1N 2QA

Responsible individual: Sue Lowndes

Responsible manager: Sarah Byatt

Telephone number: 0207 520 0383

Email address: Sue.Lowndes@coram.org.uk

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC034087

Registered provider: Coram Fostering Service

Registered provider address: 49 Mecklenburgh Square, London WC1N 2QA

Responsible individual: Sue Lowndes

Registered manager: Hannah Moss

Telephone number: 0207 520 0383

Email address: Sue.Lowndes@coram.org.uk

Inspectors

Christine Kennet, Her Majesty's Inspector
Gulcin Ardic, Social Care Regulatory Inspector

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