

Coram Fostering Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Coram, the UK's first children's charity has been offering better life chances for children since 1739. The fostering service provides concurrent planning for children who are subject to care proceedings and where in the view of the courts and past history there is a likelihood that children will need a permanent placement outside the birth family. The aim of the project is to prevent drift and delay in achieving permanence for these children and to reduce placement moves.

The Concurrent Planning service is run in conjunction with local authorities in and around London and in Cambridgeshire. It is validated by the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services a best practice hub for children's services used by local authorities across England. The fostering agency has five approved carers and two children in placement. The agency approved five concurrent carers over the previous year. Coram also has three adoption agencies registered with Ofsted.

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**.

Children receive care from a fostering agency which is outstanding in all areas. Coram fostering agency is steeped in a dynamic, pioneering history and it continues to excel in the format of concurrent planning. It is the only agency which specialises

in concurrent planning in the UK. Children make exceptional progress due to Coram's proactive promotion of early permanency. Pre-birth planning ensures children achieve the best possible outcomes. There have been no placement breakdowns over the life of the project's 15 year history. This uniquely exceeds the national average, which prolifically enhances children's lives. There are no breaches of regulations identified. The agency is aware of the need to continue in their endeavours to recruit a more culturally diverse range of carers. This will enable a wider group of children to benefit from an exceptional service.

Children benefit from highly constructive contact arrangements which empower their birth families. The agency excels in the skilled manner in which they capture the quality of contact interactions. Parents or relatives have the opportunity to develop their knowledge, understanding and capacity to meet children's needs. Children ultimately benefit from the highly skilled management of reunification. The fostering agency is also able to provide an independent, objective parenting assessment of skills. In cases where the a child will be adopted by foster carers, the agency excels in their sensitive management of this difficult situation. Pre and post adoption support is also available, where necessary.

Children flourish through the consistency and continuity of dedicated foster care. This enables them to form a significant emotional attachment. Children benefit from a highly robust assessment process. They live with carers who are dually approved as foster carers and adopters. A diverse, highly effective, accomplished fostering panel ensures the needs of children are at the centre of decision making. Foster carers are exceptional they are unreservedly committed to concurrent planning.

The extremely strong promotion of children's emotional well-being is ongoing throughout their lives. There is a strong emphasis on preventative work and excellent partnership links with psychiatric agencies. The agency dynamically succeeds in providing excellent tailored support to carers, children and birth families. The fostering team work closely with the adoption support team. This work is integral to the success of placements. The agency undertake excellent life story work. It enables children to see foster care and subsequent adoption as a positive experience.

Children receive care from an agency which has significantly strong safeguarding arrangements. Staff and foster carers demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of safeguarding and of the impact of neglect and abuse on children. The organisation offers ongoing support to children which is an exceptional area of work. There is an inspiring dedication to working through the most difficult and demanding circumstances. The agency has a national safeguarding lead person who dynamically drives a seamless safeguarding agenda throughout the organisation.

The organisation is highly influential and has wide ranging recognition within central government, leading organisations within the social care field, voluntary agencies and wide ranging local authorities. The fostering agency has significant links with Harrow and Cambridgeshire Children's Services, resulting in outstanding outcomes for a proportion of their children. The Coram Centre for Early permanence leads through innovation and partnership. The fostering agency contributes to

organisational and external research, their key messages have an inspiring impact on local and national government. The excellent steering group and subscription service enables them to assist other local authorities with developing concurrent planning.

Children benefit from leaders and managers who are highly visible, experienced and passionately dedicated to concurrent planning. Children benefit from a well organised and adaptable service. Embedding the concurrent social workers within the adoption team provides greater flexibility and financial resilience. The Registered Manager oversees both the fostering and adoption team which promotes optimum continuity and ensures a highly effective seamless service. Staff are highly competent their skills, experience and personal qualities contribute to the fostering agency's exceptional working practices. The agency is continually evolving and demystifying the advantages of concurrent planning.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- implement an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service. (NMS 13.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children make exceptional progress due to Coram's proactive promotion of early permanency. Pre-birth planning ensures children achieve the best possible outcomes. The ultimate aim is for children to be reunified with their parents or relatives at the end of proceedings. If this is not possible children benefit from the secondary plan, adoption by their concurrent planning carers. This scheme protects children from unnecessary moves and broken attachments. It is an innovative 'win/ win' situation for children, placing the risks of broken attachments with the adults. Children benefit from early stability and the optimum success of concurrent planning placements. There have been no placement breakdowns over the life of the project's 15 year history. This uniquely exceeds the national average, which prolifically enhances children's lives.

Children flourish through the consistency and continuity of dedicated foster care. This enables them to form a significant emotional attachment as carers are primarily focused on their individual needs. Professionals comment on the 'strength of their relationship and their attentive care'. This contributes to helping them 'form a secure attachment'. Professionals highlight this as being highly important in a child's 'recovery and overall development'. The extremely strong promotion of children's emotional well-being is ongoing throughout their lives. Children benefit from creative therapies, which include art and music therapy. The agency has excellent

links with the Tavistock clinic, enabling children to receive high quality purposeful support.

Children lead a healthy lifestyle, despite some of their poor starting points. Children placed in this fostering agency are exceptionally vulnerable, an example being their pre-birth exposure to substances. They receive priority treatment in regards to all health and developmental appointments and Looked After Child medicals. Foster carers receive support to attend health appointments and are accompanied by a member of the fostering team, if necessary. Foster carers highlight that children are a 'real delight to care for'. They comment that children 'brighten up' their day and it is a 'joy' to see them 'developing so well'. Fosters carers acknowledge 'there will be uncertainties' but they are 'ready to face them together'. Children are an integral part of their foster family. Foster carers state they are 'excited and happy' about each child's future in their family.

Children receive support to develop a positive identity. Foster carers assist with promoting important religious and cultural traditions, an example being facilitating their christening. The agency undertake excellent life story work. They assist with making inspiring books for children, which detail their birth parents' positive qualities and pertinent information about their heritage. These life story books are written in a clear child friendly, empowering and aspirational manner. It enables children to see foster care and subsequent adoption as a positive experience. Foster carers also receive assistance to confidently tell children about their origins. Foster carers highlight that they are 'thankful for the opportunity' to hear about children's heritage. In the future children will be able to further influence the service through the organisation's advocacy and consultation service.

Children live in foster homes which provide an age appropriate learning environment. Children engage in stimulating activities which promote their development. These include swimming lessons, looking at books, playing with musical instruments and educational toys. Children have opportunities for social contact with others at toddler music groups, the baby gym, or other groups. They are also able to visit the organisation's Parents Centre drop in activities such as baby massage, as well as visiting the local children's park.

Children benefit from highly constructive contact with their parents, siblings and other relatives. The fostering agency has a child focused environment for contact. This offers parents or relatives an opportunity to develop their knowledge, understanding and capacity to meet children's needs. The consistency of contact arrangements aims to minimise stress and disruption of the child's routine. Children receive protection from expert supervision during contact. Each child has a dedicated contact supervisor who provides a consistent figure for all parties. The contact supervisor is also a family support worker. This is another individual to discuss issues from a different perspective.

Contact supervision is an active process with supervisors supporting birth parents or relatives, advising, modelling good child care and actively intervening where care is inappropriate. Concurrent planning enables the agency to work in partnership with

relatives as the central priority is the child and reunification with their family. Foster carers and agency staff form an excellent respectful, relationships with relatives. Foster carers highlight their 'sense of compassion for the parents'. Parents are thankful for the support and refer to the agency staff as 'good people', stating they 'will continue to support Coram throughout my way in any way'. Contact supervisors are able to restore confidence to parents. Validating interactions as being 'both appropriate and meaningful'. Parents enjoy the opportunity to share loving intimate moments with their child.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children receive care from an innovative fostering agency which has a proven track record. Coram's concurrent planning service is a highly influential leader in the field. The fostering services professional practice informs research and visa versa. There is a history of making an exceptional difference to children and the assessment, support and training of foster carers. Children live with carers who are dually approved as foster carers and adopters. Foster carers are exceptional they are unreservedly committed to concurrent planning. They fully understand the needs of the child are paramount and they are very professional in their outlook. Foster carers take immense pride in their ability to remain 'child focussed'. They 'feel a sense of satisfaction and reward in having given' a child the 'best start in life'. Professionals highlight that 'highly vulnerable' babies thrive 'in their care'.

Foster carers are predominately from a White British background and the agency strives to recruit a more culturally diverse range of carers. Past work includes commissioning a study into the barriers effect sections of the community, specialist workshops and contacting former adopters. The agency are currently working with their marketing and communication department to address this need. A good example of their endeavours includes recent work with a mosque. The organisation completed their own study 'voices of mixed ethnic adopted children'. The study detailed best practice in preparing children for racism, discrimination and bullying regarding being adopted. Foster carers additionally have training on identity, equality, inclusion and anti-discriminatory practice. The agency has comprehensive matching criteria which outlines issues to consider where there is no close racial match. This is a forward thinking tool to consider children's needs in transracial placements.

The agency excels in their ability to provide a personally tailored support service to both birth families and foster carers. Birth families have the advantage of being given a chance to demonstrate their competence in an empowering environment. The substantial work with relatives provides them with the opportunity to prove their competency. The fostering service provides includes individual training, support and facilitate family group conferences. Birth families benefit from expert parenting coaching during supervised contact. They also receive support to help them make the changes necessary for the return of their child. Parent's state 'that Coram's support was excellent'. The fostering agency is also able to provide an independent,

objective assessment of their parenting skills and their ability to change. Pre and post adoption support is also available, where necessary.

Children ultimately benefit from the highly skilled management of reunification. When appropriate, the fostering agency offers intensive support for rehabilitation. Over the past year, two babies were returned to the care of a relative and one to a birth parent. Foster carers work positively with the comprehensive rehabilitation plan to ensure a seamless transition. They state they felt 'heard and validated in a powerless situation'. Foster carers and birth families demonstrate great 'mutual respect which due to the sensitivity of the situation is very admirable'. Counselling and time out is available for foster carers. Foster carers thank the agency's social workers for 'all the fantastic support' during these difficult times. They appreciate that social work staff 'got us', especially during 'the bleakest moments'. Highlighting their 'thoughtfulness, insight and wisdom. Foster carers demonstrate outstanding resilience stating they look 'forward to getting back on the concurrent care journey'.

The fostering service learns from reunification cases which results in improved practice. They now ask for more information on the putative paternal family, prior to taking each referral. They also make greater emphasis on the probability of rehabilitation in preparation groups and the home study. In cases where the outcome of care proceedings is that a child will be adopted by foster carers, the agency organises a 'family day'. Birth parents are able to invite their close family or friends. Acknowledgement is made to the parents of their love for their child. The fostering agency proactively prepares for the final contact, supportively encouraging parents to provide material for life story books. A photo album for parents is also presented to the parents, documenting their contact sessions. The fostering service excels in their sensitive management of this difficult situation.

Children benefit from a highly robust assessment process, Reports are concise, evaluative and there is immense consideration for applicant's suitability as concurrent foster carers. Assessments innovatively cover both the adoption and fostering elements of the assessment for the complex role of concurrent planning carer. Preparatory training includes specific dedicated to concurrent planning. There is considerable clarity of expectations, extensive information and substantial support. This ensures prospective foster carers make the right decision for them.

Children are cared for by extremely well supported foster carers. Foster carers highlight that their link workers are 'voices of reason' and they deeply value their 'sensible, reassuring expertise'. Foster carers benefit from a comprehensive training programme which includes experiential learning. Foster carer training also incorporates the necessary vocational standards. The fostering agency offers excellent bespoke training, an example being a baby care course delivered by the family support worker. Foster carers and children can attend a stay and play group where they can discuss issues with involved professionals, a child psychotherapist and meet other carers and adopters. The agency also holds periodic support groups for foster carers. Friends and family are also able to attend a session, which provides them with further information regarding concurrent planning.

The organisation has a strong emphasis on preventative work and there is a culture of it being a strength to ask for help. The fostering team work closely with the adoption support team. This work is integral to the success of placements. Foster carers highlight that 'Coram have been brilliant and I hope they continue to be part of our lives'. Coram has adapted and evaluated the highly regarded Webster Stratton parenting skills course, "The Incredible Years" for use with adoptive parents. This programme has the validation of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes for Children and Young Peoples' Services. This 12 week parenting skills course is available for foster carers who subsequently become adopters. The family support post covers both adoption and concurrent planning families. This enables valuable insight into children's and foster carers future needs.

A diverse, highly effective, accomplished fostering panel ensures the needs of children are at the centre of decision making. The panel is constituted to consider both the fostering and adoption application. The central list of panel members consist of an exceptionally experienced range of individuals. Their professions include social work, the judiciary, psychiatry, paediatrics and teaching. The panel chair has considerable experience in the field and is aware of the wider factors effecting concurrent planning. There is an earnest commitment to their work and concurrent planning is viewed as a 'valuable addition' for providing stability to children. The conscientious panel dynamically influence the agency through their quality assurance function. There is an excellent dialogue between the agency and the panel, which ensures children's needs are well monitored. The agency decision maker meticulously considers each application in a timely manner. There is great consideration of the prospective carers strengths and reasons for approval in accordance with the national guidance.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children receive care from an agency which has significantly strong safeguarding arrangements. Practice is informed by research and developments in the social care field. Staff and foster carers demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of safeguarding and of the impact of neglect and abuse on children. The organisation offers ongoing support to children, which is an exceptional area of work. There is an inspiring dedication to working through the most difficult and demanding circumstances. Social workers highlight that children are not exposed to 'domestic incidents, substance misuse and is free from harm and danger'. They praise the 'long term stability, in a safe and secure environment'.

The agency has a national safeguarding lead person who dynamically drives a seamless safeguarding agenda throughout the organisation. They provide expert knowledge, ensure consistent practice and improving practice in the organisation and local authorities. The organisation systematically produces quarterly safeguarding reports enabling them to analyse performance, reflect, highlight key learning and produce comprehensive action plans. There are no issues in relation to the fostering agency.

Extensive policies and procedures inform safeguarding and child protection practice. The agency learns from serious case reviews. Staff and foster carers have access to excellent training which covers the wide ranging aspects of safeguarding. There is the opportunity to innovatively explore issues at a therapeutic level through attending clinical workshops and examining complex safeguarding cases. An outstanding example of this is the Tavistock training on protecting babies, the dilemmas, risk and supporting change. Foster carers also have access to substantial resources these include Fostering Network booklets on caring for children who have been sexually abused and allegations against carers.

Fostering social workers undertake an annual unannounced visit to fostering households. Health and safety forms part of the initial assessment and is an ongoing agenda item. Due to the age of children and supervised contact there are no issues with missing episodes. Foster carers, however, know what action to take if the whereabouts of children are not known. There are clear complaints procedures which foster carers and all relevant parties are aware of. The procedure also includes Ofsted's details. There is a very good understanding of safeguarding in the digital age. Staff confidently challenge issues, an example being putting baby pictures on social networking sites.

The fostering agency's meticulous recruitment procedures further protect children. There is a dedicated commitment to employing the right person. Prior to employment applicants undergo rigorous checks and exploration of referee's is over and beyond recommended practice. The agency follows good practice and routinely undertakes Disclosure and Barring Service checks at regular intervals. Children have the assurance that their cases are being managed by accountable social workers and managers who are registered with the relevant professional body.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children needs are a thread interwoven throughout all elements of this agency's renowned practice. Coram's fostering agency has led the way nationally pioneering a scheme dedicated to concurrent planning. This attachment theory based model champions early permanence for children. It is dynamically successful and accurately reflects Coram's strapline 'better chances for children since 1739'. Local authorities highlight the fostering agency has a 'very good reputation, which is deserved'. They express admiration for the agency's 'trouble shooting', 'flexibility' and responsiveness. Other leaders in the field feels felt the fostering agency offer a 'fantastic service' and 'no one is better than them'.

The organisation is highly influential and has wide ranging recognition within central government, leading organisations within the social care field, voluntary agencies and wide ranging local authorities. The fostering agency has significant links with Harrow and Cambridgeshire Children's Services, resulting in outstanding outcomes for a proportion of their children. The excellent steering group and subscription

service enables the fostering service to assist other local authorities with developing concurrent planning. The fostering agency also creates a greater understanding within the judiciary, health services and involved professionals. The Coram Centre for Early permanence leads through innovation and partnership. They prioritise learning lessons and disseminating good practice in relation to concurrent planning and similar approaches. Professionals comment that it is 'a privilege to be part of the forward thinking group urging concurrent planning onwards'. The fostering agency contributes to organisational and external research, their key messages have an inspiring impact on local and national government.

Foster carers welcome the fact that the agency is not bureaucratic and senior leaders are highly visible. They highlight that 'everyone cared passionately about getting the best outcome for the children'. Foster carers recognise that the 'best solution for the child, may not always be you'. The organisation benefits from significant reserves, which positively contributes to their financial security. Local authorities highlight that the fostering agency 'will put children's needs first and will not compromise standards for money'.

Children benefit from leaders and managers who are highly experienced and passionately dedicated to concurrent planning. They express great pride in their work, describing it as one of their 'joys'. The Registered Manager has a relevant management qualification and twenty four years' experience within the social care field. The past five years have been in a management capacity in the organisation. Children benefit from a well organised and adaptable service. Embedding the concurrent social workers within the adoption team provides greater flexibility and financial resilience. The Registered Manager oversees both the fostering and adoption team which promotes optimum continuity and ensures a highly effective seamless service. The restructuring also promotes the model across a wider geographical area. Staff are also based in a North London office, which provides access to potential carers from that part of London.

The agency is currently introducing a new database which will help with performance management data. The agency securely store files and maintain a high level of confidentiality. Children benefit from excellent record keeping which will be a tremendous asset when they progress into adulthood. Foster carers use a nationally recognised reporting format which provides a very comprehensive overview of a child's development. Contact records meaningfully capture the intimate moments between the child and their parent. The agency excels in the skilled manner in which they capture the quality of interactions.

Being based in the organisation's headquarters gives the fostering agency access to other departments. This further increases their effectiveness and contribution to the wider vision. The agency is supported in its collection and analysis of feedback by their Policy and Research team. An external agency highlight that 'there is a well-established and consistently used approach to business planning this starts at the top, cascades throughout the organisation with people at all levels being involved'. Foster carers have a clear payment structure and receive their allowances in a timely manner. A welcomed addition is the start -up allowance paid when each child is

placed. This enables foster carers to purchase relevant items necessary for caring for a baby or young child.

Children receive a service from staff who are highly valued and considerably well supported. This is verified by the organisation's Investors in People accreditation. The fostering agency excels in their wide ranging staff development. This includes extensive training, networking, professional discussions, consultations and journal clubs. The latter enables staff to keep up-to-date with current international research. The provision of specialist training and consultancy strengthens staff members skills and knowledge. Foster carers describe the staff team as being 'completely brilliant'. Staff are highly competent their skills, experience and personal qualities contribute to the fostering agency's exceptional practice.

The agency has an excellent interactive website which gives a careful explanation of the value of concurrent care for babies and children under two. It also concisely highlights the risks and challenges for foster carers. A DVD is also available which features families who have had children placed with them talking about their experience of the process. The website includes a comprehensive Statement of Purpose which highlights the agency's aims, objectives, philosophy of care and the services available. Children and birth parents also benefit from their own guides, enabling them to make sense of the unique service.

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 independent fostering agencies.