

# 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

This voluntary adoption agency provides early permanence services<sup>1</sup> and is registered as an independent fostering agency under the Care Standards Act.

The adoption agency is one of the main childcare services run by Thomas Coram Foundation for Children, a well-established children's charity. It is registered to provide domestic adoption services and adoption support services, including birth records information and counselling for people placed for adoption by Coram.

The early permanence service is an integral part of the adoption service, although it has its own registration as an independent fostering agency. This service provides placements for children under three years old, with people who are dually approved by Coram as adopters and foster carers. This inspection was an aligned inspection of both services.

At the time of the inspection, 38 children had been placed for adoption in the preceding 12 months and there were 23 approved adoptive families.

### Inspection dates: 29 July to 2 August 2024

**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 last inspection:** 15 November 2021

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** outstanding

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

Children and adults benefit from an exceptionally high-quality service that is innovative and insightful. The service is continually evaluated by leaders and managers and is delivered by social workers who are exceptionally passionate about their work. This ethos permeates all aspects of the agency and is highly effective in securing positive experiences and outcomes for children.

Prospective adopters receive a warm and professional welcome when they contact Coram. There are well-thought-out procedures that are consistently delivered and robustly overseen to ensure that prospective adopters are given as much information as possible. This enables them to make an informed decision about whether adoption is right for them and if any further work is needed before registering an interest. Assessments of adopters are thorough and of excellent quality. Together with preparation training of a high standard, this contributes significantly to the ability of adopters and foster carers to provide safe and secure placements that meet children's complex needs. One adopter said, 'I don't think we could have been better prepared.'

Relationships between social workers and adopters are extremely positive and highly effective. This is captured in some of the comments made by adopters, which include, 'I felt safe in safe hands,' 'The social workers are amazing,' and 'There is an atmosphere of trust.' Adopters value their social worker's commitment, understanding, expertise and support as well as the 'human aspect' of the agency.

Matching is one of the agency's many strengths and contributes towards placement stability and the development of secure attachments. Comprehensive and insightful assessments mean that social workers know prospective adopters exceptionally well. They have an accurate understanding of their capacity to meet children's complex needs. This is further enhanced by the use of a recently developed 'trauma timeline' which tracks children's lived experiences. This is an excellent tool for understanding the extent and impact of children's trauma. If additional support is identified as a result of using this tool, it is agreed at an early stage to provide adopters with the strategies to manage any difficulties before they become too entrenched.

Highly innovative practice ensures that children, who may be harder to place, are successfully matched and placed with adopters. This includes bespoke information-sharing, profiles of a professional standard and prioritising promotion through the recently developed 'step-up' family-finding programme. In addition, the use of early permanence ensures that some children are placed at a very early age to enable their attachments to be strengthened.

Children's identity needs are given a high priority in a number of ways. Specific assessment tools are used with adopters who may consider a child from a different ethnicity to their own. Staff are committed to supporting these adopters to explore

and manage any additional identity needs. Adopters really benefit from specific support groups, describing them as having a lasting impact. Life-story talk training provides adopters with the confidence to understand and implement important life-story conversations with their children. A further piece of innovative practice to support identity needs is about to be implemented. This will promote contact between siblings who are in different care arrangements, and enable the adults involved to meet and be confident about supporting future contact.

The agency provides exceptional support both pre- and post-adoption, which contributes significantly to placement stability. This includes the provision of parenting groups throughout the year, work with schools to help them understand the impact of trauma, facilitating applications to the adoption support fund, and direct support, advice and advocacy.

The social workers are extremely knowledgeable about the therapeutic services which are available and can identify those which are most appropriate to meet the specific needs of children and their families. The agency works very closely with a specialist therapeutic service which supports parents and their children to develop secure attachments and positive outcomes. Adopters really value the lifelong support. Feedback to the agency includes: 'They are instrumental in making things happen'; 'I don't know how we would have survived without them,' and 'The level of support on offer is exceptional. Any question at all about parenting, childcare, adoption challenges, are all supported by the amazing team at Coram.'

Coram is also committed to providing a service to adults who have been adopted through Coram in the past. Adults are able to access their birth records, which is provided in a sensitive and safe way.

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

There are strong safeguarding arrangements throughout the service which ensure that children are protected from harm and their well-being is promoted. Leaders, managers and staff have a thorough understanding of their responsibilities to safeguard children. This is reinforced by regular training and reflective discussions.

There is good managerial oversight of safeguarding issues at a senior managerial level. The responsible individual oversees all concerns as the service's safeguarding lead. In addition, the senior management team meets regularly to monitor any safeguarding issues, identify any themes that need to be addressed or areas that require practice development.

The agency has an effective procedure for sharing safeguarding information with the appropriate authorities without delay, including any low-level concerns. This includes follow-up and advocacy within the professional network to ensure that families receive the support they need.

Adopters benefit from thorough preparation training that provides them with a good understanding of the impact of trauma and has a clear focus on safeguarding. This is reinforced throughout their assessment and post-approval support and training. Assessments of adopters have recently been strengthened as a result of learning from a recent child practice safeguarding review.

The agency's safe and highly supportive therapeutic environment enables children and adults to explore and talk openly about their difficult past experiences. Social workers have weekly reflective sessions where complex issues are discussed as a group to think about the best way to support families and have a shared responsibility for the children's overall well-being.

Some older adopted children engage in risk-taking behaviour. Social workers fully support adopters to manage this in a variety of ways, including, where appropriate, referrals for therapeutic services, referrals to the local authority, providing training and resources, or one-to-one support. Adopters are very appreciative of this. One adopter said, 'I do not know where I would have been without the support of my Coram social worker.' The parenting groups have a particular focus on safeguarding, providing adopters with strategies to manage children's behaviour, information about contextual risks and how to provide appropriate boundaries within an attachment model of care.

Safer recruitment and employment practices ensure that staff are suitably vetted. This prevents unsuitable people from being involved with the agency and helps to promote children's safety. The agency has addressed the recommendation made at the last inspection. However, recruitment practice could be further strengthened by leaders and managers ensuring that all gaps in staff's previous employment are explored and by verifying, as far as reasonably practicable, the reason why employment ended when a person has previously worked with children or vulnerable adults.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding**

The adoption agency is led and managed by highly competent, experienced and knowledgeable professionals who are totally committed and passionate about providing the very best quality of care. This includes the appropriately constituted board of trustees and the chief executive officer, whose first and main priority is 'a loving home always and forever'. The staff team is similarly enthusiastic, caring and committed to ensuring that children achieve the best possible outcomes.

Leaders and managers encourage curiosity, critical thinking and evidence-based practices. They are spearheading innovation, evaluation and research, such as the impact of transracial adoption on the understanding of children's identities. It is a learning organisation that embraces feedback, comments and complaints and uses them to develop and improve the service. Children are at the very heart of the service and the agency is in the process of improving the engagement of children and promoting the voice of the child.

Staff feel exceptionally well supported both professionally and personally. They describe their managers as readily accessible. There are comprehensive arrangements for staff supervision, which include weekly reflective sessions to discuss complex case issues. There are regular team meetings and service days, to give staff opportunities to meet together and share their expertise and learning. Staff have excellent opportunities for professional development. The excellent quality of comprehensive support has created a staff team that demonstrates a high level of expertise and competence. They are exemplary adoption practitioners who have embedded learning into their practice and who disseminate their knowledge to other professionals, both formally through training and informally.

The agency has rigorous monitoring systems at all levels and a strong improvement culture. This includes frequent and visible managerial oversight and regular reporting. The data analyst provides excellent information about all aspects of service delivery and this informs the regular reports for both managers and the board of trustees, who provide very robust scrutiny of all aspects of the service.

Professional relationships are excellent at both strategic and more personal levels. Children's social workers comment positively about how Coram social workers have supported them when they have been new to the case, or are less experienced in adoption. On a strategic level, nine local authorities have partnered with Coram to host their regional adoption agency (Ambitious for Adoption). This partnership means that Coram is well placed to support practice developments in the local authorities who make up the regional adoption agency.

The adoption panel provides excellent scrutiny of all the agency's work, having three very experienced panel chairs and a diverse membership, all of whom take their responsibilities very seriously. The panel is well administered, with clear and accurate minutes prepared in a timely way to support prompt yet thoughtful decision-making.

### **The effectiveness of early permanence arrangements**

Coram has been a well-established and respected provider of early permanence services for many years and is a sector leader in this field. It is a significant force in promoting and developing this area of practice, through its effective and well-established relationships with Adoption England, the judiciary and regional adoption agencies. Its partnership working includes providing training for local authorities, service days for the regional adoption agency, reflection groups for social workers and training manuals for the preparation of early permanence carers. This ensures that this work is undertaken by knowledgeable and supported practitioners who understand the issues and are able to reflect on their practice.

Research-informed practice is used effectively to influence, reform and support legal events and webinars nationally. Coram has been involved in designing and influencing the early permanence standards as well as a number of good practice resources that are used nationally. In addition, it hosts the early permanence network, which is a forum to influence practice as well as provide advice and

training. This innovative and evolving practice ensures that early permanence of the highest standard is embedded in practice.

Arrangements for early permanence are very well established. Because it is part of the regional adoption agency, Coram family-finding social workers are based in each of the nine constituent local authorities. This ensures that children are identified and tracked at an early stage. Matches with dually approved early permanence carers are identified swiftly and children are placed with them at the earliest opportunity to prevent delay and disruption and improve stability through strong attachments.

Early permanence is promoted as a positive choice for people wanting to adopt. There is now an opt-out system, and more information is provided at an earlier stage so that all enquirers are able to think about this as an option as soon as possible. An early permanence carer commented, 'I am 100% happy with early permanence. It is amazing and best for the child. If you can do it, it's a great way and the best way.'

Early permanence carers are very well prepared. The information is clear, detailed and informative. The uncertainty of these placements is made very clear, but also the benefits of such placements for children. Assessments are robust and focus on the capacity of carers to meet the challenging aspects of being a foster carer in these circumstances. A child's social worker confirmed this, saying about early permanence carers, 'They have rare qualities as adopters and foster carers. Their understanding of attachment really stood out and they were trauma-sensitive in their practice.'

Children's safety is given a high priority, as all aspects of risk are thoroughly assessed. Individual safer care plans are developed and early permanence carers receive high-quality relevant training, including first aid.

Carers are very well supported throughout the placement. Their social workers provide strong advocacy and an exceptional standard of support if there are challenges with other professionals or birth families. This is invaluable and enables early permanence carers to develop their resilience and continue to provide an excellent standard of care. Carers are committed to and understand their role as foster carers and complete daily logs and facilitate contact with children's birth family, while providing secure and safe care to the children.

The review of the quality of care reports are completed with relevant information about the service to aid monitoring. However, they do not include feedback from foster carers and local authorities, or provide information about how the service is going to improve. Although this information is available within the service, these additions would make this report a more useful and meaningful document.

# 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
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority.</p> <p>The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority). (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b) (2) (3))</p>	<p>30 November 2024</p>

## Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance in the recruitment of staff, volunteers and persons on the central list. This includes carrying out Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff should be trained in, understand and operate these good practices. ('Adoption: national minimum standards', 21.2)



## 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:** Cathrine Clarke

**Telephone number:** 0207 520 0383

**Email address:** adoption@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:** Cathrine Clarke

**Registered manager:** Caroline Keane

**Telephone number:** 0207 520 0383

**Email address:** adoption@coram.org.uk

## **Inspectors**

Rosemary Chapman, Social Care Inspector

Dorothy Thompstone, Social Care Inspector

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