

Coram Fostering Service

Thomas Coram Foundation for Children
Coram Family, 49 Mecklenburgh Square, London WC1N 2QA
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This 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. The aim is to prevent drift and delay in achieving permanence for these children and to reduce placement moves.

The fostering service provides carers who act as foster carers for the duration of care proceedings. The foster carers are prepared, assessed and approved as foster carers and adopters. The fostering service has 13 approved foster carers and two children in placement. In the past year, six early permanence placements have been made, with no placement disruptions.

Inspection dates: 10 to 13 July 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

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

Date of last inspection: 27 February 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- Children thrive within their fostering placements and make exceptional progress.
- Practice is transformational, steeped in the desire for excellence and grounded in child-centred research.
- It benefits from highly experienced, knowledgeable leaders and managers and highly skilled staff.
- It stands out among its peers, leading the sector in its dynamic promotion of early permanence.
- The service has a comprehensive understanding of children's experiences of trauma, loss and attachment. The agency also offers access to a child psychotherapist.
- It is leading on two practice improvement fund (PIF) projects involving early permanence. This promotes the work throughout London and nationally.
- Foster carers demonstrate excellent emotional capacity, competence and resilience. They benefit from extensive support, including counselling.
- There have been no placement breakdowns over the course of the fostering service's 19-year history.
- Work with birth parents is exceptional. The agency works collaboratively with parents and teaches them meaningful ways to play with their children, informed by research.
- Coram's 15-year longitudinal study with families who have adopted through concurrent planning demonstrates the outstanding value of the agency.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The development plan should address the shortfalls in the service. These relate to the need to clearly record the reasons for each match, ensuring that the promotion of equality and diversity is consistently considered in foster carer assessments, foster carer recruitment and working practices. Equality and diversity are not sufficiently covered in application forms and staff interviews.
- Explore the ability to meet transracial placements consistently in foster carers' assessments.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Ensure that the written development plan addresses the need to clearly record the reasons for each match and greater consideration of equality and diversity in assessments, foster carer recruitment and working practices. (NMS 18.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Coram's innovative, research-informed child-centred solution to achieving early permanence makes an exceptional difference to the lives of children. The key principle is that adults manage the uncertainties and challenges, so that the burden of uncertainty is not carried by the child. This minimises the impact on children of having an early life of uncertainty and multiple carers. Supervising social workers describe this as 'a win-win situation' for children.

Children thrive in every way within their fostering placements. Their progress is outstanding, considering their starting points. Children rapidly meet their physical, social and emotional milestones. Children enjoy a wide range of activities. A supervising social worker remarked that they now see a 'completely different child'. Social workers praised the strong attachments and life-enhancing progress made by the children.

Children receive care from foster carers who are fully committed to early permanence. Foster carers demonstrate excellent emotional capacity, competence and resilience. A child's social worker stated that she had 'nothing but compliments' for the foster carers. There have been no placement breakdowns over the course of the fostering service's 19-year history.

Comprehensive assessments skilfully detail each applicant's strengths. The panel chair commented on the 'exceptionally high' standard of assessments. A couple highlighted that their assessment brought them closer together, due to analysing and discussing their past experiences. A foster carer praised the assessment process, stating that they were 'able to be open and honest and were not judged'.

The commitment of prospective foster carers to children is exemplary. There are excellent examples of applicants who prepare well for their role, such as volunteering in childcare settings. Foster carers appreciated the extensive and insightful preparation training. One couple highlighted that it gave them confidence. Friends and family are also able to attend information sessions. A foster carer explained that this meeting was 'an asset', confirming that their family and friends 'all felt empowered in how to support us'.

Foster carers are extremely well supported. A foster carer reported, 'Coram are excellent and I thoroughly recommend them to everyone.' Another foster carer confirmed, 'I was really impressed with Coram.' Foster carers benefit from an extensive training and development programme, which includes the necessary vocational standards.

A foster carer highlighted that the support was 'amazing'. The purposeful range of support includes regular visits from their supervising social worker, support groups, baby care skills and parenting sessions. This is complemented by social events,

newsletters and access to a considerable library of resources.

Work with birth parents is exceptional. The agency strives to work in partnership with birth parents. They highly value children's histories and respect their relationship with birth relatives. Children benefit from sensitive, child-friendly life-story books, which explain their early life effectively. When possible, life-story books are created in collaboration with parents.

The agency actively promotes court-directed contact between children and their birth families. Contact is normally supported by expert contact supervisors at the agency's dedicated contact centre. These staff members offer birth parents meaningful ways to play with their children, informed by research. Photos from contact affectionately capture children's moments with their birth parents and relatives.

Foster carers excel in their ability to form positive and empathic relationships with relatives, while keeping the child at the heart of all interactions. Information regarding 'fostering to adopt' is given to birth families. Child-centred transitions are sensitively handled, regardless of whether children return to their birth family or are placed for adoption. If children return to their birth families, foster carers receive ongoing support, space and access to excellent therapeutic support.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: outstanding

Children's lives are unquestionably enhanced by the agency's excellent safeguarding arrangements. Research-informed practice focuses on giving children the best start in life through the formation of strong attachments. The focus on early permanence ensures that children have the security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging that enable them to flourish. A foster carer described the management oversight of their child's case as 'emotionally robust'.

The agency takes a proactive approach to safeguarding, which is complemented by its comprehensive policies and procedural guidance. Foster carer assessments consider safeguarding issues well and reinforce the management of risks. The organisation has a specialist post overseeing safeguarding and quality assurance. This ensures that the fostering agency benefits from expert knowledge and best practice guidance. Staff benefit from ongoing safeguarding training and participation in workshops which examine issues at a therapeutic level.

Foster carer preparation, assessment, support and training provide an excellent education on safeguarding. Topics includes broader areas of abuse, online safety, the risk of child sexual exploitation, radicalisation and extremism, female genital mutilation and honour-based violence. Foster carers demonstrate a child-centred approach to safeguarding, purposefully implementing safe caring plans. Foster carers also actively raise concerns, for example regarding contact.

Professional practice results in sustained improvements to the lives of children. There have been no safeguarding issues or allegations against foster carers or staff

since the last inspection. Foster carers receive membership of a leading fostering charity, which provides representation in the event of allegations. There are clear complaints procedures, which foster carers and all involved parties are aware of. There have been no complaints since the last inspection.

Children receive protection from annual unannounced visits to fostering households. Health and safety issues form part of the initial assessment and are ongoing agenda items. Due to the age of the children and the agency's commitment to supervised contact, there are no issues with episodes of going missing. Procedures outline the action foster carers should take if the whereabouts of children are not known.

Proactive and creative safeguarding practice means that all children have a strong sense of safety and well-being. There is a comprehensive understanding of children's experiences of trauma, loss and attachment. The agency offers access to a child psychotherapist within their 'stay and play' groups. This resource enables foster carers to discuss alternative strategies for managing behavioural concerns, removing the barrier of waiting lists for clinical support.

The organisation has a dedicated human resources team that robustly recruits new staff members. All necessary checks are undertaken. Disclosure and barring service checks are undertaken prior to offering employment and are routinely renewed every three years.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Coram's fostering agency continues to go from strength to strength and is of exceptional quality. The fostering agency innovatively leads the sector in its inspiring promotion of early permanence. Practice is transformational, spearheaded by highly experienced, knowledgeable and competent leaders and managers. The fostering agency is committed to excellence and is grounded in child-centred research.

The fostering agency is led by a highly experienced and well-qualified registered manager, who also manages the adoption team. The fostering agency has a purposeful culture of aspiration and positivity. Staff are instrumental in facilitating and embedding change in a solution-focused manner. The recruitment of the early permanence lead is proactively developing this area of work.

Staff are ambitious in their commitment to enhance the life chances of children. The agency is leading on two PIF projects involving early permanence. These involve establishing a quality mark and steering the London regionalisation agenda in early permanence work. This work includes regular monitoring by the Department for Education and has national influence.

The organisation is forward-thinking and wishes to embed early permanence work throughout the sector. The early permanence network supports the development of good practice, providing training and peer support events for local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies. It provides a stimulating platform to share learning and to receive updates on research, legislation and practice.

The fostering agency creates a culture of aspiration and positivity through established professional relationships with central government, local authorities, partner agencies and consortiums. The agency has produced a wide range of good practice resources, which includes guides, publications and DVDs. Staff provide training and support groups for early permanence carers across all London boroughs.

An independent reviewing officer praised the manner in which Coram staff guided them through the early permanence process. A local authority team manager confirmed that they 'trust their judgement', highlighting their expertise and praising their 'calmness and consistency throughout the process'. Foster carers unanimously described the agency as 'outstanding'. A foster carer commented that the agency is 'all about the children'. A child's social worker described the fostering agency as 'very professional', explaining that 'There is nothing they could have done better or differently.'

Leaders and managers are actively aware of the agency's strengths and weaknesses. The extensive quality of care review highlights the agency's innovative work and plans for continued improvement. The agency is seeking to recruit a more diverse range of foster carers. They are working with another charity via the PIF to increase recruitment from minority ethnic communities.

Managers recognise that the agency's development plan needs to clearly address minor shortfalls. These relate to recording the reasons for each match, and ensuring that there is consistent consideration of equality and diversity in assessments, foster carer recruitment and working practices. Equality and diversity are not sufficiently covered in staff interviews and application forms. The ability to meet transracial placements is not explored consistently in assessments of foster carers.

However, equality and diversity are actively addressed in best practice guidance and specific training. The recruitment strategy includes ongoing plans to recruit within the African Caribbean community. It is encouraging to see the successful recruitment of single people and same-sex couples.

The fostering agency has a clear statement of purpose, which comprehensively outlines the service. Children and birth parents benefit from their own guides, enabling them to make sense of this unique service. The findings of Coram's 15-year longitudinal study with families who have adopted through concurrent planning demonstrate the outstanding value of the fostering agency. Children's responses were more positive than children in care and other adopted children.

Leaders and managers have high expectations of their staff to change and improve the lives of the children. The agency is appropriately staffed and resourced by highly skilled and experienced individuals. Fostering social workers take pride in their 'child-centred way of working'. Foster carers describe staff as 'professional' and 'caring'. Reflective supervision, appraisals and extensive training and development opportunities successfully equip staff for their dynamic role.

Children benefit from a culturally diverse, highly experienced fostering panel, which dually approves foster carers and adopters. The conscientious panel is led by a long-standing panel chair. 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, contributing to the agency through its quality assurance function. The agency decision-maker is highly effective in her role and promptly considers all applications.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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 Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC034087

Registered provider: Thomas Coram Foundation for Children

Registered provider address: Coram, 41 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ

Responsible individual: Sarah Byatt

Registered manager: Alice Noon

Telephone number: 020 7520 0300

Email address: adoption@coram.org.uk

Inspector

Sharon Payne, social care inspector



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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