

# Thomas Coram Foundation for Children

41 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

10029231

## **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 London office comprises a recruitment and assessment team and an adoption support team, serving adopters within a 35-mile radius of central London and those living in partnership local authorities. The London team includes a sub-office in south London as well as the main Coram campus in central London. The team 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.

The adoption support team provides post-placement and post-adoption support to children and their new families when Coram has been involved in making a placement. It also provides access to information, counselling, intermediary services and support, as appropriate, to adults whose lives have been affected by adoption or other permanent placements, including adopted adults and their birth relatives and those who grew up in the care of Coram in foster care or residential care.

The agency has an early permanence project that is also subject to inspection as a fostering service. Coram works in partnership with local authorities to improve permanence planning by reducing drift and delay within the care system. This includes delivering adoption services as contracted on behalf of some London boroughs and local authorities, and providing concurrent planning and foster for adoption placements.

Coram promotes good practice in permanence planning for children by undertaking research and disseminating information to the professional network. It is working collaboratively with the emerging regional adoption agencies (RAAs), including the London RAA. The agency currently has three performance improvement fund (PIF) grants to set up and establish innovative projects and to disseminate good practice.

At the time of this inspection, the London office had placed 51 children in 38 families in the preceding year, six of those children in early permanence placements.

**Inspection dates:** 2 to 6 October 2017

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

How well children and parents are helped and protected outstanding

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 and young people.

**Date of previous inspection:** 3 February 2015

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** outstanding

**Enforcement action since last inspection:**

None.

## Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is outstanding because:

- It consistently provides exceptional social work services and assessments.
- It has an extremely well-established and experienced workforce that is up to date with relevant and recent knowledge.
- The leaders and managers are experienced and innovative, and are very well respected by their teams.
- It offers exceptional adoption support services, including creative therapies, mindfulness, mentalisation, parenting courses, life-story workshops and good access to peer, social work and psychological support.
- It is leading the work in early permanence via two PIF grants. This is supporting local authorities to improve their practice.
- It is extending its partnership working with local authorities and improving their adoption performance.
- In collaboration with multidisciplinary partners and supported by a PIF grant, the agency offers consultations and services to all families affected by adoption, through the adoption support gateway (ASG).

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- To improve thematic safeguarding training for prospective adopters.

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

### **Recommendation**

- Ensure that prospective adopters are prepared to become adoptive parents in a sensitive way, which addresses and gives them skills, knowledge and practical techniques to manage the issues that they are likely to encounter, and identifies the competencies and strengths they have or will need to develop. With particular reference to thematic safeguarding issues such as risk of radicalisation, prevention of terrorism, child sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation and honour-based violence. (National minimum standards for adoption, page 31, paragraph 10.9)

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding**

The Thomas Coram Foundation for Children is an outstanding agency in every aspect. There is excellent leadership from managers, who are passionate about improving life chances and creating stability for children in care through early permanence and adoption planning. The agency is innovative and forward thinking in how it can improve and develop services to achieve permanence for children.

Partnerships developed with local authorities are very successful, and result in excellent outcomes and improvements for children. Children have fantastic opportunities to build trusted and secure relationships with their adoptive parents. The early permanence project gives children an excellent opportunity of an early placement with a prospective adoptive family. This helps to minimise the number of placements and allows for early attachment to prospective adopters. Children make excellent progress and receive a wide range of positive experiences in their adoptive and early permanence placements. For example, the agency provides a 'stay and play' group for adopters with children under four. At this group, adopters can access psychotherapist support, a music therapist, family support workers and peer mentors, as well as socialise with others who are also adopting.

Children are encouraged and supported to participate in the services that they access. They do not actively participate in decisions about their lives, due to their age, experience and circumstances. However, the agency does seek children's feedback in a number of other ways, for example at crèche, observation in groups, during therapy and via 'The Adoptables' (a peer network of adopted young people) and other events, such as the Coram picnic. Children benefit from life-story work and books that sensitively help them to understand their backgrounds. Life-story training is accessible via Coram. This training was initially funded from the adoption support fund, but is subsequently funded by Coram so that it can be as accessible as possible to all families.

The agency has a clear complaints policy that is available to prospective adopters in the information pack and on the website, with an accessible version for children in two formats. The children's guide also provides details of advocates and services, which can support and assist children if necessary. The agency has received two complaints from prospective adopters since the last inspection in March 2015. Both of these were resolved informally. Leaders and managers provided training to staff to ensure that there was an understanding of the issues involved. The agency provides prospective adopters with information in their initial information packs about the independent review mechanism.

Staff at Coram encourage children to develop their education through engagement in pre-school activities. School-age children have careful planning around transitions when they move in with their adoptive families. The adoption support team assists schools by visiting and offering strategies to help them to support adoptive children. Education professionals are invited to attend placement planning meetings and reviews. The local authority virtual schools teams are engaged to ensure that pupil premiums are in place and appropriate support is offered or assessments provided. Children are making good progress in school, with help and support. Adopters are sensitive to their needs and are excellent advocates

to ensure that all necessary services are in place. Coram also runs an education workshop that offers help and support around schooling.

Children experience a wide range of social, educational and recreational opportunities. They quickly become part of the family and are included in a range of activities, including after-school clubs, swimming, football, holidays and picnics. Children are encouraged to attend faith-based activities in line with their religion and culture, if appropriate.

Children are supported to enjoy good health from the beginning of their placements. Planning meetings consider health needs carefully and ensure that universal healthcare is quickly established. Staff regularly advocate on behalf of adopters/prospective adopters if there are problems in receiving these services. Complex health needs are a high priority. Excellent collaborative and partnership working ensures that those needs are known and addressed, either through specialist referrals to partner agencies via the adoption gateway or through normal channels. The agency provides challenge and advocacy to placing authorities when support is needed yet funding applications or referrals are not forthcoming.

The agency currently runs the ASG project, which is an initiative between the agency and other multidisciplinary partners set up by funding from a PIF grant, with services funded via the adoption support fund. The project includes music therapists, art therapists, an administrator, a project manager, and a senior research and evaluation officer. The adoption support offer includes a range of evidence-based interventions, creative therapies, mentalisation-based therapies, child and family psychological interventions, therapeutically informed social work, parenting skills and parent workshops. The ASG provides a clear and direct easy access referral route and a fast track consultation to in-house therapeutic services or referrals through to child and adolescent mental health provision or other specialist voluntary adoption agencies. The ASG is integrated with statutory mental health services and is able to provide, at an early stage, the type and level of support that adoptive families need.

The workers in the adoption support team who provide consultation and gateway services are highly qualified and skilled. The social workers who provide training have received specialist training to ensure that they can deliver the parenting programmes on offer. Social workers always attend reviews to ensure that services are effective and to work with other professionals and parents to find a different approach, when necessary.

Relationship-based social work is a central feature of all the services provided. The positive relationships allow honest and realistic discussions about difficult and complex issues, and enable change to happen. One social worker said, when asked what the agency does well, 'The agency highly values and also practises good, high-quality relationship-based social work.'

Prospective adopters feel valued and supported by the agency. The group of adopters who met with the inspector were impressed by the professionalism of staff, their positive attitude, their care and their dedication. Adopters stated throughout this inspection that they felt welcomed and valued. They feel that the agency is well organised and that the support, training and assessment are of very high quality. Ongoing support work and

parenting groups help children and adopters to feel confident, raise their self-esteem, improve attachments and understand behaviours better. All of these activities help children to overcome previous experiences of neglect and trauma.

The agency works exceptionally well with placing authorities to ensure that they understand the child's needs. Preparation groups help adopters by using an exercise to support them in navigating child placement reports. Social workers help and support adopters to make the right choices in matching and to think through what they will be able to manage and what support will be necessary. The agency offers excellent matching prior to placements and provides outstanding early adoption support, resulting in no placement breakdowns since the last inspection. Commissioners from agency partnerships evidently held these views when spoken to as part of the inspection. They commented on high-quality work in every aspect, demonstrating confidence in the service and having high regard for managers and staff.

The agency panel works effectively and provides an additional gatekeeping service in the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters. The agency decision maker makes decisions based on clear recommendations as set out by the panel. The agency quickly refers approved adopters to the register, although many are already in the process of a match.

The agency helps adult service users affected by adoption to access birth records, support and intermediary services. Coram offers this service to all adults placed for adoption by the agency and their descendants, or directs them to more relevant agencies if necessary. Adoption support, including intermediary and birth records counselling, is sensitive to individual circumstances, is well organised and helps people to understand their history.

The practice at Coram is of high quality and innovative. Children make excellent progress, thanks to the thorough assessments and ongoing support offered by the agency. It is a significant achievement to have no placement breakdowns despite some children having very complex needs.

The initiatives and ongoing work through the partnerships are worthy of dissemination. The sharing of practice through the training and workshops on offer through the PIF grant and the innovative ASG make this agency a leader in providing adoption and support services.

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

Managers and staff work hard to keep children safe and to protect them from harm. The agency takes a strong, proactive approach to safeguarding, and has comprehensive policies and procedural guidance. The organisation has a specialist post overseeing safeguarding and quality assurance, in addition to the responsible individual, who is the agency safeguarding lead. The head of safeguarding oversees records and ensures that concerns are passed on to the local or placing authority for further consideration. The head of safeguarding compiles and shares a six-monthly analysis of safeguarding alerts with senior managers and trustees. This enables the senior managers to monitor trends, identify learning and develop safe practice. There have been no safeguarding issues or

allegations against adopters or staff in the last 12 months.

Preparation, assessment and training for adopters identify areas of potential abuse and the impact that it can have on children's behaviours and needs. The agency includes some thematic areas of abuse in the preparation of adopters, for example online safety and child sexual exploitation. The risks of radicalisation and extremism, female genital mutilation and honour-based violence are not yet included. However, the agency is aware of these from its own analysis and plans to address them in its current action plan.

Children and adults feel respected and listened to when they express concerns. For example, a child raised concerns about the lack of toys in the waiting room. The team provided toys and sent him a letter to acknowledge his views, thanking him for his input.

Adopters are carefully helped to understand risks through preparation and, later, through early parenting help and support. Careful placement planning identifies risks and addresses known vulnerabilities through action plans. Excellent ongoing adoption support ensures that adopters are helped to manage the children's behaviour as they grow. The agency offers 'stay and play' for pre-school children, early years parenting courses for those with school-age children and further parenting courses to help them to manage the teenage years. Additional specialist support is available via the ASG.

Careful screening and introductory evenings help to ensure that only those prospective adopters who are considering adoption for the right reasons are progressed. Unrealistic expectations are tackled sensitively, and information sharing helps prospective adopters to consider whether adoption is right for them. A diverse mix of prospective adopters are welcomed, including same-sex partners, single adopters and people from different cultures and backgrounds. The agency provides adopters with help to protect children to keep themselves safe via a range of interventions, which include information during preparation, parenting courses and advice, and social work support.

The agency takes a robust approach to the recruitment and monitoring of staff and panel members. All necessary checks are undertaken and copies of certificates, identity and professional registration are verified. Disclosure and barring service checks are undertaken prior to offering employment, and these are renewed every three years.

All allegations and suspicions of harm, including historic abuse, are shared promptly with the appropriate agencies. There are excellent relationships with partnership boroughs and effective links with other authorities to share information quickly and effectively. When specialist support may be required to help to keep children safe, there are good links to other voluntary adoption agencies, partners and professionals.

The agency uses research to inform its response to the behaviours of children and their responses to trauma, loss and attachment. These areas of informed practice help to ensure that the agency trains and supports prospective adopters, which in turn keeps children safe.

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

Leaders and managers provide an outstanding service. There is a very experienced head of adoption service at the London office, with overarching support from a very involved responsible individual who supports projects and partnership working. The service has developed and improved placement stability and outcomes for children through early permanence placements and excellent adoption support services. It continues to improve and develop these services through PIF grants and as part of the London regionalisation plan.

The agency is appropriately staffed and resourced to meet the needs of the children, prospective adopters and the adopters whom it works with. The staff team is highly skilled and experienced. Some of the practitioners have many years of experience in adoption practice.

There are excellent systems in place to quality assure and monitor the performance of the agency. In addition, the PIF grants require regular monitoring of progress and feedback to the Department for Education. The agency also regularly seeks feedback from adopters and children, which helps to inform and change practice. Clinical interventions use more specialised areas of monitoring and evaluation, for example in some of the ASG therapies and wider access to mainstream clinical services. The agency is also learning from research in practice into the innovative early permanence work that it is leading. This service is developing with insight and information from research on how well children do in placement, their attachments, and how to reduce significant moves and losses.

Leaders and managers actively oversee the offer of work for children, adopters and those receiving adoption support. The agency works collaboratively with all placing authorities. Where there are partnerships, this work is embedded in developing systems which consider permanence from the early stages, if required. Feedback from commissioners in the partnerships has been incredibly positive, and the performance indicators and feedback from adopters are evidence of the good collaborative work. The agency is also engaged in training for the judiciary to ensure that it is kept abreast of current developments and thinking.

The agency is currently working with three PIF projects. Two of these are in early permanence work, as the agency is the national centre for early permanence work. The first is establishing a quality mark in early permanence work, recognised by local authorities and other agencies. In addition, a good-practice guide for early permanence placements is commissioned from Coram/BAAF under the PIF grant. The second is taking a lead in early permanence in the context of the London regionalisation agenda. This project is also funding support groups for early permanence carers across all London boroughs. The third PIF is for the ASG project.

The agency is a learning environment and very progressive in its approach to adoption. The development of the PIF work and involvement in the regionalisation are evidence of this. Staff feel supported. They state that managers are always available, supervision is regular and helpful, and appraisals are positive. In addition, staff benefit from an exceptional knowledge base within their peer group and regular peer discussions on cases and within team meetings and whole team meetings. Staff can access good-quality in-



house training with some eminent professionals talking about their subjects. Additional training is targeted and child focused.

The teams work really well together and staff describe how well they support one another. They know each other's cases well and are easily able to cover absences. Staff's dedication to their families and children is exceptional. Flexibility ensures that they make themselves available at crucial times, such as introductions and during weekends and evenings. Their dedication and effort are evident, and families are very appreciative of their support. Staff work hard and are dedicated to their practice. They speak very highly of and respect their managers, whom they say are available, accessible and very knowledgeable.

The agency has a clear statement of purpose which is detailed, up to date and ensures that service users know what is available and what the agency hopes to achieve. The children's guide is available for two age ranges, and is on the website. The website is informative, helpful and easy to use. The agency makes good use of social media to promote and advertise its interests, and uses the skills and knowledge of staff and adopters to take this work forward.

The panel works effectively and promotes safe, secure and stable placements. It provides excellent feedback to the agency, and is another safety net and quality assurance tool. The quality of reports coming to panel is high and issues tend to have been addressed prior to this point. The panel members are diverse, committed and very experienced. They receive regular training, support and appraisals.

The administration team is excellent and contributes fully to the smooth running of this agency. The social work teams value the administrators, who manage and maintain the electronic recording systems and perform other administrative functions.

Leaders and managers are inspirational, confident and ambitious for all service users. They have created a centre of excellence for adoption and adoption support. The feedback from other professionals and service users is that the quality of social work at this agency goes over and above expectations. The agency leads in many areas of adoption work in the UK. It offers outstanding services to children, adopters and adopted adults. The agency knows its strengths and weaknesses, and has a clear action plan for the year ahead. The agency has developed excellent partnerships in London. These continue to grow and expand, and have been a leading part of the regionalisation plans for London.

## **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 difference 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 voluntary adoption 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 Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards.

## **Voluntary adoption agency details**

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## **Inspector**

Christine Kennet, social care inspector (lead)



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