



## Coram's Permanence Improvement Project Evaluation Summary

### Background

Coram's Permanence Improvement Project was intended to enhance the wellbeing of children who could not live safely at home, focusing in particular on cases where adoption was the permanence plan. Life chances for these children were expected to increase because less time would be spent in care. This would include particularly those children with the most complex needs, who would achieve stability and permanence at a younger age than had been the case previously.

### Aims and Objectives

Project enhancement of local authority service capacity and capability would be achieved by extending and accelerating the implementation of a bespoke data-led and practice-based approach to permanence planning in two local authorities. Practice improvement would be generated by using Coram consultancy alone or by introducing a Coram managed service model. Exemplary practice principles, and methods modelled and confirmed as effective at the local level, could become replicated nationally.

### Evaluation

The evaluation was designed to assess the effectiveness in practice in one local authority of the Coram consultancy approach. A second local authority, now employing the managed service model, provided a partial comparison:

- Quantitative data on child adoption outcomes for the whole sample of 54 children who were tracked by the Coram consultant in the first site during the 6 month period to 31 March 2016 were re-analysed for evaluation purposes. Outcomes for children during the same period in the comparison authority were compared.
- Interviews about impact on practice were undertaken with Coram project staff (3) and (20) local authority managers, service leads and social workers involved directly in the Coram case-based methodology in the first local authority. On-site observation was undertaken of the core family finding tracking and performance improvement method employed by the Coram consultant in the first local authority.

### Key findings

The Coram consultancy approach enabled significant improvements to be achieved in the timeliness of agency decision-making in family-finding for children, where adoption was the agreed plan:

- Children with a Placement Order made in the project year (2015-2016) waited an average of 113 days for an adoptive family to be found and approved by the agency. This compares with an average of 246 days achieved for children with a Placement Order made in the previous year
- In those cases most directly impacted by the Coram practice improvement methodology, timeliness was enhanced further, to 100 days. This included children defined officially as likely to be harder to place
- These outcomes compare very favourably with those achieved by the Coram managed service model implemented in the second local authority during the same period
- There was no evidence that speeding up the family finding process had compromised the likelihood that an appropriate match had been made (as indicated by lack of early family disruption)

Consultancy success was associated with the validation of the adoption service through its alignment with Coram, the personal and professional qualities of the consultant, and the single-minded activation and intensification of family-finding practice performance. Embedding Coram management in the adoption service was shown to maintain improved adoption outcomes. Consultancy illuminated systemic barriers to effective permanence planning in the wider social work practice system. Nonetheless, systemic service redesign was necessary for a permanence perspective to become embedded in the service mind-set and methods from the outset of statutory intervention.

### Cost Benefits

In the main study site, reduced days in care for children placed for adoption produced minimum nominal savings of £277k. For illustrative purposes only, these can be set against the direct cost of £145k incurred by the local authority in renewing the Coram contact.

### Key Recommendations

- It is likely to take two years to establish an effective strategic partnership based on diagnostic evidence, mutual trust and shared commitment
- Permanence improvement efforts will be realised fully only when innovation seeks to tackle shortfalls in the corporate parenting role of the local authority, understood as a whole. Meanwhile, changes made to practice in the adoption service can be expected to have a limited effect on child outcomes
- Investment should be prioritised in cost calculation methodologies for permanence planning in adoption including returning and maintaining the child at home in the care of parents.

The evaluation was carried out between July 2015 and September 2016 by the Centre for Social Work Innovation and Research and Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth, University of Sussex, Brighton, England.

*The DFE Children's Social Care Innovation Programme funded this project and its independent evaluation. Co-ordination of the evaluation was undertaken by the Rees Centre from the University of Oxford ([www.reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk](http://www.reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk).) A full copy of this report can be found at [www.gov.uk/government/publications](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications)*