

Commissioning domestic adoption services: an evaluation of the London Borough of Harrow and Coram partnership



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January 2009

Executive Summary

- In 2006 the London Borough of Harrow commissioned Coram Family to provide the Borough's domestic adoption services. This was a new form of commissioning, as no other authority had provided services in this way. As such it provided a unique opportunity to evaluate the impact on service delivery.
- The overall aim of this study was to consider how well Coram has been able to meet the needs of Harrow's looked after children who need permanence through adoption. The evaluation used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Data were collected from statistical databases and through face-to-face and telephone interviews. Interviews (n=28) were undertaken in April 2008 with Harrow social workers, independent reviewing officers, panel members, the legal department, and managers in Coram and LB Harrow. In addition 12 adopters were interviewed: seven who had had Harrow children placed before the partnership began and five with the involvement of Coram. Follow-up interviews were conducted six months later with Harrow social workers and managers in both organisations.
- After a short pilot, the Harrow/Coram partnership began on March 1st 2007. Coram's role was to find adoptive families for 11 of Harrow's children each year. If this target was not reached, the number in the subsequent year would be increased accordingly. Coram were also expected to provide consultancy to Harrow staff in planning for permanency; be responsible for chairing permanency planning meetings; and ensuring enquiries from prospective adopters were swiftly followed up.
- Harrow is an outer London Borough with the majority (52%) of children living in the borough being of minority ethnicity. It has a small looked after population (141 children FY 2008) and these children and young people have different characteristics than the characteristics of the total LAC population in England.
- In Harrow 62% of the LAC population are from an ethnic minority and many children enter care at older ages. Three-quarters are older than 10 years and 27% are older than 16 years at entry to care. This is an older LAC population

than most other authorities. There was a strong statistical association between entering care over the age of 16 years and being of a minority ethnicity. Gender was not related to age at entry.

- Fewer children are looked after in foster care in Harrow than in most other local authorities. Only 56% of Harrow's children were in foster care when it is more common to find about 70% of children looked after in family settings. Placements of Harrow children may be linked to the older age of their LAC population and higher numbers of disabled children.
- In Harrow, before the partnership began, there was a high turn-over of staff, vacant posts and consequent use of temporary agency staff. Adoption performance was very poor with children waiting for long periods or never placed.
- The management team in Harrow put in place a social care workforce strategy that has resulted in all social work posts being filled by permanent staff and children's social workers carrying caseloads of 13 to 16 cases. There are no unallocated cases. Morale has improved.
- Since Coram's involvement the number of children with a 'should be placed for adoption recommendation' has increased markedly and Coram have been able to match *all* children within six months. Adoption performance now exceeds Harrow's statistical neighbours.
- Since the partnership began 5 children have been placed with concurrent carers- 20% of those placed. This suggests that there may be far more children who would benefit from these placements in other authorities but where the costs of concurrent planning or lack of knowledge are influencing decision-making.
- A permanency tracking panel was established that enabled senior staff to monitor children's care careers. Since this innovation children who entered care under the age of 10 years old have exited care at faster rates and this suggests that decision-making has become more pro-active and decisive.
- Adopters prepared by Harrow and Coram were on the whole positive about the preparation they had received for placement. Coram's training was offered in more flexible ways than Harrow's and ensured that adopters, whatever their work patterns, would be able to attend.

- Pre-partnership adopters complained about delay, workers who lacked skills and knowledge of adoption, and inadequate adoption support. Although service provision from Harrow's own workers had improved, comments from interviews showed just how difficult it is to change perceptions once a negative view of an authority has been formed.
- From the perspective of service users, the process of adopting a child had improved since the partnership began. Support plans were agreed earlier and they reported receiving high quality social work from the Coram team.
- There still needs to be greater clarity in services for special guardians and the provision of letter-box support from Harrow's own adoption team.
- There were a number of difficulties in the early days of the partnership. These included hostility and suspicion from some Harrow workers towards Coram staff, confusion about roles, responsibilities, and accountability. Coram also had difficulty accessing electronic records. These have been mainly worked through to a position of mutual respect and shared working.
- There are a number of lessons for other local authorities embarking on similar partnership arrangements or for the new social work pilots. First, is to ensure that all staff are fully informed of the arrangements *before* the partnership begins. Information needs to be regularly circulated with opportunities for staff groups to come together for joint training or discussion. Lines of accountability and roles need to be clearly defined and understood within the organisation. We were surprised to find that one of the most frustrating and time consuming tasks for Coram staff was gaining access to electronic records. Access to confidential data again needs to be sorted out early. For the partnership to deliver, financial investment from the local authority was necessary at the beginning of the arrangement. However, it takes time for improvements to be seen. This evaluation found that it had taken three years for significant improvements, with an upward trajectory to be evident. Adoption performance now exceeds Harrow's statistical neighbours.
- It was emphasised by senior staff that although adoption performance would have improved because of the commissioning of Coram, it has been much more effective because of Harrow's work force strategy. Having a stable staff group and a joint approach has produced the positive results.