

Coram-i

Data-led support and tools to enable earlier permanence and improved outcomes for looked after children

coram.i

Insight • Innovation

Thomas Coram Foundation

Challenge

Local Authorities are struggling to deliver timely permanence (a return to birth family, adoption, special guardianship or long term foster placement) for looked after children. The number of children in care in England has risen over the last five years, but social care budgets in LAs have not increased and LAs need to find new ways of working to deliver more for less.

Innovation

Coram has provided permanency support to many LAs over recent years, making significant performance improvements in LA adoption services. Our approach is data-led, analysing performance data to identify problems; and practice-based, drawing on our wealth of experience to deliver solutions to address these problems. This is directly delivering improved performance and outcomes for looked after children.

Partners Involved

Our Innovation Programme project delivered Improvement Pilot projects with Buckinghamshire County Council and Northamptonshire County Council. We also worked with the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) at Loughborough University to develop an Adoption Module for the Cost Calculator for Children's Services.

Our Innovation

November 2016

What we're doing

Tackling problems at a case level as a team



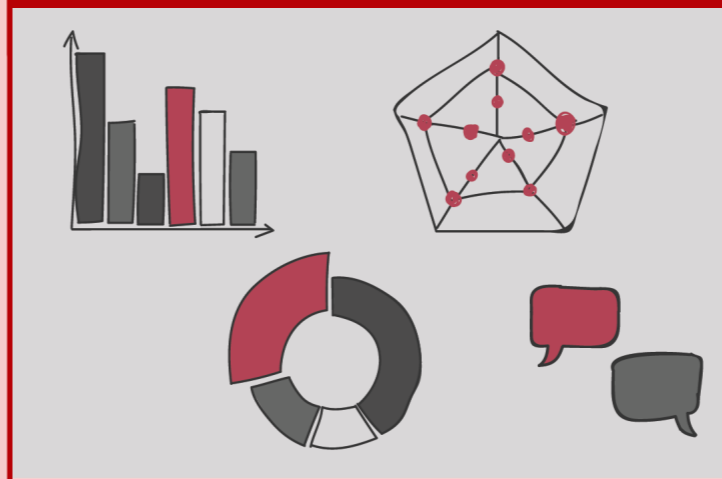
Building on our experience of working with Local Authorities such as Kent and Cambridgeshire, we are working with Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire to diagnose and solve issues across their permanence systems and processes by bringing teams together.

Web tools to manage day-to-day performance



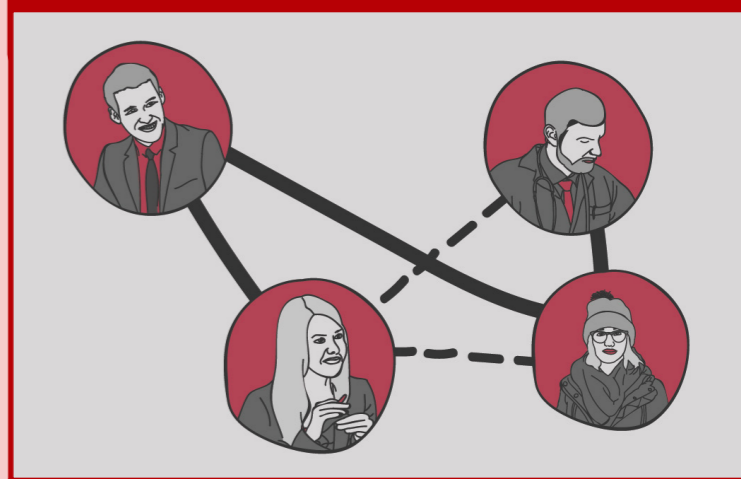
Our web-based tool allows Local Authorities to manage day-to-day permanence performance. Coupled with the new Adoption module for the Cost Calculator for Children's Services, this gives LAs an overview of both the impact and cost of their services.

Data-led assessment of adoption performance



New diagnostic tools analyse Local Authority data to provide a low-cost assessment of performance of adoption services and Special Guardianship Orders. The aim is to identify areas in need of improvement to increase the speed and volume of placements.

Growing and disseminating the evidence base



We have created a Permanence Improvement Academy to grow and disseminate the evidence base of our data-led and practice-based approach to permanence. This peer-to-peer network also allows Local Authorities to share best practice.

What's changed

Using data to identify families' problems; solving them with practice-based experience

We have developed a data-led approach that uses the analysis of performance data to identify problems.

We deploy multi-professional teams of practitioners, consultants and analysts to tackle problems at a case level, determining whether the problems are isolated or systemic. It is this 'bottom-up' approach that we believe makes our offering unique and provides us with insight into the systemic challenges that are facing children's services in England.

Bringing coherence to team decision-making

The care system within a Local Authority is complex and often lacks coherence, with several teams and organisations working on various processes independently. Our practice-based support has directly delivered improved outcomes for children, in particular reducing the time they spend in care. We also work to ensure that children with the most complex needs to achieve permanence at a younger age by focusing on identifying the most effective family finding techniques for such children. Our work in Kent reduced the average time spent in care by almost 250 days. As a result of our work together, Kent avoided £2.4m expenditure over four years.

Real-time performance information to improve practice

The various Integrated Children's Systems that Local Authorities currently use in social care do not provide information in a useful format, meaning that performance is reviewed in retrospect when it is too late to make difference to a particular child's journey. Our tools address this gap by analysing existing adoption data to provide meaningful information. In addition, we have developed the new adoption module for the Cost Calculator for Children's Services with Loughborough University. This allows LAs to quantify the opportunities for cost savings through improved adoption performance, to analyse the different drivers for the costs of adoption and see how costs will be impacted by potential changes to their processes.

Using existing data in new ways

Not all LAs are effectively using the data they have; when it is used it is primarily to report on historical performance rather than to manage active cases. Our tools present existing data in ways that help managers understand the performance of their teams and the service as a whole. This ensures that time is not wasted on debating whether there is a problem, but instead on dealing with it so that a child or carer's journey is not delayed. Senior managers are often surprised by what a diagnostic analysis uncovers, such as active cases at risk of missing deadlines.

Informing decision-making at a council level

Each Local Authority receives a report highlighting:

- the profile of children with adoption plans;
- timescales and potential drift in children's adoption journeys, focusing on the five stages of the adoption process;
- detailed analysis of the ten shortest and the ten longest adoption journeys experienced by children adopted;
- permanency outcomes for under-fives entering care who remain in care two years later, including moves, legal status, health needs and changes to permanency plans; and
- the adopter's journey and timescale from initial contact, application, assessment, approval to placement.

The analysis also provides indicators of the resource efficiency of the adoption service by reporting the unit cost of placing children for adoption and the productivity rate of staff in relation to the number of children placed for adoption and adopters recruited. The diagnostic tool for SGOs analyses the types of children granted SGOs compared to Adoption Orders, timescales in securing SGOs and the level of supported needed post-SGO.

"[Coram are] open, honest, passionate and creative in trying to think of solutions to how we could try and help children to make sure their future permanence is achieved as soon as possible."
Local Authority Service Manager

Disseminating the model and finding common ground

Our academy approach seeks to spread innovative approaches to achieving permanency. Its aim is to inform future policy development while making more efficient use of resources in children's services, reducing national costs. We have learned that many agencies share the same barriers and issues, and so a national approach to tackling those is needed. Key themes include how to develop alternative delivery models of provision outside a Local Authority; the regionalisation of adoption agencies; what constitutes an 'acceptable' level of risk; and how to ensure the adoption sector as a whole has the data it needs to be proactive in meeting the needs of children. In addition to peer learning events we share papers, reports, blogs and videos on the Permanence Improvement Academy website.

Applying to local and national contexts

Understanding the true costs of adoption is becoming even more important as we work to establish Regional Adoption Agencies. The Cost Calculator has been working with a number of RAA projects to help determine the actual spend on adoption, particularly that which is not explicitly associated with this area, such as corporate overheads and changes to processes, practice and structures. It can also be used to assess the economic impact of RAAs as they evolve, comparing models and approaches across the country.