Department for Education

Coram's Permanence Improvement Project

March 2017

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Aim of the project

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 particularly include those children with the most complex needs, who would achieve stability and permanence at a younger age than had been the case previously. Project enhancement of local authority service capacity and capability would enable service impact and child outcomes to become self- sustaining. Exemplary practice principles, and methods modelled and confirmed as effective at the local level, could become replicated nationally.

Research methodology

The Project was designed 'to impact on the lives of children by building the capacity and capability of local authorities to find permanent placements earlier for the children in their care.' (Coram 2015). This would be achieved by extending and accelerating the implementation of a bespoke data-led and practice-based approach to local authority permanence planning, especially in adoption. Although piloted previously in a number of English local authorities to demonstrable effect, the current intention was to use Innovation Programme funding to trigger the extension and acceleration of the deployment of this methodology in a changing service context. The aim was to establish strategic partnerships with local authorities to enable multi-professional teams of Coram practitioners, consultants and analysts to be embedded in the local authority adoption service to tackle problems at a case level, having determined first whether those problems were isolated or systemic. Practice improvement would be generated by using Coram Consultancy alone or by introducing a Coram Managed Service model. The consultancy approach sought to improve practice by embedding a Coram consultant within the adoption service for the project duration (initially one year), supporting that core role with additional diagnostic input from a second consultant. This approach was introduced into the main project site (Buckinghamshire), where existing adoption service managers remained in post. In the Managed Service model, Coram staff took up the direct management roles and responsibilities for practice improvement at team and service level. This model was adopted by the comparison site. Consistent with available research evidence, the primary focus of intervention would be the removal of barriers to timeliness in family-finding for children, especially where adoption was the plan (Dance et al. 2010; Farmer and Dance 2015). Success here would result in the avoidance of costs incurred by having children stay longer than needed in care.

Evaluation aims

The evaluation was designed to assess the effectiveness in practice in one local authority of the Coram Consultancy approach to permanence improvement in adoption. A second local authority, now employing the managed service model, was available to provide an element of comparison.

Research questions

The evaluation asked:

1. Whether, and to what extent, the Coram Consultancy approach to practice improvement had improved local authority permanence capacity and capability as intended?

2. Which elements of the approach as implemented were indicated to be the most effective?

3. What changes should be made to the Coram model of performance improvement and its implementation to enhance the likelihood of its successful extension across local authorities in England?

Research methods

A mixed methods, comparative approach was used.

Quantitative data on relevant child adoption outcomes collected in-house by the local authority and Coram, for routine and project-based diagnostic and case tracking purposes in each case, were re-analysed for evaluation purposes. This approach allowed the impact of the accelerated Coram project intervention on child outcomes in the first local authority to be indicated and then compared subsequently with outcomes in the comparison authority. In the absence of a bespoke adoption cost calculator, which was still in development during the project period, quantitative data on cost avoidance provided by Coram could not be validated.

Qualitative data comprised evaluative accounts of project impact on practice improvement provided by Coram project staff, local authority managers and others responsible for quality assurance and practice improvement at either a strategic, service or team level, 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. Purposively sampled, selective interviews were undertaken with strategic and operational managers in the second local authority. By agreement with Coram, data were not collected directly from children or parents, for 2 reasons. First, the focus of innovation in this case was change to the system and methods of professional

practice in decision-making about adoption planning, rather than change to direct practice with children and parents at any point of the process. Second, although the organisation of the adoption planning practice system itself has been shown to be associated with more appropriate, as well as more timely, matches (Farmer and Dance 2015), the current study was not designed to extend the comparison of the Coram family-finding method beyond the 2 project sites.

Key findings and conclusions

Outcomes for children

The Coram Consultancy approach, as implemented under innovation project conditions in the first local authority, enabled significant improvements to be achieved in the timeliness of agency decision-making in family-finding for children, where adoption was the agreed plan, as defined by reference to standard indicators:

- children with a PO 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 PO 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
- using early family disruption as the measure, there was no evidence that speeding up the family-finding process had compromised the likelihood that an appropriate match had been made

Outcomes for the local authority

The project intention to use Coram Consultancy to build capacity and capability in local authority permanence planning, such that impact could be sustained, achieved significant, but partial, success during the project period. The absence, to date, of a bespoke cost calculator using metrics associated with the adoption process in itself means that no robust quantification of savings defined in this way is possible at this stage. Simple computation using Coram in-house measures (themselves likely to be an under-estimate) show significant costs avoided by the substantial reduction in the number of days children within confirmed adoption plans remained in local authority care following project implementation. In the main study site (Buckinghamshire), reduced days in care 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 contract (now on the managed service model). Nonetheless, the costs avoided remain indicative only of project value for money in the longer term, where rates of adoption (and other permanence planning) activity are so volatile and the Coram methodology itself might be expected to be mainstreamed in due course.

Impact on adoption family-finding capacity at the level of the individual case

The data-led and practice-based methodologies employed at the case level by the lead Coram consultant were reported to have enabled family-finding capacity and capability to be enhanced in the adoption service as intended, as might be inferred by the child outcome data. Consistent with project assumptions, success here was indicated in the qualitative accounts to be associated with the validation of the adoption service through its alignment with Coram and its reputation; the personal and professional qualities of the consultant herself, and the single-minded activation and intensification of family-finding practice performance case by case. The decision taken to embed Coram expertise and authority further in the adoption service, by moving towards the managed service model, was supported by similar evidence of impact on child outcomes and encouraging qualitative reports from the second local authority.

Impact on the social work practice system capacity for permanence improvement more generally

Consultancy impact on LA capacity and capability for permanence improvement was more limited at the level of the social work practice system, when considered as a whole. The Coram Consultancy methodology did help to illuminate systemic barriers to effective permanence planning, in adoption and beyond, especially once it was implemented in full. There were indications, also, that Coram adoptive family-finding methodology could be employed to drive practice improvement case by case where the permanence plan was other than adoption. Nonetheless, although enhancement of care planning might be enabled in this way there was evidence to suggest that permanence would not simply become embedded in the mind-set and methods of managers and social workers from the outset of statutory intervention, without prior systematic service redesign. This was the case especially in the first local authority, where the success in improving adoption family-finding served to confirm the extent of the shortfalls in practice capacity and capability more generally.

Specific shortfalls in aligning social work roles and tasks

Qualitative accounts suggested that project capacity to align statutory social work duties, powers, roles and tasks undertaken in separate parts of the children's social care service, such that permanence improvement would be achieved as a matter of course, fell short in 2 main ways.

First, it was apparent that a consensus had yet to be achieved in professional thinking about the appropriate interpretation of the core principle of timeliness (and hence that of delay) underpinning project theory and practice. Anxiety was expressed here, that decisions driven by reference primarily to timeliness, defined as the meeting of performance indicators expressed as a mean score (between key decision points on the adoption journey of the parents and/or the child), might compromise timeliness as defined by reference to the relationship dynamics inherent to each unique case. Isolation and intensification of one aspect of the social work role (family-finding) might be at the expense of the improvement required across all social work roles (especially the quality of the relationship with the child and current or previous carers).

Second, there were clear indications that service functions and structures themselves, across the social work practice system, might need substantive reform in the local authority, even where a permanence mind-set was agreed. Project success in achieving timeliness in adoption decision-making, by enhancing role and task performance case by case in the adoption service family-finding social work function, served, at the same time, to highlight the extent of the structural constraints on performance improvement in the permanence planning expected of social workers in child protection and care planning roles in the children in need and children looked after parts of the service.

Summary of Implications and Recommendations

There are specific implications to be drawn about the capacity and sustainability of Coram's Permanence Improvement Project, as implemented in compliance with the requirements of the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme. The conditions necessary for this particular innovation to be implemented more widely, and with greater acceleration, are illuminated by project achievements and shortfalls during a project period extended into 2016-2107. They enable recommendations to be made with respect to 3 key aspects of project theory as it was expected to be implemented in practice.

Balancing opportunity and risk in strategic partnerships for practice improvement

The commissioning of independent expertise to galvanize change carries significant risk. This is likely to be the case especially where the pressure to perform, and to do so at pace, is intense, yet agency conditions are especially challenging, as was observed with project implementation in the first local authority site. Urgency to show impact is as likely to escalate anxiety as it is to contain it, where external scrutiny by Ofsted and others is itself driven by impatience, and is associated with significant threat to reputation on all sides. In these circumstances, careful attention must be given to the establishment of respectful relationships during the process of project implementation and its subsequent development. The suggestion by Coram that it might take 2 years to establish an effective strategic partnership based on trust and shared commitment is borne out by the experience of project sites in this case. Ensuring that the right external consultants and

managers are introduced in the right way at the right time is likely to be the primary condition for project success more generally. The process of mainstreaming Coram Consultancy and service management thereafter also takes time. The decision by the first local authority to re-commission the Coram project for a further year was consistent with the suggestion that the process of learning about what might work, for whom and how should not be rushed. It was consistent also with the experience in the comparison site, where the process of embedding the managed service model and consolidating its success took longer still. Patience, not urgency, is recommended as a core policy principle in this case. This recommendation might be expected to apply equally with regard to permanence improvement in the large majority of local authorities where external expertise is not recruited. It has implications also for permanence improvement strategy and timelines at regional and national levels.

Reiterating what counts as timely decision-making from the child's point of view

The evaluation findings suggest that the concepts of timeliness and delay which underpin the definition, diagnosis and measurement performance in permanence planning at case and agency level alike should be reviewed and reiterated. Evaluation findings indicate, in particular, that the social work practice mind-set remains conflicted with regard to what counts as a child-centred decision-making process in differing permanence scenarios. This is the case despite Coram methodology being designed explicitly to enable decision-making to be addressed from the child's point of view, consistent with attachment theory and as endorsed by NICE (2015) and the best available research findings on permanence outcomes described retrospectively (Selwyn et al. 2013). The implication is that the concepts of timeliness and delay require reiteration and explication, such that these core principles can be taken up with greater understanding and commitment across all social work decisions about children. The opportunity provided by current plans to develop the knowledge and skills of social work practice for achieving permanence should be taken up actively. The re-engagement of practitioners and managers is required, in ways of thinking effectively about 'time' understood from the individual child's point of view, especially in the context of the transition between family and other relationships. The statutory duty and professional capacity of the local authority practice system to enable a genuine, and critically engaged, child-centred decision-making process to be secured, case by case, must not be compromised by policy which is driven by anxiety and impatience about service outcomes defined as a whole.

The appropriate focus of investment in performance improvement in permanence planning

The research shows that the Coram project diagnostic and practice improvement methodology could illuminate and mitigate problems case by case at the interface of relevant statutory social work roles in the permanence planning system as a whole, but could not, in itself, overcome them. This finding suggests strongly that partial reform to

achieve permanence improvement will not suffice. Coram project methods designed to intensify and track timeliness of decision-making prospectively, in support of the statutory corporate parenting care planning process, are well-indicated. Attention should turn now equally if not more so to the task of developing innovative approaches to organising and enhancing the statutory social work role and task in child protection and care planning, such that the practice mind-set and methodology is informed by a permanence perspective from the outset. The child protection and corporate parenting role of the local authority will need to be addressed as a whole, if child outcomes are to be secured as intended. In this regard, costs avoided by achieving more timely permanent family outcomes for children might be re-invested most productively at the front end of the statutory social work service. It is at this point that decision-making about permanence makes the biggest difference of all.

Overview of the Project

What was the project intending to achieve (outcomes)?

Coram's Permanence Improvement Project was intended to enhance the wellbeing of children, especially where the decision has been made by the local authority and court that adoptive family life would be the appropriate outcome in their case. 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. These outcomes would be secured for children subsequently as a matter of routine, and become financially self-sustaining, as a result of enhanced service capability. Exemplary practice principles and methods, modelled at a local level, were expected to be replicated nationally.

What was it intending to do to achieve these outcomes?

The Coram permanence improvement approach

It was intended that the Coram project impact would be achieved by embedding a bespoke, data-led and practice-based approach more widely, to improve local authority adoption permanence . Although piloted previously in a number of English local authorities to demonstrable effect, the current intention was to use innovation programme funding to trigger the extension and acceleration of the deployment of this methodology in a changing service context. In particular, the intention was to establish strategic partnerships with local authorities to enable multi-professional teams of Coram practitioners, consultants and analysts to be embedded in the local authority adoption service, to tackle problems at a case level, having determined first whether those problems were isolated or systemic. Practice improvement would be generated by using Coram Consultancy alone or by introducing a Coram Managed Service model. Consistent with available research evidence, the primary focus of intervention would be the removal of barriers to timeliness in family-finding for children, especially where adoption was the plan (Dance et al. 2010; Farmer and Dance 2015). Success here would result in the avoidance of costs incurred by having children stay longer than needed in care.

The intended core components of the Coram data-led and practice-based permanency support programme

Coram's Permanence Improvement Project was innovative in the way in which it sought to align and deploy specialist expertise and distinctive types of service support to enable local authority practice improvement capacity and capability to be developed. The

specialist expertise available from Coram aimed to combine diagnostic analysis of adoption data already collected by a local authority; social care expertise; and management consultancy.

At the point of Project inception in March 2015, Coram practice improvement support comprised 4 main approaches:

- support and coaching: in which Coram team members advised local authority staff on the introduction of new ways of working intended to improve performance. Included here was the use of detailed tracking and regular review of cases to eliminate delays in decision-making and actions

- embedded team: in this case Coram team members would work alongside local authority staff to demonstrate more effective methods of working and delivering their service so that change was embedded faster

- managed service: in which the management of a particular service within the local authority was taken on by Coram team members

- service delivery: Coram also had experience of taking on the delivery of parts of the adoption service as a whole, for example, recruiting and assessing prospective adopters and finding families for children with a plan of adoption

In more simple terms, these approaches were described as Coram Consultancy (including support, coaching and embedding Coram team members to work alongside local authority staff) and Coram Managed Service (provided in-house or introduced separately).

During the inaugural year of the Project to March 2016, an additional permanency support service was added to the Coram portfolio. This service was developed in response to the Department for Education, 'Regional adoption agencies programme', launched in June 2015 (Department for Education 2016a).

Coram's Permanence Improvement Project

Innovation Programme funding secured for the year to March 2016 was expected to enable Coram to extend and accelerate permanence improvement capacity and capability in 3 main ways:

1. Extension of diagnostic analyses alone in ten further local authorities and the development of new Special Guardianship Order (SGO) diagnostic tool intended to complement the tool used for adoption.

2. Acceleration of the implementation of the Coram Consultancy and Coram Managed Service approaches in 2 local authorities, in both cases subject, at that time, to Ministerial Statutory Direction. In the first local authority

(Buckinghamshire) the Coram Consultancy approach would be employed (where support and coaching would be incorporated within the embedded team approach from the outset, but the service management role would be retained by local authority staff). In the second authority (Northamptonshire), the Coram Managed Service model would be inaugurated, following a period of time in which support and coaching (underpinned by a diagnostic analysis) had been in place for some time. In this case Coram appointed managers would take direct responsibility for service improvement.

3. Establishment of a Coram Permanence Improvement Academy, intended to provide a mechanism for Coram to share good practice and key learnings through an Improving Permanence programme. By March 2016 it was estimated that the Academy would have up to 30 agency members. They would benefit from exclusive access to quarterly practice-based learning sets and 2 tools intended to be created as part of the Project (a web-based performance management tool and an adoption cost calculator tool).

It was agreed that project evaluation would focus on the accelerated implementation of the Coram Consultancy and Coram Managed Service approaches in the 2 local authorities subject to Ministerial Statutory Direction.

Brief comment on any relevant existing research relating to this innovation

Research findings relevant to the consideration of the Coram Project model of building local authority permanence improvement capacity and capability, are limited in their scope and depth.

Child outcomes

Child development research, from an attachment perspective, supports the core project assumption that delayed decision-making and action compromises the life chances of children needing a new permanent family (NICE 2015). This conclusion is supported and reinforced by retrospective studies of adoption outcomes more broadly described, as undertaken in recent years by Selwyn and colleagues (2006; 2014), and is endorsed explicitly in current government policy (Department for Education 2016a). These studies show that 'delay in decision making and action has an unacceptable price in terms of the reduction in children's life chances and the financial costs to local authorities, the emotional and financial burden later placed on adoptive families and future costs to society.' (Selwyn et al. 2006, cited in Department for Education 2016a, p.6). Whereas nearly three-quarters of children in England who experienced an adoption disruption waited 2 or more years to join their adoptive family, almost three-quarters of children without such a disruption became adoptive family members within 2 years of entering

care (Selwyn et al. 2014). Meanwhile, child development and social work research interest is only now starting to focus on the lived experience and active participation of the children themselves, in the speeded-up process of making and breaking attachment and other relationships, and their re-imagining as part of (adoptive) identity development in childhood and beyond. In the existing outcome studies, retrospective and prospective alike, the voices of children as (emerging) actors in their own lives are glimpsed briefly at best. This is despite the evidence of the importance of this process summarised in formal guidance (NICE 2013; 2015). In particular, research findings are awaited which would illuminate understanding of child (and parent) experience of contemporary approaches to managing family transitions under pressure of time, and the impact of differing approaches, subsequently, on family life and wider relationships. Meanwhile, research on the experience and impact in adoption of communication and contact for children across their previous, current and future family lives (for example, Neil et al. 2015) has become a marginal policy concern, as indicated by the adoption support priorities of the Adoption Support Fund (First4adoption 2016).

Service organisation

Some research evidence was available, at project inception, to support the view taken by Coram that matching would be improved in its timeliness and impact where tracking processes were in place. This would be the case where the family-finding social worker based in the local authority adoption service took an unequivocally proactive and authoritative role in the co-working relationship with the child's social worker, where adoption was the plan (Dance et al. 2010; Farmer and Dance 2015). Meanwhile, research evidence on the efficacy of permanence planning practice systems understood as a whole (Department for Education 2015) has not emerged to date, despite the fact that children are identified (or not) for family-finding and matching for adoption by local authorities who employ contrasting organisational approaches to exercising the corporate parenting roles of protection and care planning.

Commissioning external expertise

No body of research evidence has been accumulated to support any one approach to commissioning external expertise to enhance practice improvement within these practice systems. This is especially the case where the commissioning process takes place under the conditions of anxiety generated by critical judgements of existing practice performance, such as created by a critical Ofsted inspection. Coram itself has made available service evaluations which provide some evidence that its own suite of permanence improvement methodologies can be shown to be effective as intended (Red Quadrant 2013; Selwyn and Wijedasa 2009). These studies indicate that Coram practice improvement methodologies have potential impact in enhancing the capacity of the adoption service to find families for children in timely and cost effective ways. Nonetheless, to date no evidence base has been developed in permanence planning in

social work generally, to support claims for either the benefits or risks involved in driving change in this way, despite the proliferation of organisational partnerships designed to recruit external expertise to secure practice improvement on various fronts.

Have there been any major changes to the project's intended outcomes or activities?

Outcomes

No substantive changes were made to the specification of the intended child outcomes of the initial project evaluation period, to 31 March 2016. Building local authority permanence improvement capacity and capability, such that these outcomes could be demonstrated and sustained, remained the core objective.

Activities

The intention to implement contrasting approaches to permanence improvement in the 2 project local authorities remained unchanged. However, it proved much easier to extend Coram impact in one local authority, moving from the consultancy approach to the managed service model, than it did to accelerate the implementation of the project in the other site. In the event, it was only in the final weeks of the project year (to 31 March 2016) that consultancy activities got fully underway as originally intended in Buckinghamshire County Council, the main project site. Project implementation took place incrementally in 3 phases:

1. April – August 2015: the Coram project lead engaged with local authority managers, including a new (interim) strategic lead. The focus of the project was confirmed, the terms of reference and person specification of the first Senior Improvement Consultant role (3 days per week) finalised.

2. September 2015 - March 2016: the first Senior Improvement Consultant was appointed jointly by the interim strategic lead and the Coram project and commenced in role in late September. This appointment enabled the consultancy approach to be devised and implemented during the last 2 quarters of the project year, to 31 March 2016. The consultant was embedded in the Permanence Team throughout this 6 month period. A fuller report of initial assessment findings was completed (November 2015), while consultancy activities on a case by case basis got underway. The proactive, family-finding approach led by Permanence Team social workers was put in place immediately, and developed further in the light of subsequent experience. Performance surgeries, chaired by the consultant, were introduced in the team. An initial focus on family-finding for children who were subjects of a Placement Order (PO) was extended rapidly to include children for

whom adoption was the permanence plan, or might soon become so. The introduction of permanence planning meetings was intended to engage much more directly social workers and managers based in the Children in Need (CiN) and/or Children in Care (CiC) teams or units, in taking up responsibility more actively in progressing decisions about family-finding in adoption.

3. February – March 2016: the second Senior Improvement Consultant joined the project (one day per week), enabling the full service review finally to be completed for report subsequently to the Senior Management Team. However, by the time the second consultant began her system-level intervention, it had been decided by Coram and local authority commissioners that the 6 month transition period to project mainstreaming, to 30 September 2016, should be used to re-focus the performance improvement strategy to resemble more closely the service management model implemented in the second site. To this end, the first consultant took up the role of Adoption Service Manager in April 2016, on a 3 day a week basis.

Developing and disseminating permanence improvement tools

Meanwhile, development work on Coram practice improvement tools, intended to inform diagnostic and cost calculation work with Coram Permanence Academy members more generally, was itself subject to rescheduling in the light of new policy and practice circumstances. Progress on development of the Special Guardianship diagnostic tool was delayed for reasons local to development sites and beyond the influence of Coram. The development of the adoption cost calculator proceeded largely as intended, such that by March 2016 a number of local authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies had agreed to trial the prototype. Nonetheless, this tool was not available for use in the current evaluation.

Describe the context within which this innovation has been taking place

Both project sites are large county council authorities in England, with demographic characteristics to match their history and location. The local authority (Buckinghamshire) introducing the Coram Consultancy approach, was one of the least deprived in England, as judged on the basis of conventional multiple indices. However, this masked the fact that there were pockets of child deprivation, including within a growing minority ethnic child population, that required more active policy and practice attention. The level of statutory social work intervention in support of children and families is relatively low, when compared with national figures. The second local authority (Northamptonshire), extending its existing involvement with Coram, has a multi-ethnic child population which is much more likely to score significantly on indices of deprivation. The level of social work intervention is much higher than average for the country as a whole.

Although social work practice organisation and methodology differed at the early stages of statutory intervention, both sites relied on social workers based in an authority-wide Permanence Team to pick up the family-finding task actively at that point where a PO had been made. In both cases, a co-working approach was in place, where one or more social workers responsible for protection and care planning through to, and beyond, the court process were joined at the point the PO was made by the family-finding social worker in the Permanence Team, to enable links and a match to be made for the child. It was this co-working model that Coram Consultancy and Management approaches alike were particularly intended to target in order to improve performance directly, on a case by case basis.

The practice improvement context nationally and locally

During the 2 years to March 2015 adoption decisions by local authorities and family courts nationally dropped significantly (Adoption Leadership Board 2015). Agency Decision Maker (ADM) decisions reduced by one third in 2014-2015 and PO by slightly more. Overall, across England the number of children looked after with a PO throughout the year fell from 9,580 (14% of looked after children) in 2014 to 7,320 (11%) in 2015 (Department for Education 2016b). This meant that the number of children looked after waiting to join their adoptive family at any point in the year was falling too. However, although reducing in number, these children were most likely to be identified as harder to place and waiting times for placement nationally were increasing, rather than falling, during 2014-2015. During the project year there was a further fall (of 12%) in the number of children nationally leaving care to join their adoptive family. However, there were some indications that reductions in ADM and court decisions had levelled out (Adoption Leadership Board 2015).

Of particular significance for project implementation was the fact that the children's social care practice systems and political and professional leadership in place in both local authorities had been found seriously wanting in Ofsted inspections and subsequent government directed reviews prior to Coram project implementation and extension in 2015 (Ofsted 2013; 2014). Of concern in themselves, these shortfalls in child protection and adoption performance capability and outcomes attracted particular attention in government due to the re-emergence, more generally, of uncertainty about the use of adoption as a preferred permanent placement. It was the Department for Education expectation that performance improvement in both authorities be supported by the use of improvement partners with relevant expertise. In the case of adoption, Coram was engaged by the second local authority to undertake this role during 2014, and by the first early in 2015. In this way the Wave 1 Innovation funding from March 2015 was secured to support the wider performance improvement agenda in adoption at the local authority level, which was, at that point in time, about to be refocused at a regional level instead (Department for Education 2015).

Buckinghamshire: The practice system and adoption performance capability

In April 2013 a new operating structure was introduced in Buckinghamshire to enable a move to what was described as a 'systemic model of practice' in the CiN and CiC social work service, said to be consistent with both the Munro Report (Department for Education 2011) and the Reclaiming Social Work approach (Forrester et al. 2013). In the meantime, the family-finding social work role for those children with an adoption plan was allocated as one aspect only of the generic workload of social workers located in a Permanence Team. Although practitioners in a separate First Steps team managed the adopter recruitment and Stage 1 assessment, the workload of Permanence Team social workers included Stage 2 assessment and preparation and post-adoption and Special Guardianship (SGO) support.

By the time of the Ofsted inspection in June 2014, the focus given to implementation of the new service model led to the judgement that 'the requirements of basic social work practice were not being met (Para. 63). Ofsted found that this was the case especially in the new frontline social work teams (units), where high caseloads and an unstable workforce, combined with poor assessments of need, resulted in a piecemeal approach and delayed decision-making where children were at risk. Supervision of social workers was poor quality and managers' oversight of practice, in many teams, was judged to be inconsistent. For the new system as a whole, and at all levels, Ofsted found that too many managers were temporary, and arrangements for quality assurance and performance management were ineffective.

However, where need and risk were assessed appropriately, and timely decisions were made for children looked after, the picture improved somewhat. Ofsted judged that, for most children adoption, was considered at the earliest stage, in accordance with minimum statutory requirements (the 4 month statutory review). Disruptions to adoption placements were low (2 in the previous year) and 'excellent analyses' of these incidents had been used to improve the service (Para. 54). Nonetheless, changes of social worker; poor quality practice; assessment and reporting; and recording in the earlier stage of the adoption planning process and subsequently could mean that children faced delays to the realisation of plans. Although there had been some improvement, inadequate systems of case supervision, quality assurance and performance management continued to result in agency shortfalls in the achievement of policy expectations about the use of adoption as a permanent placement generally, and the achievement of Adoption Scorecard performance targets for those children for whom an adoption decision had been made.

Adoption performance outcomes

In Buckinghamshire, care and adoption rates had been historically low and were still rising towards the national average during the period to 2014-2015. There had been a steady increase in numbers of children looked after between 2012 and 2015 (from 375 to 435 at 31 March each year). Although this represented a rise from 33 to 37 children per 10,000 during this period it was still considerably lower than the average for South East England (itself rising in this period, from 59 to 60 children per 10,000). Children leaving care for adoption during this period increased also, rising from 14% in 2011-2012 to 23% in 2013-2014, and falling back only a little to 20% in 2014-2015. This compared with the change in England in the period to 2014-2015 from 13% to 17%. In this first site, there were no returns to the Adoption Leadership Board reporting the number of children looked after on a PO and waiting to join their adoptive family at the end of 2013-2014, nor the number of ADM and POs made during that year. This failure in capacity to provide full reports on the required quarterly basis was itself an indicator of systemic service problems, which the Coram Consultancy was expected to help resolve.

Table 1: Buckinghamshire Adoption Scorecard performance for children placed (2012-2015)

	Average time between care entry and move to adoptive family (days)	Average time between PO and match (days)	Children waiting less than 16 months between care entry and move to adoptive family
3 year average score	710	292	29%
Distance from performance threshold (487 and 121 days)	223	171	N/A
England 3 year average	593	223	47%
Latest quarter (April-September 2015)	719	354	39%

Table 1 shows that most children who had joined their adoptive family had waited a much longer time to move in than did children in England as a whole during the 3 year period to Coram project inception in April 2015. This performance was worsening, not improving, as project implementation was getting underway in the first 6 months of 2015-2016. Delay in family-finding following receipt of court authority (the PO) was most notable

here. For those children still waiting to move to their adoptive family at the end of the pre-project year (2014-2015) the delay in Buckinghamshire was closer to the national average (756 days compared with 717 for England).

Northamptonshire: The practice system and adoption performance

In the comparison site, the practice system was stable during the period under scrutiny. Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams, organised on an area basis, were responsible for children and young people subject to Child in Need Plans, Child Protection Plans or Public Law Outline and Care Proceedings. A county-wide Looked after Children Service was responsible for overseeing care planning for children in care and accommodation. Where the plan was adoption, social workers based in a Permanence Team were responsible for family-finding and other assessment and support roles and tasks.

Ofsted reports in 2013 (a, b) suggested that the local authority had 'serious and widespread weaknesses across all services, including child protection, children looked after and adoption' (Ofsted 2016, p.2). Similar to the situation in the first site, Department for Education intervention followed the 'inadequate' rating, with the establishment of an improvement board led by an independent chair. Ofsted reported in 2013 that, 'The most vulnerable children, young people and their families experience delays and discontinuities in service at all stages of work.' (Ofsted 2013 a. Para.15). In the case of adoption, the main area of weakness was 'the delay in identifying children for whom adoption is the appropriate plan at an early enough stage in their care history. This diminishes children's chances of achieving positive outcomes. There is ineffective early care planning which contributes to delays for children at all stages. Family-finding has not been effective or rigorous in preventing delay.' (Ofsted 2013b, p.3/4).

At the point of Coram project inception in April 2015, Ofsted had reported to the local authority that improvements were underway, such that a final decision on the future governance arrangements for children's services could be deferred. In effect, and unlike the situation in the first site, where the Coram Consultancy approach was intended to be introduced at the same time, the service management model was being put in place in the comparison site at a point when demonstrable improvement in child protection and care planning, as well as adoption, was already secured.

Adoption performance outcomes

In the second site, care and adoption rates were much higher than in the first, being very close to the national average in 2015. Numbers in care at the end of the year rose from 735 in 2012 to 935 in 2015. This represented a rise from 51 to 58 per 10,000 children.

Children leaving care for adoption during this period increased also, rising from 9% in 2011-2012 to 16% in 2014-2015. This brought the outcome in line with the national

figure. At the end of 2014-2015, the number waiting on a PO was reported to be 45, of which 20 had waited for at least 18 months. The number of ADM decisions made during the year was 75, which was the same as the number of POs. The Adoption Scorecard performance for those children adopted in the second site during the 3 years prior to project inception is available.

Table 2: Northamptonshire Adoption Scorecard performance for children (2012-2015)

	Average time between care entry and move to adoptive family (days)	Average time between PO and match (days)	Children waiting less than 16 months between care entry and move to adoptive family
3 year average score	649	255	36%
Distance from performance threshold (487 and 121 days)	162	134	N/A
England 3 year average	593	223	47%
Latest quarter (April-September 2015)	743	311	59%

Table 2 shows that most children waited a longer time to move into their adoptive family in this local authority than did children in England as a whole during the 3 year period to Coram project inception in April 2015. This performance was somewhat better than that seen in the first site, but it, too, was worsening, not improving, as project implementation was getting underway in the first 6 months of 2015-2016. Delay in achieving court authority (the PO) was especially notable in this case.

Overview of the evaluation

What were the evaluation questions?

The evaluation was designed to assess, in particular, the effectiveness in practice in Buckinghamshire of the Coram data-led and practice-based consultancy approach. Northamptonshire, now employing the managed service model, was available to provide some comparison. Evaluation design allowed Coram's impact on local authority capacity and capability to improve decision-making in adoption cases to be highlighted, and for the impact on the permanence planning capacity of the social work practice system as a whole to be estimated.

The project commissioners and the evaluation team agreed 3 overarching evaluation questions:

1. To what extent has the Coram Consultancy approach, implemented in an accelerated way in Buckinghamshire, demonstrated effectiveness in building local authority capacity and capability to achieve outcomes for children as intended?

2. Which elements of the approach were indicated to be the most, and which the least, effective in this respect?

3. What changes should be made to the theory and practice of the Coram Consultancy approach to enhance its efficacy as a model of performance improvement?

Summary of the methodology used to address these questions

The independent research was designed in accordance broadly with realist evaluation principles (Pawson and Tilley 1997), the aim being to illuminate project mechanisms which might secure practice improvement as required, within the local context.

A mixed methods, comparative approach was agreed for data collection and analysis, consistent with this overarching evaluation stance. The primary unit of analysis for the purposes of estimating project impact was the adoption journey of children made eligible for family-finding by a formal agency decision that adoption was the appropriate permanence plan. Case tracking of children placed by other local authorities with prospective adoptive parents recruited in the 2 project sites was not undertaken. Reflecting the local and national context in adoption, where there was a surplus of available parents for children, project impact on adoptive parent recruitment and approval could not be evaluated as no registrations of interest were being accepted during the evaluation period. This focus on child outcomes in adoption enabled project impact on

local authority capacity and capability to be indicated, especially for family-finding, at the level of the specific case. It also allowed, although less directly, project impact and future potential to be illuminated for permanence planning and decision-making more generally. Ethical approval was given to the evaluation design by the University of Sussex Research Ethics Committee.

Quantitative data collection and analysis

Quantitative data on relevant child adoption journeys, collected in-house by the local authority and Coram, for routine and project based diagnostic and case tracking purposes in each case, were re-analysed for evaluation purposes. This approach allowed the impact of accelerated Coram project intervention on child outcomes in Buckinghamshire to be assessed and then compared with outcomes in Northamptonshire. Outcomes are reported at a point 6 months after the end of the initial project period ended in March 2016. This enabled comparisons of child journeys to adoption placement, and beyond, to be made between sites during the project period, and, to some extent, with outcomes in the previous year in both cases. Comparison with national targets and trends over the 2 periods could be provided also. Of interest here was whether or not adoption placements were achieved as intended during the project year, with less delay than had been the case previously, and with indications that child stability in placement and wellbeing had been secured. In lieu of the availability of a bespoke adoption cost calculator, which was still in development during the project period, quantitative data on cost avoidance provided by Coram could not be validated. Coram estimates are described but not evaluated.

The quantitative data set included 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. The sub-division of the sample made by the project was used for the purposes of analysis also, allowing, as necessary, those cases where a PO had been made, and those for whom adoption plans were not yet approved by the court, to be distinguished.

Qualitative data collection and analysis

Qualitative data comprised evaluative accounts of project impact on practice, provided by Coram project staff, local authority managers and others responsible for quality assurance and practice improvement at either a strategic, service or team level, 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. Selective interviews were undertaken with strategic and operational managers and social workers in the second local authority. Individual practitioners are not identified, to maintain anonymity, where possible. Data were not collected directly from children or parents. First, the focus of innovation in this case was change to the system of

professional practice in decision-making about adoption planning, rather than change to direct practice methodology at any point of the process. Second, although the organisation of the adoption planning practice system itself has been shown to be associated with more appropriate, as well as more timely, matches (Farmer and Dance 2015), the current study was not designed to extend the comparison of the Coram family-finding method beyond the 2 project sites.

Interviews were conducted in the first site with 13 managers and 7 social workers during the main period of project implementation through to March 2016 and slightly beyond, with further accounts collected in some of these cases (2 managers and 2 practitioners) at the end of the evaluation period in August and September 2016. On-site observation was undertaken of Coram consultation methods in action at the case level. A selection of 6 cases, illustrative of project intentions, was made by the lead Coram consultant, to provide a focus to qualitative data collection. Primary data collection was supplemented by secondary analysis of internal agency and Coram reports. Interviews were undertaken in the second site with 3 managers and 3 social workers. The Adoption Panel Advisor in both sites was interviewed, as was the Panel Chair in the first site.

Measuring and accounting for impact

The measures agreed for testing the success of the Coram Consultancy approach as implemented were twofold:

1. Duration of the child's progress to adoption from final entry to care, and stability of subsequent child placement.

    The comparison made here was with baseline performance in the period prior to project inception in each site, and with national trends reported by the Adoption Leadership Board. The indicator of stability was the absence of pre-adoption order disruption of placement.

2. Dominant themes emerging from social work practitioner and manager accounts of their personal experience and self-evaluation of the case level, and systemic impact of the Coram Consultancy approach.

    Thematic analysis of documentary evidence, qualitative accounts and observed practice was designed to illuminate consultancy impact in building permanence improvement capacity and capability overall within the individual local authority context.

For the quantitative analysis of project impact on child outcomes, a simple descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken, including the verification of Coram data and analysis procedures. In contrast to the retrospective approach to reporting child outcomes employed by the Adoption Leadership Board and Coram, the evaluation analysis reported here was prospective in design.

For the qualitative analysis of social work practitioner and manager interviews, all responses were recorded and transcribed as Word documents. These accounts were analysed thematically by the principal investigator (BL) using a simple iterative approach, designed to illuminate key aspects of Coram practice improvement methodology which were either validated or not by participants as factors associated with project impact as intended. The analysis developed in this way was then checked by one co-investigator (RW) responsible also for conducting many of the interviews and undertaking observations of practice.

Summary of any significant changes to evaluation methodology from the original design

Evaluation plans were affected, first, by a delay in research commissioning, and then by a hiatus in the process of commencing project implementation in the primary research site. An initial intention to collect qualitative accounts of project impact from adoptive parents had to be set aside. The decision was taken instead to extend the period of data collection on child outcomes for a further 6 months, to September 2016. This extension also allowed qualitative accounts gathered in the early months of the delayed project implementation, to be compared with accounts provided retrospectively. However, no attempt was made to systematically collect and compare qualitative accounts in the early (delayed) and later (extended) project period, where the project had itself been recommissioned on a different basis in the meantime.

Key findings

How far the innovation has achieved its intended outcomes

The Coram Permanence Improvement Project, as implemented in one local authority during 2015-2016, demonstrated capacity to achieve positive outcomes for individual children. Specifically, the practice-based aspects of the consultancy approach put in place in Buckinghamshire did prove effective in building the capacity and capability of the local authority adoption service to find adoptive homes earlier for children, where that was the approved plan. Consultancy methods, designed to activate and enhance the lead role of the family-finding social worker in the co-working relationship with the child's social worker, were, for the most part, effective. This approach enabled timely decisions to be made on a case by case basis, including proactively from the earliest point in the adoption planning process. This finding is consistent with the conclusion of previous independent research (Dance et al. 2010; Farmer and Dance 2015). Targeting effort on the family-finding function of a local authority adoption service can, indeed, have a significant impact on child outcomes, where adoption is the confirmed plan.

These impacts were specific to the focus of the consultancy on the adoption service itself, and the research indicated that the entrenched shortfalls identified in the capacity and functioning of the children's services practice system as a whole, and its leadership and management, were not addressed to any significant effect by the end of the project period to March 2016.

The absence, to date, of a bespoke cost calculator which uses metrics associated with the adoption process, in itself means that no robust quantification of savings defined in this way is possible at this stage. It can be said, simply, that enhanced timeliness of matching in cases within an approved adoption plan will have reduced local authority corporate parenting costs for the children involved. However, the decision taken by Buckinghamshire to follow the example of Northamptonshire, and integrate the Coram model, and its funding, within the in-house adoption service management system for one further year, was indicative of wider financial, and other service, considerations related to the regionalisation of adoption.

Findings on outcomes for children

The Coram Consultancy approach, as implemented in the first project site, had a marked impact in enhancing the likelihood that the benefits of adoptive family life and relationships would be achieved for children for whom that was the plan agreed by the family court. Significant improvements were achieved, as intended, in the timeliness of agency decision-making about adoption and matching, including for children expected to

be harder to place by virtue of their personal circumstances. Consistent with findings from previous research (Dance et al. 2010; Farmer and Dance 2015), securing change on a case-by-case basis, by reinforcing the leadership role of the Permanence Team practitioner in the co-working model with children's social workers, proved effective for those children eligible by virtue of a PO having been made in their case. The impact of this approach in cases where early family-finding was employed prior to a care application, and court authorisation of an adoption plan, was also notable in those cases where such a plan was pursued. However, the fact that such plans were dropped more often than not - in many cases because the court was not persuaded - indicates the limitations, too, of the Coram approach to driving permanence improvement from the adoption service alone.

Evidence of timeliness

Child outcomes analysed prospectively

A case-tracking system, set up by Coram, identified 54 children, during the 6 month project period to 31 March 2016, for whom adoptive family-finding was required, or likely to be required. For 24 of these children the tracking and family-finding process was initiated after the PO had been made. For the other 30 children, a process of tracking was initiated to facilitate early family-finding and avoid delay, in the expectation that an adoption plan might be confirmed by the agency, and a PO granted by the court.

Children on a PO

The impact of the Coram project on the timeliness of family-finding can be estimated, in general, by making a simple comparison of outcomes with the year before project inception (2014-2015), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Children on a PO: timeliness of family-finding

Year	PO decisions made during the year	Average days from PO to match	Tracked and supported children who are harder to place
2014-2015	28	246.4 (27)	NK
2015-2016	25	113.1 (24)	NK

Table 3 shows the extent of improved timeliness of matching decisions for those children for whom a PO was granted in the baseline (2014-2015) and project year (2015-2016). For the 25 children with PO made in 2015-2016, it took an average of 113.1 days from

the decision to match them with their adoptive family. This compares with the figure of 246.4 days for the 2014-2015 PO cohort. This is a striking improvement in timeliness on this measure. In each case only one child in the cohort had yet to be found a family.

Most (16) of the 25 PO in 2015-2016 were granted by the court in the final 6 months of the year, when the Coram project was underway. These were the cases most likely to benefit from the new tracking methods. By 30 September 2016, all but one of these children had been matched. The average time to adoption for this sub group of the whole year cohort (16/25) was 100 days, with one child still waiting.

It was not possible to collect data which would confirm the extent to which children in each year group as a whole were deemed harder to place. However, a small majority (12/20) of the cohort of tracked children with a PO made in 2015-2016 included such children.

A caution

Caution must be exercised, where results for PO cohorts tracked prospectively in these ways are compared with Adoption Scorecard returns and targets based on adoption cohorts tracked retrospectively (see Table 1 above). The average number of days will increase, to some extent, when the outstanding days taken by the children (albeit only one in each year group) who were yet to have a family found for them are added to the analysis. Furthermore, it cannot be known at this stage whether the children will be adopted, as intended. Nonetheless, at point of data collection at the end of September 2016, no early family disruption had been reported in these cases.

Children tracked prior to a PO

The case tracking system was extended to include children for whom the care plan (or anticipated plan in the case of unborn children) was likely to be adoption. Once these children had been identified by the Permanence Team, the family-finding process was instigated, in ways consistent with due process within adoption agency and local authority statutory regulations and guidance. During the project period to March 2016, 30 children were identified and tracked subsequently.

In the event, case trajectories had varied widely by the final data collection date of 30 September 2016:

- adoption plans had proceeded as anticipated for just 9/30 of these children (in 8 cases a PO had been made and a family found in half of these); in one case the plan was for the child to remain in permanent care in the country of origin; in a further case there had been a termination of pregnancy

- adoption plans were still under active consideration but not yet finalised in 4 of the remaining 19 cases

- adoption had ceased to be the plan in the remaining cases (15/30)

As a result, most children in the early family-finding tracking cohort remained at, or returned, home to the care of parents. Of these, 3 children were in the care of both parents, 9 were with their mother and 2 with their father. The remaining child was placed with paternal grandparents under a Special Guardianship Order.

Changes to adoption plans were made by the court itself in no fewer than 6 of 15 cases. There was agreement, in due course, about the change of plan in the other cases, between social workers and managers in the child protection, care planning and the family-finding parts of the service. Nonetheless, these child trajectories through the decision-making process do indicate some indecision in making appropriate permanence plans in that part of the service.

Comparison with child outcomes from the Coram Managed Service model

A simple comparison with child outcomes achieved in the comparison local authority (Northamptonshire) was undertaken, using the same basis of calculation. In this case, the results set out in Table 4 (below) should be compared with those presented in Table 3 (above). No comparison could be undertaken with early family-finding performance in the Coram Managed Service model, as no common basis for case tracking could be applied.

Table 4: Coram family-finding post-PO activity and impact in Northamptonshire

Year	Whole cohort of children with PO decisions made	Days from PO to ADM match for the whole cohort	Tracked and supported children harder to place
2014-2015	67	162.13 (65)	N/K
2015-2016	69	135.93 (58)	N/K

Table 4 indicates that baseline performance in family-finding in adoption in the comparison site was much stronger than in the first site that year (2014-2015). However, the position had reversed in the project year (2015-2016), and significantly so.

Evidence of child and family stability and well-being

The single indicator of early family disruption was used to estimate the extent to which the risks associated with speedy decision-making had been mitigated, in effect, in both local authority sites. These risks have been identified in earlier research, and include stretching too far adoptive parents' expectations about the children likely to achieve permanence in their family (Dance et al. 2010; Farmer and Dance 2015), and preparing those children, and their current carers, appropriately for the move to adoptive family life

(Boswell and Cudmore 2014). Early family disruption was estimated at the point 6 months after the end of the year in which the PO was made; that is, on 30 September 2015 and 2016 respectively, for the baseline and project years. Once again, the caution about prospective tracking of child outcomes applies.

No early family disruption was reported in Buckinghamshire for the children with PO made in the project year. For children with PO granted in the previous year, the figure was not available. By comparison there were 3 such cases in Northamptonshire in 2015-2016 (on a significantly larger cohort). This was 2 more than had been the case at the same point in the previous year.

Findings on outcomes for the local authority

The evidence is that the project intention to use Coram Consultancy to build capacity and capability in local authority permanence planning met with significant, yet delimited, success during the project period. Consistent with the evidence of the quantitative findings on child outcomes, project impact on adoption family-finding capacity, at the level of the individual case, was strongly confirmed in the qualitative accounts. As the tracking outcome findings suggested, there was confirmation here, too, that this impact could be achieved earlier in the permanence planning and decision-making process for children. Nonetheless, the practitioner and manager accounts also suggested that consultancy impact on local authority permanence improvement capacity and capability had remained more limited at the level of the social work practice system, when understood as a whole. This provided endorsement for the quantitative results, which showed that, in a significant minority of cases, timeliness in securing permanence, whether through adoption or not, had been compromised by a lack of a sure touch in decision-making in the wider practice system. The qualitative accounts also illuminated persistent uncertainty, in the minds of some, about the integrity of underpinning project theory about what constituted timeliness in permanence planning in any case, and about how best to achieve it.

Impact on adoption family-finding capacity at the level of the individual case

Accounts offered by managers and practitioners confirmed that the Coram Consultancy, and its data-led and practice-based methodologies, had enabled purpose and pace to be established more reliably in family-finding decision-making for children with an adoption plan, on a case by case basis, as intended. They confirmed that this impact was also beginning to be shown for children likely to benefit from adoption, but where a plan had yet to be confirmed by the court.

Consistent with project assumptions, success here was indicated more or less unequivocally in the qualitative accounts associated with:

- the validation of the adoption service through its association with Coram and its reputation

- the personal and professional qualities of the Coram consultant herself

- the single-minded activation and intensification of family-finding practice performance, case by case

The decision taken to embed Coram expertise and authority further in the adoption service, by moving towards the managed service model, was supported by the similar evidence of impact on child outcomes and encouraging qualitative reports from the second local authority.

Validation of the adoption service itself through association with Coram

Embedding the main consultant in the part of the adoption service responsible for undertaking the family-finding social work role enabled the Coram presence in the agency to have a direct and immediate impact on decision-making, day by day, and case by case. It was this that validated the adoption service role and function in the social work practice system as a whole, rather than the Coram diagnostic report produced in November 2016:

'I think the report could have been a little bit more robust. I think certainly everybody who's read it within my supervision group has commented they didn't feel the quality of the report reflected the quality of the work that's been done by Coram, and the support that they have had.' (Permanence Team Manager)

The report also confirmed, for Permanence Team members themselves, that their own commitment to improving adoption processes and outcomes was legitimate.

The location of the consultant in the Permanence Team, working alongside the practitioners and managers whose role was to be enhanced and whose practice was to be improved most directly, was important for team members themselves.

'She's come with a plan but she sits on our team and she's approachable, and she helps us as well. So it's not like it's an inspection as such, it's like she's part of the team, and she's bringing in changes for the better.' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

Embedding the consultancy role in this way enhanced team capacity to make progress on practice improvement work already envisioned by team managers but not yet implemented for one reason or another:

'(Consultant) has had the time, that role has had the time to do some development work that I couldn't devote that much time to.' (Permanence Team Manager)

'I think she's had a particularly positive role in terms of focusing on some of the… performance indicator sort of information, and making that a key to evaluating and judging the service. And, as with all performance indicators, there's a sort of an upside and a downside to that but the upside is that it's… it has meant that we've been able to say, well, this is the resources we need to do this job, you know, this is what our expectations are. And we've been able to deliver on that to a large extent.' (Permanence Team Manager)

It enabled managerial authority to be respected, with regard to case by case decision-making within the Permanence Team and beyond, without avoiding the need for change to be addressed more or less directly where necessary:

'..managers have to sit up and listen and do something, be accountable, … I have escalated stuff, and if I escalate it, it moves better than it would have done otherwise.' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

'certainly with my own supervision group, I don't object, you know, if I've hit a wall, and they've hit a wall, trying to get something done, and we've got another avenue to move this forward, then I'm not precious over them going to (consultant) for support.' (Permanence Team Manager)

'even the managers will talk to her as if she is someone that is able to give them advice and experience.' (Social Worker, Fostering Team)

The personal and professional qualities of the Coram consultant

The importance placed by Coram on the practice-based specialist expertise provided by the consultancy approach was endorsed unequivocally. Reports were consistently positive, whatever the role and location of the person asked. No-one who offered a view raised any criticism or complaint about the experience, knowledge and skill of the primary consultant, nor about the way in which she conducted herself personally in role. This enabled her, for the most part, to succeed in exercising both aspects of this role, providing challenge and support alike to enable practice improvement. The feedback tended to be effusive, no matter what the role of the speaker in the adoption service itself:

'I can tell you she's brilliant. You've got somebody who knows what they're doing, yes.' (Permanence Team Manager)

'I'd feel confident that she would give a view, not necessarily that I'd then go away and act on that, but it's an idea or I learn something from her, and I find that helpful.' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

'she's always available to kind of talk to….. I think she has brought fresh ideas, but ideas that actually existed in different local authorities, if you know what I mean…' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

This personal appreciation extended to practitioners and managers beyond the adoption service too:

'she says, oh, actually, you've done really well……that praise, sometimes you need that, you need to be recognised, that actually it's a difficult situation but you're doing as much you can …… but these are the other things that we need to take into account and this is how you can do it. …she's also saying that in front of the manager, so that's quite helpful.' (Social Worker, Fostering Team)

'She's very clear ……..she's very knowledgeable, but she's also very approachable.' (Fostering Team Manager)

' '…' '…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. On an individual level she's advised me and helped me, and certainly she's helped the managers as well.' (Practice Improvement Manager)

'she challenges very clearly and firmly based on very good knowledge. But she does it in a way that makes people think, oh, actually I want to do that, rather than what the hell does she think she's talking about.' (Service Manager)

The significance of this finding should not be underestimated. Strategic managers in the local authority had taken considerable care to confirm that Coram had made the right appointment at the outset, aware, as they were, of the risks, as well as the benefits, associated with exposing the service to the further high profile external scrutiny inherent in the Coram project approach. The reputation of the service itself, and that of individual managers, and perhaps social workers, was more or less at stake here. In this respect, it might also be the case that the positive accounts express a certain sense of relief that the appointment had worked out well.

The single-minded activation and intensification of adoption family-finding practice performance

Embedding the main consultant in that part of the adoption service responsible for undertaking the family-finding social work role also ensured that the data-led and practice-based methodology introduced was taken up by the team, more or less as a matter of routine. This meant that the professional mind-set required for sustaining and enhancing new ways of working could be entrenched. In this respect the data-led aspect of the Coram Consultancy approach to practice-based service improvement can be endorsed too.

Success in enhancing practice performance in family-finding, case by case and by reference explicitly to the need to achieve specified decision-making milestones, did depend on the capacity of the adoption service to generate reliable and up-to-date information and track child journeys to adoption from the outset.

The single-minded activation and intensification of family-finding practice performance, using the Coram methodology, was appreciated by Permanence Team practitioners and managers for its impact.These methods included:

- introducing performance tracking surgeries and refocusing practice roles in the Permanence Team, to support the family-finding process

- reducing informal procedures constraining the achievement of timeliness in family-finding in the adoption service

- initiating the family-finding social work role much earlier in the adoption planning process for the child

Nonetheless, it is the case, too, that these methods were not seen by team members, and others, to be entirely straightforward or fully risk free.

Performance surgeries

Coram data-led and practice-based performance surgeries became embedded in routine family-finding practice as Permanence Team members came to understand more clearly how they might contribute to confirming responsibility for, and chasing, progress in decision-making.

What was most welcomed here was the formalisation of the performance tracking process in routine practice:

'The performance surgeries, … I felt a bit trepidant… … we were already quite pushed for time, but we wanted to give them a go. So we felt, you know, we want a good standard of practice in the team, it's hard to get things done, and we were thinking, well, great, we'll give it a go.   … as they've bedded in, I think they've become extremely helpful. (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

'…'there's no hiding in the performance surgeries. You're put on the spot, what have you done, why haven't you done it, so I think it's a shame it needed to come to that, but I think that's where it's helped.' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

'At times I needed to escalate stuff about paperwork. We did the CPR (Child Permanence Report) on time. We didn't do the medical information on time. So I suppose just because we had a focus, everybody sort of knew what was going on.' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

The risk of establishing a parallel process of performance management in the Permanence Team could be addressed by the distinctive nature of the consultancy role:

'… what wasn't happening before is, in supervision you weren't getting at actions, so there weren't really decisions about your work, so people, I think, were going away and maybe not clear about what they needed to do next. So you'd come back 4 weeks later and you'd be in the same position, whereas what the tracking meetings have done is… I suppose you're more accountable for your work and you take responsibility, and if there's an area of something you're not sure of, you can actually then go away and say, actually, I didn't know there was a process there or what do I need to do in order to get to that.' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

Practice performance could be verified in a context where local recording systems were unreliable, or where they were not being updated routinely by busy practitioners. More significantly for practice improvement, Permanence Team social workers and managers alike could be enabled and validated in taking professional responsibility for active decision-making, as required by their enhanced family-finding role.

'…having it fortnightly has kind of helped me in my case recordings which I've had to make sure I keep up to date. And actually I find it is like another supervision at the same sort of time really. … having the performance surgeries was just more of a stick to make sure I'm doing the right thing.' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

'….it's been difficult to work out how I adjust my supervision to performance surgeries, because I mean, there are different ways of dealing with these things, and I could have sort of been quite territorial. But I think I've seen performance surgery as something that challenges me as well.' (Permanence Team, Manager)

Re-focusing practice roles

The consolidation and intensification by Coram of role specialisation in family-finding was understood by the social workers who took on this task to be consistent with the idea that this was a way of validating and building professionalism in this particular aspect of practice:

'I would prefer to have one area and specialise in that area. I enjoy family-finding. ….. I know that other people in the team also like to do assessments and they like to go on assessment training, but I also find that the training that's available is probably quite limited when you're doing a bit of everything as well' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

'Yes, where my skills lie best. I do struggle with the adoption support stuff. I do think it is a specialism within a specialism, '…'…, … I think if I'd been pushed the other route and gone, and had a case of having adoption support, I would have left and I would've gone to another adoption service that would give me where my, where I think my skills lie best' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

Bringing the family-finding social work role forward in the adoption planning process

Introducing the adoption family-finding role and task earlier in the adoption planning process in each case was welcomed by Permanence Team members. The Coram objective of activating the process of decision-making prior to the approval of an adoption plan by the court was endorsed:

'You know, in this team, the case wouldn't even be allocated until after the placement order has been granted, we started allocating early, but couldn't really do much with the family-finding until after the placement order. So at least, you know, we were one step forward in that we had a social worker in our team who knew the child, and could go once the placement order was granted. But Coram's work brought that back a little bit further to the ADM, and now, you know, we are doing early selections when placement orders are granted, we are going out within a week or 2 of the placement order being granted, ready to move onto adoption for those cases where we can do that.' (Permanence Team Manager)

Reducing informal procedures

Informal procedures such as matching meetings, inserted previously to mitigate concerns that recommendations to the Adoption Panel might not hold up under scrutiny, could be let go more readily, but only where confidence in decision-making had been boosted sufficiently by consultancy support:

'…I was in two minds about that *[ending matching meetings before Panel]* because actually I felt at the time… this will be my first… my new family-finding case, this is the first time I won't be doing a matching meeting. And I think because I feel more confident doing the paperwork I don't need to have the meeting. But I think sometimes it brings everybody together, just making sure we all agree with everything and everybody's understanding, because the next time you see everybody is going to be at panel.' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

Some cautions about unintended consequences

As indicated by the ambivalence shown about what might be lost when the process is speeded up, these methods were not seen by team members and others to be entirely straightforward or free of risk. From the operational management perspective, there were concerns expressed too, that the role specialisation demanded by the Coram approach to family-finding might have unintended consequences for adoption service capacity and understanding as a whole:

'…being able to understand the whole area of work, from working with adopted adults who want to reunify, or birth family members who want to reunify, right to pre-birth, you know, family-finding, and planning, you've sort of had that scope, there's a lot of

learning. ..I think, from a strategic perspective, people find it difficult because they can't box off who does what.' (Manager, Permanence Team)

'I prefer to have a model where you've got greater flexibility, which is what generic work gives you. I think in the long run you get job satisfaction for team members '. (Manager, Permanence Team)

Consistent with the debate about the strengths and shortfalls of institutionalising specialist roles, some Permanence Team social workers suggested that the remit of the performance surgeries should be widened to include all aspects of practice decision-making relevant to securing a family for the child:

'I mean, we only really focus on prospective adopter assessments around, sort of, stage 2 and on family-finding. We don't really focus on adoption support cases, which I think could be quite helpful as well.' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

'But it didn't happen on all my other cases, it didn't even look at my adoption support cases and what was going on there. So they had no idea about how many caseloads I had, and then obviously it is raised in front of your face that you haven't done A, B, C, and you haven't done this, that and the other.' (Social Worker, Permanence Team)

The significance of adoption support for successful family-finding raised by these 2 social workers indicates concern about the single-minded focus on intensification of the family-finding role and task. It emerges later in the analysis, too, when attention is shifted from the experience of the professionals of the new urgent approach to that of the children and parents involved.

Impact on wider social work practice system capacity for permanence improvement

The quantitative evidence – showing that child journeys were made in a timely way when estimated against scorecard targets and previous practice outcomes – suggests a positive impact had been achieved as intended by the Coram Consultancy on capacity and capability building in permanence planning in adoption in the local authority. The qualitative accounts confirm that this was the case. They support the view that the Coram Consultancy methodology did help draw attention to, and begin to mitigate, systemic barriers to effective permanence planning, in adoption and beyond, especially once it was implemented in full.

Nonetheless, these accounts also indicate the limitations inherent in a permanence improvement strategy which was designed to use external expertise to activate the changes required in the social work practice system as a whole, by prioritising, for enhancement and escalation, decision-making processes addressing one function of that system. Project capacity to align statutory social work duties, powers, roles and tasks undertaken in separate parts of the children's social care service, such that permanence

improvement would be achieved as a matter of course, fell short in 2 main ways on the evidence of the accounts taken as a whole:

- first, it was apparent that a consensus had yet to be achieved in the practice mind about the appropriate interpretation of the core principle of 'timeliness' (and hence that of 'delay') underpinning project theory and practice

- second, there were clear indications that service functions and structures themselves, across social work practice, might need substantive reform in the local authority, even where a permanence mind-set was emerging more widely across the practice system, and responsibility for active planning being taken up earlier as appropriate

Procedural shortcomings and systemic barriers to effective permanence planning

The indications were that the introduction of greater urgency into family-finding practice in adoption succeeded in highlighting procedural shortcomings and systemic barriers elsewhere in the practice system too, which were impeding the achievement of timely decisions for children and families. This was helpful in confirming local analysis. It enabled the project focus to be shifted rapidly in response, by project commissioners and leads, enhancing the impact of Coram's data-based (diagnostic) and practice-led methodologies, case by case, during the first part of the extended project year (April – September 2016). Once again, the personal and professional reputation of the main consultant, embedded in the Permanence Team, was said to be significant here. By contrast the more objectifying diagnostic process was not identified by participants as being especially helpful in its initial iteration. In any case, in the event the full service diagnosis had not been completed and published 6 months after the end of the initial project period.

It was widely suggested by interviewees that the consultancy had reaffirmed the existence of systems level problems impeding joint working across services for child permanence, and also tested the potential for these problems to be mitigated. In this case, existing concerns about the shortcomings of a unit model introduced previously in the CiN and CiC side of the service, and being supported itself by Innovation Programme funding during 2015-2016, were amplified by the renewed attention given to permanence planning resulting from the Coram Consultancy.

The unit model practice theory itself, as implemented, was implicated as a threat to effective permanence planning:

'They didn't consider the risk enough. And I think the training and the model enabled that to happen in a way that I didn't think was very helpful. So people weren't focused on risk, they were focused on positives. You need to have both, clearly, and I think the model, what people took away from the model, I'm not saying the model taught that,

but what people took away from the model is we have to keep trying with these families, which led to drift and delay and all sorts of things coming to bite us. So I do think that was very problematic.' (Service Manager)

'I think the strategic sphere is not clear and is not… it's not integrated throughout the service so, you know, from the top, you know, there's not the philosophy of, you know, permanency wherever possible should be within the child's own family. However, if they need alternative permanent care and that's in the form of adoption, then that needs to be done in this particular way.' (Service Manager)

Service diagnostics and performance tracking methods

Coram adoption service diagnostic and performance tracking methods were helpful in legitimating in-house concerns about the model as implemented:

'We know we have a systemic problem in our authority, and Coram have picked that up; and, I think, that's hugely... been hugely helpful because they've picked up that there isn't... that we, you know, whoever is writing the CPRs needs to be involved for a considerable period of time to get to know the child, to get to know the case, to actually research the reports so that they can read everything and write a good child's permanence report.' (Panel Advisor)

The involvement of Coram meant that the risk to child outcomes of the divergent priorities of practice theory and methods in the CiN and CiC units, and those informing the adoption service, could be spoken of more freely:

'I mean there is a lack of understanding, a lack of recognition…..and I think from the frontline team's point of view, I think their priorities were somewhere else, quite understandably, because they were focused on, you know, the day-to-day, you know.' (Permanence Team Manager)

The unintended consequences for permanence planning of the unit system were identified explicitly, in response to Coram (and Adoption Panel) concerns about the lack of consistent and continuous child focus in current practice:

'The problem we have had is that in Children in Need, they're so focused on trying to safeguard children and work with child protection they kind of get lost in that and aren't focussing on the bigger picture…… On a positive level, the child was seen by the same people in the same team through one process. However, that social worker had to work with a child through a Child in Need plan, another child with a Child Protection plan, another child could be in care proceedings, and it took really skilled workers that we didn't have enough of in order to be able to do all of those different pieces of work at the same time. So the CPR was taken back into CiC.' (Practice Improvement Manager)

Remedial strategies were most likely to be defended, although with some circumspection, by those managers responsible for attempting to make the unit system work better in this way:

'CiC and the Child in Need team have worked really well to make sure that that transition and co-working element of the CPR is quite robust. There are times when it goes wrong, but generally there's a co-working agreement between those 2 parts of the service.' (Practice Improvement Manager)

Others were convinced that a much more radical approach was required, based instead on stretching still further the systemic impact of the Permanence Team:

'we should take responsibility for the CPRs … we are involved for longest, we're there, you know, a few weeks after they come into care, to when the adoption order's granted, we have that overview, so why couldn't we write the CPR, why couldn't we have some input into that?' (Permanence Team Manager)

In the meantime, the loss of a routine focus on tracking and reporting child outcomes was noted too:

'The problem with the unit model was that there was a huge emphasis quite rightly on the quality of practice and the quality of intervention with families, considering the hypothesis, considering why families are the way they are, and looking at how we can engage families that are traditionally difficult to engage. Rather than a task focussed line management approach, looking at a more facilitative approach where there's group discussion and more joined up working with families and partners, to try and help families overcome difficulties. And all of that was good, but then we didn't have a real… well, we didn't have a focus on our data, our statistics and recording of how we did it. So whilst there was good work going on across the service, we didn't have a uniform approach of reporting how we were doing it.' (Practice Improvement Manager)

Mitagating the impact of systematic shortfalls

With the underlying problem of the unit model as implemented confirmed, from a permanence planning perspective, the Coram performance improvement methodology could be used to mitigate the impact of systemic shortfalls. In the same way that case by case impact was achieved in the adoption service, the activism of the Coram consultant could be used to (re-)engage key people in the wider practice system in taking their responsibility for purposeful planning for children.

From a more narrowly conceived adoption service perspective, this shift of responsibility was extremely welcome, as it confirmed the belief that delay was not explained simply by a lack of urgency in that part of the system:

'I think there is a recognition from that initial 6 months that we (the adoption service) are part of a process in a system that needs to be looked at as a whole and, yes, there were things that we needed to improve and have improved, but there was a much wider sort of problem that needed to now be addressed.' (Permanence Team Manager)

From the perspective of those at the operational and strategic service interface, there was hope that the influence felt in one part of the practice system would indeed be extended as intended, in due course:

'The systemic impact of Coram for us, I think it takes time. Some things they've achieved straight away. ..I think the understanding on the adoption service and the understanding of permanence for children, and that end of the child's permanency… we are getting there….. they have had those messages and they are starting to understand it. The managers know, well actually we need to think about that part of a child's journey, and I don't think they would've got that as quickly if we hadn't had Coram there. Coram has been helpful in making sure that transition between all of the teams has been better because they were there' (Practice Improvement Manager)

As the consultancy became established, joint tracking arrangements, which delegated responsibility for checking and chasing performance in permanence planning on all relevant children in the local authority upwards to senior managers, were revised, to ensure this case-level task was restored appropriately to the local team. Once again the way in which this was done mattered a great deal:

'So she now has these tracking meetings with the team managers, so it's come down a level, and the practice improvement managers also go. And they're looking at individual children and that has really shifted some children very quickly through the system. So we are now getting children placed within time scales, we have permanency plans in place and people have come away really wanting to do things better because it's the right thing to do for children, rather than we just don't want to get called out in the tracking meeting. And I think that's down to the way she's gone around and communicated with staff, given examples, she knows individual children and she does it in a way that, we've got to do this better but I can help you. And I think that's really, really been good.' (Service Manager)

The importance of this restoration of responsibility for permanence planning to frontline teams, demonstrated already in the child outcome data reported earlier, was recognised by those responsible for practice improvement. Nonetheless, the intensity of the drive to enforce change was not always appreciated. It was apparent, too, that the child's social worker in the CiN team remained at the end of a rather long line of practice leadership and advice:

'We've got a new permanency planning… a revised permanency planning meeting process, I should say, and CiC are invited to those meetings very early in the day when it's identified that a child… part of the parallel planning is that the child might need to be moving into… not return home or be placed elsewhere with extended family. And the CiC service, along with the adoption team, come to those meetings and the good thing about that is that there's shared knowledge across the piece and the Child in Need team is being advised from the other teams about what they need to do early on for the child's permanency and planning.' (Practice Improvement Manager)

Securing performance improvement in permanence planning, by extending the reach and impact of the family-finding function back down the practice system, was successful in as much as it stretched practice and management functions and capacity to better effect case by case. However, the evidence of the qualitative accounts was also that more fundamental change was required if the impact of the approach was to become embedded systemically. The fact that the Permanence Team was renamed as the Adoption Team once again, in the period immediately after the original Coram Consultancy ended in March 2015, confirmed that the primary focus of permanence improvement as a whole had begun to shift elsewhere. This was welcomed by the Coram Consultant herself, in her new role as Adoption Service Manager.

Embedding permanence in the practice mindset

It was apparent from the accounts provided that a shared interpretation of the core principle of timeliness (and hence that of delay), underpinning project theory and practice, remained emergent at best. Anxiety was expressed here that decisions driven by reference primarily to timeliness, defined as the meeting of performance indicators expressed as a mean score (between key decision points on the adoption journey of the parents and/or the child), might compromise timeliness as defined by reference to the relationship dynamics inherent to each unique case:

'Sometimes decisions are taken not to go down a certain route… that inherently causes a delay, but it's not delay as in the way we use it: delay is a criticism. It is because that wasn't the right thing, we have to sometimes take a step back, and think okay we can't do that.'(CiC Team Manager)

'You're expecting these children to fast track along to somebody new all of a sudden, and it's like, this is your new mummy and daddy, within a short period of time. And where's the real adjustment to that? … when you're talking about 4 year old, 5 year olds, and so on, to a point of 7, well, it isn't that simple. You know, they've spent 3 or 4 years of their life with their parents, and they've witnessed who knows what. Because we don't get the full stories or the full impacts of what's gone on in those children's lives. And then, all of a sudden, we're turning around to them and saying, you're going to have a new mummy and daddy.' (Social Worker, CiC Team)

Where the child in question was, or might become, part of a sibling group looked after by the local authority, the measurement of timeliness on a child by child basis alone was questionable:

'My previous experience has been that if we have got siblings and we place one first then inevitably the adopters then stick with one rather than taking the second, so I was quite concerned that this would be the outcome. Yeah because they have got the one child and they want to concentrate on that child and that takes time. So we could potentially have waited until the little boy was ready and placed them as a sibling pair but that would have meant considerable delay for J. So you know, one way or the other you don't always know what is the right answer.' (CiC Team Manager)

Embedding permanence in the practice system

Project success in achieving timeliness in adoption decision-making, by enhancing role and task performance, case by case, in the adoption service family-finding social work function, served, at the same time, to illustrate the extent of the structural constraints on performance improvement in permanence planning expected of social workers. By the end of the initial project period in March 2016, there were already clear indications that service functions and structures, across social work practice, might need substantive reform in the local authority.

There was a widespread recognition that the process of what might be called 'sweating' the existing practice system, case by case and function by function, would be enhanced by consolidating the Coram Consultancy within a bespoke managed service model designed for the purpose. To this extent, the project capacity to learn from experience was confirmed too. The decision was congruent, to some extent, with the positive reports provided by service leads in the comparison local authority, where this approach to project extension had already been judged a success. These reports confirmed that the Coram Managed Service had compensated effectively for the lack of focus on permanence in the frontline social work service:

'So it took 3 months (to set the service up) but we got there and then we really started to see the changes happening really, in terms of the permanence team driving the work in a way that was anticipated, and we see time scales speeding up, we see the quality of permanence work improving. I'm very confident that there aren't children in our system in (local authority) that should be having PPMs that are not having PPMs. So where there is a permanence plan we now know about them. So that's how the team service has developed really over the 12 months in operation.' (Service Manager)

However, they also pointed to the fact that the wider systemic problems were left unresolved. The very high caseloads in the frontline social work teams helped sustain the

separation in the agency mindset between safeguarding and permanence planning activities. The permanence team became overloaded, in turn, by their lead role in the Permanency Planning Meetings (PPMs), and had to insist that local managers took the chairing role. Because the primary task of the Coram-led permanence team was family-finding in adoption, and the PPMs took a wider view of permanence options, attendance had to be widened to include the fostering service. Where there were differences of view on the best interests of the child, the Independent Reviewing Officer had to be invited too. Sometimes, disputes required the involvement of a strategic manager. In the meantime, the child's social worker remained peripheral:

> 'One of the challenges for the permanence team is linking in with the social workers, really difficult when you've got children that have got a high number of social workers in their life when they're very very little. So when you're trying to prepare children for permanence and do all of that work, that is one of the big challenges. And if you didn't have the permanence team here at this time doing what they're doing the outcomes for children would be very different. So I think that's one of the realities.' (Service Manager)

The double-edged outcome of the Coram-led service left unresolved the core problem of how to establish and embed a child-centred permanence planning system from the outset, for all children. Although adoption-led family-finding methods could be extended effectively under Coram Managed Service leadership, to ensure all children who might need a permanent family life away from parents were tracked, this approach itself generated risk. Core social work capacity and commitment remained undeveloped and a parallel care planning system was at risk of becoming established, in effect, if not by design. With national policy reasserting the primacy of permanence planning in adoption, the local service system was torn between thinking about how best to align assertiveness in family-finding with the safeguarding and corporate parenting roles. This raised questions about the limitations as well as the strengths of the kinds of approach and methods exemplified by the Coram project. As one service manager in the first site said:

> 'They have their uses and they're good but they don't do the corporate parenting bit. And that's what worries me.' (Service Manager)

What lessons have been learned from this innovation?

Both the strengths and the limitations of the Coram Permanence Improvement Project were illuminated during the initial period of implementation during 2015–2016.

The Coram data-led and practice-based project methodology, which was shown previously in other settings to have been effective in enhancing family-finding for children with an adoption plan, was extended to a new local authority site to enable a similar impact to be achieved within the Innovation Programme. Child outcomes were secured as intended for those children, as measured by standard national indicators applied to child cohorts as a whole. As a result of the project, children with confirmed adoption plans spent less time in public care than they would have done previously. There were indications that this impact had the potential to be extended to children for whom adoption plans were proposed but not confirmed. The positive contribution of the external consultancy model was celebrated in the local authority in question. The decision taken by strategic managers to recommission Coram intervention on the basis of the managed service model was consistent with the positive reports about this model of service leadership in achieving adoption outcomes in the comparison authority. Nonetheless, it was recognised that improvements to permanence performance across the safeguarding and corporate parenting function as a whole would be contingent on more substantive practice system redesign.

The absence to date of a bespoke cost calculator, using metrics associated with the adoption process in itself, means that no robust quantification of savings defined in this way is possible at this stage. However, simple computation using Coram in-house measures (themselves likely to be an under-estimate) show significant costs avoided by the substantial reduction in the number of days children within confirmed adoption plans remained in local authority care following project implementation. In the main study site (Buckinghamshire), reduced days in care 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 contract. Nonetheless, the costs avoided remain indicative only of project value for money in the longer term, where rates of adoption (and other permanence planning) activity are so volatile, and the Coram methodology itself might be expected to be mainstreamed in due course.

Limitations of the evaluation and future evaluation

The evaluation was limited in its estimation of project impact on child outcomes by the use of the proxy measures only. Fully matched samples were not used, and no data were collected from children, their new parents or other carers through the permanence planning process and beyond, to test the largely unequivocal assumption that the timeliness of family-finding achieved by the project methodology would be beneficial. However, as noted above, there was no indication that the model incurred higher rates of placement breakdown. The use of the second local authority as a benchmark provided indicative data, at best, to confirm project integrity and impact. No further comparison was made with other models of permanence improvement in use elsewhere, whether commissioned externally, or developed wholly in-house by the local authority.

Future evaluation of permanence improvement methodologies should focus on their integration within, and impact on, the local authority safeguarding and corporate parenting practice as a whole and its outcomes. All children assessed by the local authority as being in need (s17 Children Act 1989) have the legal right to statutory social work support designed to secure safe and stable family life and relationships through living at home with one or more of their parents, where possible. In this way permanence and planning for it should be central to the practice mindset from the start, not just when a child becomes looked after, and therefore, additional duties and powers apply, or will do (s22 Children Act 1989; s1 Children and Social Work Bill). The understanding that the primary statutory task is, indeed, to support parental responsibility to safeguard and promote the welfare of their children, where that is consistent with the child's needs at the time and, in future, is being reinforced by statute (s8 Children and Social Work Bill). Innovative practice methods, designed to enhance permanence in family life, to secure good outcomes for children in childhood and beyond, should be informed by a contemporary and inclusive rather than a traditional and narrow permanence perspective. Where innovative methodologies continue to isolate one aspect of permanence planning for improvement, the wider systemic impact on outcomes for children should be a primary evaluation focus.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

There are specific implications to be drawn about the capacity and sustainability of Coram's Permanence Improvement Project, as implemented in compliance with the requirements of the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme. The conditions necessary for this particular innovation to be implemented more widely, and with greater acceleration, are illuminated by project achievements and shortfalls during a project period extended into 2016-2107. They enable recommendations to be made with respect to 3 key aspects of project theory as it was expected to be implemented in practice.

Balancing opportunity and risk in strategic partnerships for practice improvement

The commissioning of independent expertise to galvanize change in itself carries significant risk. This is likely to be the case, especially where the pressure to perform, and to do so at pace, is intense, yet agency conditions are especially challenging, as was observed with project implementation in the first local authority site. Urgency to show impact is as likely to escalate anxiety as it is to contain it, where external scrutiny itself is driven by impatience and is associated with significant threat to reputation on all sides. In these circumstances, careful attention must be given to the establishment of respectful relationships during the process of project implementation and its subsequent development. The suggestion by Coram that it might take 2 years to establish an effective strategic partnership based on trust and shared commitment is borne out by the experience of project sites in this case. Ensuring the right external consultants and managers are introduced in the right way, at the right time is likely to be the primary condition for project success more generally. The process of mainstreaming Coram Consultancy and service management thereafter also takes time. The decision by the first local authority to re-commission the Coram project for a further year was consistent with advice by Coram in the Wave 1 bid, that it would take 2 years for this innovative approach to show its full impact on adoption service performance, and further potential for enhancing permanence improvement more generally. It was consistent also with the experience in the comparison site, where the process of embedding the managed service model, and consolidating its success, took longer still. Patience, not urgency, is recommended as a core policy principle in this case. This recommendation might be expected to apply equally with regard to permanence improvement in the large majority of local authorities where external expertise is not recruited. It has implications also for permanence improvement strategy and timelines at regional and national levels.

Reiterating what counts as timely decision-making from the child's point of view

The evaluation findings suggest that the concepts of timeliness and delay which underpin the definition, diagnosis and measurement performance in permanence planning at case and agency level alike should be reviewed and reiterated. Evaluation findings indicate, in particular, that the social work practice mind-set remains conflicted with regard to what counts as a child-centred decision-making process in differing permanence scenarios. This is the case, despite Coram methodology being designed explicitly to enable decision-making to be addressed from the child's point of view, consistent with developmental theory endorsed by NICE (2015) and the best available research findings on permanence outcomes described retrospectively (Selwyn et al. 2014). The implication is that the concepts of timeliness and delay require reiteration, such that these core principles can be taken up with greater understanding and commitment across all social work decisions about children. The opportunity provided by current plans to develop social work practice, knowledge, and skills in achieving permanence should be taken up actively. The re- engagement of practitioners and managers is required, in ways of thinking effectively about time understood from the individual child's point of view, especially in the context of the transition between family and other relationships (attachments and identifications). The statutory duty and professional capacity of the local authority practice system to enable a genuine and critically engaged child-centred decision-making process to take place, case by case, must not be compromised by policy driven by anxiety and impatience about service outcomes defined as a whole.

The appropriate focus of investment in performance improvement in permanence planning

The finding that the Coram project diagnostic and practice improvement methodology could illuminate and mitigate problems case by case at the interface of relevant statutory social work roles in the permanence planning system as a whole, but not in itself overcome them, suggests strongly that partial reform will not suffice. Coram project methods designed to intensify and track timeliness of decision-making prospectively in support of the statutory corporate parenting care planning process are well-indicated. However, activating practice improvement in permanence planning in general by extending the reach and influence of the family-finding social work role and task based in the adoption (or foster care) service is not indicated by project experience as likely to be the most effective means of generating the change in timeliness of social work decisions in the practice system as a whole.

Instead, attention should turn now equally if not more so to the task of developing innovative approaches to organising and enhancing the statutory social work role and task in safeguarding and corporate parenting, such that the practice mind-set and

methodology is informed by a permanence perspective from the outset. The corporate parenting role of the local authority will need to be addressed as a whole, if child outcomes are to be secured as intended. In this regard the question arises about whether costs avoided by achieving more timely permanent family outcomes for children might be re-invested most productively at the front end of the statutory social work service. It is at this point that decision-making about permanence makes the biggest difference of all.

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