

**SUBMISSIONS ON BEHALF OF CORAM IN RESPECT OF MODULE 8  
FOR THE PRELIMINARY HEARING ON 6 SEPTEMBER 2024**

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**Introduction**

1. Coram welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Module 8 of the Inquiry. While this is the first module in which Coram has been afforded Core Participant status, the organisation filed a Rule 9 statement at the request of the Inquiry in Module 1. Coram looks forward to working with the Inquiry to interrogate the issues which are relevant to this strand of the Inquiry.

**The Background to Coram**

2. Originating as the Foundling Hospital in 1739, Coram is the UK's oldest children's charity, working as 'the Coram Group' of specialist organisations helping hundreds of thousands of children, young people, families and professionals nationwide. Coram uses its experience of working daily with children and young people to engage with government, local authorities, social workers, teachers and families to help deliver better practice, systems and laws.
3. Coram supports children and young people from infancy to independence with:
  - free legal advice and representation;
  - adoption, fostering, kinship and therapy services;
  - advocacy for children and young people in and leaving care;
  - best practice support for children's services professionals, teachers and families;
  - life skills, drama and volunteer reading programmes in over 3,000 schools nationwide;
  - practice guidance, CPD, and advice to support front line professionals and local authorities;

- research and evaluation to inform both practice and policy.
4. During 2021-2022:
- there were over 1,500,000 users of Coram’s Child Law Advice Service website;
  - 309,000 children took part in Coram’s life skills and cultural education programmes;
  - 46,000 teachers subscribed to Coram’s online school resources;
  - over 9,000 children in care and care leavers used Coram “Always Heard” advice line;
  - every local authority in the UK drew upon Coram’s training and best practice resources.
5. There is equivalent data for 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Although the records from period 2021-2022 represent the year which is perhaps most relevant to the Inquiry, the evolving picture of the longer term consequences of the pandemic also provides important information about the impact of the pandemic on children and young people. However, to give the Inquiry a sense of what is happening at present, in 2024, Coram provided 588,000 children engaged with the life skills and cultural education programmes, and this is now complemented by the school exclusion hub.
6. The Coram Group’s broad spectrum comprises the following:
- Coram Children’s Legal Centre is the country’s leading provider of specialist legal support for children, providing in-person, phone and online advice to hundreds of thousands of families every year who could not afford legal support. It works to influence the UK’s legal framework. The Migrant Children’s Project, part of Coram Children’s Legal Centre, promote the rights of refugee and migrant children, young people and families via advice, representation, training, policy and research.
  - Coram Voice is the leading advocate for children in care and care leavers. Coram’s young ambassadors ensure children’s voices are heard in and influence public debate, along with improvement of services on which they depend.
  - Coram Adoption is recognised as an outstanding voluntary adoption agency providing adoption services for nine local authorities across London through

its regional adoption agency *Coram Ambitious for Adoption*. It provides information for potential carers, informs policy and practice and runs adoption activity days across England.

- Coram Intercountry Adoption Centre is also an outstanding voluntary adoption agency dedicated to supporting trans-national placements and working with the DfE as the dedicated national centre of advice and support to local authorities.
- Coram's Creative Therapies Team provides therapeutic support to children offering art and music therapy supported by psychologists and psychotherapists.
- Coram Life Education is the leading provider of health, wellbeing, relationship and drugs education to hundreds of thousands of primary school children across the UK, developing programmes to support schools to deliver the mandatory new RHSE requirements on the national curriculum.
- Coram Beanstalk supports children experiencing reading difficulties by recruiting, training and supporting volunteers into schools to read with children one-to-one.
- Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation enables thousands of young people to perform Shakespeare live in the world's largest youth drama festival, building confidence, team-work and willingness to learn.
- Coram-i works with local authorities and partners Microsoft EY and PA Consulting to deliver better children's social care services through the Coram Innovation Incubator.
- Coram BAAF is the membership organisation for professionals, foster carers, adopters, and those working with or looking after children in or from care, sharing best practice, shaping policy and representing the sector on key issues of the day. It convenes groups bringing together sector expertise on themes including ethnicity, research, and health.
- Coram Family and Childcare publishes the annual childcare survey, the reference for

understanding cost and availability of childcare across Great Britain, as well as delivering programmes helping families access childcare, support and services.

- Coram International works with governments and organisations in 29 countries to protect and build the rights of children and young people.
- Coram Voice runs the ‘Always Heard’ helpline for children in care and care leavers, convenes collaborative work across the sector on advocacy, and runs the largest survey of the well-being of children in care and care leavers in England. Coram researchers have analysed this unique dataset to track pandemic effects. In ‘The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on care leavers’ well-being’ (2022) it published follow-up analysis on 2,476 care leavers to the pre-pandemic responses from 1,804 previously reported in What Makes Life Good (2020). For example, in early 2022, Coram’s Impact and Evaluation team conducted an evidence review on the pandemic’s effects on children and families, to inform a DfE-funded Covid recovery project for the childcare and early years workforce. [*Available on request. This was made available to training participants but has not been published.*].
- Coram Hemsall’s provides consultancy and capacity building programmes across the early years, working with nurseries and daycare settings across the country

As a group, Coram plays a convening role for the children’s sector, coordinating a range of activities including evidence generation, sharing and dissemination. As such, Coram is ready and willing to work with other parties to the Inquiry with an interest in children and families.

### **Coram and the impact of the pandemic on Children and Young People**

7. Coram has a particular interest in the rights of children and has recorded and researched the effect of the pandemic on those rights. While all children experienced negative consequences resulting from government policies in response to the threats posed by Covid 19, the ramifications for children with vulnerabilities and for cohorts facing additional societal challenges were particularly significant.

8. As a third sector organisation, Coram witnessed first-hand the impact of the pandemic on children and young people. In particular, it saw the profound impact of the pandemic across a diverse range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Coram continues to witness the ongoing impact on these children and young people and works with these people to mitigate the wider long-term impact of the pandemic in areas such as education, health and social care, areas in which the ongoing impact of the pandemic remains evident.
  
9. Throughout the pandemic, Coram was on the front line seeing first-hand, at scale and in real time, the impact of the pandemic on children and young people. Coram is particularly well placed to assist the Inquiry in the module's identified areas of:
  - The impact of the pandemic on children and young people's physical and mental health, wellbeing, development, family lives and on their access to healthcare services;
  
  - The impact of the pandemic on early years provision and education, including on those with special educational needs and/or disabilities;
  
  - The impact of the pandemic on children and young people in relation to access to and engagement with social care services and other agencies with a role in supporting the safety of children;
  
  - The impact of the pandemic on children and young people in contact with the immigration system.
  
10. To assist the Inquiry, Coram can offer direct evidence in these areas and would highlight the following in particular:
  - a. The impact on children and young people: Coram's Impact and Evaluation team have collated significant data on the impact pandemic decision-making and the lack of specific consideration had on children and families. The team are experts in data analysis, qualitative and quantitative research methods and participatory research with children, young people, parents and

professionals. Along with direct experience of the trends and themes in our advice lines and professional support services, Coram considers that this information is directly relevant to Module 8 and intends to share this research and evidence with the Inquiry.

- b. Early years provision: In early 2022, Coram's Impact and Evaluation team conducted an evidence review on the pandemic's effects on children and families to inform a DfE-funded Covid recovery project for the childcare and early years workforce. Coram Family and Childcare and Coram Hemsall's were engaged on a daily basis with the impacts occurring for providers.
- c. Education: Coram saw directly the impact of the sudden closure of schools through its Child Law Advice Service, which provides direct advice on 16,000 cases per year. In particular, Coram witnessed, recorded and assisted with the impact on those with special educational needs and/or disabilities and advised on school access. The education law team's Civil Legal Advice service saw the impacts of the pandemic on children with SEND and witnessed the effects of the suspension of in-school services. Coram's services fielded many questions early in the pandemic from parents and carers of children with SEND, who were disproportionately impacted. Coram developed specific information and guidance resources, bearing testament also to the reduced access to both universal and specialist health services. Coram can evidence major delays in the EHCP application and assessment process - partly due to the relaxation of legislative duties enforced in 2020. These delays continue to resonate to date.
- d. Social care and the safety of children: Coram's Child Law Advice Service saw the impacts of lockdown on family life and child arrangements, continuing to run its helpline throughout the pandemic for thousands of families. Coram Voice ran the national Always Heard helpline for children in care and care leavers during the pandemic.

Coram Voice also undertakes the largest survey of the well-being of children in care and care leavers in England. Coram researchers have analysed this unique dataset to track pandemic effects. In 'The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on

care leavers' well-being' (2022) it published follow-up analysis on 2,476 care leavers, comparing to the pre-pandemic responses from 1,804 previously reported in 'What Makes Life Good' (2020).

Coram witnessed the slowing down of government (national and local) decision-making, including in the courts, experienced through Coram's community care and family law casework.

- e. Adoption and permanence planning for children, in which Coram is an acknowledged leader, was significantly impacted, something Coram is able to quantify directly as secretariat to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board. Remote family court hearings led to major delays as family courts prioritised care proceedings, with the consequence that private law proceedings were de-prioritised, prejudicing child arrangements between separated parents and family members (for which there is still a backlog).
  - f. Children and young people in contact with the immigration system: As the convener of the Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium, with 80+ frontline members and representation in government forums, Coram has particular insight into how the pandemic impacted children and young people affected by the immigration and asylum systems and the development of policies impacting this group. Coram convened youth meetings and peer education, set up a group for NGO service-providers in this arena to work on pandemic response, continued to offer remote legal advice to hundreds of children, young people and families, and was at the heart of policy developments that impacted these children, including on no recourse to public funds and visa extensions.
11. As the list above demonstrates, Coram has a breadth of experience and has available to it both a significant amount of research and datasets, but also access to a network of professionals with expertise and research interests in a number of areas relevant to this module. It will share its research with the Inquiry to advance an understanding of the impact of the pandemic and decisions made during the course of it.

12. Coram continues to witness the ongoing impact on children and young people and can evidence the wider long-term impact of the pandemic including on wellbeing, education and social care, as well as offering insight into the decisions made during and since the pandemic. It will be able to contribute to the wealth of knowledge that this Inquiry has already collected and continues to evaluate.

### **Expert evidence**

13. Coram has conducted and commissioned a significant amount of research in respect of the impact of the pandemic on children and young people in the context of their families, in their schools and in society in general. It is well placed to assist the Inquiry in identifying areas of research and relevant experts. It will provide such assistance as is requested of it and is keen to assist the Inquiry.

### **Every Story Matters**

14. It is noted that the Inquiry intends to hear directly from children about their experiences in the pandemic. Coram welcomes this initiative and considers that it is crucial that efforts are made to ensure that the voices of children in care; in secure accommodation; in young offenders institutions; with disabilities, special educational needs and in pupil referral units, are given an opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry.
15. Coram also commends its publication by Coram Voice: Voices 2020. Special Category; Experiences of COVID-19. An anthology exploring children in care and care leavers' individual and shared experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on their lives to the Inquiry.

### **Key Lines of Enquiry**

16. Coram is conscious of the fact that it has not been involved directly in the Inquiry save that it submitted a Rule 9 statement at the request of the Chair. It has neither had access to the evidence already submitted and disclosed nor detailed knowledge of the breadth of the issues considered within the previous modules. Having considered the



wide-ranging lines of enquiry the following suggestions are made by way of further investigation.

### **The impact on the Family Justice System**

17. It is acknowledged that the family Justice System was agile in the face of the pandemic and introduced remote hearings with a speed which no other arm of the specialist bar was able to emulate. It is also accepted that there were delays in the system before the pandemic occurred. However, there was no doubt a significant impact on both private law cases and financial remedies cases. The former had direct implications for the welfare of children and the latter indirectly impacted children living in families where finances were in issue.
18. In January 2023, Richard Oldershaw, the lead adviser in Coram's Child Law Advice Service, wrote an [article here](#) regarding the backlog in family cases. Coram's research indicated that it was taking on average 15 weeks longer to conclude private law cases compared to pre-pandemic levels. There was also an increase in domestic abuse, which will have added to the already increased risk to children caused by the backlog in cases.
19. The introduction of fully remote hearings to resolve family law cases in the pandemic provided a pragmatic solution to social distancing. However, it was a solution which was not without problems and disadvantages for some of those involved in the family justice system. Alongside the research carried out by the Government, there has also been valuable research undertaken by Nuffield Family Justice Observatory which was produced at the request of The President of the Family Division in respect of the efficacy and fairness of remote hearings which the Inquiry may wish to draw upon.

### **Relationships**

20. It is noted that the Inquiry intends to explore the impact of the pandemic on early years provision. Coram acknowledges the effects of the disruption of formal childcare provision on the learning and development of children in early years. However, that is only part of the picture. Coram invites the Inquiry also to examine the impact of the suspension of informal/recreational toddler groups etc., and the withdrawal of the

freedom to interact, play and socialise with other children upon their social development during the pandemic and effect on children's language attainment and acquisition of other skills by the time of starting school during and post pandemic.

21. Coram Voice completed research in December 2021 on care leavers' wellbeing, as a follow up to previous similar surveys throughout 2017-2019. Their research ('The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on care leavers' well-being') contains data analysing various key areas of care leavers' personal lives, including housing, finances, emotional support and loneliness (amongst many others). ONS research (2020) clearly demonstrated the drastic impact that the pandemic had upon young people, with young people (aged 16-29) reporting that their well-being was being affected by the pandemic at a rate that far exceeded those aged 60+. Coram was able to focus specifically upon the impact on care leavers, who often have complex, diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, and may therefore have experienced the pandemic differently to the general population of young people.
22. Through Coram Voice and its Bright Spots Programme, it has gathered specific data which may interest the Inquiry.
23. It appears that all aspects of permanency planning for children were affected by Covid-19 policies, including how children were visited by local authorities, how they stayed in touch with those important to them, how prospective and existing carers were assessed, and how decisions were made.
24. Coram would highlight and invite the Inquiry to focus its investigations upon the impact of the response to the pandemic upon access to familial relationships for children in care and for those in kinship care arrangements whose contact with family members was significantly impacted by the government's pandemic policies. There was also a negative impact on arrangements for birth family contact with children who were the subject of placement orders and adopted children.
25. By way of example in respect of the impact of children placed in (interim) care, prior to the pandemic a newborn separated from birth parents would often be expected to have a significant amount of family time, perhaps 3 times per week, whereas during

the pandemic this quite often became once a fortnight and was dependent on a variety of things (negative covid test/no symptoms/willing and healthy supervisors).

26. During the pandemic there was also a much heavier reliance upon video calls and phone calls (usually in place of face to face contact) by way of family.
27. Coram-i provided a secretariat service to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leader Board from 2019-2022, which has a great deal of data which may be of interest to the Inquiry. By reference to [analysis done in 2021](#) by the CVAA (Consortium for Voluntary Adoption Agencies) it appears that among other findings, there was evidence of a decline in children being considered for adoption, and a sharp decrease in placement orders and adoption orders being made. The reasons for that are unclear.
28. The same analysis found that adopter recruitment increased during the first 6 months of the pandemic.
29. Coram Voice supported the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (published 2022) through their 'A National Voice' ('ANV') network, to make sure the voices of more children and young people in care and leaving care were heard. The [ANV response](#) to the review's case for change emphasised how destabilising and harmful it is when children in care experience frequent placement moves (p.10).
30. It is thought, though not evidenced as yet, that the pandemic led to fewer placement moves for looked after children. Logic suggests that this would have afforded children greater stability, but no study of the impact has taken place. It may be that this is an area where research would be helpful.

### **Children in institutions**

31. Coram was pleased to see that the Inquiry will consider criminal justice in this module. Coram would invite the Inquiry to add to this a consideration of children in other secure settings, including mental health institutions and secure children's homes. Some settings may not have been secure, but with more stringent rules e.g. residential schools, children's homes. Although there was rightly a lot of focus during the height

of the pandemic on older people in care homes, there was little information provided or interrogated on the impact upon children in secure or semi-secure residential settings.

### **Housing and homelessness**

32. There are significant gaps in official statistics about the number of care experienced people who experience homelessness, the data from the DLUHC in 2022 found that 26% of the homeless population had spent time in care (source p.210 of the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care 2022](#)). Coram regards this as an issue which requires highlighting and where more investigation is necessary. The number of care leavers who experience or are threatened by homelessness [has increased by a third since 2018](#). While policies on housing those who were street homeless during the pandemic has been widely discussed, it is noted that little research has been done into the impact of the pandemic on homelessness for care leavers specifically, and whether good practice developed during that period could be learned from.

### **Conclusion**

33. There is a need to evaluate the response to the Covid 19 pandemic upon children. Coram has already undertaken a significant amount of relevant research. Coram will make that research available to the Inquiry and reaffirms its commitment to assisting the Inquiry so that the experiences of children during the time when the pandemic took hold and informed government policy can be properly understood and the negative consequences on their lives can be mitigated in the future.

Dated: 22.08.2024

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