



The Centenary of Adoption

In 2026, Coram, the longest-serving children's charity in the UK, is marking the centenary of adoption by telling the story of its evolution – for children, parents and professionals – and by convening the sector and those interested in its future development in policy and practice.

The history of adoption

The **Adoption of Children Act (1926)** introduced for the first time in England and Wales a legal process by which the rights and responsibilities for a child could be transferred from birth parents to adoptive parents. It gave adoptive parents the same rights and responsibilities as birth parents, secured the child's new position within their adoptive family and prevented birth family members from reclaiming them. The Act paved the way for the establishment of adoption agencies and an era of relinquishment of children for adoption.

Coram is the UK's first and longest continuing children's charity, supporting children and young people since 1739. We originated as the Foundling Hospital and today we work as a group of specialist organisations – the Coram Group – helping hundreds of thousands of children, young people, families and professionals every year.

After the legalisation of adoption, Coram as the Foundling Hospital continued its work with residential/fostering care which left open the potential for reunion with birth families (although in practice this rarely happened). It was not until 1972 that Coram registered as an adoption agency to seek families for children removed into care for their protection. It continues today as an independent, secular agency at the heart of national practice and innovation, including in early permanence, national matching, and sibling connections. Coram Adoption was rated Outstanding by Ofsted in 2024.

Social change

During the century of adoption there have been numerous changes in social attitudes, legislation and practice. Legislation has been introduced to ensure that children are properly safeguarded through the adoption process and that adoption agencies follow proper procedures in approving prospective adoptive parents.

There have also been changes in the ways in which the legislation has regulated any continuing relationship between adoptive children and their birth families, moving from what was initially a complete severance of family ties towards greater transparency and potential opportunities for post adoption contact.

From the 1960s onwards, increased availability of contraception, the legalisation of abortion as well as changes in attitudes towards illegitimacy led to changes in the profile of adoptees and a reduction in the number of adoptions. A hundred years ago most adoptees were the infants of single mothers who were forced by social and financial pressures to relinquish them. Most adoptees in the modern era are not relinquished but are abused and neglected children who have been placed in the care of local authorities for their protection and cannot safely return to birth families within their timeframe.

As social attitudes have changed so the lack of support for search and reunion has become a greater issue and a sense of outrage at the treatment of unmarried mothers and their children, for whom adoption was a means of securing family life rather than an institutional upbringing. Much more is now also known about the consequences of adoption for birth parents, children and adoptive parents as well as about the stability that adoption affords and its contribution to permanence for children who cannot remain in their birth family.

The future of adoption

Our aim for the programme marking the centenary is to improve understanding of adoption and its evolution in the UK, recognising progress over time and its continuing contribution to the support of the most vulnerable children, and how it needs to evolve for the future.

This is particularly important at this time when entry into care is at an all-time high and the numbers of children receiving adoption placement orders is at an all-time low and courts are reticent to issue such orders, as the availability of adoptive families continues to decrease.

The programme includes events, conferences, a book on the history of adoption, a special edition of *Adoption & Fostering*, and the publication of other research. Coram is also creating a new collection of personal testimony featuring the voices of those who have experience of adoption from across the decades.

Centenary programme timeline

- January 2026 Publication of paper by Professor Harriet Ward - 'Is adoption legislation necessary? An introduction to a century of debate' 19th - Parliamentary reception hosted by Baroness Butler-Sloss (by invitation) 21st – VAA Big Adoption Day in collaboration with the National Theatre (by invitation)
- 23 March Coram Society event, the first in a short series on social change and the history of adoption
- May Coram BAAF conference on adoption
- July (TBC) Screening of Mary Lee-Woolf's film Perfect Blue, multidisciplinary performance work
- September Coram Society event
- October National Adoption Week
- Longitudinal adoption research – conference and publication
Coram IAC conference on the voice of adoption
Publication of the special edition of Adoption & Fostering (Sage / Coram BAAF)
- November Coram Society event
- December Round table on the future of adoption



Join us

We welcome participation in the Centenary of Adoption programme by professionals and families from other organisations working in adoption, anyone touched by adoption, as well as the general public. We hope to help raise awareness and understanding of the history and impact of adoption and its potential to support children and young people today and in future.

For further information please contact events@coram.org.uk or visit adoptionstory.org.uk



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