



Findings from the first year of the Step Up Programme

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About Coram

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This report refers to the first phase of Coram's evaluation, taking place one year into the Step Up project, funded by Adoption England. The final phase of evaluation will take place after the programme has concluded, in 2026/7.

Step Up is an intensive family finding service that works with children who have characteristics that mean they often wait longer before being adopted. Societal structures such as "financial barriers and inequalities, a lengthy and challenging adoption process, a lack of post-adoption support (including culturally informed support)" as well as the impact of discrimination and bias can make it harder for some children to secure a permanent adoption placement (Brown, et al., 2023, p. 5). This group often includes:

- Children from minoritised ethnicity backgrounds
- Children with siblings
- Older children (over 5 years old)
- And children with complex needs

Waiting longer is a particular challenge for children in this priority group (Coram, 2022). Children with these characteristics often have a shorter period of time allocated for family finding and are more likely to have their plans move away from adoption if they do not find a successful match after 12 months. The courts often permit shorter timescales for family finding for children they see as unlikely to find a permanent placement, so these children can be moved to another permanent option (such as long term foster care) as quickly as possible. However, this can make existing disparities worse, and means that priority children can miss out on the opportunity to achieve permanence through adoption.

Children with a combination of intersecting characteristics are likely to wait the longest due to a range of complex and interconnected factors that, for example, disproportionately impact children and prospective adopters from minoritised backgrounds (Brown, et al., 2023; Elahi & Khan, 2016).

In this report, we have used both of the terms 'harder to place' and 'priority' to refer to children who are likely to wait longer before being placed. Harder to place (HTP) is commonly used in statistics, such as Adoption and Special Guardianship (ASG) data. However, the term has been criticised for prompting assumptions and dehumanising children (Packham, 2020). We use the term 'harder to place' in this report to make comparisons to statistical data clear, but acknowledge the term 'priority' is more appropriate.

What does the programme involve?

Step Up is designed to be flexible and personalised for each individual child, providing family finding support for a minimum of two months and a maximum of six months. Local authorities within the Coram Regional Adoption Agency submit referral forms for individual children, stating the reason for referral and the desired support. The programme brings together a range of activities which can include:

- Funding for children to attend Adoption Activity Days
- Professional videos and photos of the child or sibling group for their online profiles
- Therapeutic support, for example, delivered by Coram creative therapies team

What is the purpose of this evaluation?

The aim of this initial phase of the evaluation looking at the first year of delivery is to gain a better understanding of the merits of the Step Up programme; to reflect on what has worked well so far; to inform the delivery of the programme for the remainder of the funding; and to inform possible future funding.

The evaluation outcomes will be shared with other Regional Adoption Agencies to help inform this model of priority matching across the sector. The final phase of the evaluation will update the analysis of administrative data, survey data, and additional interviews with family finders, social workers, and adopters.

Evaluation methods

The first phase of the evaluation principally involved analysing the programme's existing administrative data one year into the programme. Routinely collected demographic data on the children referred to the Step Up programme was extracted from referral forms and analysed in Excel. Date of referral to the programme, placement order, and date of family finding work commencing were also analysed in Excel alongside the demographic data.

Outcome reports are completed for each child who is placed, or who has received six months of support from the Step Up programme. Outcome reports are structured chronologically and include the activities carried out by the Step Up team; any progressions in the child's family finding journey; and the impacts of different activities. These reports were analysed thematically in Excel to generate codes under the categories activities, Impact of activities, and Outcomes. This thematic analysis was inductive, so the findings were clearly linked to the report contents.

We also conducted qualitative data from family finders who referred children into the programme and worked in partnership with the Step Up practitioners. We interviewed one family finder and received survey responses from four others who have worked with the Step Up programme. The survey included both multiple choice and open text boxes. Due to the small number of participants, survey responses and quotes from administrative data (referral forms and outcome reports) were reported qualitatively, alongside the interviewed family finder, to preserve participant anonymity.

National Adoption and Special Guardianship data is routinely collected by Coram-i. For the purposes of this evaluation, data from the period April 2018 to September 2023 was extracted and analysed quantitatively in Excel. The analysis examined differences between adoption timelines for children classified as harder to place against the remaining group. The chances of placement after one or more breakdowns in proceedings were also explored. In total, this refers to 17,915 children, 8,838 of whom had harder to place characteristics (49%).

We have provided a glossary of adoption terms used in this report on p8.

Strengths of programme

The Step Up programme supports family finders to provide intensive, bespoke matching for priority children.

- Step Up improved children's access to Adoption Activity Days and Exchange Days, and there were positive outcomes for children attending, such as expressions of interest from potential adoptive parents.
- Step Up linked priority children with a wide network of professionals who may not usually be involved in family finding.
- Step Up provided extra time and resources for family finding by having an additional experienced adoption practitioner working alongside each case.
- Step Up activities were flexible, creative and child-centred.

Step Up increased the number of options for priority children

- Family finders and practitioners reported that the Step Up activities helped to increase the number of expressions of interest.
- Step Up practitioners worked with children's family finders to assess potential adoptive families more quickly or with greater confidence than would ordinarily be possible.
- Step Up practitioners provided additional support to potential adoptive families, helping them to make informed decisions about progressing to adopt a child.

Step Up appears to speed up family finding for priority children

- The average time between referral and the date children progressed to matching panel was five months.
- Children referred to Step Up were unlikely to wait over 12 months between the date of their placement order and the date their case progressed to matching panel.

Other strengths of the programme: Step Up helped to place children with a combination of priority characteristics, complex needs, experience of placement disruption or a lack of expressions of interest.

- Most children in the first cohort had a combination of multiple priority characteristics.
- Step Up successfully placed children with a history of placement disruption and priority characteristics. ASG data analysis carried out for this evaluation shows that only 23% of these children are placed on average.

Some family finders believe that **through Step Up, families were found for children who may not have been placed otherwise.**

- Family finders who answered a short survey felt that there was 'considerable gain' for family finding supported by Step Up, and would support Step Up Family Finding operating as a permanent programme within the Coram Regional Adoption Agency.

The main research questions for this evaluation were:

- What were the strengths of the Step Up programme?
- Has Step Up sped up family finding for priority children?
- Has Step Up increased the number of permanency options for priority children?

These questions are addressed and partially answered in this report, and will be revisited in phase 3 of the evaluation. Specifically in this first phase of the evaluation, we also looked into:

- What children were referred to Step Up?
 - What were common reasons for referral?
 - What family finding activities had already taken place?
- What activities could be adopted as part of 'normal' family finding activity?
- What are the barriers to adopting Step Up activities as part of regular family finding for priority children?
- What is the feasibility of looking at the impact of the programme, or similar programmes?

We have started to address some additional research questions in this report, but will examine further in the final phase evaluation:

- What was the experience of receiving additional support through Step Up, for social workers?
- What was the experience of co-working with Step Up, for family finders?
- What were the impacts of Step Up on children's journey to adoption, from practitioners' perspective?



Glossary of key terms

- **Adoption Activity Days** are events that enable prospective adopters to meet children and explore “whether they feel an emotional connection with a child, rather than simply relying on a written profile, and importantly they also give the children the same opportunity” (Coram, 2022, p. 5).
- **Pre-meets, bump into meetings, or chemistry meetings** are terms for in person meetings between a child and potential adoptive family which are observed by social workers and family finders to assess the connection between the child and potential adopter.
- **Child and family social workers** help to establish safe and stable environments for children to live in (Department for Education, 2023).
- **Child Permanence Report (CPR)** “is a tool to enable the adoption agency to plan for the future life of a child. It is completed by a child’s social worker and contains comprehensive information about the child’s family background, life experiences, health and the circumstances that led to the child being in care” (Adopt London, 2024).
- **Coram Ambitious for Adoption Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)** works across eight local authorities in London and beyond, to provide high quality adoption services on their behalf (Coram Ambitious for Adoption, 2024).
- **Exchange Days** are events where adopters can meet and hear directly from social workers and foster carers about children needing adoptive families.
- **Expressions of interest** in relation to adoption are conversations with a social workers, or a form submitted, which shows a potential adoptive family is interested in adopting a child.
- **Family finder** is the person who identifies potential families for the child’s social worker to consider. Family finding is the journey of identifying a family for a child with an order to be placed for adoption.
- **Harder to place (HTP) or priority children** have a characteristic which means they often have to wait longer before being adopted. This includes older children, those with complex needs, large sibling groups and those from Black and minoritised ethnicity backgrounds.
- **Life appreciation events** guide potential adopters through a child’s journey to the present day. They often involve the child’s foster carer and other people who have significant knowledge of the child.
- **Life Story Work** is a term used to describe the process between a child and social worker which involves documenting and sharing ideas, feelings, memories and records to help a child reflect on why they were adopted, as well as their experiences prior. It is a statutory requirement that children should be provided with a life story book within 10 days of their Adoption Order (Salaman, 2021).
- **Link Maker** is a digital platform where children and prospective adopters can have an online profile.
- **Placement order (PO)** is an order made by the court authorising a local authority to place a child for adoption with any prospective adopters who may be chosen by the authority (GOV.UK, 2002).
- **Prospective adopters report** “is required by legislation and provides a comprehensive picture of prospective adopters, the experiences, skills and values that they are bringing to the adoption role and any support they may need to provide a loving, secure and stable home to a looked after child or children” (Coram BAAF, 2016, p. 4).
- **Step Up practitioner** is an adoption practitioner who works with family finders through the Step Up programme.

Referrals

Twenty four children were referred to Step Up in its first year from March 2023 to January 2024. This exceeded the three-year target of 15 referrals. Seven single children and seven sibling groups were referred; meaning most children supported by Step Up had a plan to be placed together with their siblings.

Other priority characteristics in the cohort included: 14 children with additional needs and/or health uncertainties, eight children from a minoritised ethnicity background, six children over five years old, and four had experienced a previous adoption placement breakdown.

Age 5 or over	6
Minoritised ethnicity background	8
Additional needs or health uncertainties	14
Disability	6
Children with siblings	17
Placement breakdown	4
Total children referred in year 1	24

Fig1. Demographic data from children referred in year one.

The majority (n=16) of children referred to Step Up had a combination of two or more priority characteristics. When including children with siblings who have additional characteristics (for example, siblings with a plan to be placed together when one child has a developmental disability, such as autism) almost the entire cohort of children in year one (n=21) had multiple characteristics for which they would be considered a priority.

‘... this being a sibling group of three [...] the eldest of which is rising five and [two] with some developmental uncertainties, we recognise that finding a suitable family for them all together will be a challenge.’ – Family Finder 1

There was an even spread of referrals from boroughs^[1] in the Coram Regional Adoption Agency (Coram RAA), demonstrating that local authorities had good awareness of the programme, and indicating potential demand.

Why were children referred to the Step Up programme?

Every child referred to the Step Up programme had at least one priority characteristic. Most children had additional experiences and circumstances which made family finding particularly complicated or challenging.

Reasons that children were referred to the programme included:

- Past disruption (such as an adoption breakdown)
- A complex family background, such as a one or both parents having learning disabilities
- Limited time or circumstances for family finding
- A large amount of uncertainty (usually in regards to health or development)
- Ongoing family contact requirements
- Or a lack of interest/high number of withdrawn adopter applications

[1] See appendix for breakdown of local authorities involved in the programme

What work was already happening?

For all children, some family finding work had taken place before being referred to Step Up. Children typically fell into two categories:

- 1. No previous work specific to their characteristics or needs:** Some children were early in their family finding journey. These children often had their profile created (for example, on Link Maker or the RAA); their family finders had manually searched for suitable families in the Coram RAA or Link Maker; and perhaps had been referred to or attended an upcoming Adoption Activity Day.
- 2. Extensive family finding work taking place already:** This included some children who had previously been adopted but the placement had broken down. Children in this group had often had their profiles shared nationally; they may have already attended Adoption Activity Days; had their profile recently updated; and/or prospective adopter's report (PAR) had been received, but none had been suitable.

The most common requests for support were:

- Priority access to, or funding to attend Adoption Activity Days
- Therapeutic support for the child
- Dedicated, specific marketing in relation to child's characteristics or requirements
- Exchange Days profiling
- Professional photos or videos of the child/ren for their profile
- Increased profile sharing or publication
- Support with creating, updating, or improving a child's profile.

'We want to make Sara's [2] profile as appealing as possible. Sara has multiple strengths that make her a sparky, bright, sociable and caring little girl. Extra investment and support is needed to translate these strengths into a strong profile that will attract carers despite the very difficult placement breakdown she has experienced' – Family Finder 2

What does the Step Up programme look like?

A range of activities take place through the Step Up programme. Outcome reports – which include a summary of information about each child/case, the activities carried out, and the impact of each phase of activity – detail the child's journey through the programme. Outcome reports are completed for each child who has been placed or who has completed the programme of support (lasting over six months).

Broadly, support in the first phase of the Step Up programme fell under the following categories:

- Access to Adoption Activity Days or Exchange Days
- Access to a wide network of family finding professionals
- Access to professionals outside of Family Finding, including:
 - photographers/videographers
 - psychotherapists
- Additional time and resource
- Social and professional support
- Flexibility and creativity
- Child centred practice



[2] Names have been changed throughout

Case Study: Poppy and Grace

Siblings Poppy and Grace^[3] were both around 5 years old when they were referred to the Step Up programme.

The courts made a placement order for the girls in autumn 2021 and they were placed with prospective adopters several months later. Sadly, this placement broke down after a few weeks, and the children returned to their previous foster carer.

Poppy and Grace had a strong sibling rivalry: they are close in age and have similar needs, and both wanted the attention of a single foster carer. Because the girls were older, have some additional needs, and are in a sibling group – in addition to their experience of disruption – the local authority was likely to face challenges in finding an adoptive family for them (CVAA, 2022).

Family finding resumed in autumn 2022. Some expressions of interest were made, but some families withdrew interest after reading the siblings' needs Child Permanence Report (CPRs), and the other adoptive parents felt they could not meet the sibling's needs.

In early 2023, siblings Poppy and Grace were referred to the Step Up programme, after their family finder attended a webinar on the new programme. The Step Up practitioner profiled the siblings at a National Adoption Exchange day for children in sibling groups, and registered them to attend an Adoption Activity Day – inviting a prospective adoptive family to meet the siblings. The Step Up practitioner produced a new written profile of the siblings tailored specifically for the Activity Day, which was featured in a booklet given to prospective adoptive families who attended. Step Up also arranged and funded a professional video of the girls for their profile.

After several profiling opportunities at Activity Days and remaining featured on Link Maker, there were several expressions of interest in the girls. The Step Up practitioner reviewed three prospective adopter's report's (PAR) with the family finder and provided feedback. The families were invited to attend a different Adoption Activity Day taking place to meet the siblings and to speak with the social worker and foster carer directly.

Meanwhile, the Step Up practitioner attended the siblings' statutory Child Looked After (CLA) review meeting and suggested the children access therapy in order to improve their understanding of the disruption in 2022, and to support their transition to a new family. **Following this meeting, the siblings were referred to Coram's Creative Therapies team by Step Up.** The Creative Therapies team provided art therapy for the girls, helping them to understand the disruption in 2022 and eventually help them move onto a new family.

At the Adoption Activity Day the siblings played and interacted with many prospective families, including the three families who were invited to meet them specifically. Following the event, there was another expression of interest but this could not progress due to where the family lived geographically. One of the families attending withdrew their interest due to concerns around how they would manage the girls' needs.

The two other families reaffirmed their interest in the siblings. Two meetings with the families took place, and the Step Up practitioner attended. Sadly, it was the shared view that neither family was the right match.

One month later, the siblings were profiled on the Coram Ambitious for Adoption Regional Adoption Agency stand at a National Adoption Exchange day for older children. The Step Up practitioner attended on the day and spoke directly with prospective families wanting to know more about the girls. **The siblings' new video – featuring a voice over from their foster carer – was added to their profile.**

More expressions of interest were received, and the Step Up practitioner reviewed PAR's for two potential families with the family finder. Unfortunately, the expressions of interest were withdrawn after the social worker shared the siblings' Child Permanence Report (CPR), with families citing the children's developmental uncertainty and complex sibling relationship.

The Step Up practitioner then suggested that the siblings' CPR should be reviewed and the information updated, to reflect the girls' progress. The girls' social worker updated the CPR and a plan was made for the final phase of Step Up support.

The Step Up practitioner attended an Adoption Activity Day which featured the siblings' profile. Families were encouraged to talk to the Step Up practitioner directly if they wanted to find out more. During the event, the Step Up practitioner was approached by the Jones family. They had a lengthy conversation about the siblings, including discussing the disruption in 2022, progress since, and the most recent information about the children's needs. The couple were shown the siblings' video profile on Link Maker.

After considering the CPRs, the couple confirmed their wish to progress a match with the siblings, and the social worker and family finder conducted a home visit. Following the visit, the social worker and family finder confirmed their wish to proceed with the match. A selection meeting was held, and all professionals were in agreement with the match.

Step Up supported the potential adopters to attend an Adoption Activity Day with the siblings to meet them in person and to explore whether they had a connection or chemistry with the children. **At this event, the Step Up practitioner took photographs of the day for the children's life story work, and shared observations of the meeting with social workers.**

A unanimous decision was reached to progress to matching panel with the Jones family. Two practitioners from Step Up chaired a Life Appreciation Day for the siblings. Attendees included current and former social workers, their foster carer, the Independent Reviewing Officer and staff from school and nursery. Attendees shared information that took the couple on a guided journey of the children's lives from birth until the present day, bringing to life the siblings experiences, as well as support needs. **This piece of work brought the involvement of Step Up family finding to a conclusion.**

Adoption panel was booked, with a positive recommendation that the siblings be placed for adoption with the Jones family. The adoption panel approved the match Autumn 2023.

'I really think having [Step Up practitioner] helped find the family for them [...] she's been part of their journey all along: the life appreciation days, all the meetings, everything.' – Family Finder 4

The family finder used the University of East Anglia's Moving to Adoption model (Neil, 2024) for the transition, which focuses on relationship building between the prospective adopters and current foster carer, opportunities for the children to become familiar with their adopters through play (before caregiving), and the transition plan moving at the children's pace. The girls moved in with their adoptive parents in early 2024.

[3] Names have been changed throughout

In conclusion, the Step Up practitioner:

1. Attended five Adoption Activity Days, and arranged for the girls to attend two Adoption Activity Days
2. Attending four national Exchange Days
3. Created or updated the girls profile twice (which included adding photos or videos)
4. Read and offered views on five Prospective Adopters Reports
5. Invited four families to attend adoption events

During the Step Up programme, nine expressions of interest were received for the siblings, five of which came after either the practitioner's or girls' attendance at Adoption Activity Days.



What are the strengths of the Step Up programme?

The Step Up programme improved access to Adoption Activity Days and Exchange Days.

The Step Up programme provided funding and arranged for children to attend Adoption Activity Days: this included events specifically for potential adoptive families interested in caring for the child's priority characteristic(s). This included priority access for Step Up children and covering the cost of a place[4]. Step Up practitioners often helped family finders to update the child's profile for adoption events, tailoring it to specific requirements.

Step Up practitioners shared the children's profiles at events – for example including the profiles in booklets, which prospective families would take away with them – and regularly attending to chat with prospective adopters about children who weren't able to be there in person. Having the Step Up practitioner attend events to speak about specific priority children appeared to increase Expressions of Interest, according to outcome reports. Many children in the first cohort had complex histories and developmental or medical needs; families seemed to particularly benefit from having someone with intimate knowledge of the child's needs and abilities present to answer questions, and the time to talk about the child in depth.

"During the event, I had a lengthy conversation with the couple about [the siblings], including the disruption in [year], progress since, and the most recent information about Ben's[5] medical testing. I showed [potential family] the [children's] video profile on Link Maker and answered some of the couple's questions. [...] An expression of interest was received directly from [the couple] following the Adoption Activity Day and there was an exchange of Adoption Assessment Reports and Child Permanence Reports." – Step Up practitioner 1

Adoption Activity Days also provided children with an opportunity to meet potential families.

[4] See appendix for breakdown of potential cost

[5] Names have been changes throughout

In some cases, the events served as opportunities for family finders and Step Up practitioners to observe the child and family interacting and explore their chemistry or connection.

The Step Up programme linked priority children with a much wider network of professionals than would usually be involved with family finding.

The Step Up programme involved contacting, liaising with, and organising events between different family finders and agencies across the country. Profiles of both children and potential families were shared by the Step Up practitioners. Unique family finding webinars were hosted by Step Up, where adoption agencies could profile children, discuss their needs, and answer any questions. Through this network, Step Up children were linked with a much wider pool of potential adopters than family finders would typically be able to reach.

The Step Up network included professionals who are not typically involved in the family finding process at all, such as a photographer and Coram's Creative Therapies team. Children typically do not have high quality videos or photos as part of their profiles. This means that children waiting for adoption rely on the photographic abilities of their foster carer, as well as their access to, and knowledge of, technology.

Family finders appreciated the work with the Step Up videographer. The videographer spent time with the social workers and foster carers to understand what the children are like, produce a video, to give a well-rounded sense of the child's personality. The foster carers provided voiceovers talking about the child, which helped to show their unique personality and explain their needs, or the relationships between siblings. For children with complex profiles, these additional features helped potential adopters get a clearer and/or fuller sense of the children.

'The video made was very child focussed and showed off her personality and interests well.'- Family Finder 5

The Step Up programme provided extra time and resources for family finding by having an additional experienced practitioner working alongside each case.

The family finder and Step Up practitioner worked closely together throughout the programme, providing valuable social and professional support for the children's family finders. The Step Up practitioner regularly attended both statutory and family finding team meetings, helped to review and discuss potential families, and offered feedback and comments on Prospective Adopters Report's.

'I think you feel that you're not just on your own. [...] You feel as if you're in a partnership with that person going through the case.' – Family Finder 4

The Step Up practitioner provided additional time, capacity and resources for each case they worked alongside. This is partly due to having two people working on a case rather than one, and due to the busy nature of social work. Often, social workers and family finders have many cases and may not have the time or resources to continually review, update, and chase up delays in support for one child or a sibling group. Having an additional practitioner allowed the family finders to focus on their core work, and Step Up could invest time where the most value was added. For example, Step Up practitioners:

- Attended adoption events out-of-hours and discussed the children with potential families
- Regularly edited and updated children's profiles to reflect a child's progress in foster care, or new medical results
- Reviewed PARs and offered feedback
- Spent time chasing up other practitioners such as the social workers of potential families, therapeutic support, or videography sessions
- Took photographs of the children at events for life story work
- Chaired Life Appreciation Days[6]

These actions are not always part of family finding due to time, capacity, money or resources:

'Often, the child's social worker, they'll attend some [adoption events] but they can't always attend them all because again, it's at weekends and people have got family commitments [...] it's just really helpful having workers that regularly attend those with Step Up.' – Family Finder 4

The Step Up programme activities were flexible, creative and child-centred.

Having extra capacity and funding for family finding – and a widened network of professionals – helped support a family finding process that could be more flexible, adaptable and creative. Step Up practitioners could respond and adapt plans around a child. This included profiling in a magazine for their specific characteristic to meet a wider audience and identifying Adoption Activity Days which were likely to engage families who reflect the children's ethnic origin, cultural background and religion. Other practitioners involved also took a child-centred approach. The videographer, for example, spent time getting to know the children and foster carer when developing their video profile.

Crucially, the Step Up programme was agile in adapting to and reflecting the needs of individual children. In addition to regularly updating children's profiles and reports, this included changing tactics or investing resources in different areas if one method of family finding wasn't proving effective for the child.

'Decision made for Lucy[7] not to attend any further [Adoption] Activity Days. Lucy enjoys the days but as there is a lot going on she tends to run around and want to explore the environment so it makes it difficult for adopters to engage or see the best of her.' - Step Up practitioner 2]

Photos and videos taken as part of Step Up could be used in many different ways, even once family finding has concluded and a child looked likely to be progressing to adoption. This included using the videos in Life Appreciation Days (discussed in the case study on page 12-13), or other types of life story work:

'It was then agreed after discussion that the Step-Up funding for Zoe[8] would be used to create a 'You are Special to Me' video. 'You are Special to Me' videos feature short clips of the most important people in a child's life as they transition to their forever family. The video is for the child: it will be shared with them and is an important part of their life story, providing valuable information about their childhood. This video was completed and edited and shared with Zoe's social worker.' – Step Up practitioner 2



[6] See glossary of adoption terms

[7] Names have been changed throughout

[8] Names have been changed throughout

Has Step Up increased the number of options for priority children?

Step Up programme activities helped to increase the number of expressions of interest.

'We had lots of interest and more adopters to choose from to choose the best match for the children.' – Family finder 6

Although we don't know how many expressions of interest each child would have received if they were not involved in the Step Up programme, there are signs that the Step Up programme had an effect on increasing the numbers of expressions of interest.

Analysis of outcome reports show that a number of expressions of interest received were related to the child or Step Up practitioner's attendance at Adoption Activity Days. This includes events which the child may not have ordinarily attended, due to logistics or funding. As discussed elsewhere in the report (p12-13), families were more likely to submit an expression of interest after speaking to the Step Up practitioner at adoption events: someone who knew the children personally and could explain any complex needs, uncertainty or history in detail. Talking to the Step Up practitioner helped potential adopters decide whether they felt able to overcome or manage, for example, a child's additional needs. It also seems that updated profiles for children, including the photos and videos with voiceover from their foster carer, increased expressions of Interest.

The Step Up practitioners were involved in reviewing Child Permanence Reports (CPRs). It was quite common for potential adopters to pull out after reading the children's CPRs if they had complex needs or a difficult history which families did not feel able to manage.

By updating CPRs to reflect the progress child has made in foster care, or to include more details about a medical condition such as test results, this is likely to have encouraged potential adopters to progress through the adoption process with this child.

Step Up practitioners worked with children's family finders to assess potential adoptive families quicker or in more detail than would ordinarily be possible.

'I contact [Step Up Practitioner] whenever I want and she always replies more or less straight away [...] I sent her a PAR to read and it's done, she's read it that day.' – Family finder 4

Having an experienced pair of eyes to read Prospective Adopters Reports (PARs) and discuss potential adoptive families can help family finders decide whether to progress with a match. One family finder commented that it gave her more confidence in her decisions. It is likely that the quicker assessment of potential adoptive families would result in the family finding process taking less time overall, although it is hard to say for sure with the data available from the first phase of this evaluation.

Step Up practitioners provided additional support to potential adoptive families, helping them to make informed decisions.

Adopters appeared to appreciate how the Step Up programme supported their decision making. Step Up practitioners were available to talk about the children at events, and children attended Adoption Activity Days to meet potential adopters where this may have otherwise been too expensive.

'Agreement made for Caleb[9] to attend to Adoption Activity Day taking place in London as a chemistry meeting with prospective adopter (Cost of £300 covered via Step Up).

Caleb attended the Adoption Activity Day in London with his foster carer, along with his family finder, to meet prospective adopter. This chemistry meeting went extremely well with Caleb quickly interacting and playing with [prospective adopter]. This also gave a great opportunity for [prospective adopter] to meet the family finder and foster carer in person and discuss any questions she had. Photographs were also taken of Caleb and [prospective adopter], which will be very beneficial for his life story work.' – Step Up practitioner 1

Webinars about a child's specific needs, Life Appreciation events, and life story work were also part of the Step Up programme. This helped potential adopters learn about the children and their needs. The case study on p12-13 discusses this in more detail.

'One of [practitioner's] ideas for him was to hold a conference with someone who's got the condition to talk about what it's like to live with it, and to have maybe an adoptive parent who's adopted someone with the condition, or a birth parent of a child with the condition, to talk about what it's like to care for someone with [the] condition.' – Family finder 4

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Some of the families who have adopted a child through Step Up will be interviewed as part of the evaluation taking place in year three, to develop our understanding of the benefits of the programme from their perspective.



Has the Step Up programme sped up family finding?

How long does family finding take?

Typically, family finders are allocated up to 12 months to identify a suitable family for a child. Priority or harder to place (HTP) children are sometimes given time limited searches, where family finding will only take place for around six months (Practical Law Family, 2014).

According to analysis of the last six years of ASG data carried out as part of this evaluation^[10], it took 187 days, or around six months and one week on average, for a child to be placed after the local authority received a placement order (PO).

How long do HTP children wait on average before they are placed?

According to our analysis of ASG data, children who have harder to place characteristics waited an average of eight months^[11] from their PO to being placed. This is compared to five months for children without harder to place characteristics.

HTP children are more likely to wait the longest, and have plans moved away from adoption

According to recent ASG data covering period 1st April 2023 to 31 December 2023, 10% of all children with a PO have still been waiting to be matched over 18 months after the PO was granted. Some 80% of these children have harder to place characteristics, even though these children make up only 61% of those currently waiting with a PO (Coram-i, 2023).

This means children with harder to place characteristics are significantly overrepresented in the group of children waiting the very longest since their placement order: over 18 months.^[12]

Our analysis of ASG data shows that harder to place characteristics are also overrepresented in children who have their plans moved away from adoption: 80% of children who are not found a permanent placement have harder to place characteristics^[13] when they make up 49% of all children.

How many children with previous adoption breakdown are placed?

According to analysis of ASG data, only 28% of children are placed after an adoption breakdown. Around 23% of children with harder to place characteristics are placed after a breakdown, compared to 39% of children without harder to place characteristics. This suggests that harder to place children are less likely than other children to be placed again, after a breakdown in the initial placement. It is important to note, many children who have experienced adoption breakdown are in the harder to place category, if they have aged over five years old during the first placement.

How long did Step Up children wait?

Nine children had progressed to adoption panel with a potential adoptive family at the time of the evaluation, however, the exact dates of adoption were not available. Children were referred to the programme in very different stages in their family finding journey: the date between a child's placement order and referral to the Step Up programme ranged by up to 23 months, for example, due to adoption disruption. Additionally, 13 children in the first cohort were referred into the programme towards the end of the year, so had not received the full six months of support from Step Up by the time of the evaluation.

Due to the small cohort and these inconsistencies with the data, we are not able to say for sure whether Step Up decreased the average waiting time for harder to place children to be adopted in the first cohort.

Regardless, the first year of the programme showed promising signs of decreasing the waiting time for some children, and finding places for children who otherwise may not have been placed.

Nine children waited an average five months between being referred to Step Up and moving to adoption panel (likely meaning they will be adopted shortly after). This is split between two sibling groups who waited a very short time (1-2 months), three children who waited for around four months, and one sibling group who waited for nine months. A promising link for a child in the first cohort, which had the potential to move to matching panel 8 months after being referred to the programme, was in the process of being explored. However this would have occurred after the evaluation. No children waited over 12 months from their date of referral to progressing to adoption panel.

One of the sibling groups who were placed after one to two months were referred immediately after the placement order, and the match was identified very quickly through an Adoption Activity Day for Black and Asian children. The Step Up practitioner suggested and facilitated the children's attendance at this day. The other sibling group who were linked with potential adopters after one to two months had already waited for ten months, and their foster carer came forward to adopt them, so it is unlikely that the Step Up programme impacted their family finding journey directly.

The children who were placed after around four months of support from Step Up were referred at varying points in the family finding journey. One child was referred almost immediately after their placement order, another after seven months, and one child was referred after a placement breakdown – 22 months after the placement order, but seven months after family finding work had resumed after the initial disruption. The third child was expected to wait a particularly long time before being placed: having multiple HTP characteristics and experiencing a difficult placement breakdown. It appears that Step Up may have helped these children find matches quicker than might have been possible outside of the programme.

The siblings who progressed to matching panel after nine months could be considered children who are likely to wait the very longest due to having a complex combination of HTP characteristics and health or developmental uncertainty. Both the siblings and the individual child had a combination of more than two reasons they could be considered harder to place. For these children, it is possible that without the support from Step Up, suitable matches may not have been identified.

Children not placed by the time of evaluation:

Two children in the first cohort completed the full programme of Step Up support but were not placed within the time covered by the evaluation. Both children received more than the six months originally planned for the programme: eight and 11 months respectively. Both children had a combination of multiple HTP characteristics. Having more than one HTP characteristic seems a potential way to identify children in the harder to place category who are likely to face intersecting challenges with family finding, and therefore potentially wait the very longest.

[10] See appendix.

[11] Seven months and three weeks

[12] To note, this refers to children waiting at the time of ASG data collection, not children who have been placed.

[13] 80% of children not placed either in the first instance of family finding, or not placed after a breakdown in the original placement, had harder to place characteristics.

Does Step Up have potential to speed up family finding?

The first year of the Step Up programme showed potential to speed up family finding for HTP children through increasing expressions of interest; supporting family finders to assess potential families; and making as much information as possible available to help adopters make informed decisions. Every family finder who responded to the survey or was interviewed felt that the Step Up had potential to speed up family finding.

There are two groups of children for whom the programme showed potential to speed up family finding:

1. First, children who are in the harder to place group but who are still likely to be placed after a short phase of intense activity, such as new photos or attending Adoption Activity Days. These children may have been referred to the programme quickly after their placement order, and are unlikely to have plans moved away from adoption. For these children, the Step Up programme works as a brief intervention, which intensifies and speeds up family finding, potentially bringing their outcomes in line with children who are not in the harder to place category (see page 21).
2. For the second group of children, a fair amount of family finding work may have already taken place, and they have typically been referred several months after their placement order. Family finding is expected to take a significant amount of time for these children, or there is a high chance that the child's plans will be moved away from adoption. For these children, the Step Up programme is focused on working closely in partnership with the family finder to increase the number of expressions of interests, and the rate that potential matches progress and are successful.

These two categories of children may have very different outcomes in the length of time between placement order or referral and adoption: what is an outstanding outcome for one child, may not look as positive for the next. It is important to reflect in reporting that harder to place children are not a homogenous group, and the category includes a wide range of needs, identities and experiences.

The Step Up programme, therefore, has the potential not only to speed up the placement of many harder to place children (who, research shows, wait longer than non-HTP children) but also to secure permanence for children who may take longer to be placed, or may not be placed at all.

Record outcomes of children who were not placed, or were placed after the programme of support ended, to complete data.

To determine if the programme is speeding up family finding, data on all children who entered the programme needs to be retained after the full programme of support ends. Because the programme is relatively short, Step Up could speed up family finding, but the child could still be placed after the six months of support ends.

This could work on an annual basis, asking family finders at the end of each year: what has the outcome been for all children referred? Were they placed or were plans moved away from adoption? The dates of decisions should also be included.

Consider the feasibility of increasing support from six months to 12, in line with the needs of children in the cohort.

The six month programme is designed as a short intervention which supports family finding overall. However, a valued part of the service was the close partnership between practitioner and family finder. Children who are at risk of having their plans move away from adoption, and may not be placed within six to 11 months, could benefit from maintaining this partnership for longer – a larger proportion of their family finding journey.

However, this needs to be balanced with the resources and capacity of the programme. Increasing length of support could decrease the number of children the programme is able to work with. Each referral needs to be carefully considered, to assess potential value added by Step Up for that child, against the capacity of the programme at a given point.

Increasing referrals of children from Black backgrounds.

Though the majority of children in the first cohort were White (including White Other), a third of children were from either Asian Other, mixed Black African and White, or Mixed Black Caribbean and White backgrounds. This is in line with the total number of children from a minoritised ethnicity background waiting to be adopted nationally (25% (Coram Ambitious for Adoption, 2024)), but Black children are underrepresented in the cohort (7% nationally). In the next cohort, referrals specifically from Black African or Black Caribbean backgrounds could be prioritised, as this is a cohort of children who face additional and particular challenges around adoption. The Black Adoption project recently reported that Black children were “around 20% less likely to be successfully placed for adoption than white British children, and to spend on average 6½ – 8 months longer in the adoption process before moving in with their adoptive family” (Brown, et al., 2023).

This disparity is the result of a range of complex and interconnected factors, which affect the experience of Black children and Black adoptive families. This includes deprivation (Owen & Statham, 2009), racism (Chand, 2001), and a lack of research and policy focusing on ethnic inequity, as well practitioner behaviour and attitudes (Bywaters, et al., 2018). Step Up has potential to positively affect outcomes through specific, targeted methods (such as Adoption Activity Days for children from Black and Asian backgrounds) to shorten family finding time for Black children. The programme has potential to add to the growing evidence base for supporting Black children achieve permanence through adoption.

Explore Step Up as a targeted offer for children with a combination of characteristics, complex cases, experience of placement disruption or a lack of expressions of interest.

For some children, Family Finding can be an incredibly complex process. Step Up is able to adapt, respond, and attune to individual cases, offering a family finding process that is proportionate to the challenges faced by individual children.

In the outcome reports, the bespoke and child-centred nature of Step Up has shone through for these children. The next phase of the programme should pay particular attention to the outcomes for this cohort. Methods of identifying this cohort have been discussed on page 21.

Based on reports from family finders, we recommend that the programme is funded to continue and expand, while we continue to evaluate the service.

'... there has been a waiting list, and I get that's obviously to do with capacity but you see, once you've had it for one or two priority children, it's so good you want it for all your children that are priority [...] it's just such a good service for them and you know how much they'll benefit from it, so you just want all those children to be able to have that opportunity as well.' – Family Finder

Family finders believe that families were found for some children who would not have been placed without the support from Step Up. There appears to be a demand, need, and potential model for this type of matching. The Step Up project has potential to build on an evidence base for matching priority children across the sector. In order to assess potential impact, we need more children to receive support from Step Up to support a larger sample size.

Replicating and embedding practice

Family finders who answered a survey felt that there was 'considerable gain' to family finding supported by Step Up, and would support Step Up family finding operating as a permanent programme within the Regional Adoption Agency.

The Step Up model sits outside of local authorities' family finding teams: this helped to make links between different agencies and provided a fresh perspective on cases. There is also potential for some of the benefits of Step Up to be replicated and embedded within services, as part of normal family finding activity for priority children.

Family finders with expertise in adoption to work alongside social workers on priority cases.

Step Up practitioners were unique: they had a range of experience from working in the Coram Adoption Activity Days team, with a background in social work and adoption. To replicate the benefits that the practitioners provided to family finders, adoption agencies could identify specific social work practitioners, who already have experience in adoption, to provide additional support for priority cases.

Practitioners who can attend Adoption Activity Days and Exchange Days

Having someone to talk about the children at adoption events was invaluable to the Step Up programme. Potential adoptive families may have more questions about a child with complex needs; for this group it is important to have this information readily available. A practitioner sharing information about a child they do not know may not have the same effect – and responses would be limited to the information available. Adoption agencies could provide extra support to enable a practitioner working on family finding for priority children to attend these events, which are almost exclusively out-of-hours. This may not be the family finder, but should be someone with a detailed knowledge of the child.

Joined up working between agencies

Another unique value of the Step Up practitioners was their knowledge of other agencies and adoption professionals. Networking, knowledge and case sharing webinars took place throughout the programme. To embed this network into practice, regular family finding webinars would help different boroughs, social workers, family finders and potential adopters to learn about different children and their cases in more detail. Similar to having a practitioner attend Adoption Activity Days, the webinars brought the children to life, reaching more families and helping adopters make informed decisions.

It is likely that the webinars would initially continue to be hosted or organised by the Step Up practitioners, with potential for them to become embedded in normal family finding activity for HTP children, hosted by different agencies or boroughs in rotation.

Agencies to ensure access to Adoption Activity Days for HTP children/children with multiple HTP characteristics

Children with complex needs benefit from meeting prospective adopters in a safe and therapeutic environment. Additionally, children benefit from being profiled and represented at events specifically for families interested in adopting a child with their background, needs or characteristics (Coram, 2022).

The Step Up programme demonstrates one way for priority children to access more Adoption Activity Days. Adoption agencies should look to secure access to Adoption Activity Days as part of standard family finding and matching activity for priority children. This could involve putting funding arrangements in place for priority children to attend, or working closely with Coram to secure places.

Funding is main barrier for activities like videography and therapeutic support

Ultimately, resource, practitioners and access are conditional on funding. In particular, video editing and therapeutic support is not commonly available for family finding. Step Up provides a model of prioritising and concentrating resources where they are needed most. To embed the most valued aspects of the programme into wider family finding practice requires a sustained increase in the funding available for family finding.

Limitations and feasibility of looking at programme impact

The first phase of evaluation suggests it is feasible to look at the impact of the Step Up programme after more children have received support, and the sample size has increased. The data collection and fieldwork process for this evaluation was straightforward.

To assess the impact of the programme, the Step Up team should continue to collect and record:

- Date of placement order for each child
- Date of outcome (placed, plans moved away from adoption, placement breakdown)

This information helps to assess the impact of the programme when compared to national averages for harder to place children.

- Step Up practitioners should also continue to record expressions of interests that are received (or matches progressed) in response to the Step Up programme activity, such as attending an Activity Day.

The fieldwork for this evaluation had a small number of participants: only one interview, and four survey responses. Survey responses from family finders and social workers are likely to increase as more children pass through the programme. Survey data and qualitative fieldwork (interviews) will help to explain the different types of impact the programme may have had on a child, or why the programme did not have a direct impact. More interviews with a variety of professionals will be carried out in the final phase of this evaluation.

Limitations of the evaluation

1. Children were referred at varying lengths of time since the date they were granted a PO. This means the impact of Step Up on how long they had waited will vary, outside of the impact of the programme.
2. ASG data averages used to assess the impact of the programme have limitations – data include children who were placed before placement order, and those who were placed and then the placement broke down. Averages taken from ASG data should be taken as indications of potential waiting times.
3. Family finders who completed the survey were likely to be self-selecting, on the basis of having a positive experience of the programme. Family finders who felt ambivalent towards the programme may not have been as motivated to complete the feedback survey.
4. Irregularities in admin data: different family finders provided different levels of information. For some children, we had a detailed and thorough picture of their unique and individual needs before Step Up, and for others, we were mainly relying on demographic data. Some changes have been made to the administration forms for the rest of the Step Up programme, but with open text boxes we are still likely to receive a range of depth in answers.

The Step Up programme supported family finders to provide intensive, bespoke matching for priority children. Initial findings from the first cohort show that this method of matching has the potential to help priority children find adoptive families faster than they might have otherwise.

Priority children face a range of structural and interpersonal challenges. **The Step Up programme supports family finders to try to overcome some of these challenges.** Previous research shows that a lack of knowledge or confidence, and preconceptions about a child's needs affect how potential adopters view children in the priority category. For example, in one survey, 42% didn't feel they had the skills to adopt a child with additional needs (CVAA, 2022). Updated online profiles with images and videos helped potential adopters to find out more about children, bringing their unique traits and personality to the forefront. This could help potential adopters to understand what looking after a certain child may be like, and potentially help to remove some of the uncertainty or preconceptions about priority children.

It is important to note that this programme focuses on the child, so any structural barriers that potential adopters face in being matched with a child will still have an effect on how long children are waiting to be placed. This might relate to the race and ethnicity of the adopter, their relationship status or their financial situation (Brown, et al., 2023).

The children referred to Step Up almost exclusively had a combination of two or more priority characteristics. In addition, a higher proportion of children in the first cohort had experienced previous placement breakdown, compared to national averages. **It is possible that a proportion of referrals to this programme are from children who are likely to wait the very longest compared to other priority children.** Further analysis is needed to make more accurate comparisons on the value of the Step Up programme for these children, but this data is not available for the first phase of evaluation.

Family finders involved in this evaluation felt that though the programme was incredibly valuable for priority children. The benefits of the programme can extend outside family finding, for example, when photos and videos taken by Step Up practitioners are used in a child's life story work. **However, as the cohort is small and each child so individual and unique, individual factors have an effect on outcomes and it is difficult to determine the programme's impact.** For example, there was significant variation between when children were referred, and at what point in their family finding journey. Also, the date of adoption was unavailable for most children placed in year one due to the evaluation taking place prior to the placement date. The survey uptake was relatively low, with four family finders completing the survey and one family finder taking part in an interview. **In order to obtain a more detailed and representative picture of the benefits of this programme, more interviews will be conducted in the final phase of evaluation.**

Step Up has exceeded its intended target of referrals in the first year. Survey and interview data has shown that family finders recognise the benefits of the Step Up programme in speeding up and supporting the placement of priority children with adoptive families.

'I felt supported throughout the process, the Step Up social worker was available when I needed her and there were suggestions made that supported me finding a forever family and home for a beautiful child that I was having difficulty in achieving prior to this service' - family finder 7

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- 1. Cost of Adoption Activity Days:** The typical costs related to attending an Adoption Activity Days vary. The fee is £650 plus VAT per child, but travel and accommodation costs are drastically different depending on where a child is based. The local authority or fostering service should cover these costs.
- 2. ASG data:** The analysis below covers children included in Adoption and Special Guardianship data collection in the period April 2018 to September 2023. In total, this refers to 17915 children, 8838 of whom had harder to place characteristics (49%).

Time waiting (time between PO and placement)	Days	Months
All children	186.62	6.14
HTP children	229.74	7.55
Non-HTP children	155.50	5.11

Children adopted after breakdown in original placement	Total children: disruption	Placed after disruption	%
All children	288	81	28.13%
HTP children	191	43	22.51%
Non-HTP children	97	38	39.18%

Children not placed	Number
All children not placed	1108
HTP children	887
HTP children as a percentage of those not placed	80.05%

3. Full demographic data figures below.

Referrals	Number
Age 5 or over	6
Minoritised ethnicity background	8
Additional needs or health concerns	14
Disability	6
Children with siblings	17
Placement breakdown	4

Ethnicity	Number	%
WBRI	11	46%
AOTH	3	13%
MWBA	1	4%
WROM	4	17%
WOTH	1	4%
MWBC	4	17%

Children with siblings	17	71%
Single child	7	29%
2 siblings in group	5	
3 sibling	1	
4 siblings	1	

Combination of priority characteristics		
1+	16	67%
1+ in sibling group	21	88%



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