



Voluntary Adoption Agency Report April 2022 – March 2023

Report Summary

This report outlines the progress made by Slough Children First's Voluntary Adoption Agency.

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A hands-on approach to help children in Slough be
..... Safe, Secure and Successful

1 Introduction and service overview

- a. This report details the performance of Slough Voluntary Adoption Agency in line with the National Minimal Standards for adoption and Statutory Guidance looking at activity from 1st April 2022 until 31st March 2023 and focusses on plans for development for 2023-2024.
- b. As an adoption agency we are required to comply with a comprehensive range of legislation, statutory guidance and national minimal standards and are subject to inspection by OFSTED.
- c. Slough Voluntary Adoption Agency continues to sit within Coram Ambitious for Adoption Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) since joining on 1st April 2021 and delivers adoption services for Slough Children First (SCF).
- d. Our range of activity is captured within our Statement of Purpose which is reviewed annually, is published on our website and should be read alongside this report.
- e. The VAA SCIEF inspection took place between 21st February and 25th February 2023. Whilst we are awaiting the draft report the general feedback from the inspection was positive.

2 Summary of Progress

The Adoption Service has established and delivered the following services during the last year to meet the needs of children within Slough:

- Worked closely with the 8 partner Local Authorities within the Coram Ambitious for Adoption RAA to develop standard working practices in family finding and post adoption support to support best outcomes for children and families
- Accessed therapeutic services for a number of families via the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), making 23 successful applications.
- Family finding social workers have identified families for a 7 Slough Children where their permanency plan is one of adoption.
- Slough post adoption social workers and service manager have been very proactive in developing the post adoption work stream to develop a standard post adoption offer within the RAA.
- Matched children both internally within the RAA and with external providers when there have been no suitable identified Coram adopters.
- Have utilised a dedicated 'Step Up' Family finding service offered within the RAA through national grant funding to provide intensive family finding for priority children.
- Have utilised the Early Permanence Team within the RAA to make 4 referrals for EP placements.
- Delivered a training programme for adopters with Slough children placed, living in Slough or within the wider RAA.
- Reviewed and developed, events and the training and development calendar for our adopter community.
- Updated Slough Children First adoption policies and guidance
- Promoted Equality and Diversity
- Our Muslim adopters have access to Muslim adopters' support group organised by the RAA.
- The Slough Adoption Team have had access to a rich and varied learning and development programme through the RAA.
- Our adoption support social workers in addition have had access to group reflective supervision once a month facilitated by the Coram RAA.
- A dedicated Life Story Worker, located within SCF who completes life story books for children with plan for adoption, will return to sit within the VAA in April 2023.

- Held a successful picnic event in July 2022
- Developed a non ASF funded 12-week parenting programme to support all adoptive families with a Slough child placed.
- Have offered direct support to 8 birth relatives to facilitate contact with adopted children, including support to write letters for letterbox contact and supporting a mother whose son is turning 18.
- Have re-engaged 8 adoptive families to re-commence indirect contact with birth families.
- Have provided Theraplay support delivered by a skilled adoption support worker within the service.
- One of our adoption support social workers have undertaken 8 MIMS assessments with adoptive families.

3 Changes in the Adoption Service

- a) Since the last annual report there has been a change in management of the Adoption Service. This change occurred in January 2023 with the departure of the previous manager, Raheela Khan who left on 13.01/2023 and the appointment of the new manager, Susan Chapman who took over as manager on 16.01.2023 and who previously occupied a senior social worker role within the service. At the time of writing this report the process of registering as the VAA Registered Manager is in process.
- b) Further appointments have been made for two vacant part time Senior Social Worker posts. One Post Adoption Social Worker post was filled in February 2023 and the second role for a joint family finder and post adoption social worker is due to start in April 2023.

4 Promoting Equality and Diversity

The Adoption Service wholeheartedly supports the principle of equality of opportunity and opposes all forms of discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, medical condition (including people living with HIV or AIDS), disability and age. It is in both the service's best interest and those who work with the service to ensure that the attributes, talents and skills available throughout the community are recognised and utilised in the interests of children in care. To this end, the over-riding principle is that the adopters recruited and approved by Coram Adoption are those best able to provide a stable and safe permanent home for children needing adoption.

5 Ofsted Inspection

- a. The adoption services was inspected as a Voluntary Adoption Agency in February 2023. At the time of writing this report the official judgement and report has not yet been published.
- b. The adoption service was also focused on during Slough Children First's Ofsted inspection where positive feedback was received in regards to the quality of family finding and adoption support the service offers to children and families where a Slough child has been placed.

6 Performance Summary 1st April 2022– 31st March 2023

6.1 Child placements

- a. Since April 2022 – March 23, 7 children have been placed for adoption, including 3 children placed in Early Permanence placements under fostering regulations.
- b. 3 children have been placed with Adopters from Coram Ambitious for Adoption Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) and 4 children have been placed with adopters from other adoption agencies. The age profile of the children at date of placement is between the ages of 10 weeks and 7 years and 6 months. 1 child is 7 plus, 1 child is 4 plus, 2 children are 1 plus, 1 child is 5 months and 1 child is 10 weeks.
- c. It is envisaged that the Slough children will continue to benefit from the matching activity within the RAA during the coming months. We have plans for a further match with RAA approved adopters at panel in May, a potential EP placement is being explored for another child and 1 RAA family will be visited following the Placement Order being granted for another child.
- d. The total number of ADM decisions during this period is 10. Out of these 10 children 1 child is placed in an adoption placement, 2 are placed in an EP placement, 2 children are still waiting for placement orders to be granted. The ages of children waiting for placement orders are between 1 and 5 years old.
- e. The reported number of placement orders for the last year is 7. The profile of the children with a placement order are predominately White and between the ages of 1 year and 5 years.
- f. The plan has changed from adoption for 2 children to an alternative plan. For 1 child the plan changed to long-term fostering in recognition of her ongoing family involvement and her father's commitment to change his circumstances in order to care for her in the future. For 1 child the plan changed to an SGO placement with a family member.
- g. As of 31 March 2023, 6 children were waiting with a Placement Order for an adoptive family. Out of these 6 children we have identified families for 2 children. 1 child is going to matching panel in May, and 1 child will go to matching panel once a pending health assessment has been completed. 1 child has a family identified and a family finding visit will be taking place in April 2023. 1 child has complex needs and active family finding is

taking place and for the remaining 3 children, they are a sibling group of 2 and a number of families are currently being considered. The profile of children waiting to be matched are aged between 1 and 5 years.

- h. Adoption Orders were granted for 18 children during the last year.
- i. During the last year 2 EP placements were made. A further 2 referrals have been made to Coram and other agencies for early permanence placements. 1 of these referrals were for a sibling group of 2. A decision was made after further consideration that an EP placement would not be appropriate for these siblings at that time. The second referral was made in March 23 and at the time of writing is still in the process of consideration between professionals.

6.2 Adopter Sufficiency

- j. Slough Children First no longer recruit or assess prospective adopters, having joined the RAA in April 2021. Through contract, Coram Adoption recruit, assess, prepare and train adopters and early permanence carers to provide loving and secure families to children requiring adoption from Slough.
- k. The agreed contractual arrangements 2023/2024 between Slough and Coram Adoption for child adoption placements is the same as the previous year with 9 placements.
- l. Coram Adoption draw upon enquires from across the wider London Region, Slough and neighbouring Home Counties. Any prospective adopter living in Slough will be signposted to Coram Adoption to make enquires about becoming an approved adopter.
- m. Information events are being held virtually on average twice a month. These online events remain popular and will continue to be held throughout 2023/2024. Whilst subject to regular review, there are no immediate plans to start face to face information events as the current arrangements are working well.
- n. The task to recruit more applicants from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds is long term, with the focus on building trust and confidence and finding ways to work through barriers that might prevent applicants coming forward. Coram have taken a proactive approach by recruiting an Ambassador to work closely on recruiting more adopters from Black, Asian and ethnic backgrounds.

7. Early Permanence Quality Mark

- a. In March 2023 the RAA as a whole, was awarded the Early Permanence Quality Mark. This standard of excellence is awarded to adoption agencies that demonstrate the quality of their service and commitment to delivering early permanence for children where adoption is in their best interest.
- b. Early Permanence is by its nature complex work and may not result in a placement but always contributes to child focused planning.
- c. Early Permanence is actively promoted across the RAA. Regular training and support opportunities are offered to all RAA partners from the EP lead and team, this includes lunch and learn workshops for SCF social workers, IRO's and team managers.

- d. To contribute to the promotion of Early Permanence, the service manager has started to attend pre proceeding tracking meeting's alongside the care proceeding tracking meetings and can therefore ensure that EP is considered for all children within court proceedings with a recognition that this will not always be appropriate.

8. Adoption Support

- a. The post adoption service provides a range of services for adopters who have been matched with a Slough child and any adopters living in the area post 3 years of their adoption order being granted and any adopters living within Slough. From April 2022 to March 2023 the post adoption service has responded to 80 requests for support on a variety of subjects.
- b. Some of these enquiries resulted in the completion of an assessment of need, ongoing support from our adoption support social workers, ASF applications for ongoing therapeutic packages. In some cases, the families were signposted to other areas or agencies or offered a short-term service from the team, for example writing Later Life Letters, sorting out finances, tracking medical information, supporting contact with siblings as well as letter box contact and sharing sensitive information with adopters about birth family as well as ASF enquiries and processing invoices.
- c. As of March 2023, the post adoption service was working with 30 children (24 families). 19 children are receiving various services via the ASF funds such as Dyadic Developmental Psychology (DDP), play therapy and therapeutic life story work as well as therapeutic parenting.
- d. Further to the support via the adoption support fund the post adoption service is fortunate to have a dedicated social worker who is also trained in Theraplay. She has worked with a number of children and the adopter's both pre and post adoption. As of March 2023, this social worker has undertaken 8 Adult Attachment Style Interviews, 8 MIMS assessments and offered Theraplay to 5 families. The work of the Theraplay worker has been appreciated by the adopters and has been complimented by the independent reviewing officers, and the adopters' supervising social workers.
- e. The post adoption team have developed a non ASF funded 12 week support programme for supporting early placements. This programme has benefitted 5 families in the last 12 months and helped to stabilise 1 placement that came close to breaking down.
- f. The post adoption service contributes to the annual financial reviews of the adoption allowances.
- g. The post adoption service runs well attended social gatherings (e.g. picnics) for adopters and their children. At the last summer picnic children enjoyed using a wide range of indoor and outdoor equipment and we received positive feedback from adopters and their children about how they have appreciated the opportunity to meet with other adoptive families and gain advice from the post adoption service.
- h. The training and development of adopters is a high priority for the service. The post adoption service also provides a significant amount of training for adopters. A training programme has been delivered over the last two years and will be reviewed this year to build on the already successful content. Training opportunities are circulated to the adopters within Slough and adopters approved by Slough as well as to the adopters of the partner local authorities within the RAA. The service plans to continue to develop a

more focused and 'needs led training programme' to target the developmental needs of adopters.

- i. Three newsletters have been produced in the last year and sent out to all adopters approved by the Agency, adopters with Slough children placed with them, and adoptive families who have moved into the area post 3 years Adoption Order. This keeps adopters informed about up and coming training and social events as well as providing them with informative articles regarding adoption.
- j. Post Adoption social workers within the RAA have access to group reflective supervision once a month.
- k. Our Muslim adopters have access to Muslim adopters support group organised by RAA.

7. Birth Records Counselling

- a. The post adoption team is responsible for providing an adoption service to adult adoptees living in the area, providing advice and counselling about their adoptions, together with any information that is available from adoption records.
- b. Where a birth parent or sibling of an adopted adult is wishing to establish contact with his/her birth child/sibling, he/she will be offered a counselling interview.
- c. Between April 2022 and March 2023 there have been 3 adult adoptees living in the area wanting to access their records/establish contact with birth family for whom we have provided a service or provided advice. There have also been 8 birth parents/family and a sibling of an adopted adult wishing to establish contact with his/her birth child/sibling, who we have provided a service for.

8. Letter Box Service

- a. The letter box service is managed by a senior post adoption social worker and supported by an administrator letter box coordinator.
- b. The service includes:
 - Management of the letter box service, including relevant administrative and professional tasks as required.
 - Management of the support offered and provided to birth family members when the plan for the child is adoption.
 - Management of post adoption direct contact arrangements between adoptive families and birth families where there is no statutory local authority involvement. Support has included direct work with birth family to write letters when birth relatives find this difficult.

- In March 2023, 1 birth mother was supported to meet with the adoptive parent via a video call with an agreed plan for future ongoing direct contact to take place between birth and adoptive mother.
- The adoption team has 152 open cases for letter box contact and the letter box coordinator is facilitating letter box contact for 138 families.

9. Coffee Mornings/Picnics

- a. Coffee mornings have in the past enabled our adopters and their children (under 5's) to meet with other adopters and to socialise with other adopted children. An impact of the Covid pandemic was that coffee mornings moved to virtual events which were poorly attended and consequently the decision was made to pause these events.
- b. The team have considered resuming these face-to-face events and considered the need for sourcing and financing of venues and potential location issues since many of our adopters are living outside of the Slough area.
- c. There is no doubt of the benefit of such events as they provide opportunities for adopters to support each other and for the adoption team to inform and consult with adopters for the purpose of service development and therefore we will need to think creatively as to how to facilitate events that can be accessed by families with Slough children.
- d. The team held another successful picnic event in July 2022 which was enjoyed by all who attended, although it was not as well attended as previous picnic events which may have been due to a number of reasons. Planning will begin in April for this year's summer picnic.

10. Wellbeing Service

The Agency has access to a play therapist and clinicians who offer therapeutic support to our adopters, carers and children within Slough Children First. The adoption service also has access to its own Theraplay worker.

11. Management of Adoption Agency Work

- a. The day-to-day management of the work of the Adoption Agency is undertaken by the Adoption Service Manager in consultation with the Coram Ambitious for Adoption Managing Director and the Responsible Individual for the Adoption Agency. The responsibility for adoption decisions rests with the Head of Service for Regulatory Services for Slough Childrens First
- b. The role of Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) is vested in the Service Manager for Adoption Support, with delegated day to day activities undertaken by the post adoption workers within the Adoption Team located in Slough. Strategic issues that need to be addressed at senior management level are raised by the ASSA to the RAA Managing Director.

- c. Board Members receive regular information on the management and outcomes of the service in order to inform them in carrying out their responsibilities as Corporate Parents.

12. Inter-country Adoption

The Agency, by arrangement with IAC Centre for Adoption, delegates to that Agency the work of providing assessments, counselling and services to applicants wishing to adopt from abroad. Any requests received by the adoption service for Inter-country adoption are responded to via our duty system and advice is provided and enquirers are directed to the IAC Centre for Adoption.

13. Adoption Panel and Decision Making

- a. Coram Ambitious for Adoption RAA holds adoption and permanency panel 3 times a month. The composition of the panel is in line with regulations. Additional panels can be arranged if needed. The role of the panel is to consider adopter approvals, matches, and if adoption is the best plan for a child that has been relinquished for adoption.
- b. The overall functioning of the adoption panel is managed by Coram Ambitious for Adoption panel adviser, including maintaining the central list of panel members and ensuring that annual reviews of panel members and training requirements are maintained in accordance with regulations.
- c. The Managing Director for Coram Ambitious for Adoption undertakes the role of the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for the approval of adopters who will consider recommendations from Panel.
- d. A decision as to whether a child who is the subject of care proceedings should be placed for adoption is made by the ADM at Slough Children First. The ADM is able to consult with the agency's legal, medical and adoption advisors and requests any further information which is deemed necessary for making ADM decisions.
- e. The ADM at Slough Children First also undertakes the role of ADM for the matching of the children with the adopters and considers the recommendation from the panel.

14. Non-agency Adoptions

Slough Children First provides a service to people applying for a non-agency adoption (adoption not arranged through the VAA). Initial meetings and subsequent assessments are undertaken by experienced staff and reports are provided to the Court within set timescales. Adopters are made aware of their right to access adoption support services. The prospective adopters are also made aware of alternatives available to them via written information and during the meeting with the social worker.

15. Life Story Work

Slough Children First has a dedicated Life Story Worker who has produced excellent life story books for children. The Life Story Worker is currently working on 13 books in conjunction with adopters and social workers. The work of the Life Story Work was commended during the recent VAA Ofsted Inspection and from this it was recognised that the work undertaken by the worker would be best placed back within the Adoption Service and as such the Life Story

Worker will return to the adoption service from April 2023 with oversight and management provided by the Adoption Service Manager.

16. Disruptions

There were no disruptions of adoptive placements for our children during the last year.

17. Complaints/Allegations

The Adoption Service Manager dealt with 1 complaint in the last year. This complaint centred around a decision to stop payments for an enhanced adoption allowance prior to a review of the allowance.

There have been two allegations that have led to section 47 investigations since April 2022. These concluded with no further action by Slough Children First with the families continuing to be supported by their post adoption social workers.

18. Financial Report

The Adoption Agency budget was £646k for the contract sum, with a further £864k for adoption allowances and interagency fees, a total budget of £1,510k. There has been a £78k overspend in the last year from adoption allowances paid following an adoption placement. A number of adoptive placements have attracted enhanced financial support due to the complex needs of the children. There is a further small overspend of £4k against interagency fees where Coram RAA have not been able to find matching adopters and the organisation has had to look to external agencies for placements.

19. Coram Ambitious for Adoption RAA Key Objectives 2023/2024

- Sufficiency of adopters to meet contracted placement targets including early permanence carers.
- Recruitment of more adopters from a Black and Minority Ethnic background.
- Completion of the Coram RAA review including recommendations for next 5 year delivery
- Implementation of the agreed best practice family finding models to achieve consistency across the RAA for the selection, linking and matching of prospective adopters to RAA children.
- Development and introductions of the Beth Neil UEA approach to transitions for children moving to adoptive placements.
- Improve commissioning arrangements for the provision of therapeutic support through the Adoption Support Fund

19.b Slough Adoption Team Objectives 2023/2024

- Review of contact arrangements to develop support offered to birth relatives and to consider direct contact arrangements post adoption.
- Review and development of our post adoption training programme offered to all adopters of Slough children and to also include Slough Foster carers.
- Strengthening safeguarding, quality assurance and regulatory compliance.

- Strengthening the knowledge of Early Permanence of SCF staff through the support of the Coram RAA EP lead.
- Contribution of the adoption team to training focused on developing the skills of SCF social workers in writing CPRs.

Susan Chapman

Service Manager for Slough

Coram Ambitious for Adoption RAA