

# Slough Children's Services Trust

## Adoption Service

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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**Inspection date** 23–27 January 2017  
**Inspector** Rosie Dancer and Ros Chapman  
**Type of inspection** Full  
**Provision subtype** Domestic adoption

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**Date of last inspection** N/A

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This voluntary adoption agency is managed by Slough Children's Services Trust Limited. It is a not-for-profit organisation. It was registered as a voluntary adoption agency by Ofsted on 30 September 2015. It currently has no branches.

The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive families. Adoptive families approved by it are also used by other local authorities for their children waiting for an adoptive placement.

The agency provides support to families directly and does some of the support to adopted adults affected by adoption. The contracted service (The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service) also provides support to adults affected by adoption and manages the panel and contact arrangements.

Data covering April 2016 to January 2017 shows that the agency approved 15 adoptive families. Four adoptive families were waiting for a match. A decision had been made for 20 children for whom adoption was their plan and, of those, 11 children were living with their adoptive parents. Three of these children had been placed in a fostering for adoption placement.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those who have the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services, so that they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards, but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures, which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Slough Children's Trust Limited was registered on 30 September 2015 as a voluntary adoption agency. It is delivering the adoption service that was previously provided by Slough Borough Council. Slough Borough Council children's services were taken from the control of the local authority following an inadequate Ofsted inspection judgement that was made in November 2013.

There were some shortfalls found during this inspection.

Insufficient attention has been given to planning, commissioning and evaluating the post-adoption support services provided to individual children and families. In one case, the agency used an individual who was not registered with Ofsted to provide adoption support services and failed to fully check the suitability of the person carrying out this commissioned piece of work.

There is a lack of clarity about the purpose of some visits to prospective adoptive families post placement, specifically in relation to the support aspects for adults.

There is insufficient attention given to auditing records, which means that not all records are complete or accurate.

Since commencing operation, the agency has made good progress in clearing a backlog of work inherited from the council. A number of improvements are embedding. There have been changes in managers and staff since registration, and the team is developing well. There are plans being implemented to further improve the quality of the services provided.

The agency has forged supportive and useful relationships with other organisations and professionals that are supporting the agency's journey of improvement.

The agency's recruitment and family-finding activity for adopters is successful and means that placements are made in a timely way.

The assessment and preparation of prospective adopters are of a good quality and ensure that adopters are suitable and are well prepared to parent a child from the care system.

Children's educational needs are known, understood and catered for through the good links with the virtual headteacher.

The leader of the agency is knowledgeable, experienced and skilled in management

and adoption.

Effective tracking systems have improved timescales for all aspects of the work.

The leadership and management are committed and very passionate about adoption and have high expectations for their service. As a result, since the Trust has taken over, improvements have been made and many more are planned.

## Areas of improvement

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person(s) meet(s) the Care Standards Act 2000, the 'Voluntary adoption agencies and the adoption agencies (miscellaneous amendments) regulations', 2003, the 'Adoption agencies regulations', 2005 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The registered provider, the manager and, in relation to any branch, the branch manager, shall not—</p> <p>employ a person to work for the purposes of the agency unless that person is fit to work for the purposes of an agency; or allow a person to whom paragraph (2) applies, to work for the purposes of the agency unless that person is fit to work for the purposes of an agency. For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of an agency unless—</p> <p>he is of integrity and good character; he has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work he is to perform; he is physically and mentally fit for the work he is to perform; and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to him in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 2. ('Voluntary adoption agencies (miscellaneous amendments) regulations', 2003, regulation 14(1)(2)(3))</p>	<p>05/05/2017</p>
<p>The adoption agency must obtain, so far as is reasonably practicable, the information about the child which is specified in Part 1 of Schedule 1. This is with specific reference to checking reports and other documents against original sources of</p>	<p>05/05/2017</p>

information and correcting any inaccuracies in a timely way as is stated in the 'Statutory guidance for adoption'. ('Adoption agency regulations', 2005, regulation 15(1))	
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## Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- Ensure that the purpose of visits to families is to enable the agency to satisfy itself as to the child's welfare, and to provide the prospective adopter with advice and support. Visits should be shared whenever possible between the child's social worker and prospective adopter's social worker, and it is essential that there is clarity from the outset about which social worker will conduct each visit and that they communicate promptly with each other, including sharing their written reports. This is with specific reference to ensuring that prospective adopters are provided with a sufficient number of visits to enable there to be a focus on their needs. ('Statutory guidance on adoption, July 2014, 7.20, page 85')
- Where services are commissioned by an adoption agency, a three-way working relationship is developed with the adoption agency and the adoption support agency working in partnership to most effectively meet the needs of the service user. Commissioning arrangements are underpinned by a written agreement and are reviewed at regular intervals. (Adoption: national minimum standards 15.1)
- The service user knows, and receives written information about, the service they are to receive; what the service is designed to achieve; what is involved in the particular service provision and how the service will be monitored to ensure that it is delivering the intended outcome. (Adoption: national minimum standards 15.3)
- Adoption agencies seek feedback from service users on the success of the service provision. This feedback is recorded centrally and on the case record of the service user.  
With specific reference to the agency consistently collating and analysing feedback from service users so that it can be better used to shape and develop services.

(Adoption: national minimum standards 15.6)

- Ensure there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-keeping and action is taken when needed. (Adoption: national minimum standards 27.2)

## Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children are well prepared for adoption. Child-friendly guides are effectively used to help to explain adoption to children. When required, they are provided with therapy to prepare them emotionally to move into an adoptive placement. Prospective adopters provide children who have been matched with them with useful age-appropriate information to help them to become familiar with their new family and home. Introductions are well planned and are taken at the child's and adopter's pace. There is a meeting midway through the introduction plan, and this enables any emerging issues to be discussed and addressed.

Most children settle well into their adoptive families. Their prospective adopters use strategies that are effective in parenting a child who may have complex needs arising from their past experiences. Therapeutic support is provided for children who struggle to settle with their adoptive family, to help them to adapt to their new life circumstances. They are supported to develop satisfying, loving relationships that form the basis for their future emotional and social development.

Prospective adopters provide children with a loving and caring environment and are responsive to their needs. Children build trust in their adoptive parents, develop socially and emotionally, feel safe and form healthier and more secure attachments. Their self-esteem and confidence improve and they develop a good sense of belonging. Children make friends in their community, engage in their education and become calmer and more accepting of boundaries. There have been improvements in the speech of some and in the self-awareness of others. One adopter described her child as a 'different boy'. A professional said of one family, 'It is an excellent placement. I am very impressed by both adoptive parents; their world revolves around the child... They are lucky to have found each other.'

Disruptions of placements are rare, and only one has taken place since the agency's registration. Findings from the disruption have been used to inform future practice, specifically in relation to ensuring that children are well prepared for adoption. The good level of stability of placements reflects the commitment to and understanding of children's needs that individual social workers and prospective adopters have and their strong commitment to ensuring that children reach their full potential. Adopters are clearly dedicated to providing caring and loving homes for their children, whatever difficulties may arise.

When safe and appropriate, children are supported to maintain contact with their birth families and other people who are significant to them. Through this, they retain

a sense of their heritage.

Adopted adults are supported well to understand their histories and to make contact with their birth family members when possible and safe to do so.

The support to birth parents helps them to begin to come to terms with their situation, and they are well supported to take part in letterbox contact so that they can maintain a connection to their child.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

There was a shortfall found in the accuracy of two children's permanence reports and case records from the cases sampled. For example, there was incorrect or missing information about the birth names of two children. Although these reports and the case records are not initially the responsibility of the adoption team, at the point of a placement order having been granted these children were allocated a worker in the adoption team. The reports and other information on the files had not been corrected immediately the errors were identified.

Visits are carried out to families after placement. The agency ensures that statutory visits are made to children at the correct frequency, but some of these are combined with support visits to the adults. On one occasion, a statutory review took place at the same time. This presents a risk that the opportunities that prospective adopters have to discuss issues they may wish to raise are compromised. However, generally, people feel well supported in the early stages of placement, and children settle well with their new families.

The agency has recently invested in improving access to post-adoption support. A dedicated post-adoption support worker has been appointed to work through the backlog of cases that need review. In her short time in post, the worker has achieved improvement in the timeliness of services to support adoptive families that are under pressure.

However, there is a lack of structure to the work that commissioned services carry out. For example:

- there is not full information about the commissioning arrangement for each piece of work and no written agreements
- there is a lack of clarity about the decision-making about why a specific course of action has been taken

- there are no clear aims and objectives of the work
- there is no formal evaluation of the work by the agency or the family.

In one case, it was noted that, while it was clear that adoption was a significant contributor to the difficulties, a family was experiencing a person who was not registered with Ofsted to provide adoption support services but had been commissioned to work with the family. The agency had failed to carry out its own checks as to the provider's suitability and had not taken responsibility for supervision of their work.

Good, clear written and verbal information is provided to enquirers. They feel valued and welcomed by the agency, are treated with sensitivity and feel that discussions about adoption help them to make an informed decision about whether adoption is right for them.

Prospective adopters feel that the preparation courses are informative, well organised and interactive. They gain useful information about adoption and the needs of the children. They develop an understanding about how abuse and trauma impact on children's behaviour and what that may mean for them as a family.

The assessment process is thorough and generally carried out in a timely way. Assessments are analytical and provide a good view of the applicants' parenting capacity. Second opinion visits are carried out routinely, and these provide an additional layer of quality assurance.

The panel process is thorough, and panel provides appropriate challenge to the agency when required. Prospective adopters are prepared well for their panel attendance by their social worker and said that the panel members help to put them at ease during the hearing. Minutes made of the panel meetings are of a good quality and clearly set out areas for development. This aids the matching process and leads to any training needs being identified and then met. Panel monitoring is effective, and a useful panel report is provided to the agency every six months. These reports are analytical and are used by the agency to develop its practice.

Decision-making is undertaken with due rigour, and decisions made are based on careful consideration of all available information. If work is not of an adequate standard, the decision-maker pursues this until she is satisfied that shortfalls have been addressed.

Family finding is of a good quality and undertaken by social workers who know the prospective adopters well. Prospective adopters said that they do not feel pressurised into considering taking children whose needs they feel unable to meet. They are confident that their worker knows them well and only puts forward children whose needs they would be likely to be able to meet.

Generally, the matching processes are well planned. Child appreciation days provide prospective adopters with first-hand information about the child from professionals who have worked with them and others who have known them. Children's needs in relation to education are supported by an extremely knowledgeable and committed virtual school headteacher, and this ensures that adopted children's educational attainment is promoted. When relevant, prospective adopters meet the medical adviser and other medical professionals to ensure that they know and understand their child's health needs.

The agency has a partnership with a user-led Department for Education-funded scheme to deliver adoption support services, Cornerstone. Through this partnership and the agency's own resources, there is good support to children and their adoptive parents, pre and early post placement. Through this support, adopters build confidence in their abilities and develop their parenting skills, and this helps to achieve placement stability.

There is a backlog of life-story books and later-in-life letters that the agency inherited from the council. All children placed since the Trust has taken over have been provided with this important information, and a dedicated worker is clearing the backlog.

Prospective adopters and birth parents are supported to meet each other and share information about the child. This is useful to prospective adopters, because they receive first-hand information about the child, and it is supportive for birth parents, because they are reassured about who their children will be living with. In the future, children will know that their parents have met. One adopter said of the support during the meeting, 'I can't praise them [the workers] highly enough.'

Contact for children with their birth families is carried out by a commissioned service. All parties are well supported. For example, they are helped to write the letter to ensure that the content is appropriate. They are also supported to make sure that the exchange takes place at the correct time.

Annual reviews take place for adopters when they have been approved for a year but have no child placed with them. Although some of these had been out of timescales, the agency recognised this and addressed it.

The service to adopted adults and their birth relatives is carried out by a suitably trained and experienced social worker who is able to respond promptly to requests. There is good, informative written information for adopted people and their birth relatives, to enable them to understand the process and possible pitfalls and to manage their expectations. Feedback is requested after the provision of any service, so that the agency can learn and amend its practice if necessary.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The agency has a strong ethos of safeguarding and ensures that children's well-being is the paramount consideration. Social workers are trained in child protection, including in how to deal with incidents of child sexual exploitation, suspected cases of radicalisation and practices such as female genital mutilation. Their training has provided them with a good understanding about their duty in relation to safeguarding children, the roles of safeguarding professionals and the actions to take should they have a concern about a child. There have been no allegations against, or suspicions of harm by adopters or staff since the agency has been registered.

Adopter recruitment has a strong focus on child protection. Applicants are thoroughly assessed as to their suitability to keep children safe from harm. The training that they receive has led to their having an enhanced understanding about the impact that past abuse and trauma have had on children's functioning and their behaviour. They understand how these complex needs require them to adjust their parenting styles to help and support the child effectively and about the additional risks posed to their child due to their past experiences. Adopters work closely with the agency to help children to begin to take more responsibility for themselves as is appropriate to their age, level of understanding and needs. A professional said, 'They [the adopters] are realistic and understand her needs and the risks to her.'

There is an accessible complaints process for adults and children. There is a low level of complaints and these are investigated appropriately. Children have child-friendly information about how to make a complaint, and adopters are good advocates for their children.

Staff recruitment and vetting are thorough, comply with statutory requirements and, as far as possible, ensure that members of the team are suitable to be working for the agency. It was positive to note that an adopter was involved in the recent recruitment to the manager's post.

However, the agency was unable to evidence that the suitability of all people commissioned to work with children and their adoptive families has been checked.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The leadership and management have a strong commitment to adoption and have high aspirations for the agency. There have been a number of developments since the Trust took over the management of the adoption service, and these are beginning to have a positive impact. For example, there have been improvements in timescales, and strong partnerships have developed with other agencies and professionals. The developments show that the resources are managed effectively and that the leadership and management demonstrate a strong capacity for improvement.

The developments include:

- commissioning the services of Coram, a voluntary adoption agency, to support the journey of improvement
- developing a partnership with Cornerstone to enhance the adoption support services and another local authority to share some of the preparation and support activities
- increasing the involvement of adopters in the development of the agency
- improving the systems for tracking and monitoring timescales
- appointing permanent managers and workers to undertake post-adoption support services, life-story work and later-in-life letters
- improving the timeliness and quality of the decision-making process.

Time is needed to ensure that these improvements embed, are sustained and are built upon.

Due to geographic considerations, the agency does not focus recruitment in its local area. Nonetheless, the recruitment of adopters and family finding for children are successful, and neither prospective adopters nor children are left waiting.

The work of the agency is underpinned by a clear and accessible statement of purpose that sets out the aims and objectives and the services that it provides.

The staff team is relatively new, but it is clear that there is a shared commitment to providing a high quality of service. Staff say that work is 'more focused' and 'streamlined', and they feel that the service is going 'onward and upward'. Staff are appropriately qualified and experienced, and adopters hold them in high esteem. Adopters highlighted that the workers are sensitive towards them, reliable, flexible,

accessible and professional. More than one adopter called their social worker 'amazing'.

There is a strong commitment from leaders and managers to ensure that staff are well trained and supported and that staff recognise the value that training and support have in their professional development. Staff said that the leadership and management are supportive and fair and they listen to them. They feel that their opinions matter. There are clear procedures to deal with disciplinary matters that are used effectively when required.

Shortfalls found in record-keeping mean that some records do not provide accurate information or are incomplete. For example, some records are not dated, legal advice sought has not been retained on the adopter's file and the records relating to post-adoption support are poor. These shortfalls have not been identified through the audit systems.

## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of voluntary adoption agencies.