



Slough Children's Services Trust as a Voluntary Adoption Agency

Statement of Purpose 2020-21

Summary

This Statement of Purpose explains the services Slough Children's Services Trust as a registered Voluntary Adoption Agency provides, the governing principles and details of the service.

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

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Principles and Value Statements.....	3
Aims and Objectives of the Voluntary Adoption Agency	4
National Context	6
Regional Adoption Agency	7
Management of the Service	7
Responsible Officer	8
Staffing for Voluntary Adoption Agency	8
Services provided by Slough Children’s Services Trust Voluntary Adoption Agency.....	9
Adoption Recruitment.....	9
Family Finding and Matching	9
Adoption Activity Days (AAD).....	9
Audio Profiles & Audio Visual Profiles	9
Exchange Days.....	9
Adoption Link	10
New Family Social.....	10
Adoption Support Services	10
Panel and LetterBox Service.....	12
Adoption Panel and Decision Making	12
Inter-country Adoptions.....	13
Non-agency Adoptions	13
Systems for the Monitoring, Quality assurance and Evaluation of Services	14
Safeguarding and Promoting Welfare.....	14
Evaluating and Responding to Feedback	15
The Complaints Procedure	15
Links to Other Agencies.....	16
COVID-19	16
Details of the Registration Authority	17
Details of the Children’s Commissioner for England	18

Introduction

Slough Children's Services Trust (SCST) is a registered Voluntary Adoption Agency, and is subject to the Adoption Agency Regulations (AAR) 2005 and subsequent amendments (2012). SCST Voluntary Adoption Agency provides all the services of a VAA with a key role to recruit, assess and prepare and train adopters to provide loving and secure families to children requiring adoption.

The Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) 2011 sets out the requirement for adoption agencies to compile a statement of purpose explaining what services are provided, the governing principles and details of the management of the Service.

The statement of purpose is for:

- Children and young people
- Birth relatives
- Prospective and approved adopters
- Social workers internal and external to the agency
- Adoption panel members
- Elected members
- Slough Children's Services Trust Board Members
- Ofsted
- Members of the public

Principles and Value Statements

The work of the SCST Voluntary Adoption Agency is informed by the principles of the National Minimum Standards for Adoption:

- The needs, rights, wishes, safety and welfare of children are our paramount concern.
- All prospective adopters are treated with respect at all times.
- The lifelong implications of adoption and the need for comprehensive support services to adopters, and adopted children and adults, is recognized from the start.
- The service includes support to birth parents and relatives as appropriate to each family and access to records and intermediary services.
- the service actively supports early permanence as in the child's interest working closely with all the SCST social work Teams to identify children who would benefit from early permanence fostering for adoption (FFA) placements optimising secure attachments.
- The service actively supports birth families of children in placement working towards rehabilitation home where it is achievable within a child's developmental timescales and includes parenting coaching and supervision of contact arrangements.

- Equal opportunities and diversity frameworks are intrinsic to the delivery approach and care offered across all the activities of recruitment of prospective adopters and their preparation and training.
- Achieve positive outcomes for children with diverse needs and backgrounds enabling their emotional social and educational needs to be met with respect to identity, ethnicity, race, religion, disability, culture and language and gender.
- Act as champions for the right to family life and the enjoyment of health care, education, leisure time and social interactions and therapeutic support to ensure each child has the best life chances through adoption and permanent families.
- Encourage and support families with attributes to prioritise children's needs, and make a commitment to the child on a permanent basis and with resilience to persevere through difficult times.
- Celebrate all family structures (e.g. single parents, couples who are heterosexual or gay, married, in civil partnerships or unmarried) can provide the nurture and parenting to meet the needs of children coming forward for adoption.
- Understand that birth parents and relatives with a plan for adoption of children experience a profound loss, and can be supported to make a meaningful through letter box contact, providing photographs or a letter to read in later life.
- Encourage a spirit of openness so that children grow up with knowledge and understanding of their birth family and support direct and indirect contact between adopted children and birth relatives.
- Prioritise children's safety and welfare and implement SCST's Safeguarding Children Policy consulting with the designated safeguarding lead for SCST and placing authorities in relation to any concerns.

Aims and Objectives of the Voluntary Adoption Agency

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 provides the legal framework for the Service. In accordance with the provisions of the Children and Adoption Act 2002, all local authorities have a duty to establish and maintain an adoption service in their area, to meet the needs in relation to adoption, of children who have or may be adopted, of adults who have been adopted, parents and guardians of such children and persons who have or may adopt a child.

The Voluntary Adoption Agency is part of a range of services delivered by SCST which primarily seek to promote the upbringing of children by their families in accordance with the spirit and provisions of the Children Act 1989. This ethos is also underpinned by Article 21 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that every child has a right to family life and if it cannot be provided by the family of origin it should be provided by a permanent alternative family.

Slough Children's Services Trust supports the basic principles that:

- Every child is entitled to grow up as part of a loving family, which can meet his/her needs during childhood, and beyond.
- It is best for children, whenever possible, to be brought up by their own birth families.
- Children whose birth families cannot provide them with a safe, secure, stable and permanent home are entitled to have adoption considered for them as one of a range of permanency options.
- The child's welfare, safety and needs must be at the centre of the adoption process.
- Children's views should be listened to, recorded and given due consideration when decisions are made about their placement needs.
- We recognise that people who have been affected by adoption, both children and adults, may require additional support at different times over the years. We aim to treat everyone with respect and fairness.

The aims and objectives of SCST VAA are:

- To work closely with Childrens Teams to identify children who are looked after where adoption is the plan and in their interest seeks to place a child with permanent families as expediently as possible. Additionally a member of the adoption team attends all permanency planning meeting that are held for every child that requires one.
- To secure for each child a loving family to 'belong' to on a permanent basis and to form secure attachments and reach their potential and developmental milestones.
- Actively recruit, prepare, assess and support adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds who have the ability to meet the needs of children coming forward for adoption.
- Support adopters to consider matching options for children identified with a plan for adoption.
- Once SCST VAV joined the RAA to recruit and support carers who are willing and able to be dually approved as foster carers and as prospective adopters to undertake early permanence placements for children aged 0-2 where the final care plan remains uncertain.
- To provide post placement support to newly created and existing adoptive families.

- To provide access to information, counselling, intermediary services and support as appropriate to adults whose lives have been affected by adoption, including adopted adults and their birth relatives.
- Appropriate support is provided to the prospective adopters recruited by the Voluntary Adoption Agency following the placement of children, including linking them with experienced adopters who could offer them additional support, guidance and advice. The Voluntary Adoption Agency works effectively with placing authorities to maximise the long-term success of each child's placement.

National Context

In 2012, the Government published 'Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay', which outlined proposals to accelerate the adoption process with the aim of more children being adopted and more rapidly. Slough Children's Services Trust has a strong track record of successfully placing children and performed well in the adoption scorecards. We continually strive to improve our services and to deliver improved outcomes for our children and young people.

Our key areas for development are:

To focus on our more difficult to place children – we work with our colleagues within neighbouring local authorities and VAAs as well as agencies further afield to prioritise and place those children. Additionally, from the earliest opportunity we place children's names on the Linkmaker. We also regularly attend the profiling events and adoption activity days organised by Coram BAAF.

- To consider fostering for adoption for children where this may be appropriate.
- To continuously review practice and systems in order to ensure that the recruitment and approval of prospective adopters takes place within six months from the time of the acceptance of their register of interest in line with government guidelines.
- We are currently working with other agencies in the formation of a new Regional Adoption Agency, working title: 'Ambitious for Adoption' to support our work which has the following objectives:
 1. Accelerate the placement/reduce the waiting time for children in particular for harder-to-place children
 2. Retain and build confidence of adopters as they move through the assessment and matching process by supporting and encouraging them on their journey
 3. Increase early placement stability

4. Remove peripheral activity from social workers in order to increase their capacity to focus on the tasks that only social workers can do i.e. child protection, adoption assessment and family finding tasks. An example of this is a dedicated family support worker employed to be the consistent point of call for potential adopters contacting the agency with their enquiries.

Regional Adoption Agency

The plan for SCST VAA was to Join Coram Ambitious for Adoption on 1 July; however this is delayed due to COVID-19 and now will take effect on 1 September.

Coram Ambitious for Adoption is a registered Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) and a registered Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). The agency is commissioned through the London Borough of Harrow to deliver the services of a regional adoption agency (RAA) for participating local authorities including Harrow, Bromley, City of London, Hillingdon, Redbridge, Waltham Forest, Bi-Borough [Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea and Westminster, Royal Borough of Greenwich and Slough Borough Council who are yet to join.

Coram Ambitious for Adoption provides all the services of a VAA with a key role to recruit, assess and prepare and train adopters to provide loving and secure families to children requiring adoption. The fostering service relates to early permanence placements and dual approvals of adopters to provide fostering placements for early permanence placement delivery.

Coram Ambitious for Adoption works on having a hub of activities for the recruitment and support of adopters at its main office location at Brunswick Square. With the family finding activities and local post adoption support services being provided by Coram staff located at offices for each of the local authorities. This arrangement will ensure that Coram Ambitious for Adoption RAA works together with each local authority framework to improve outcomes for children and adoptive families and to meet the objectives of a regional adoption agency to:

- Recruit adopters for children needing permanent families through adoption
- Provide family finding and matching services
- Provide adoption support services
- To recruit, prepare and assess and train foster carers to undertake early permanency placements.

Management of the Service

The SCST Voluntary Adoption Agency work within Slough Children's Services Trust and the day-to-day management of the service is undertaken by the Practice Manager in consultation with the Chief Executive for Slough Children's Services Trust.

Responsible Officer

Lisa Humphreys, Chief Executive for Slough Children's Services Trust is the Responsible Individual for the Voluntary Adoption Agency, under Regulation 5 of the Voluntary Adoption Agency (England) Regulations 2003.

Lisa Humphreys is also the Voluntary Adoption Agency Decision Maker.

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Moving forward to RAA Slough Voluntary Adoption Agency will retain its own registered agency status and Lisa Humphreys will remain The Agency Decision Maker (ADM). The ADM retain a twofold responsibility in relation to adoption namely

- a) Responsibility for decisions for a Looked After Child and/or relinquished babies to be placed for adoption
- b) The consideration of a panel recommendation for placement of a child and the decision to place a child with a particular adoptive family

SCST Board Members will receive regular information on the management and outcomes of the service in order to inform them in carrying out their responsibilities as corporate parents.

Staffing for Voluntary Adoption Agency

Specialist posts within the team are responsible for providing adoption support services, Family finding and adopter's recruitment and there is also a life story worker within the service. The recruitment social workers currently process non-agency adoptions. The function of a Life Story Worker and non-agency adoption however will remain with the Trust moving forward to the RAA.

All the professional staff of the VAA hold the CQSW's, DipSW or Degree or Masters approved qualification in Social Work or equivalent qualification. All are registered with the Social Work England the new regulator for social work under the provisions of the transfer in 2019.

Social workers, managers and leaders of the services have opportunity to update their continuing professional development and to attain post qualifying training and awards relevant to the services.

VAA is supported by a part time business support staff and a data analyst including, panel administrators, and communications team for marketing.

All social work staff within Slough Children's Services Trust share the same job descriptions commensurate to their posts. All staff are provided with a thorough induction and are supported by experienced staff to ensure that the principles and values of the agency are intrinsic in the way that the service works. Staff work in accordance with the agency's policies and procedure.

Services provided by Slough Children's Services Trust Voluntary Adoption Agency

All services provided are within the legal framework of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, The Children Act 1989, and associated guidance and regulations.

There is specific information relating to adoption on the Slough Children's Services Trust website: <http://www.scstrust.co.uk/>

Adoption Recruitment

In preparation to join RAA, SCST VAA is not actively recruiting for adopters currently. The VAA however continues to undertake assessment of foster carers who wish to adopt Slough's children in their care. Moving forward the approval of prospective adopters together with the approval of foster carers for the purpose of early permanence will be managed centrally by Coram Ambitious for Adoption.

Coram Ambitious will recruit, assess and prepare and train adopters to provide loving and secure families to children requiring adoption. The fostering service relates to early permanence placements and dual approvals of adopters to provide fostering placements for early permanence placement delivery. The Managing Director for Coram Ambitious for Adoption will be undertaking role of ADM and the approval of adopters will be the decision of the Coram (VAA) Agency Decision Maker, who will consider recommendations from Panel.

Family Finding and Matching

Adoption Activity Days (AAD)

VAA attends adoption activity days arranged by Coram

Audio Profiles & Audio Visual Profiles

VAA has developed professional audio-visual profiles of the children to be used earlier in the selection process of would-be adopters

Exchange Days

VAA attend these days organised by Coram. These are a cost-effective means of family finding and raising awareness of SCST's VVA service and provide links with other agencies.

Adoption Link

This is online database that VAA use if appropriate to refer children and adopters waiting to be matched.

New Family Social

VAA is members of New Family Social and actively refer children profiles to them.

In addition to the above SCST VAA also does:

- Targeted recruiting of prospective adopters for difficult to place children by sharing anonymous profiles
- Anonymous profiles at faith events
- Features in local papers
- Social media campaigns
- A series of targeted digital marketing campaigns (Facebook)
- Attendance at local community events
- Talks to community groups
- Production of marketing collateral and branded materials
- Comprehensive and up-to-date information on the Trust's website
- Fast track assessment of prospective adopters seeking to adopt difficult to place children
- Attend Adoption Activity Days in geographic areas outside Slough
- Moving forward once joined the RAA, Ambitious for Adoption, the VAA will be accessing adopters approved by Coram Ambitious for Adoption.

Once a suitable adopter is identified there will be a series of meetings to ensure that adopters have full information about the child – as far as is available. This will include meeting with the Medical Advisor, the current foster carer, the child's school, when applicable, and may also include a child appreciation day to gather detailed information about the child's experiences and history to date. Prospective adopters are entitled to all available information about the child that they are considering and will need to feel confident that all information about the child has been shared with them.

When a child is placed for adoption the allocated social worker for the adopters will visit the placement regularly and reports will be provide to the SCST VAA. The allocated SW will also attend all reviews and any other meetings that are convened in relation to the placement.

Adoption Support Services

Slough Children's Services Trust is committed to providing the full range of adoption support services required by regulations. SCST VAA offers its approved adopters support post placement and post order. Post placement support is provided by both the allocated child's social worker and the VAA social worker. Once a child is adopted support is provided by the adoption support workers within the VAA and the case will be transferred to the adoption support service.

The post adoption services are:

- Counselling, advice and information
- Financial support
- Services to enable groups of adoptive children, adoptive parents and birth parents or former guardians or an adoptive child to discuss matters relating to adoption
- Assistance, including mediation services, in relation to contact between an adoptive child and a birthparent, birth sibling, former guardian or a related person of the adoptive child
- Services in relation to therapeutic needs of an adoptive child
- Assistance for the purpose of ensuring the continuance of the relationship between an adoptive child and his adoptive parent, including training for adoptive parents to meet any special needs of the child; and respite care
- Assistance where disruption of an adoptive placement or adoption arrangement following the making of an adoption order has occurred, or is in danger of occurring, including making arrangements for the provision of mediation services and organising and running meetings to discuss disruptions.
- Coffee mornings for adopters and children are held 3 times a year with the support of the Adoption Manager, post adoption worker and play therapist (as and when needed). These groups provide opportunities for peer support and participation.
- Adopters picnics twice a year are also held to provide opportunity for peer support and participation
- Adopters have actively supported VAA's work by participating in events to promote adoption and to recruit adopters and carers.

The Adoption Support Fund is part of a wider package of reforms introduced by the Government through the Children and Families Act 2014, and became available in May 2015 and will continue until 2021.

While Slough Children's Services Trust seeks to ensure provision of the full range of services, the Trust may make arrangements for the services to be provided by others; either Voluntary Adoption Agencies, Local Authorities or independent providers of adoption services.

The Voluntary Adoption Agency is committed to providing adoption support services as part of an overall integrated service for all children and families who are engaged with children's services and in the context of the local Preventive Strategy, recognising that while there are some services that are specific to adoption, it is essential that adopted children and their families also have access to mainstream services available to children and families with particular needs.

The Voluntary Adoption Agency has a dedicated worker providing counselling and support services to:

- Any person directly affected by adoption who requires counselling or support
- Adopted persons requiring access to birth records
- Persons requiring information as to the use of the Adoption Contact Register, in particular adopted persons, birth parents and other relatives
- Adults seeking to establish contact with birth family members separated via adoption and requesting an Intermediary Service.

Panel and LetterBox Service

The Trust has established an adoption and permanency panel, and there is a dedicated panel advisor, who also manages the letterbox service. The service includes:

- Management, training, recruitment and co-ordination of SCST adoption and permanency panel
- Management of the letterbox service, including relevant administrative and professional tasks as required
- Management of the birth relative project including relevant administrative and professional tasks in providing support 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.

Adoption Panel and Decision Making

The Voluntary Adoption Agency holds its own adoption and permanency panel monthly. 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.

The overall functioning of the adoption panel is managed by the 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.

Panel members and the Voluntary Adoption Agency's decision maker are supplied with copies of all the reports to be considered by the panel on each agenda item, in the week prior to the panel meeting.

The link worker for the applicants, or in her/ his absence, their manager will be present when an application is considered, to answer the panel's questions and assist them in reaching a decision. Applicants are given the opportunity to attend panel for their approval or when a specific match is being presented with a child/ren.

The recommendation of the panel is conveyed verbally to the applicants on the day of the panel. The draft panel minutes are forwarded to the panel chair within four working days. The chair approves and finalises the minutes before they are passed to the agency decision maker.

The agency decision maker reaches the final decision in relation to any application within seven working days of receiving the recommendation and final panel minutes, and this is conveyed to the applicants verbally within two working days and in writing within five working days, in line with regulatory requirements.

A decision as to whether a child who is the subject of care proceedings should be placed for adoption is made by the agency decision maker (ADM) at Slough Children's Services Trust. The agency decision maker (ADM) is able to consult with the agency legal, medical and adoption advisor and to request any further information which is deemed necessary.

Inter-country Adoptions

The Voluntary Adoption Agency by arrangement with IAC Centre for Adoption delegates to that Agency the work of providing counselling and services to applicants wishing to adopt from abroad.

Non-agency Adoptions

Slough Children's Services Trust provides a service to people applying for a non agency adoption (adoption not arranged through the Voluntary Adoption Agency). Initial meetings and subsequent assessments are undertaken by staff experienced in this area of work and reports are provided to the Court within timescales set. Adopters are made aware of their right to access adoption support services. The prospective adopters are also made aware of other alternatives available to them via written information and during the meeting with the social worker.

Systems for the Monitoring, Quality assurance and Evaluation of Services

SCST VAA will undergo regular internal and external scrutiny to ensure that services are robust and of good quality. This will be achieved by:

Supervision and oversight of the service:

- a) All social workers/senior practitioners/ managers receive regular reflective supervision and annual performance appraisal. The frequency depends on the needs of the supervisee, but is generally not less than monthly. SCST VAA has a supervision policy.
- b) File audits are undertaken by social workers and managers.
- c) Regular team meetings take place to consider and analyse performance across the service and for staff to feedback on training sessions they have attended.
- d) There is an induction programme for new Adoption Panel Members and annual appraisals for all members, including Panel chairs, to monitor performance.

Safeguarding and Promoting Welfare

The Berkshire Local Safeguarding Children's Board provides the procedural framework for safeguarding children in Slough and the Voluntary Adoption Agency ensures that staff and managers attend child protection training and comply with good practice and guidance. Adoption panel members are also provided with safeguarding training as part of their programme and at least one training day per year with the Voluntary Adoption Agency. Additionally panel members are invited to attend adopter and carer conferences, and can access the SCST training programme that is available to all staff working for the Trust.

Systems are in place to monitor and evaluate the provision of services to ensure that the services provided by the Voluntary Adoption Agency are effective and the quality of those services is of an appropriate standard.

- Performance is monitored nationally via adoption scorecards that assess the effectiveness of planning and permanency (including adoption) arrangements for children
- Annual data is sent to Ofsted
- Quarterly information sent to the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB)
- Reports are provided on a bi-annual basis to SCST Board. Tracking meetings are in place to capture key milestones in the child's journey in care, including adoption progress and to avoid any unnecessary delay

- Feedback from service users is pro-actively sought in order to inform future service provision from children, prospective and approved adopters, birth parents, adult adoptees, following birth records counselling and feedback from birth relatives, following enquiries about tracing adopted relatives. In addition, feedback is obtained and collated from adopters who attend the adoption support group meetings; adopters following life appreciation days; and from foster carers, after children have been moved on to adoption placements, regarding their views on this process
- Children's wishes and feelings are also captured at events specifically organised for adoptive families
- An Adopter Advisory Board chaired by the head of service for adoption, fostering and residential services has been established, for adopters to provide insight and challenge to the service and help us develop new processes
- The adoption panel provides independent oversight of cases
- Chairing of adoption disruption meetings is undertaken independently.

Evaluating and Responding to Feedback

Where a shortfall in services is identified or an expression of dissatisfaction about a service is received by the Voluntary Adoption Agency, this is referred to/considered by the relevant manager in the first instance (including where necessary liaising with external agencies/ organisations) and where it is reasonable for the Voluntary Adoption Agency to do so, action will be taken to address the issue.

Where the expression of dissatisfaction constitutes a 'complaint' the matter will be dealt with via Slough Children's Services Trust's complaints procedure.

The Complaints Procedure

All prospective adopters engaging with the Voluntary Adoption Agency and all birth parents and where appropriate family members of children for whom the Voluntary Adoption Agency is planning adoption are provided with written information about the Trust's complaints procedure.

All young people, for whom there is an adoption plan and who are of an appropriate age and understanding are likewise informed of the complaints procedure and are also informed about accessing advocacy services and other relevant organisations.

Other service users are also provided with details of the complaints process as appropriate. The practice managers of the Family Placement Service, along with the head of service, placements and resources monitors all complaints received in respect of any aspect of the work undertaken by the Family Placement Service.

Links to Other Agencies

The Practice manager is the member of the Coram BAAF Early Permanence Network. Meetings are also attended that are organised by the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB). The Practice Manger also attends the Coram BAAF Practice Forum for adoption managers held on a quarterly basis.

COVID-19

COVID-19 coronavirus emergency measures have significant impact on the ways Slough VVA delivers and conducts its adoption services. In line with the Government advice the VAA staff are currently working from home and delivering all aspects of the adoption service virtually using various methods of communications such as LoopUp, Blackberry, Zoom and BlueJeans.

Adoption panels

These are held virtually using LoopUp for conference calls.

Family finding

The VAA continues to find families for children needing permanent families. Family finding visits are conducted via Zoom and now Blue Jeans.

COVID-19 measures have significant consequences for those children who are matched with prospective adopters and where introductions are being planned or are in process. VAA is following guidance published by Coram BAAF, "Managing introductions of children with prospective adopters" A number of risk assessments have been developed that the child/rens social workers, foster carers' supervising social workers and link workers have to complete to inform practice and decision making to ensure safety of all involved in the introductions.

Adoption support

VAA continues to provide post adoption support to families.

Information is regularly sent to families via emails on various matters such us as how to cope during COVID-19 lockdown, tips on home schooling, supporting yourself and your child's mental health during COVID-19 outbreak, autism and daily exercise.

Families continue to have counselling sessions via video calls from their therapists and VAA post adoption workers have been offering support to the families

VAA has made a joint application with Ambitious for Adoption for ASF for COVID-19 allocated by the DFE for the following services:

- Adopter Learning Forum CB
- WAF peer support
- Beanstalk
- PAC-UK
- Coram gateway for SGOs/Adopters
- On line parenting and support groups
- NVR course - group and individual
- Activities to support placement stability attachment – storytelling
- Online DDP Adoption Plus + attachment informed sensory consultations

VAA has regular team meetings where information is shared with the team about the temporary changes in the legislation due to COVID-19.

Training

VAA staff has access to training via webinars arranged by CVAA and have attended the following sessions:

- Body Based Calming Techniques for the Current Climate and Managing Stress
- Initial Enquiries and Preparation Groups during COVID-19 Epidemic
- Adoption Assessments and Therapy through Zoom digital platform
- Adoption support

Upcoming webinars include:

- Identity of transracial and transcultural adoptions
- Education Matters in Adoption: the Teenage Years
- Sharing Stories: the need for a specialized and dedicated approach to life story work

Details of the Registration Authority

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Details of the Children's Commissioner for England

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