

27 March 2020
Intercountry Adoption
Department of Social Services
GPO Box 9820
Canberra ACT 2610

By email: ICAPrograms@dss.gov.au

Consultation on the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service

Relationships Australia South Australian (RASA) thanks the Department of Social Services for the opportunity to make a submission and appreciates the extension of time to submit our response to the Discussion Paper released during February 2020.

RASA is a secular community-based, not-for-profit organisation and leading provider of relationship support services for individuals, families and communities in South Australia for over 70 years. We believe in the transformative power of human relationships underpinned by strong values that centre on respect, diversity, belonging and learning. We respect the rights of all people, in all their diversity, to live life fully within their families and communities with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy relationships.

We have substantial experience in providing education and support services in the Intercountry Adoption Support Services community through our state funded Post Adoption Support Service (PASS) for almost 15 years. Trauma informed practice underpins all of the work in the PASS service, and an understanding of adoption related trauma is vital in meeting the needs of this community. It is from this experience base that we submit our response to the Consultation on the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service.

RASA is recognized as a national leader in intercountry adoption support services and staff expertise is sought in private and public capacities including:

- a staff member was a South Australian representative on the National Intercountry Adoption Advisory Group from 2009-12 in a parent/private capacity
- in 2015 PASS was contracted by DSS to provide training to staff in the new Intercountry Adoption Australia information and referral service
- our PASS Manager was nationally consulted on the provision of the SA forced adoption apology, has been a leader in developing both State and National post adoption service provider networks and in training provision.



Diversity • Respect • Belonging • Learning

In the content of Intercountry Adoption Family Support, our work is underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect to Intercountry Adoption.

Addressing the needs of those who use the ICAFSS

The intercountry adoption (ICA) community is varied, with multiple different needs present. For those in the pre-adoption phase through to the post-adoption parent phase, from young intercountry adoptees, through to teenagers and then adults. Each of these groups can have competing needs at any one time.

Intercountry adoption is a vexed and complex space to work in. There are many who do not agree with the practices and principles of ICA, even some adoptive parents and adoptees themselves. Services need to be able to work within these competing principles and ethical dilemmas about the practice of ICA in and of itself, whilst providing support to those most affected.

Any work in this area should hold the needs of the child and therefore, intercountry adoptee adult, in the centre of all adoption related work. Whilst adoption has an impact on all those involved, it is ultimately the adoptee who feels this in a profound and ongoing way throughout their life.

Our experience tells us that services in this area need to ensure that they are:

- Trauma-informed, adoption history informed, and have an understanding of racism and cultural identity.
- understand that no adoption can take place without loss and adoptees bear the greatest burden of this in terms of loss of country, culture and kinship in order to be raised by an Australian family.
- respond effectively to adoptees about the lack of knowledge of their early life experiences and the effect this can have on them throughout their life course.
- Competent in post adoption literacy and well versed in issues faced by adoptees and their families, such as cultural identity, mental health, trauma, grief and loss and social issues.
- Providing accessible services for clients across Australia, especially in regional, rural and remote areas where adoptees face specific challenges. While telephone, email and video-link services should be an option, it is important that any online contact is strengthened by face-to-face service alternatives where possible.
- Providing options for intensive, long-term and early intervention support, as well as referrals to other service as needed.

Nationally, there is a gap for timely, appropriate therapeutic services for intercountry adoptees and their families when adoptees are younger, and in the early placement years. The teenage and young adult years are particular times of additional stressors for intercountry adoptees and when they often present to services in a crisis.

As support needs change over time, counselling and case management services need to be able to respond in an informed way to meet the changing needs of this client group. Whilst ICAFFS goes some way to filling this therapeutic gap, there is still a waiting list. Some referrals have been deemed to be out of scope, due to the complexity of needs that clients present with.

An ICA specific therapeutic service needs to be skilled to respond to the high and complex needs some adoptees present with, and to refer appropriately when further mental health supports are needed. Jurisdictional differences in the intercountry post adoption support services can result in a fragmented service system with a need for case management support for those with complex needs.

In its current form, ICAFFS counselling providers are individual private practitioners for whom intercountry adoption counselling is only one aspect of their work. This has implications for access as many of these practitioners have waiting lists. We have also noticed that some of these practitioners do not always have a nuanced understanding of the needs of intercountry adoptees and the online training available from the Australian Psychological Society commissioned by DSS at the commencement of the Forced Adoption Support Services in 2015 is not readily accessible and comes at a significant cost.

In relation to the case management side of ICAFFS, this is now offered via phone or other online platform. It's difficult to provide an adequate case management service remotely when you are living in a different state and lack the local knowledge about other services is not as thorough. When supporting those who have significant trauma, responding to crisis and high risk matters is also difficult, as crisis services vary from state to state.

What changes to the ICAFFS would you recommend?

Rather than the current model of having individual private practitioners to provide therapeutic support, this could be better managed by employing a full time clinicians experienced in counselling and managing complex presentations to work solely with those affected by intercountry adoption, with priority given to adoptees.

These practitioners working solely with the ICA community will have a number of positive benefits including enhancing access by reducing waiting list times and enable capacity building by being able to provide current practice based expertise in a range of online consultation, professional development and training support to the sector.

If the current system were to be maintained, then practitioners should be selected to be able to respond to the complexity of needs that young and teenage adoptees are presenting with, and have capacity to respond in a timely manner.

Our experience in providing a range of services for people impacted by complex trauma (including inter-country adoptees) has shown the use of brokerage funds to pay for specialist psychological services, when required. This can promote access where particular needs cannot be readily met, for those who may live in rural and regional areas or when individuals within a family prefer to be seen by a separate practitioner.

Many adoptees prefer to keep post-adoption and pre-adoption support separated, and there can be tension for a service providing both due to the conflict of interest. This tension arises from the perspectives of those in the community, who feel that the very nature of adoption supports the separation of a child from their birth family/country and community, and that providing services to those who are seen to be complicit in supporting this separation contributes to silencing the immense grief loss and trauma that adoptees experience.

A change in ICAFFS that ensures pre and post adoption services are completely separate, enables each service to engage in the work from the position of strengthening a adoptive family relationships, and paying attention to the trauma and loss experienced by adoptees in order for them to gain a family. Adoptees are able to access a service that is not involved in supporting the primary separation that adoption facilitates, and can maintain a neutral position of support in the post adoption space.

What is the best way to ensure that the available funding is accessed equitably?

This can be a complex matter given there are distinct groups with varying needs. Our experience indicates that while funding needs to be available to support families across the continuum of needs, post adoption support should be prioritised. There have been many questions from those in the post adoption community about the fairness of free support to those 'wishing to adopt a child', as this competes for resources for those most affected i.e. the adoptee themselves. Priority should be given to intercountry adoptees, and their individual and family lives across their life course. Provision of free counselling and support through the existing ICAFFS model for those wishing to adopt prior to adoption is not the best fit for a service such as this, as the needs are very different and this gives rise to potential, actual, or perceived conflicts of interest by those in the adoption community. This is evident in our experience providing a number of Federal complex trauma services including Forced Adoption Support Services and Redress Support Services.

Search Support

Search support is an important continuing need for adoptees or their families and for which we propose a number elements.

Practical support elements include:

- Providing country specific birth family search information/booklet to adoptees
- Assisting adoptees who are communicating with overseas adoption agencies, orphanage's and possibly private searchers in relation to finding birth family members.
- Provide searching education on using online tools for searching.
- There also needs to be some consideration for how to support found birth parents in overseas countries. For those who work in local post adoption support services, we know that for those found birth parents, the trauma of the loss and grief is triggered, and support is required prior to any reunion/contact with their child. This support needs to be offered in a culturally sensitive and supportive way, which may require building relationships with workers in birth countries that can then provide this support. If this is not possible, then the use of interpreters should be utilised when communicating with birth parents overseas.

Emotional support elements include:

- Providing information and counselling/support pre-search process starting, to assist those searching to be as prepared as possible for unknown outcomes.
- Support needs to continue through the process and through contact and reunion, as reunion can be times of high emotional intensity.
- When adoptees are unable to find anything, their therapeutic support needs increase as they have moved from a space of hopefulness in finding information and /or birth family, to one of knowing that they are not going to be able find any further information or their birth family.
- When they are able to find birth family, support needs to be provided for communicating with birth family where there are language barriers, and in helping the adoptee understand more about the life and culture their birth family are living in.
- Providing opportunities for peer support groups for other intercountry adoptees possibly from the same birth county who are interested in searching for birth family or who have gone through the process

National accessibility

National accessibility is best achieved through a national network of agencies or single provider with established presence in all jurisdictions. This operational model has the best capability to deploy a

high quality nationally consistent and locally available service able to leverage and build capacity of the whole service system thereby achieving quality client outcomes for intercountry adoptees and their families.

We believe that a service such as this is best to be provided face to face where possible recognising there will always be challenges for accessibility for clients living in rural and remote areas. We believe these can be addressed using visiting/outreach services, use of various telephone, online and web-based technologies and engaging local community based supports to build capacity.

Locally available supports ensures that staff are familiar with other services, and in particular when responding to high and complex needs.

Webinars are a good tool to use for therapeutic educational groups, as well as training for other health care professionals.

3.5 Capacity building

Due to the nature of intercountry adoption and complex trauma for those involved, having staff who are adoption-aware and trauma-informed is paramount.

It is important for the service to connect with others in a similar field, including those that are providing services in the local post adoption space. This has not been a feature of the current service model, and means that the learning and expertise of those who have been providing services in this area for many years has not been tapped into. In our PASS service, we have found that there are many similarities between those who are local adoptees and those who are ICA. The expertise and understanding that we have gained from local adoptees throughout the various age groups, allows us to respond more effectively to ICA as they are growing and moving through different life transitions. Without the connections between local and ICA post adoption support services, these learnings are not able to be passed on.

Many local post adoption support services also provide support to birth parents and through this have gained a rich and comprehensive knowledge about the effects of losing a child to adoption, and about the ongoing grief and loss they experience. This knowledge is vital in supporting adoptees to understand a little about what their birth parents may have gone through, and to recognise that their mother may have had little or no other choice in their adoption. It is also vital that adoptive parents are able to understand this as well, as it supports them to talk more openly about their child's birth parent/s.

When a single service or service network holds all these perspectives, the capacity building and professional education is able to be offered from a wide knowledge base with a highly sophisticated

and nuanced understanding of intercountry adoption. Adoption related trauma is complex and varied and influenced by experiences of others involved, and to understand this, services need to be connected to those across the adoption spectrum.

There are many similarities in regards to the impact of adoption separation and loss, and therefore enhancing connections between service providers in these spaces enables a wider community of professional expertise.

For further capacity building in the affected communities, some consideration could be given to providing a Small Grants Program, similar to what is offered through the DSS Forced Adoption Support Program. This could allow for more Peer Mentoring programs, similar to what is offered in SA, to be available in other states.

Measuring success

In regard to short-term outcomes, intensive early intervention family support to be provided when the child first joins an adoptive family is very important. This is to assist with the child developing healthy attachments with their new family, support with managing the grief and loss they experience during this transition, as well as supporting new adoptive parents in developing parenting tools to respond to trauma. This is crucial for supporting children to build trust and attachment with their new family.

Similar short term outcomes can be achieved at key life transition points such as occur when dealing with change associated with adolescence and progression to secondary schooling as well as young people transitioning from school. In our experience supporting people across the life course is important as adoption identity often arise throughout a adult at such times as marriage, parenthood etcetera.

In terms of longer term outcomes, our capacity to intervene early and effectively manifestly helps change the trajectory for those who experience complex trauma and thereby mitigate long-term compromised health outcomes. This support enables adoptees to manage adoption related grief and trauma, and the subsequent mental health issues they may present with or otherwise develop.

In terms of knowledge, attitudes or skills should be developed through the activity, a more integrated national model as proposed earlier in our submission provides a more effective means of developing stronger capacity within the sector and across metropolitan, rural and regional communities

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the Discussion Paper and we look forward to our continued engagement with the ICAFFS service and wider sector in supporting intercountry adoptees and their families.

Please don't hesitate to contact either me or Nikki Hartmann, Manager Post Adoption and Forced Adoption Support Services.

Yours Sincerely



Jonathon Main
Executive General Manager Policy and Programs