

## Consultation on the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service

### Submission by International Social Service (ISS) Australia

10 March 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the issues raised in the Discussion Paper 'Capturing the voices of the intercountry adoption community in the redesign of the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service'.

#### Background

International Social Service (ISS) Australia is a not-for-profit, non-government organisation which provides a range of social work and legal services across international borders and is committed to promoting the rights and best interests of the child and reuniting children and families.

ISS Australia is the independent Australian arm of the global ISS network, with members in over 140 countries worldwide. Our General Secretariat is based in Geneva and includes the *International Reference Centre for the rights of children deprived of their family* (IRC), a highly regarded unit dedicated to education, training, research and technical assistance in intercountry adoption (ICA), local adoption and search for origins.

ISS Australia has provided both general family and adoption tracing and reunification services in Australia for over fifty years. We have been funded by the NSW Government (DCJ) since 2008 to provide post adoption tracing services in that jurisdiction.

The then LifeWorks (now Relationship Matters) and ISS Australia jointly provided the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service (ICAFSS) from 2016 to 2019. LifeWorks were the lead partner contracted by DSS and they subcontracted certain services to ISS Australia.

Under those previous arrangements, ISS Australia provided the case management (i.e. information and support) component of ICAFSS through experienced ICA social workers based in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.

From July 2016 to June 2018 ISS Australia also received non-recurrent Australian Government (DSS) funding to provide an ICA Tracing and Reunification Service. This service provided specialised search and reunion services to Australian intercountry adoptees and their adoptive parents (for those with adopted children aged under 18).

ISS Australia's experienced ICA Tracing Social Workers assisted intercountry adoptees and their families to navigate the often-complex journey of accessing their records and searching for their birth family overseas, including support to begin and progress the complex reunification process.

ISS Australia provides nationwide services from:

#### **VICTORIAN OFFICE**

Level 2, 424 William St, West Melbourne Vic 3003 Australia  
T: (+61) 3 9614 8755 E: [iss@iss.org.au](mailto:iss@iss.org.au)

#### **NSW OFFICE**

Suite 2.01, Building C, 33 Saunders St, Pyrmont NSW 2009 Australia  
T: (+61) 2 9267 0300 E: [issnsw@iss.org.au](mailto:issnsw@iss.org.au)

Local call cost:

**1300 657 843**

Anywhere in Australia

### **3.1 Addressing the needs of those who use the ICAFSS**

#### Localised Information and Support Services

As professionals in the adoption sector know, intercountry adoption often has a lifelong impact with attachment issues at its core. While ICA families' support needs may ebb and flow with various developmental stages or life events, having access to localised support from an experienced professional who understands adoption issues has clear benefits to ICAFSS clients.

A face-to-face appointment is often critical in building a trusted working relationship with an ICA family or adopted individual (either adult or young person). It can be very difficult to build initial rapport by means of telephone calls and emails only.

For this reason, under ISS Australia's previous involvement in ICAFSS, providing the information and support component, social workers would undertake home visits or other face-to-face appointments (in a café, park, ISS Australia office etc) whenever possible. This would establish a safe and trusted relationship with each client. Further support and education can then be provided by telephone or email once a trusting relationship has developed, however face-to-face visits are preferred by many ICA clients.

ISS Australia is concerned about the significant reduction in the capacity and reach of the information and support component and that the current ICAFSS model appears to only provide for a single part-time worker to provide remote case management via the telephone and email.

Furthermore, the current ICAFSS model invests heavily on the counselling component of possible services. Whilst ISS Australia acknowledges the value of the counselling services and recognises the therapeutic benefits of individualised counselling sessions, it is important to understand that counselling is not always the most appropriate intervention for all ICA clients.

For example, many issues experienced by intercountry adoptees such as identity, grief and loss tend to surface during adolescence. During this time a clear majority of teenagers prefer to engage with workers in settings in which they feel comfortable rather than clinical counselling sessions. ICAFSS current model of remote case management delivered by telephone and email may also disadvantage particularly vulnerable clients unlike the local support presence previously provided by ISS Australia.

Many parents of intercountry adopted children require support and services when they are in crisis, even if they are already engaged with a counsellor. This is because they require immediate support and cannot wait several weeks for a counselling appointment.

Having an established trusted relationship with a social worker can provide such clients with the emotional and practical support they require when it is most needed. Similarly, many ICA clients

have young children, which can make getting to a counselling appointment difficult. These clients typically prefer having a social worker visit them at home or meet with them at their workplace.

Adult intercountry adoptees have also noted that the current ICAFSS staffing structure lacks diversity in terms of having skilled workers from different cultural, racial and gender backgrounds. Clients having greater choice in who they can see and how they access support can ensure both a greater take up of services and more effective services.

ISS Australia acknowledges there is clearly a role for both the (1) *counselling* and (2) *local information and support* components in meeting the varied needs of ICA families and clients, given the complex issues and presentations in this client group. ISS Australia recommends complementary components of *counselling* and *local information and support* services in the redesign of ICAFSS.

### **3.2 Ideas for different forms of support**

ISS Australia welcomes different forms of support to be incorporated into the ICAFSS redesign. However, we note that ICAFSS annual budget of \$900,000 may make it difficult to broaden the service offering without reducing the delivery of the current and existing ICAFSS components, namely counselling, information and support services, and education. While we acknowledge that any budget increase is out of scope of this consultation process, it may be worth considering whether a modest increase in budget would enable an expansion of services without impacting existing services. ISS Australia suggests the following initiatives are considered in the redesign of ICAFSS.

#### Peer Support Model

A Peer Support Model is valuable and complementary to ICAFSS professional counselling and information and support services, as it enables intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents to share their wisdom and offer mutual support and encouragement. It also allows intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents the opportunity to connect with people who share common experiences and personally understand intercountry adoption issues.

Many adult intercountry adoptees are committed to mentoring younger adoptees, by sharing their skills and interests in a safe, non-judgmental environment. ISS Australia is aware of adult intercountry adoptees who already mentor younger adoptees through art, dance and photography classes, and suggests the expansion of the Peer Support Model is supported through the redesign of ICAFSS.

ISS Australia suggests a professional Peer Support Coordinator role is included in the redesign of ICAFSS, who could be responsible for the following:

- Developing processes to establish Peer Support Groups and conducting ICA community needs assessments.
- Developing templates for Peer Mentors to use that define their roles and responsibilities, and cover risk management and Working with Children checks.
- Assisting the promotion of Peer Support Groups.
- Providing supervision and support to Peer Mentors, including opportunities to debrief issues raised in the group, potential referral pathways, and education and training.
- Developing and updating an online Peer Support portal with resources, tools and relevant information.

Additionally, the Peer Support Coordinator could organise an annual national training for Peer Mentors that would allow Peer Mentors across Australia to connect with one another. Peer Mentors could raise issues emerging from the Groups and receive professional development training and education.

ISS Australia recommends a budget within ICAFSS is allocated to facilitate this national training as it recognises the extensive support and knowledge Peer Mentors voluntarily provide and would support their ongoing development by providing them with specific tools and information.

#### Trauma-informed therapeutic parenting training

Children adopted from overseas have often experienced early separation from their birth family, which can result in trauma and attachment issues. Common parenting approaches are often ineffective in responding to the challenging behaviours of children adopted from overseas. Therefore, adoptive parents often require specialised support and training to understand the impact of trauma to their child's brain development, as well as the strategies and tools to restore their confidence in parenting and their connection to their child.

Relationships Australia South Australia have trained professionals across Australia to deliver their six week '*Therapeutic Parenting*' course to parents of adopted or fostered children. As a result of this training, many intercountry adoptive parents have improved their parenting techniques so the trauma their child experienced can begin to heal and attachments can strengthen.

While some adoptive parents cannot afford the time to attend a six week course, ICAFSS could consider offering condensed one day therapeutic parenting training sessions or offer specific therapeutic parenting strategies during homes visits.

Previously ISS Australia's ICAFSS Information and Support Social Workers would support adoptive parents whose children presented with challenging behaviors, with tools and trauma-informed parenting techniques.

### Workshops / Information Sessions

In 2019 ISS Australia received one-off funding from the Korean Adoption Services to deliver workshops in Sydney and Melbourne to provide information and support to Korean adoptees living in Australia. The workshops focused specifically on the search and reunion process and associated issues, such as living and working in Korea and visa processes. The additional benefit of the workshops were that they facilitated the meeting of Korean adoptees and adoptive parents, allowing them to network, foster relationships and share common experiences associated with their adoption from Korea.

As information on search and reunion is one the greatest needs for intercountry adoptees and their families, events like the Australian – Korean Adoptee Information and Support Workshops can provide a large cohort of adoptees and their families with much needed information. These events are very beneficial to intercountry adoptees and some provision could be made for them in the ICAFSS service design.

An initiative of ISS Australia's previous South Australian ICAFSS worker was Ethiopian language and culture classes. These weekend classes were well attended and responded to the interests of teenage and young adult Australian-Ethiopian adoptees. The classes were set up and supported by the ICAFSS worker, in collaboration with the Australian-Ethiopian intercountry adoptees and adoptive parent community. The Australian-Ethiopian adoptees (with some parental support) have managed the group going forward.

The classes provide peer support, create links with the local Australian-Ethiopian community, and support familiarity with language, food and culture. This greatly assists Australian-Ethiopian adoptees with their identity and preparation for visits back to their country of origin.

### Preparation support for 'Homeland Journeys'

Adoptive parents are today often more motivated to travel back to their child's birth country with their adoptive child. These '*homeland journeys*' provide a great bonding experience for the entire family but more importantly allow intercountry adoptees to experience the culture and the sights, sounds, tastes and smells of where they were born.

Intercountry adoptive families often benefit from professional preparation and support in order to decide whether their family is ready for a '*homeland*' visit and why they want to go. For instance is the purpose of the trip to learn more about their child's birth country or is it to find specific information related to their child's adoption. Adult intercountry adoptees often require this support too, especially if they have never returned to their country of origin following their adoption.

ISS Australia's previous ICAFSS workers had knowledge of specific '*sending countries*' and supported intercountry adoptive families to prepare for their '*homeland*' visit. The preparation included understanding the cultural context in which the adoption occurred, discussing scenarios the family may encounter during the '*homeland journey*' and considering whether organised tours, travelling with other families or on their own, best suited their family's needs.

This model of workers understanding the cultural context of 'homeland' visits and search and reunion issues is also engrained in Link-up's support reuniting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with their family, country and culture. ISS Australia suggests preparation support for 'homeland journeys' is provided through counselling, information and support, and information sessions or workshops.

### **3.3 Search for origins**

#### Tracing and Reunion Preparatory Support

Support in accessing overseas records, and for tracing and reunification with biological family, is undoubtedly one of the most significant needs for intercountry adoptees. Many intercountry adoptees feel the need to access information about their birth family, country of origin, culture and language. However, this can be very difficult for individual adoptees who have little or no knowledge of how to navigate overseas adoption records or access information from their country of origin.

When an intercountry adoptee or an adoptive parent is contemplating searching, they should avoid undertaking this journey alone. It is important that support is available from professionals who understand the complexities and issues related to intercountry adoption tracing and reunion. Professionals can help intercountry adoptees articulate their motivations (i.e. building their identity, medical purposes, etc) and understand the multitude of outcomes and potential issues that may arise at each stage. While reunion is often positive, unfortunately in some cases it is possible that significant disappointment and/or trauma can emerge during the reunion process and ideally this process needs to be professionally managed to minimise harm to the adoptee.

ISS Australia's Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service (ICATRS), a non-recurrent DSS service that was funded from July 2016 to June 2018, was very successful in its brief period of operation. Through establishing strong partnerships with tracing partners overseas and achieving many positive outcomes, including assisting over 240 clients and nearly half of those clients were adoptive parents searching on behalf of their children adopted from overseas. ICATRS located 55 biological families overseas and facilitated 28 family reunions.

For over 50 years, ISS Australia is the only organisation specialising in intercountry post adoption tracing and family reunification. ISS Australia believes it is a fundamental right for intercountry adoptees to trace their biological family, and to know their family and medical history. The importance of professional support was reiterated at the Hague's 2015 Special Commission on adoption, with a recommendation to all signatory countries (including Australia). They recommended that *'the possibility of a child searching for his or her origins be included in the counselling and preparation of the prospective adoptive parents. When an adopted child or an adult adoptee undertakes such a search, professional support at all stages is recommended'*.

As one of our former client's eloquently stated, *'if a country decides to allow intercountry adoption, by default, the same investment and equal flow of resources and money needs to go into post adoption services. This is no longer an ethical or moral understanding, but with all the evidence we now have on hand, this should be built into underpinning policy and procedures on a national level.'* Another client stated, *'ISS has the knowledge, experience and contacts that an individual is unable to access. Also an adoptee or adoptive parent is emotionally involved and therefore may rush the process if searching on their own, where a social worker is detached and would consider all parties involved.'*

The former Commonwealth funded tracing and reunification service ICATRS complemented ICAFSS very well. When at an earlier stage ISS Australia delivered ICATRS and co-delivered ICAFSS, we often received referrals for tracing support (i.e. ICATRS) in which the clients would also present with underlying issues such as identity development, grief and loss. These clients could then be provided with support through ISS Australia's ICAFSS Information and Support Social Workers.

Similarly, clients seeking emotional and practical support from ISS Australia's ICAFSS Information and Support Social Workers could, when the need arose, seek and obtain support in accessing overseas records and/or tracing birth family through ICATRS.

A further need identified by the ICA community is access to sound knowledge and support to undertake DNA testing and genealogy searching. Skilled ICAFSS staff with expert knowledge in DNA testing could support and guide intercountry adoptees and their families to undertake testing for the purposes of ethnicity identification as well as matching when a potential birth family member is found.

The ICAFSS Discussion Paper suggests overseas tracing and support may not be incorporated into the redesign of ICAFSS. None the less, ISS Australia considers overseas tracing and support a critical service for intercountry adoptees and their families, and would like further consideration of it being funded by the Commonwealth given its previous success. We know that intercountry adoptees and their families find this service particularly critical in the post adoption journey and in their search for identity and connection.

If for some reason tracing and reunification cannot be funded, ISS Australia suggests that as a minimum ICAFSS provides preparatory counselling and support related to search and reunion. This would enable intercountry adoptees and their families to obtain information on how to access adoption records overseas and the various search options. ICAFSS could also link intercountry adoptees with other adoptees or adoptee groups who have experience searching in a particular country.

While each adoptee's search is unique, it is important to be aware that the process can be onerous and could take many months, and is often life-long. ISS Australia suggests emotional and practical support from professionals is available throughout their journey and as discoveries are made. They may discover their family member is deceased or doesn't want contact, or even illicit practice

related to their adoption. Therefore professional support and counselling is essential and needs to be available to prepare and respond to potential discoveries.

### **3.4 National accessibility**

#### Rural Regional and Remote Outreach

It is important that the intercountry adoption community in rural, regional and remote areas are afforded with information and support, as they are often isolated from other intercountry adoptees and lack access to country and adoption specific information, counselling and support. In the redesign of ICAFSS, funds could be allocated to support travel to regional areas and to the smaller states and territories.

This could occur through bi-annual visits to cities such as Hobart, Canberra, Darwin and Alice Springs, and regional and remote visits where appropriate. ICAFSS could replicate the model used by The Benevolent Society's NSW Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC).

PARC hold '*Adoption Connections*' meetings in selected regional hubs throughout NSW that allow adoptees to share common experiences and connect with others in a similar situation. Providing forewarning to the regional and rural intercountry adoption community that an ICAFSS worker will present at an '*ICA Connections*' meeting in regional or remote towns can provide an incentive for the people in the general regional or remote area to attend.

As a result of the '*ICA Connections*' meetings, ICAFSS could create online support groups to allow the participants to continue to connect, support and share common experiences. Consideration to implement virtual '*ICA Connections*' meetings could also occur, in order to provide access all ICA communities across Australia.

### **3.5 Capacity building**

#### Links with Government to assist with citizenship, passports and adoption records

Intercountry Adoption Australia (IAA) service provides useful information, telephone and email support in relation to intercountry adoption. IAA is based within the Australian Government's Department of Social Services and therefore has strong links with other Federal Government departments and states and territories central authorities. These links can assist intercountry adoptees and their families with citizenship and passport issues, as well information on how to access adoption records in Australia and overseas.

ISS Australia suggests this model is replicated in the redesign of ICAFSS, allowing ICAFSS workers to establish strong links with Federal Government departments, states and territories central authorities, which would assist ICAFSS clients some of who can find navigating the bureaucracy and red tape overwhelming.



## Establishing an ICAFSS Advisory Group

An Advisory Group is a consultative body whose function is to advise government and the broader sector on service delivery and policy, and exchange information to help build best practice in service delivery. Such a group would not have authority to make decisions or direct organisations. Advisory Groups usually consist of a range of professionals and stakeholders from the sector but importantly should also include individuals with lived experience, who ensure their views and knowledge are central to service delivery.

Intercountry adoption also has a history of Advisory Groups. In 2008 the previous National Intercountry Adoption Advisory Group (NICAAG) was established whose role was to consult and advise the Attorney-General's Department on intercountry adoption matters.

During ISS Australia's tenure delivering the DSS funded Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service (ICATRS) from 2016 – 2018, we established an ICATRS Advisory Group that met online four times a year. The ICATRS Advisory Group members included professionals from DSS, AGD and ISS Australia, academics, two intercountry adoptees and an adoptive parent. ISS Australia benefited from the members views and knowledge, as we collaboratively enhanced intercountry adoption best practice.

In NSW, both the Post Adoption Resource Centre and Institute of Open Adoption utilise Advisory Groups to consult and advise. ISS Australia suggests establishing an ICAFSS Advisory Group in order to improve best practice and ensure the views and knowledge of relevant stakeholders and the intercountry adoption community are heard.

## Conclusion

ISS Australia appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Consultation on the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service. We support this invaluable service that assists the intercountry adoption community. In summary ISS Australia recommends:

- A stronger focus on localised information and support services which allow for client face-to-face appointments.
- Coordinate and support peer mentors and more peer support groups, which acknowledges their value and how they complement professional support.
- Promote and deliver trauma-informed therapeutic parenting training to parents of children adopted from overseas.
- Provide specific '*sending country*' support for '*homeland journeys*' so families can decide if they are ready and prepared for their visit to their child's country of origin.
- Consider tracing and reunification services in the redesign of ICAFSS, or as a minimum ensure ICAFSS provides preparatory counselling and support related to search and reunion which is also available throughout their journey and as discoveries are made.
- In order to increase ICAFSS accessibility nationally, promote '*ICA Connections*' meetings in regional areas and smaller states and territories as well as implement virtual '*ICA Connections*' meetings and online support groups.

- Develop an ICAFSS Advisory Group to advise on ICA policy and service delivery which includes people with lived experience of ICA.

ISS Australia looks forward to working with the Department of Social Services on strengthening this critical service.