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Dear Mr Coutts-Trotter

Thank you for providing Adopt Change with the *Issues Paper for the Institute for Open Adoption.* We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on what should be included in the tender for the Institute of Open Adoption.

Adopt Change has advocated over a number of years for the establishment of a Centre of Excellence in pre- and post-adoptive care. We commend the New South Wales Government for committing to establish a Centre of Excellence in the form of the Institute for Open Adoption. It is critical in ensuring that vulnerable children in the out-of-home care (OOHC) system have the opportunity of a permanent loving family through open adoption.

Adopt Change believes that the Institute for Open Adoption ('the Institute') should be instrumental in bringing about positive changes in the way open adoption is understood, practiced and experienced by families and children, professionals working in Government Departments and accredited non-governmental agencies, the Judiciary and the community.

Adopt Change's vision for the Institute is that it will be the leading expert in research-led, best practice in Open Adoption in Australia. The outcomes the Institute could achieve are:
1. An increase in the number of adoptions from OOHC for children who would benefit from adoption
2. Key individuals and organisations working in and around the OOHC system are equipped with evidence-based research and practice to provide guidance in when and how to best facilitate and support open adoption
3. Contribute research evidence and practice wisdom to inform policy development
4. Provide service delivery and support for those involved in the adoption process

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Adopt Change has identified this vision and these outcomes for the Institute through understanding the gaps and needs within Australia and drawing on existing models from overseas, including the Institute of Child Development, Texas Christian University.

The following responses to the 'issues for decision' as presented in the paper are provided as Adopt Change's response to what should be included in the Tender document. As such, they do not outline the full model for a Centre of Excellence or Institute that Adopt Change is advocating for. These details can be provided on request.

Issues for decision (as outlined in the Issues Paper)

Issue 1: How should the proposed Institute become a leader in the development of best practice for open adoption?

As outlined above, the Institute should become a leader in the development of best practice for open adoption through linking research, service delivery, professional training and advocacy in order to provide children with access to stable, permanent families.

The Governance of the Institute will be critical to its success. The Tender document should require respondents to detail the establishment and scope of an Independent Board that will be responsible for the governance of the Institute. This response should include:

1. Board composition, including ideal number, skill set (reflecting the need for both expertise and achieving sustainability for the Institute), qualifications and background of the Board Members and Chair.
2. Timeframe for the establishment of the Board.
3. Frequency of meetings and proposal for the establishment of any sub-committees, such as Finance and Audit and Governance.
4. Reporting of the Institute's activities and outcomes to the Department of Family and Community Services, the Minister for Family and Community Services and the community.

Issue 2: What are the core activities that should be undertaken by the Institute? (i.e. applied research, service provision or other functions).

The organisation(s) tendering should outline the business model for the Institute and should include the following elements. If there is a consortium of organisations tendering, it should detail who is responsible for each activity:

- Target stakeholders
- Primary channels for delivering activities
- The offering to the community, government and adoptive families
- The cost recovery model
- Key activities
- Sourcing of expertise (internally and with partners)

Those tendering should demonstrate how the business model will achieve the outcomes for the Institute. Adopt Change believes that the core activities the Institute should include are:

1. **Services and support** both pre- and post-adoption, directed toward all the key adoption stakeholders: adoptive parents, children, relinquishing parents, and those who support them. This is critical in ensuring outcomes for children who are adopted.
2. Undertake **research** that is informed and responsive to the needs of practitioners, policy makers, the judiciary and families. Also, the Institute should engage in research into the longer-term outcomes of adopted children and families.
3. **Professional development and training** of those involved in the adoption process and out-of-home care system.
4. **Advocacy** and contribution to **policy development.**

Issue 3: What is the appropriate service delivery model for the proposed Institute to achieve its objective and why?

This a critical aspect of the tender document. Those tendering should explain how the service delivery model will achieve the outcomes and impact the Institute wishes to make, and how it will ensure sustainability of the Institute.

Issue 4: What needs to be included in the tender process so the Institute is in a sound position to receive funds from a combination of philanthropy, grants and fee for service?

As detailed above, a business model canvas needs to be developed outlining the key activities and cost recovery model. Information on the legal structure to support this should also be included.

Issue 5: Should the Institute play a role in the evaluation of individual interventions and the provision of expert evidence in individual matters? Why or why not?

The Institute will develop deep expertise in best practice in open adoption. In order to ensure outcomes for children are optimal, the Institute should provide expert evidence and input based on their research and experience of the children and families involved in service delivery. Those tendering should outline how best to provide independent expert evidence.

Issue 6: What priority areas of applied research should be addressed by the tender? What needs to be done in the formation of the Institute to ensure these specific functions of applied research are to be undertaken?

The organisation(s) tendering would need to identify the research priorities following consultation with stakeholders, children and families and based on their own expert knowledge. Adopt Change advocates for the research to be child-focused and for the following gaps in understanding to be prioritised:

- Emotional and mental health of adoptive children
- Support needs of adoptive children and families and education and training of adoptive parents
- Effects of multiple short-term placements in out of home care on children
- Barriers to open adoption and bringing about cultural change to improve the understanding of open adoption
- Understanding how to support contact between birth families, children and adoptive parents
- The long term outcomes for adoptive children

Issue 7: How broadly should the term 'open adoption' be interpreted?

Adopt Change advocates for research, service delivery and training to be provided for all of those involved in adoption pre- and post-adoption – birth family, adoptive parents and children (and as they grow up, adults). Research and support must cover the entire adoption process to ensure a unified, holistic approach to adoption.

Adopt Change believes all children and families involved in open adoption, including Aboriginal children, living in NSW should have access to the research, support and services provided by the Institute Of Open Adoption. The Institute should ensure that there is expertise and leadership from the Aboriginal community when developing and implementing support services for Aboriginal children.

Comprehensive understanding and support for all parties throughout the adoption process is essential for ensuring the best possible outcomes. It is the fuel that enables children and parents to have successful transitions through the adoption journey's many and varied challenges and go on to lead healthy, productive lives.

In order to effectively support these people, those involved in making decisions and supporting them – the bureaucracy, the Judiciary, Government and the community need to also be provided with research, professional development and training and support.

Issue 8: What specific powers to access information and data should the proposed Institute have?

Within the research program access to information and data will be approved by the normal Human Research Ethics requirements, including data confidentiality requirements. Adopt Change foresees that in order for the Institute to undertake research and deliver effective services and support, access to personal information on adoption cases held by FACS and accredited adoption service providers will need to be accessed if those involved in the adoption agree. Those tendering should demonstrate how they would comply with confidentiality and privacy requirements.

Issue 9: What structural elements should be included in the tender specifications and why? and
Issue 10: What structural elements should be excluded from any proposed structure and why?

Adopt Change believes the organisation(s) tendering should develop the structure that will best enable the Institute to deliver the activities and outcomes. Those tendering could also indicate how they believe the structure may need to evolve over time to ensure it meets the needs of the stakeholders involved and to achieve sustainability.

Issue 11: What specific matters need to be dealt with to allow the proposed Institute access to, and maintenance of security of, all requisite information and data for the undertaking of the applied research?

Please refer to the response to Issue 8.

Issue 12: What issues need to be considered to ensure a healthy partnership between the researcher and non-government service provider responsible for the Institute?

Adopt Change believes it is critical that the organisation(s) tendering can:
  • Demonstrate a track record and expertise in establishing collaborative working relationships with stakeholders
  • Describe the level of commitment and articulate the responsibilities of each organisation
  • Describe the relationship and the processes that will support a productive relationship between the organisations involved, and
  • Describe any conflict resolution processes in the eventuality that the relationship does not progress as expected

Issue 13: While the Institute will be independent of Government, should there be connections between the Institute and the NSW Government that need to be contained in the document establishing the Institute and, if so, what needs to be achieved? Are there any other governance issues that should be considered?

Adopt Change believes the Institute should provide an annual Business Plan and report on activities and outcomes to the NSW Government, through the Department of Family and Community Services. These should be outlined in the Reporting Requirements. The Institute should be independent of Government to pursue research, service delivery professional training and advocacy in order to develop best practice in open adoption.

For further information please contact:
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