



Settlement Services International

Comments on Issues Paper for Establishing an Institute of Open Adoption

Background about SSI

Settlement Services International (SSI) is a leading not-for-profit organisation providing a range of services in the areas of humanitarian settlement, housing services, asylum seeker assistance, disability support, foster care, and employment services in NSW.

Formed in 2000, SSI is also an umbrella organisation for 11 Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) and multicultural organisations across NSW.

SSI is the largest not-for-profit humanitarian settlement organisation in Australia servicing more than 7,500 clients per year on refugee and bridging visas. The organisation is committed to achieving a society that values the diversity of its people and actively provides support to ensure meaningful social and economic participation and to assist individuals and families reach their potential.

SSI Multicultural Foster Care Service (MFCS) is a provisionally accredited OOHC provider. Launched in early 2013, the MFCS is the first service in NSW delivered by a multicultural not-for-profit organisation funded to deliver a culturally appropriate model of foster care for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. The service currently provides case management to 115 CALD children and young people.

General comments

SSI welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the aims, functions and work of the proposed Institute of Open Adoption. SSI believes that the institute and its focus on research and best practice in open adoption is a positive development that can lead to valuable support for agencies involved in open adoption, and improved outcomes for children and young people in OOHC who go into open adoptions.

SSI has the following general comments on the function and role of the institute:

- Given the institute's proposed role in cultural change and promoting open adoption, we recommend that the tender specifications include community education, communications, training and development, and resource development as key roles of the institute.
- The relationship of the institute to OOHC agencies will have a critical impact on the capacity of the new entity to improve open adoption practice and research. Therefore we recommend the tender specifications require tenderers to demonstrate collaborative links with agencies involved in OOHC and adoption, and a track record of sector engagement and capacity building.

- Finally, we believe that the institute will be best placed to build strong relationships with OOHC agencies if it has an expert practice and advisory function in supporting them in open adoptions

Children and young people from CALD backgrounds make up a significant proportion of all those in OOHC. Approximately 15% of children in care are from a family where a language other than English is spoken at home and approximately 25% are from a CALD background (NSW Department of Community Services Research Report, Children and Young People from NESB in OOHC in NSW, 2008). Cultural diversity in OOHC, and by extension open adoption, is set to grow in the future as outlined in ACWA's trend paper *Changing Face of Fostering in Australia*.

Given the current significant representation, and projected future trends, SSI believes that there is a critical need for the institute to address a number of important issues relating to open adoption with children and young people from CALD backgrounds. The priority issues include:

- research and practice in the area of cultural matching in open adoption
- supporting children to maintain connections to their culture and heritage
- cultural competency for adoptive parents
- promoting awareness in CALD communities about open adoption

Recommendation 1: Given the breadth of these issues and the likely extent of cultural diversity in open adoption in NSW, SSI recommends that the tender specifications for the institute include a requirement for the successful tenderer to demonstrate a strong capacity to address challenges, issues and strategies in open adoptions as they pertain to CALD children and young people, birth families, adoptive parents and communities.

Research and best practice in the area of cultural matching in adoption

A central issue in open adoption practice with children and young people from CALD backgrounds is the assessment and practice of cultural matching. SSI believes that, where possible, cultural matching in adoption should be a preferred option. This is underpinned by our belief in the fundamental importance of supporting adopted CALD children to maintain a connection to their cultural heritage, language and, if relevant, religious affiliation. In our view, culturally matched placement provides a 'natural' source of access to culture and language. SSI believes that an assessment of a child's ethnicity and culture ought to be a key consideration in decisions about placements in OOHC and subsequent considerations in open adoption.

Debates about the merits of cultural matching have been occurring primarily in the UK and the USA. Key questions to emerge have been: does cultural matching produce better outcomes for children than non-matched adoptions? Can adoptive parents in non-matched adoptions meet a child's cultural needs? How much does cultural matching matter? How do we balance cultural considerations against a child's other needs? How do prioritise a cultural match alongside finding an available placement? (Barn and Kurtin, 2012)

There is an absence of research in the Australian context on cultural matching and adoption as it pertains to CALD children. In essence, there is a lack of evidence-based guidance in this area.

Recommendation 2: SSI recommends that the institute considers applied research on the issue of cultural matching, including some of the questions highlighted above, and provides advice and practice guidance to agencies involved in open adoption.

Maintenance of cultural connections

The importance of supporting children and young people to maintain a connection to their cultural heritage is outlined in the *Adoptions Act 2000* which states that:

“...in placing a child (other than an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child) for adoption, the decision maker must take into account the culture, any disability, language and religion of the child and the principle that the child’s given name, identity, language and cultural and religious ties should, as far as possible, be preserved.”

Similar requirements are embedded in the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* governing OOH. In both OOH and adoption, it is widely accepted that supporting children and young people who cannot live with their birth families to maintain a connection to their cultural heritage is central for ongoing identity development, creating a healthy sense of place and belonging, and general wellbeing.

A number of reports have addressed the importance and challenges of supporting CALD children in child protection and OOH to maintain cultural connections including: *NSW Department of Community Services Research Report: Children and Young People from non-English speaking Backgrounds in OOH in NSW* (September 2008), Social Policy Research Centre report on *Culturally Appropriate Service Provision for Culturally And Linguistically Diverse Children and Families in the NSW Child Protection System* (2009), NSW FaCS Report on the *Evaluation of the Multicultural Foster Carer Recruitment Pilot* (2012), and report on *Cultural Diversity and Child Protection* by Diversity Consultants (2012).

Children and young people who have experienced trauma are particularly vulnerable to internalising negative messages and attributing those to their self-concept and identity. For example, negative media or societal messages about a particular ethnic group that the young person identifies with may be attributed towards negative self-concept and identity (Kinniburgh and Blaustein, 2010).

Cultural maintenance is a key focus of SSI’s Multicultural Foster Care Service. We support CALD children with cultural maintenance through:

- three-way matching of the cultural background of the child, carer and caseworkers
- strong cultural care planning processes
- training and information on cultural needs for carers
- access to bilingual Cultural Aides who can assist with cultural support work
- strong engagement with community and religious organisations and leaders

Recommendation 3: That the work of the institute addresses best practice in cultural maintenance for children and young from CALD backgrounds in open adoption. This includes support for agencies, workers, children and young people and adoptive parents.

Cultural competencies for adoptive parents

The *Adoptions Act 2000* recognises the importance of having adoptive parents with appropriate skills and attributes to care for children in culturally non-matched adoptions. The Act states that:

The decision maker must take into account whether a prospective adoptive parent of a different cultural heritage to that of the child has demonstrated the following:

- a. the capacity to assist the child to develop a healthy and positive cultural identity
- b. knowledge of or a willingness to learn about, and teach the child about, the child's cultural heritage
- c. a willingness to foster links with that heritage in the child's upbringing
- d. the capacity to help the child if the child encounters racism or discrimination in school or the wider community.

These requirements are reflected in cultural competencies for adoptive parents for culturally non-matched adoptions. The Sydney based Post Adoption Resource Centre in its publication *The Colour of Difference* (Armstrong and Slaytor 2002) highlighted the following as important elements in transcultural adoptions:

- The adoptive family's attitude to the child's race and its commitment to maintaining a positive sense of the child's racial identity. This includes 'adopting' the child's culture and making continuous efforts to develop the child's pride in race and appearance.
- Being open about the adoption. This includes talking about members of the birth family, their place in the child's past and present life and the possibility of contact.
- Geographical location of the adoptive family in a multicultural area.
- Growing up with same race adopted siblings. Siblings reflected the child's appearance and reduced aloneness from being the only person of colour in a family.

Similar competencies are in place in the assessment of foster carers in NSW using *Shared Stories Shared Lives*. The assessment tool assesses the ability of prospective carers to: describe the influence of culture, identify strategies to maintain a child's culture, and discuss a range of strategies to assist a child to respond to prejudice and racism.

Recommendation 4: That the institute supports agencies, workers and adoptive parents to further define, assess and develop cultural competencies for caring for CALD children and young people in culturally non-matched open adoptions.

Recommendation 5: That the institute considers applied research on the conditions that generate optimal outcomes for CALD children and young people in open adoptions, including outcomes for children and young people in culturally non-matched adoptions.

Promoting awareness in CALD communities about open adoption

We note that the issues paper identifies one of the potential roles for the institute as being to encourage people to consider adoptions of children in care by identifying impediments. Impediments to people from CALD communities considering adoptions include access to information and limited awareness of open adoption in NSW, and cultural variations in understanding of adoption based on exposure to different legal systems and arrangements in their countries of origin.

There is evidence that many cultures have traditional practices of caring for the children of others when needed (e.g., children whose parents die or are unable to take care of them may be taken in by extended family or community members). How this occurs (e.g., state or community managed), who undertakes this role (eg, elders or government officials) and the ways in which communities and families conceptualise the practice of adoption varies across countries and cultures, and indeed communities that have settled in NSW.

SSI believes that there is a need for strong community engagement and education with CALD community leaders, organisations, service providers, networks and ethnic media to promote awareness of open adoption in CALD communities. This will increase the potential for recruiting a diversity of adoptive parents who can care for the significant proportion of culturally diverse children and young people being considered for open adoption in the years ahead.

Similar challenges are experienced by OOHc agencies in NSW in promoting awareness of foster care and recruiting foster carers from CALD communities. SSI has had significant experience in working with other organisations to address these challenges having conducted foster care awareness-raising and recruitment campaigns in Arabic and Greek communities. We have also conducted similar campaigns in five Pacific background communities on behalf of ACWA as part of Fostering NSW initiatives.

ACWA in its trend paper *Changing Face of Fostering in Australia* notes that almost half of Australians (43%) have at least one parent born overseas, and this diversity brings with it different approaches to parenting, concepts of families and attitudes to foster care. In the context of OOHc, the paper highlights the importance of targeted awareness raising campaigns in CALD communities and recognising CALD communities as untapped sources of carers. SSI believes that similar challenges and opportunities exist in the open adoption context.

Recommendation 6: That the institute implements community engagement and education strategies to raise awareness of open adoption in CALD communities and that this be conducted in collaboration with CALD organisations, service providers, networks and ethnic media.

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References

- *Children and Young People from non-English speaking Backgrounds in OoHC in NSW* (NSW Department of Community Services Research Report, September 2008)
- *Culturally Appropriate Service Provision for Culturally And Linguistically Diverse Children and Families in the NSW Child Protection System* (Social Policy Research Centre report, 2009)
- *Report on the Evaluation of the Multicultural Foster Carer Recruitment Pilot* (NSW FACS, 2012)
- *Cultural Diversity and Child Protection* (Diversity Consultants 2012)
- *The colour of difference: Journeys in Transracial adoption* (Armstrong, S & Slaytor, P. 2002)
- *Trend Paper: ifoster2: The Changing Face of Fostering in Australia* (Association of Children's Welfare Agencies ACWA 2013)

- *Treating Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents: How to foster resilience through attachment, regulation and competency* (Blaustein, M.E. & Kinniburgh, K.M. 2010)
- *Transcultural Adoption in Britain: Politics, Ideology, Reality* (Barn and Kurtin, 2012)
- *Pathways of Care: Longitudinal study on children and young people in out-of-home care in New South Wales* (Paxman, M., Tully, L., Burke, S. and Watson, J. 2014)