

Report from Committee Chair for the Annual General Meeting – 6 March 2020

It has been another busy year for the adoption sector. 310 adoptions were finalised in Australia in the last financial year. For NSW there were 14 local adoptions, 13 intercountry adoptions and 165 known child adoptions¹.

Overall, there has been a 64% decline in adoptions in Australia in the 25-year period between 1995 and 2019, with a low recorded in 2016. Since this time there has been a rise of 12 %, attributed to 'known child adoptions', specifically the adoption of children by their foster carers, due largely to the policy changes in New South Wales resulting in 136 children adopted by their foster carer/s last financial year. In the ten years between 2008–09 and 2018–19, Australian adoptions by foster carers rose by 306%².

There is little comprehensive data on the extent of post adoption support accessed by children, adults and their families. The Post Adoption Resource Centre, NSW Government Adoption Information Unit and International Social Services are the primary source of practical, therapeutic and search assistance in NSW. Although the increase in adoption numbers is small, there is anecdotal evidence families are increasingly seeking support to navigate aspects of their 'open adoptions'. Sector wide advocacy for additional resourcing for post adoption support for children and families, regardless of adoption pathway, continues.

Significant efforts by individuals and organisations have been invested in navigating the NSW Government's Permanency Support Program (PSP) reforms. 2019 was the first full calendar year of the new policy and the associated practice guidelines and contracting. Department of Communities and Justice and Funded Service Providers (the agencies designated to provide out of home care in

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Adoptions Australia Report 2018-19

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Adoptions Australia Report 2018-19

www.aihw.gov.au/reports/adoptions/adoptions-australia-2018-19/contents/table-of-contents

NSW) spent much time ensuring workable, collaborative decision making, defining roles and responsibilities.

As we know the NSW Government's PSP reforms identify adoption as a preferred long-term order over foster care for children who are unable to live with their family. In the last year, amendments were enacted to the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* to enshrine practice in legislation. The changes mean the Children's Court is prevented from making an order allocating parental responsibility to the Minister for more than two years in circumstances where the 'permanency plan' is restoration, guardianship or adoption. Further, the Children's Court is required to find whether there is a possibility of restoration 'within a reasonable period' not exceeding 24 months, unless there are special circumstances warranting a longer period. The NSW Government has funded programs to support restoration wherever possible.

This legislative amendment is significant for this committee as our membership is diverse and our agencies are tasked with working, at various points along a continuum, with people impacted by the changes. Some committee members talk to the benefits that the permanency of adoption provides for children affected by significant abuse and trauma. Others are cautious about adoption as a solution for child protection matters. Further still, some members bring expertise learned from past policies such as 'Forced Adoption', 'Stolen Generations' and 'Forgotten Australians'. Indeed the 'Family is Culture' Independent Review of Aboriginal Children in OOHC released by the NSW Government in November 2019³, articulates well the impact of past policies on Aboriginal communities and their attitude to Adoption of Aboriginal children in OOHC.

This diversity is a strength of the committee. Members do not need to agree on specific issues to enable us to address our aim of ensuring "permanent family placements for children who are unable to remain with, or be restored to, family" while balancing "the needs and rights of children & young people, birth families, adoptive and permanent care families"⁴. As Committee members we need to engage in collaborative discussion rather than advocating one position over another. The children, adults and families we are working with now exist within a unique legislative, policy and historical climate. Lessons from the past, hopes for the future and the needs of now should be balanced to ensure all are meaningfully supported.

This committee has evolved to include subcommittees aimed at addressing these needs through specific focus; for the committee to maintain momentum we need to remain passionate in 2020

³ www.familyisculture.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/726329/Family-Is-Culture-Review-Report.pdf

⁴ COAPC Constitution 2013

about legislative review and advocacy, providing training & education and considering impact that can be made by, and with, social media.

I noted earlier it has been a busy year for the sector, particularly those affected by the PSP reforms. This has resulted in limited time for each of us to dedicate to our voluntary roles in this forum, I urge each of us to bring renewed energy to the collective intent of this committee.

I thank wholeheartedly the work of the individual members of the committee who bring insight and experience, we acknowledge your commitment to ensuring all voices are heard. We thank too Brooke Bengston and the COAPC training Subcommittee Members; Jodie Mollison for guiding the legislative subcommittee when necessary and the newly recruited members of the Social Media & Community Education subcommittee. Significant thanks too, to the members of the management committee, Vice Chair - Renee Carter, Secretary - Betty Luu, Treasurer - Jacinda Wing, and Ordinary Members - Damon Martin and Kay Berry. Your time is much appreciated particularly given the demands of organising the Australasian Post Adoption Meeting hosted by us and held in October 2019.

We have met each quarter over the last 12 months, welcoming guests and new members. We farewell Robin Turner and Catherine Lynch. Thank you for your time and we wish you well for the future. We have benefited from the research undertaken by the Institute of Open Adoption Studies at Sydney University and look forward to supporting them where possible - including preparation to host the International Conference on Adoption Research in 2022. The summary of legal processes and implications for discharging adoption orders from Emil Ford, the personal reflection from a young person on her care journey and Gabby's presentation today have provided diverse opportunities to understand the many aspects of adoption.

I look forward to working together to identify areas of collaborative practice in 2020!

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