



Forced Adoption Support Services – Post Implementation Review (PIR)

Background

In the past, the adoption of children of unwed mothers was common. During the peak period of 1951 to 1971, approximately 150,000 adoptions occurred in Australia. Many of these adoptions were arranged without willing or informed consent, were unethical, dishonest and in many cases illegal, and are therefore considered ‘forced’.

Following the National Apology for Forced Adoptions on 21 March 2013, the Commonwealth Government announced its response to the 2012 Community Affairs References Committee inquiry into the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices*. This included the funding of Forced Adoption Support Services (FASS). These services were established in 2015, and designed to complement and enhance existing services funded by state and territory governments.

Seven organisations are funded \$5.7 million over four years (until 30 June 2021) to provide coordinated specialist support to people affected by past forced adoptions through:

- a national 1800 helpline answered locally during weekdays – **1800 21 03 13**;
- referrals and information based on individual needs;
- where possible, face-to-face support, casework, emotional support, records tracing, assistance with family searching and intermediary services, group activities, peer support, and facilitation to therapeutic counselling; and
- small grants to build sector capacity and enhance group-healing activities where appropriate/possible.

PIR Approach and Consultations

In June 2017, the Department of Social Services engaged Australian Healthcare Associates (AHA) to conduct a PIR of the FASS using a mixed-methods approach. The PIR included a national public survey, provider site visits, focus groups and interviews with those affected by forced adoption.

AHA consulted with a wide range of stakeholders including representatives from peer support and advocacy groups, state and territory government representatives delivering similar services, academics with interest in this area, FASS providers, and people affected by past forced adoption policies and practices including mothers, fathers, adoptees and siblings.

The PIR final report was completed in March 2018.

Report Findings and Recommendations

The PIR report outlines many promising results, including high levels of satisfaction among service users, particularly with the general information, emotional support and general counselling provided. The report findings demonstrate a continued need for these services.

The report findings and recommendations identify a number of areas to improve on the existing strengths of the program and enhance service delivery, including:

- Greater advertising and promotion of FASS, online promotion, and the development of a clear and distinct profile and identity so people are more aware of the support available to them.
- Reviewing areas for improvement in the provision of some services, including access to therapeutic counselling¹, records searching, DNA testing and to peer support (particularly in regional and remote areas) as well as the training needs of FASS staff to ensure a specialist service.
- Most FASS are required to provide between five and ten per cent of their funding towards small grants to fund peer support groups and other organisations to support sector capacity building, group healing and community support. The report noted that the small grants policy could benefit from greater clarity and improved transparency.

Responding to the PIR report

The Department would like to thank the approximately 400 stakeholders who contributed to the PIR by providing feedback through the national survey and in depth consultations. The views and experiences of stakeholders have deepened the Department's understanding of how effectively the FASS have been implemented, challenges encountered, and where service enhancements could be made to better meet the needs of people affected by past forced adoption policies and practices.

Since receiving the final PIR report in March 2018, the Department has been considering the report's findings and working to progress suggested improvements in partnership with the FASS providers. The Department has implemented changes to the DSS website² to improve promotion of the FASS and is continuing to work with FASS providers on further promotion. The FASS Operational Guidelines and Small Grants Guidelines are being revised in consultation with FASS providers to improve consistency and clarity, with a focus on the above-identified areas for service improvement. Some fact sheets and other resources are in development to assist the FASS help those affected by past forced adoption to better understand the services available to them.

The PIR will form a baseline for future evaluations, as well as inform the future policy direction for the program. It will better position the FASS into the future ensuring services assist and support people affected by past forced adoption so they can heal from the impacts of their experiences, strengthen relationships, and improve their well-being.

¹ 'Therapeutic counselling' refers to formal counselling provided by a professional, (e.g. psychologist/social worker/counsellor) typically informed by a therapeutic framework.

² Please see: <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children/programmes-services/family-relationships/forced-adoption-practices/support-services-for-people-affected-by-past-forced-adoption-policies-and-practices>