

Submission to the Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas

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22 April 2005

My wife and I are the proud parents of a 16 month old daughter adopted from China in November 2004.

We formally entered the intercountry adoption program in Victoria in February 2003. The Victorian program is run by the InterCountry Adoption Service (ICAS) unit of Department of Human Services (DHS).

It is made clear by ICAS that the process is designed to look after the best interests of the child and not the prospective parents. Parents are applicants to be vetted rather than clients to be guided. For a prospective parent this is somewhat problematic, as the desire to parent provides a strong emotional driver. For us, adoption was not an altruistic act – it was about forming a family and to raise a child in the best way that we could, and the sooner we could begin the better.

So time becomes a really important issue, particularly the time taken to get through the screening at the Australian end of the process to the point where a file is sent overseas. In our case it took over one year for this part of the process, with no delays on our part. This seems like an overly long time.

It would appear that there are two main contributors to the length of time taken for approval. One is the large number of steps and scrutiny to get through to achieve approval at the Australian end. The other is the limited departmental resource available to process the many applicants through all of these steps.

The process for us from the point of our Expression of Interest until approval by ICAS (all prior to our file being sent overseas) generated some 172 pages of documentation including application providing full personal financial details, full medicals, police checks, 5 referee letters, Lifestories answering 114 questions each, China country project, Genogram, former medical specialist letters, Homestudy generated from 9.5 hours of in home interviews, 3 days of Education Group, Country Information Night and 2 hours further interview at ICAS.

This process from Expression of Interest to reach Australian approval took 11 months at a cost of \$3950, paid to ICAS. From approval to our file being sent to China took a further 3 months and an additional \$1570 paid to ICAS. Allocation of a child by China took a further 6 months with an additional \$1000 payment to ICAS, giving a total of \$6520.

The large number of steps required to achieve approval at the Australian end reflects the high degree of scrutiny applied to prospective parents. While being assessed, the process feels intense and intrusive and non-transparent. There is a feeling of powerlessness going through this process and it was our genuine commitment that saw us continue. The ICAS department had pointed out to us that this is a process of self-selection, and it would appear that the process may be designed to test the real commitment of prospective parents. It may also be due to a very cautious approach to assessment.

The limited department resource becomes very evident in the great deal of time spent waiting for paperwork to be addressed or for required sessions such as compulsory Education Groups. In Victoria, fees are charged effectively on a pay as you go basis, although it is not clear whether these fees go into consolidated revenue rather than helping the department to grow. I would be quite happy to pay full fees if it would in turn support the resourcing required to efficiently and effectively process prospective parents.

To comment with respect to the specific terms of reference for this enquiry:

1 Any inconsistencies between state and territory approval processes for overseas adoptions

The process does differ between States in Australia and then differs again between the US and Australia. There would seem to be some opportunity to find a best practise amongst all of these different approaches. The US makes use of private agencies which can get a file overseas in 4 months from the point of application. This may provide an indication to an improved process where policy could be set centrally or nationally, and executed through properly resourced and motivated private agencies.

2. Any inconsistencies between the benefits and entitlements provided to families with their own birth children and those provided to families who have adopted children from overseas

The baby bonus has a 26 week limit on age of child for eligibility. All children adopted from China are older than this by the nature of the process in China and so are excluded from this benefit by what appears to be an arbitrary restriction.

In summary, there is a need to streamline the process both to the benefit of prospective parents and to the overall benefit of children who will ultimately be brought into their new families sooner.

Yours Sincerely

John Hardisty