

The route to becoming an adoption support agency

Kunu Gordon explains how she and a small group of other psychotherapists worked together towards registration



Kunu Gordon

Kunu is a founder member, therapist and manager of ASART, and has counselled people with adoption issues throughout her 20-year career. Her main therapeutic work has been with Cruse – Bereavement Care and the Student Counselling Service at Surrey University. Kunu has an MA in Philosophy and Psychology, an MSc in Psychological Counselling and a senior accreditation from BACP. Her private practice is based in Guildford.

**kunugordon@yahoo.co.uk
www.kunugordon.counselling.co.uk
www.adoptioncounselling.com**

Since the passing, in December 2005, of amendments to the 2002 Children’s Act, it has been illegal, without government registration as an adoption support agency (ASA), to counsel anyone for whom any aspect of adoption is a main focus.

There are two routes to registration as an ASA: one is for large organisations, such as Adoption UK or the Post-Adoption Centre (PAC), and the other is for small groups. Small in this context means three people or fewer, and individuals who wish to register on their own come under this category. One of the advantages of registering as a small group is that expenses can be shared. Other advantages are discussed later.

Fees

Registration and annual fees total around £4,000 for the large ASAs. Small agencies are charged a registration fee of £414 and an annual fee of £345. It is rumoured that a middle band is going to be introduced to make registration more manageable for medium-size organisations.

Registering is not only for counsellors. It is for any organisation concerned with adoption: for example, agencies that place children for adoption, including social services teams.

In September 2006 I attended an Adoption Counselling Expertise (ACE) course run by PAC. At the very beginning, we were informed that we would be legally obliged to register if we wanted to practise as adoption counsellors. Many people had protested against this legislation but to no avail. At first, nobody seemed worried about this news, but, as the end of the course approached, we began to wonder what we had to do. The more we found out, the more daunting it seemed.

That left four

Several course members were social workers so were unaffected, while another quickly paired up with someone she knew in her hometown who was already practising as an adoption counsellor. That left four of us who wanted to register but did not want to go it alone. We were not keen on breaking down into two pairs, partly because it would have cost everybody twice as much but mainly because we wanted mutual support and input. We had been on an intense 20-day course, spread out over six months, and had developed close relationships. I, for one, relished the idea of remaining in contact with at least some members of the group and co-operating in a vital project.

There were problems that we had to surmount from the start. One was that registration as a small ASA stipulated a group of not more than three and we were four. We boldly decided that we would argue in our application that we were not more than three full-time equivalent counsellors. In fact, the likelihood of using anything like this putative number of 120 hours per week was remote. Another difficulty was that we all practised at a considerable distance from each other and had our own therapy rooms. We made another bold decision: we would describe ourselves as associates and we substituted this word every time the many forms we had to fill in used the words ‘staff’ or ‘employees’.

Our first practical decision was to find a

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venue that would suit all of us. We came up with the Thistle Hotel at Victoria Station. So the coffee lounge of this grand old hotel, dating from the era of the great railway hotels, became a scene of intense and creative activity over several Saturdays between March 2006 and January 2007.

A 'responsible' person

When we looked closely at the application forms, we found that we needed to select one person as the 'responsible person' and 'manager' of our little group. I, being semi-retired, had theoretically more time available than the others who were working full time. I also had some managerial experience. I therefore said that I would take on these roles, but only if I could work as a therapist just as much as the other three. Again, we boldly declared in our application that this was our intention, and I assumed these impressive titles. I did not altogether know what I was letting myself in for. Among other things, I had to apply for a CRB disclosure, obtain a statement from my GP to say that I was sound physically and mentally and another from my bank manager to say that I was solvent and managed my account well. The main task though, over which everybody co-operated, was that of producing a statement of purpose and a business plan, together with child protection, complaints and associates' disciplinary policies and procedures. Fortunately, one of our number had been involved in a large ASA which had made a similar application and gone through a subsequent inspection so had a clear idea about what was needed. In October 2006, we submitted our application, which comprised a completed application form of about 20 pages, various supplementary documents and all the main documents mentioned above ... and paid our fee.

The application – and the interview

Shortly before Christmas we were given a date, early in the New Year, for an interview with an inspector. It was made clear that I had to be interviewed alone. There was a long pre-interview questionnaire demanding mini-essays on ten different questions such as 'How will you promote equality and diversity for people who use and who work in your service?' and 'How will you protect the people who use your service from abuse?' As a group we discussed how we would answer these questions. I fine-tuned the answers

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and sent them back as required. Over the Christmas break I prepared myself by looking over the documents and answers we had prepared and also studied the legal requirements ('the regs') and minimum standards on which everything was based until I knew them really well.

At the time of our application, the Commission for Social Care Inspection was in charge, though subsequently Ofsted has taken over. When the day arrived, I met with an inspector at a local CSCI office in a remote part of Surrey, who was rigorous but not intimidating. She went through everything that we had submitted but did not question a single one of the three items we feared would be unacceptable. At the end she complimented me, as representative of our small organisation, on a very thorough and clear application. Two or three days later our registration came through. The date – 19 January 2007 – remains in our minds as a red letter day.

Policies and procedures

The process did not stop there. Along with the registration document came the information that we would be inspected within a year. There was no guidance as to what would be required for our inspection but again the knowledge of the person who had been through all of this within another organisation was invaluable. The next few months were busy. We produced 20 more policies and procedures and similar documents amounting to a further 53 pages, plus items such as record keeping, client evaluation and associate appraisal forms.

During June 2008 we were told that we were to be inspected. We were given the name of our inspector who quickly contacted me. He explained that he would interview me beforehand and plan how the inspection would be conducted. In the meantime, I was sent Ofsted evaluation questionnaires to be distributed to some of our clients and another pre-interview self-assessment form of 14 sides that had to be completed by me. We were given two months to get everything together.

Before the actual inspection we had to send to the inspector, electronically, every single document that we had produced and make sure that there were some 20 items in every associate's HR file. What gave us most concern was that the inspector not only wanted to read a sample of case notes but also to actually interview some of our clients. We knew we could not refuse, so went through a list of all those who were still in therapy and selected a few who we felt were not too vulnerable. These were scattered over quite a wide area and the inspector was disinclined to travel far. In the end only two interviews were carried out and one of these was on the phone. Some clients we had put forward were quite disappointed not to have seen the inspector! We were told that the two clients who were interviewed gave positive feedback, as did those who responded to the Ofsted questionnaire.

The inspection

On the day of the actual inspection we all met in the house of one of the associates. The inspector was with us from 11am to 5pm. He was an affable man and seemed genuinely interested in what we were doing. He engaged each associate in conversation, so that, in an informal way, he was interviewing us individually, asking at times quite penetrating questions which could have caught us off-guard had we not thought through carefully what we might be asked. He looked through HR files and read case notes. Finally, someone who had recently joined us gave a presentation of her work with children and families, illustrated by photos displayed on a laptop. This clearly impressed the inspector.

After several weeks we received our report and our rating. We had been given a 'good' on every item and an overall 'good'. We had been told that the only higher grade – 'outstanding' – was never awarded at a first inspection. A fitting reward for many months of hard work. We were more than pleased! [P](#)

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