

Changesmith

Summary Report

Review of the Intercountry Adoption
Family Support (ICAFS) Service

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Summary Report

“Intercountry adoption is a formal process that occurs when an Australian citizen or permanent resident, who is residing in Australia, adopts a child from overseas through the authorities in his or her Australian State or Territory”¹.

Intercountry adoption (ICA) occurs within a context of declining adoption rates overall; where there are multiple situations where a child may be adopted or live permanently in a family of a different race or cultural background; and importantly, within a community that is increasingly cognisant that “adoption is a lifelong experience”².

The ICAFS program was developed as a partnership between LifeWorks Relationship Counselling and Education Services (lead agency) and International Social Service. Funding is split evenly between the two partners.

As of January 2019, demand for LifeWorks counselling is growing at a level that cannot be sustained with current funding. Meanwhile, demand for ISS case work program has dropped off and the program is no longer cost effective against the objectives and targets of the program.

Upon the conclusion of the 3-year contract on 30 June 2019, it is recommended that the ICAFS program be recalibrated and transitioned into a centralised model of referral, support, casework and counselling, run directly by LifeWorks, with relevant components contracted out to key personnel where required.

Review Brief

The objective of the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service is to provide counselling, case management, relationship education and support that will assist with family functioning, relationship strengthening, attachment support, parenting skills, and individual and child well-being³.

The program consists of a three-year contract split equally between lead agency (LifeWorks) and International Social Service (ISS) through subcontracting arrangements. The original contract commenced on 1 June 2016 to finish on 30 June 2019. LifeWorks runs intake and individual counselling, while ISS runs the casework component (more generally known as information and referral support).

There is a need to review and consider possible changes before a new subcontracting agreement is negotiated. Changesmith Consulting was contracted to review ICAFS in November 2018.

The brief included a review of:

¹ Intercountry Adoption Australia, Australian Government. <https://www.intercountryadoption.gov.au/>

² Stakeholder feedback for this report further amplified this point

³ DSS Activity Work Plan 1/7/17-30/6/18

- Attributes of people accessing the program (data on intake and referrals, including between ISS and LifeWorks);
- People who appear to be under-represented in accessing the program;
- Views of different stakeholders on the model and what should change - including key State / Territory government departmental contacts and other stakeholders; Associates, adult adoptees and relevant (adoptee and adoptee family) support groups.
- Effectiveness of the counselling and case management activity itself, including targets and utilisation of staff / Associates working in the program.

The scope of this report is limited to the specific ICAFS program itself, as it is currently designed and implemented.

Methodology

Documents held by LifeWorks about the service development, model, contract arrangement and partnership were reviewed. Service data was reviewed, including referrals and demand over the 3 years to late 2018, from information provided by ISS and LifeWorks, and included an examination of Penelope Data. A desk top review of intercountry adoption policy context was also undertaken, to inform interviews with key stakeholders. The policy context and history of intercountry adoption is complex and dynamic, and a number of references are noted in the paper.

The research phase was undertaken between late November and January. The aim was to gain appreciation of the expectations of the program by different key stakeholders, perceptions of where the program is working well and where changes might be required.

Interviews

Interviewees included:-

1. Damon Martin, Manager Intercountry Adoption Service / Manager, NSW Office / Manager, Special Search Service
2. Melissa Hanning, Information and Caseworker at ISS (QLD)
3. Sandi Petersen, ISS information and referral (casework) worker (SA)
4. Lynelle Long, Founder of Intercountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV)
5. Gianna Mazzone, Intercountry Adoption Support Coordinator at the LifeWorks Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service and Ann Smith Executive Manager Service Development and Quality at LifeWorks.
6. Susan Gregory, LifeWorks Associate, Counsellor and Consultant (QLD)
7. Hana Crisp – adult adoptee (Vic)
8. Elizabeth Hallam, Adoption Coordinator, Adoptions, Permanency and After Care Support Services, Communities Tasmania
9. Michael Coutts, Manager Adoption and Permanent Care Services, Child Safety Services, South East Region and Liz O'Flynn| Senior Team Leader, Adoption Services, Child Safety Services, South East Region, Queensland Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women (DCSYW)
10. Marian Brown, Supervisor Adoption Services, Out of Home Care Directorate, Department for Child Protection, South Australian Government
11. Jo Maning, Director, Intercountry Adoption Policy and Program Management, Families and Children Branch, Department of Social Services
12. Nikki Hartmann, Relationships Australia - Manager of Post-Adoption Support Services (PASS) and Forced Adoption Support Service (FASS), RA South Australia.

13. Trevor Jordan, Jigsaw Queensland Inc.

Also identified, but not completed at time of writing:

1. Meike Zielinski, LifeWorks Associate (Vic) (invited)
2. Adoptive family (invited – one comment provided for the report)
3. VANISH (Victorian post-adoption support network)
4. PCA Families (invited)
5. NSW adoption service provider

Lynelle Long from ICAV provided comments from numerous adult adoptees for inclusion as relevant.

Notes from interviews were returned to interviewees for fact and context checking. The use of non-attributed quotes was preferred by most interviewees, so quotes are non-attributed. There was interest in viewing the completed report by numerous interviewees.

There was wide ranging discussion with stakeholders that reflected the breadth and complexity of the intercountry adoption issue, and related services and supports to adoptive families and adult adoptees.

Detailed analysis was also undertaken of intake and referrals, demand and staff/Associate allocation across adoptee countries of origin, family state of residence and the categories of clients i.e. families, parents and adult adoptees; pre- and post-adoption. In addition, client records on Penelope were analysed as well as ISS intake activity records.

Model Effectiveness – Key issues and Findings

Mode of delivery – face-to-face, phone or online

Client engagement and counselling practice modes are a common point of contention in locations outside Australia's major capital cities.

Part of the rationale for the case management model was that clients need to have a choice of face-to-face support, and for some clients, they cannot get into a capital city office to meet a support worker or counsellor. LifeWorks Associates do tend to rely on phone or skype and, in general, are not asked to visit a client at a distance. Other post-adoption support practitioners interviewed are also somewhat constrained, and also tend to rely on phone and online connections where a client lives a long way from the relevant capital city.

While the ICAFS model assumed a significant proportion of face-to-face engagement by ISS information and referral case workers, in reality, this is not the case. The percentage of time spent in face-to-face delivery is less than originally assumed in the design of the model. The table below summarises the last 18 months in terms of delivery mode.

Mode of support by ISS to clients

Source: ISS intake records

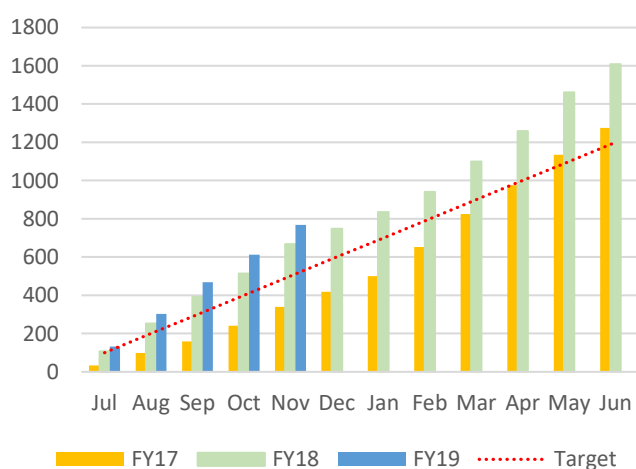
	2017-18		July to Dec 2018	
Face-to-face	49	32%	3	11%
Phone	72	47%	14	50%
Email	25	16%	10	36%
Event / workshop	3	2%	0	
Home visit	0	0	1	3.6%
Not stated	3	-		
TOTAL	152		28	

These figures show that ISS provided face-to-face support to 32% of their clients in 2017-18. There are clearly some barriers to visiting clients at home, but time is not one of them. In the past year, face-to-face demand has not risen and indeed has dropped further to 11% in the first 6 months of 2018-2019.

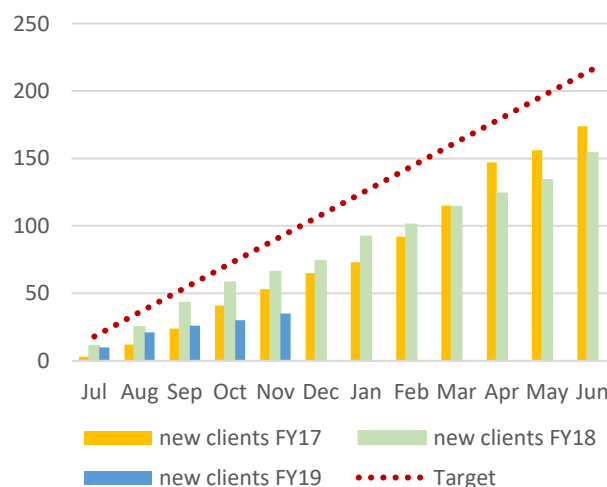
Service demand

Counselling is valued by all stakeholders; however timely availability is now at risk due to escalating demand while demand drops within the ISS component of the program. *“Counselling is useful, and we know it is appreciated. If there was unmet need in counselling, it could work to move resources around to enhance the benefits – not stick with what is”* (Practitioner).

ICAFS Counselling hours against target



ICAFS Casework against target



Education and group activities

LifeWorks has delivered 4 webinars with follow-up respondent survey. Several stakeholders volunteered the latest webinar in positive terms and indicated their willingness to forward links and promotional material about such resources to pre-and post-adoption family and adoptee networks in different States.

ISS staff engage actively with local community groups; e.g. morning tea with a Korean families group. In contrast, the ICAFS model has been designed to enable nationally produced resources to be disseminated online – as a LifeWorks role. If there were more resources, community development activity would be an evident priority. However, the dilemma currently is the lack of active demand for ISS funded supports at local level, while the more cost-efficient model delivered by LifeWorks is constrained by lack of resources.

Factors that have impacted service model effectiveness

1. **Falling demand for ISS service** has meant the geographically devolved, community-based model is not cost-effective in terms of per-client costs.
2. **Demand for LifeWorks counselling has accelerated** as the program has become established, but resources to offer sessions within a reasonable time frame are about to run out for the FY.
3. **Education activity** by LifeWorks has been delivered primarily online, and there is high level of interest and enthusiasm to do more, expressed by both LifeWorks and by stakeholders.
4. **Adoption competency, in particular intercountry adoption competency, is a missing feature within mainstream community support**, counselling and other mental health services. However, in terms of development of an adoption-competent workforce, there is a 'sweet spot' where a niche cohort of clients' needs to be able to connect with accessible but experienced counsellors, when working through issues relating to adoption, with a level of choice over delivery mode, background and professional expertise of the support worker or counsellor. There may be an opportunity to develop a secondary consultation support for practitioners who are working well with ICA's but could benefit from expert advice and support in their work.
5. Respective State and Territory service models and funded services impact the gaps and opportunities for ICAFS. The ICAFS program appears to be a valued 'gap filler' in SA, VIC, QLD, TAS and NT, while the systems in WA and NSW appear to have less need for ICAFS.

Future demand on ICAFS

The demographics of the ICA population are changing, and the ICA debate is being influenced by social and political changes regarding past and current adoption practices in Australia See Appendix One for further discussion of this.

Overall numbers of pre-and immediate post-adoption families are in decline (down to 65 per year across the whole of Australia), and that established post-adoption families are moving through the 2005 'ICA peak' with children in their teenage and early adult years. By 2020, 'peak ICA' will have shifted into adulthood. Therefore, we can expect demand for support services from adult adoptees to grow at the expense of young families.

Some practitioners commented that the pre-adoption education focus of recent years has acted as an ‘early intervention’ to avert family pressures down the track. However, the experience is challenging for adoptive families, siblings and the adoptees themselves.

“If pre-adoption education is better, and parents are doing it better, does this mean the next generation won’t have mental health or identity issues? No – ICA is a fundamentally challenging experience” (adult adoptee)

“It won’t necessarily prevent a thriving life, but the experiences, specific challenges, and consequences will mean adoptees will still need to grapple with identity and reconnect with the birth country and/or family” (adult adoptee)

For ICA families who have accessed ICAFS, the access to a support service has been greatly valued. The conflation of tracing support with ICAFS has made it difficult to analyse the components of support specific to ICAFS that don’t relate to tracing. Some practitioners argue that search and tracing is inextricably conflated with any long-term support service within the ICA sector. The initial scope of ICAFS request for tender excluded reunification and tracing; ongoing case management support or mental health support and counselling for deep and complex trauma. This was amended prior to service commencement to allow access for adult adoptees to information, referral and casework and or counselling, via the LifeWorks intake.

Critical success factors for a future ICAFS model

The objective of the ICAFS model is to provide counselling, case management, relationship education and support that will assist with family functioning, relationship strengthening, attachment support, parenting skills, individual and child well-being.⁴

This objective is not currently being met in as cost-effective a way as is necessary, given the demand. Information and referral / casework demand is falling in line with falling numbers of ICA finalised adoptions, so changes will be necessary to create a viable cost-effective model of service for the components experiencing an escalation in demand.

A number of critical success factors can be identified for continuing development of a successful, cost-effective model:

Recalibrate expectations

The model cannot deliver a funded tracing program nor fully meet the emerging needs of adult adoptees, some of whom require long-term psycho-social supports that are beyond the capacity of the ICAFS model.

⁴ DSS Activity Work Plan 1/7/17-30/6/18

However, ICAFS can deliver a high-quality therapeutic support program that is accessible, affordable and of high enough quality to attract demand through word of mouth, promotion of the 1300 number and via educational resources disseminated through stakeholder networks.

The implication of this factor will be the need for active and clear communications with key stakeholders, which will include strengthening of program support within HQ and refreshed attendance with sector networks and forums.

Continue focus on high quality services that meet a clear need / fill an identified gap

There is a demand for counselling and satisfaction with the affordable, adoption competent counselling model on offer, albeit always with the need for practitioners to keep improving and learning.

Engage with adoptive families and adult adoptees to develop program

There is a view among some adult adoptees that effort is required to further develop the role and inclusion of ‘experts through experience’ – i.e. start to build a cohort of psych trained ICAs and work closely with local post adoption services – as they employ ‘thoroughly processed’ people.

“Need to build the field of counsellors for the future e.g. support and mentor adult adoptees moving into mental health/psych services field” (Adult adoptee). This stakeholder went on to discuss how adoptee needs are not just about adoption. The trans-racial, international nature of the experience makes it different to many local adoptions. She “did not have experience of a counsellor who is a Person of Colour. Especially for teenage ICA adoptees (who are often coming to terms with their racial identity) – this is a no-brainer”. She reflected on ethnicity/race differences: “How will a young male learn how to grow up as an Asian male in Australia living in a white family?”

Keep building and deepening the practice of the professional staff

Both client and practitioner interviews generated opinions on how the professional ICAFS staff can deepen their practice.

Some of the adult adoptee feedback shared via ICAV indicated a need to better communicate the scope of counselling on offer and align what is offered with what is communicated i.e. availability to refer people for long term psycho-social case management, but not able to deliver it in-house, and communicate the extent of professional qualifications required for staff, in addition to their adoption competency.

ISS staff are expected to have a social work degree, while LifeWorks counsellors are required to have post graduate qualifications and experience sufficient for eligibility for membership within the Australian Counsellors Association, Australian Association of Family Therapists and/or APHRA for counselling and clinical psychologists. There were adoptee comments that were not aware of this.

There was also a view to reinforce the value of supporting new entrants into the field, in particular the “experts by experience”.

Develop sector standards

The niche for ICA professional practice is small, and one government stakeholder commented, “The numbers of clients in smaller states are too small for many private practitioners to be able to justify much professional development.”

The role of ICAFS personnel to educate mainstream professional practitioners was also questioned by an adult adoptee: “Don’t expect to build an ICA adoption competent mainstream sector in a hurry – Two hours of “ICA education” isn’t enough to build confidence and referrals by existing clients.”

However, a countervailing view, also from the adult adoptee community was to propose a role for LifeWorks to contribute to the development of ICA counselling and support standards.

Educate mainstream health and mental health professionals

There was a view that ICAFS should focus some educational resources on raising awareness of the impacts of intercountry adoption with mainstream health and human service professionals.

Sector relationships are complex and require continued attention

The complex dynamics in the small pre-and post-adoption and intercountry adoption sectors were discussed by several stakeholders.

To summarise the views, it is important for LifeWorks, as a relatively new player, to actively engage with relevant networks and for both LifeWorks and ISS to ensure that any tensions within the ICAFS service model are managed (by both parties) in ways that do not leak into service impacts.

Pay close attention to client demand and analysis of client educational and support needs

A core question for this review was how the ICAFS funding can best be used. Desk-top review and stakeholder inputs discussed the need for funded tracing services and the provision of specialised knowledge and support to ICA adult adoptees as a lifelong need, within a vision of a trauma-informed, intercountry adoption competent mental health and family relationships sector across Australia.

Clearly, ICAFS cannot meet this ambitious vision at the moment, as it is primarily a service response in a point in time. However, it should be a priority to ensure service data and analysis can inform future policy and investment decisions over time.

Market and promote a refreshed, cost-effective model

Inputs suggest it is important to remain accessible and present – online and with collateral that is useful; e.g. webinars, conference attendance, etc.

The affordability is much valued – i.e. free service - to ensure equity of access across countries of origin and current State of residence. While some ICA families clearly can afford private counselling, not all can.

Develop online resources

Cost-effective online directories and information resources are also a priority and make sense within a national funded contract.

Conclusion and recommendations

Upon consideration of factors impacting on eligibility and scope; on referrals and intake; on effectiveness of the service model; and themes raised to inform future directions of ICAFS; the following recommendations are made to inform development of ICAFS from 1 July 2019 onwards.

Objective: Transition ICAFS into a centrally managed counselling, case management and support program that is cost effective and delivers a high quality, accountable program.

If the funds currently invested with ISS was to be re-invested, this might look like:

- Dial up: More resources for Counsellors / Associates.
- Dial up: Travel, and networking and promotions budget for the national Coordinator.
- Dial up: Resources for admin / communications support at HQ.
- Dial up: Create a national case management role to back up the National Coordinator to offer phone-and email-based support and case management. Not critical for this role to be in Melbourne, but will work closely with overall Coordinator and be client / external facing to the field, to build and maintain knowledge of local referral networks and require high level intercountry adoption competency.
- Re-calibrate: Option to contract out production of educational material; development of state-by-state local referral guides to accompany generic online resources; delivery of educational and engagement programs by 'national' staff.
- Re-calibrate: Data collection and analysis to deepen understanding of issues associated with intercountry adoption; enable contribution to policy debates; deliver KPIs for community development, sector / professional development of the national community of practice. Data and overhead supports.
- Drop: Funding of a part-time devolved staff cohort in 5 capital cities with a 'state' focus. Manage transition of clients from ISS to other sources of support, including the new ICAFS national case management model.
- Dial up: Community of Practice – annual Thought Leadership and Practice Forum with invitations to Associates (free registration), private practitioners in the field (paid registration) local adoption services, family and adoptee support networks, mentors and young / emerging practitioners, and international researchers.