

Evaluation Report: 2016 OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forums

OOHC Adoption Research Initiative
Programs and Service Design



Executive Summary

“Never lose sight of who in this journey holds your highest regard. That’s the child. If you look at the experience through the eyes of the child, you’ll be able to more clearly understand that the sorrow of the adults is tolerable. The sorrow of the child is not tolerable”

- Janie Cravens (USA)

Keynote Speaker

OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Launch Forum

Background

In October 2014 the NSW Government enacted changes to legislation to prioritise consideration of open adoption over placement in foster care for children and young people placed in Out-of-Home-Care (OOHC). Reviews from KPMG (2013) and Deloitte and Second Road (2014) suggested a need for sector culture change and capacity building in relation to OOHC adoption practice to support the permanency planning reforms.

The Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) Open Adoption in OOHC Research Initiative (Research Initiative) was established in 2014 to undertake a suite of research projects focused on open adoption for children and young people in OOHC in alignment with implementation of the Safe Home For Life permanency placement legislative reforms. The Research Initiative implemented a frontline practitioner study (Practitioner Study), in which key findings were reported in the study’s final report *“The Gap Between Knowing and Doing: Developing Practice in Open Adoption from OOHC in New South Wales”*.

The findings derived from the Practitioner Study:

- Increased the evidence base underpinning casework and open adoption;
- Informed the development of resources and tools to support OOHC adoption casework; and,
- Identified ‘target’ areas of skill, professional and organisational development which represented barriers to practice in OOHC adoption.

The Practitioner Study informed the development of state-wide OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forums (Adoption Forums) aimed to enhance sector culture, communication and capability to undertake OOHC adoption practice on the basis of identified needs.

On 9 February 2016 the Adoption Practice Innovation Forums were launched with a Launch Event in Sydney, where current OOHC adoption research and practice insights were presented by a mix of local, interstate and international keynote speakers. The event was also addressed by the Minister for the Department of Family and Community Services, the Hon. Brad Hazzard. A total of 212 FACS and NGO practitioners, managers and policy and operational executives attended the launch event.

Following the launch event, eight Adoption Forums were implemented throughout the state during February and March 2016. The Adoption Forums were practice-focussed and attended by FACS and NGO frontline practitioners including caseworkers, psychologists and managers. Opening addresses at each forum were co-presented by NGO and FACS senior executive to support frontline commitment to considering OOHC adoption as a permanency placement option. A total of 387 registrations were received for the state-wide adoption forums.

In total, 599 NGO and FACS professionals attended the Launch Event and Adoption Forums. Fifty-three percent of attendees were FACS employees.

The evaluation of these events is articulated within this report. Key evaluation findings and recommendations are presented below:

Adoption Forum Evaluation: Key Findings

“It enabled me to see the option of adoption in a new light and to be open to the idea of adoption”

- Adoption Forum Participant

- The OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forums lifted practitioner confidence to identify when OOHC adoption is the most suitable case plan goal.
- The OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forums had a positive impact on sector understanding of the benefits of OOHC adoption, practical application of the Safe Home for Life reforms and enhanced adoption practice skill and knowledge.
- The OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forums enhanced sector understanding of openness in OOHC adoption practice, including the significant culture shift of building relationships between carer and birth families and having early transparent conversations about the permanency placement principles which include open adoption.

- The keynote speakers and presenters at the OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forums and Launch Event were highly valued and influential in shifting culture and enhancing practice.
- The crisis-focus of OOHC environments particularly constrains the ability of frontline practitioners to prioritise and devote time to progressing open adoption arrangements. There is a need for organisational structural changes to enable OOHC adoption work to be undertaken.
- Carer openness is perceived as a barrier to progressing OOHC adoption and the work required to shift carer openness to building relationships with birth families is particularly resource intensive. There is a need for support to frontline practitioners to support carer openness earlier in placements, and to revise carer training in line with openness expectations.
- There is a need for support to frontline practitioners with making child-focussed and child time-framed permanency decisions.
- Practitioners value and seek out learning from real, personal and practical experiences of OOHC adoption directly from children, young people, families and practitioners. More opportunities to hear real stories of OOHC adoption are sought by the sector.
- Practitioners value and require training opportunities that allow sufficient time to have interactive, informal and reflective discussions about OOHC adoption.
- There is an identified need for more experiential knowledge to be provided to the sector on the OOHC adoption process, especially in relation to progressing adoption assessments, post-adoption support and Supreme Court adoption proceedings.
- There is a need for OOHC adoption training to be targeted to managers as key permanency decision makers. Additionally, there is a need for targeted training to casework specialists and child protection caseworkers who work directly with families in the early stages of a child being placed in statutory OOHC. Such training would enhance the likelihood of earlier consideration of adoption as a case plan goal.

The key findings have been considered and inform the following recommendations aimed to support future sector development specifically in the area of OOHC adoption practice.

Recommendations

1. Ongoing training and resource development in relation to permanency planning and OOHC adoption to build on the positive momentum of the Adoption Practice Innovation Forums
2. That the recorded presentations from all four keynote speakers be published on the FACS internet and intranet for ongoing accessibility by FACS and NGO staff
3. That the Adoption Practice Innovation Forum workshops Opening Conversations, Building Relationships and the Case Scenario be targeted to FACS / NGO managers, FACS child protection caseworkers and FACS /NGO casework specialists to enhance child-focussed permanency decision making and workplace cultures that support OOHC adoption work
4. That consideration be given to organisational restructuring as per NGO and international models that enable a subset of frontline based practitioners to be quarantined from crisis work in order to drive permanency and adoption casework and lift sector capacity to undertake OOHC adoption.
5. That the Journeys to Permanency Through Open Adoption Practice be distributed to FACS and NGO frontline practitioners to present real life examples of adoption practice and outcomes for children and young people.
6. That foster carer training and ongoing carer support services be enhanced to enable all authorised carers to have a higher level of openness with birth families
7. That future training opportunities are implemented and focussed on the OOHC adoption *process* including adoption assessments, post adoption support and Supreme Court legal proceedings
- 8.** That future OOHC adoption training include adequate time and opportunities for professional reflection, discussion and networking that links practitioners with practice support and expertise.

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Adoption Forum Evaluation: Full Report

This paper evaluates the effectiveness of the Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) Adoption Practice Innovation Forums to positively shift culture, communication and capability in relation to OOHC adoption work.

Key Messages

- Local workshop-style forums are effective formats for presenting current adoption research, developing FACS and NGO practice skills and lifting sector knowledge and confidence in the area of OOHC adoption work
- Real stories of OOHC adoption provide valuable experiential knowledge to practitioners, enable practice reflection and reinforce the benefits of OOHC adoption work for practitioners who have not undertaken adoption work
- Organisational structures play a pivotal role in addressing the barriers to progressing OOHC adoption work including workloads, crisis response prioritisation, child-focussed permanency decision making and carer openness
- Targeted training is needed to lift practice skills associated with effective implementation of the permanency placement principles

Introduction

The Adoption Practice Innovation Forums (Adoption Forums) were developed in response to findings from a Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) frontline practitioner research study (Practitioner Study), and reviews from KPMG (2013) and Deloitte and Second Road (2014) which identified a need for sector culture change, communication, capacity and capability building in relation to OOHC adoption practice, as well as a need to support the 2014 permanency placement reforms.

A launch event and eight state-wide practice forums were subsequently implemented around New South Wales throughout February and March 2016. The forums presented research evidence, with practice workshops aimed to lift practitioner skills, knowledge and understanding in considering and progressing OOHC adoption.

This report evaluates the effectiveness of the Adoption Practice Innovation Forums in supporting sector OOHC adoption culture, communication skills and capability, and makes recommendations for future sector development.

Background

The Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) Open Adoption in OOHC Research Initiative (Research Initiative) was established in 2014 to undertake a suite of research projects focused on open adoption for children and young people in OOHC to support the implementation of the permanency planning legislative reforms. The research initiative subsequently implemented a frontline practitioner research study, entitled “*The Gap Between Knowing and Doing: Developing Practice in Open Adoption from OOHC in New South Wales*”.

The findings derived from the Practitioner Study:

- Increased the evidence base underpinning casework and open adoption;
- Informed the development of resources and tools to support OOHC adoption casework; and,
- Identified ‘target’ areas of skill, professional and organisational development which represented barriers to practice in OOHC adoption.

A conceptual framework based on the study findings (Figure 1) was developed to best explain the conditions necessary for open adoption practice development. Four key practice drivers for open adoption practice were identified to this end, being: **Capability** of the sector to undertake casework associated with adoption; **Capacity** of the sector given the need to balance urgency in tasks; **Communication** skills necessary to progress open adoptions; and **Culture**, both personal and organisational, which facilitates practice.

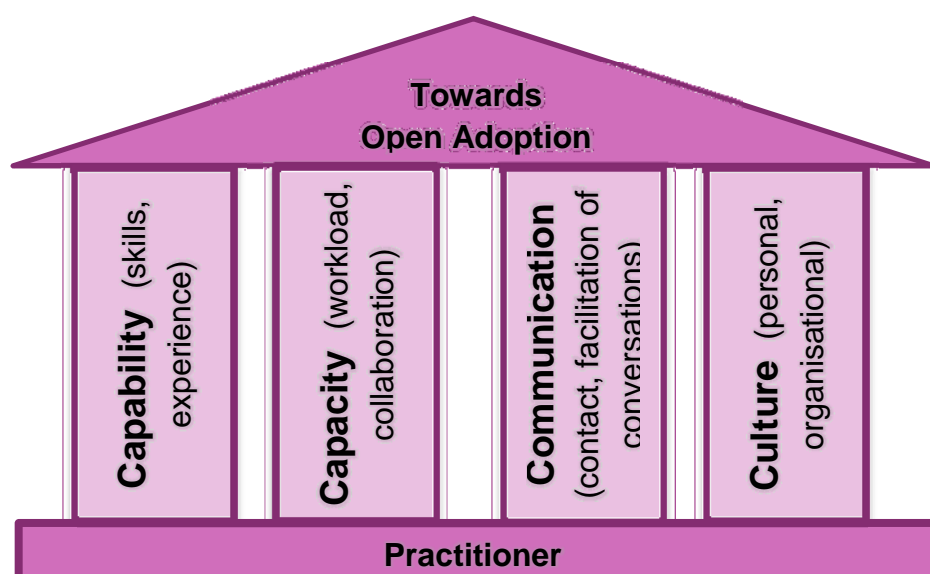


Figure 1. Pillars of Open Adoption Casework Practice

The Practitioner Study informed the content of state-wide Adoption Forums to enhance sector culture, communication skills and capability in relation to OOHC adoption practice.

Practice Forums Development

In order to plan, develop and implement the Adoption Forums, the Research Initiative established a Steering Committee which included NGO and FACS representatives.

The Adoption Forums were designed on the basis of findings from the Practitioner Study, with a number of sector developmental goals, being:

- To increase awareness of open adoption from OOHC, informed by researchers, experts and highly experienced practitioners from the child protection field
- To provide a participative experience for practitioners – a communicative space in which they felt free to ask questions and reflect on their current permanency planning practices
- To provide an opportunity to develop hands-on skills associated with permanency planning and adoption casework
- To inspire culture and practice change in the area of open adoption practice
- To provide experiential knowledge through sharing real casework practice experiences and presenting the voice of real children, young people, adoptive parents and birth parents that have experienced OOHC adoption.

The Practitioner Study identified that the majority of practitioners (91%) sought District workshops or seminars with guest speakers to effectively impart information on OOHC adoption. Thus, the following training formats were designed with Steering Committee endorsement and implemented:

1. OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forums Launch (Launch Event)

A launch event was held in Sydney on 9 February 2016 at the University of Technology, Sydney. International expert keynote speakers presented current research and practice insights pertaining to OOHC adoption. Specifically the presentations sought to enhance commitment to considering and progressing OOHC adoption work through presenting research evidencing the benefits to children and young people, their permanent carers and birth families (see Appendix A. Launch Program).

Participants at this launch event included NGO and FACS frontline practitioners, managers and senior executives in operational and policy streams in recognition that shifting organisational culture requires whole of sector participation. A

presentation was also delivered by the Minister for the Department of Community Services, Hon. Brad Hazzard. The Launch Event was attended by 212 individuals.

2. OOH Adoption Practice Innovation Forums (Adoption Forums)

Following the Sydney launch event, eight Adoption Forums were implemented throughout New South Wales during February and March 2016, with a focus on frontline casework practice knowledge and skill development areas of need as identified in the Practitioner Study (see Appendix B, Adoption Forum Program). The Adoption Forums were attended by NGO and FACS frontline practitioners including caseworkers, psychologists and managers. Opening addresses were presented by NGO and FACS senior executive, with sessions delivered by local adoption experts to target key practice development areas.

A total 387 registrations were received for the state-wide Adoption Forums. In total, 599 NGO and FACS professionals attended either the Launch Event and/or Adoption Forums. Fifty-three percent of attendees were FACS employees; the remaining 47 percent were NGO based. Table 1 identifies the locations of the Adoption Forums and number of participants per district.

Table 1. Attendees at Launch and Practice Forums

| Location of Adoption Forum | Date of Forum | Number of registered participants |
|----------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Sydney launch | | Webinar: 91 |
| | 9 February 2016 | In person: 121 |
| | | Total: 212 |
| Sydney | 10 February 2016 | 84 |
| Tumbi Umbi | 18 February 2016 | 56 |
| Orange | 1 March 2016 | 23 |
| Ballina | 8 March 2016 | 43 |
| Coffs Harbour | 10 March 2016 | 40 |
| Tamworth | 15 March 2016 | 43 |
| Albury | 22 March 2016 | 39 |
| Wollongong | 30 March 2016 | 59 |
| | | TOTAL: 599 |

1. Practice Resources

The following practice resources were developed and / or provided in hard copy and electronically throughout the Adoption Forums to support the OOHC adoption training:

1. OOHC Adoption Fact Sheet developed by the Open Adoption in OOHC Research Initiative (Appendix C)
2. Barnardos Australia Search Action Kit, a practice focused family finding search action kit
3. Mandatory Written Information on Adoption: Information for Parents of a Child in OOHC
4. OOHC Adoption Process (FACS)
5. OOHC Adoption Process (NGO)
6. CREATE Foundation Flier

Evaluation Methodology

Evaluation of the Launch Event and subsequent state-wide Adoption Forums consisted of on-the-day qualitative feedback, alongside a survey sent in the weeks post-attendance. This timing of the survey was deliberately selected to ascertain ongoing practice support needs upon return to practice. A total of 70 evaluation surveys were completed for the Launch Event, representing 33% of attendees. There were a total 143 feedback forms completed on the day of the Adoption Forums, which represents 41% of registered participants. There were an additional 148 online surveys completed post Adoption Forums, which represents 38% of the registered participants.

Survey Measures

The post-attendance Launch Event survey featured items evaluating keynote speaker presentation accessibility and participant satisfaction, alongside items relating to the application of the presented material to participants' practice.

The survey completed on the day of the Adoption Forums focused on satisfaction with forum content and self-assessment of its relevance to practice, with open ended qualitative items only.

The post-attendance Adoption Forum survey included both open ended and likert-scale response items to examine self-rated knowledge and skills on a range of adoption practice areas, attitudes towards openness and adoption practice, satisfaction with the forum training received, and ongoing training needs.

Standardised measures which had been previously utilised in the Practitioner Study were included in the post-attendance forum evaluation survey to examine sector changes in knowledge and skills pre- and post- forum attendance. It is important to note that although post-forum findings related only to those individuals who attended the forums, their characteristics in relation to years of experience, adoption experience and level of role held were generally consistent with the respondents in the baseline Practitioner Study (Table 2 Workforce Profile). The greatest difference in the worker profile of the baseline Practitioner Study group compared to the post-forum group was the number of child protection caseworkers (19% baseline survey respondents compared to 8% of post-forum respondents). As such, the changes in knowledge and confidence observed between baseline and post-attendance scores were unlikely to be as a result of differences between respondent groups, and were instead considered to demonstrate actual change in knowledge and skills.

Table 2. Workforce Profile at Baseline and Post Forum

| Respondent characteristics | % Pre-forum (Baseline) | % Post-forum |
|--|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Level of experience in current role | % (n=614) | % (n=148) |
| <1 year | 26 | 31 |
| 1-2 yrs | 23 | 22 |
| 3-4 | 13 | 14 |
| 4+ | 39 | 44 |
| Job role | % | |
| Caseworker (child protection) | 19 | 8 |
| Caseworker (OOHC) | 40 | 33 |
| Specialist | 8 | 7 |
| Manager/team leader | 29 | 27 |
| Executive | 4 | 1 |
| Other | N/A | 24* |

*The majority of respondents who selected 'Other' held adoption or carer-focused roles

Evaluation Results

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data analysis (Table 3) showed significant gains in post-forum practice confidence and knowledge for attendees as compared to the data provided by the 614 participants in the Practitioner Study (the 'baseline' group).

It is evident that the Adoption Forums enhanced practitioner confidence in identifying when OOHC adoption is in a child or young person's best interests, as well as enhanced practitioner confidence, knowledge and skills in talking about OOHC adoption with birth parents and prospective adoptive parents. These increased skills echoed the focal areas of the training sessions contained within the Adoption Forums.

Table 3. Self-reported Knowledge and Confidence in Adoption Practice at Baseline and Post-forum.

| Item | Disagree (%) | |
|---|--------------|------------|
| | Baseline | Post-forum |
| I have the knowledge and skills required for assessing the suitability of prospective adoptive parents | 28 | 12 |
| I am confident I can determine if adoption is in the best interests of a child or young person | 14 | 5 |
| I have the skills required for involving children and young people in talking about adoption | 14 | 3 |
| I feel prepared for talking to birth parents about the prospect of adoption | 20 | 3 |
| I have the knowledge and skills required for preparing and working with prospective adoptive parents | 19 | 5 |
| I have a good understanding of the court processes and procedures involved in adoption from OOHC applications | 39 | 16 |
| I have a good understanding of the post adoption supports that are available to adoptive parents | 45 | 28 |
| I have the knowledge and skills to help adoptive parents care for children and young people experiencing trauma | 12 | 3 |
| I have a good understanding why adoption is not the preferred placement option for Aboriginal children and young people | 7 | 2 |

Analysis of participant feedback in relation to the individual session content of the forum launch event and subsequent state-wide forums is provided later in this report. Overwhelming feedback identified that the keynote speakers at all events were highly valued by the practitioner participants, and had a positive impact on understanding the benefits of OOHC adoption, practice skill and knowledge development. Exemplary comments received from participants included:

“This was training of a higher than usual standard. I appreciated working through real issues caseworkers face rather than presenting only what’s ideal”

“I thoroughly enjoyed the enthusiasm of all the presenters – great to see child focussed approach and adoption as part of the conversation...”

“Very informative and speakers had various expertise and knowledge on many aspects of OOHC and adoption”

Analysis of participant feedback demonstrated overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the efficacy of the Adoption Forums. 90% of attendees who completed evaluation surveys post-attendance indicated that the Adoption Forums had been effective in supporting their practice in the area of OOHC adoption. The following participant statements highlighted the Adoption Forums efficacy:

“The forum opened a positive environment in which to be able to talk professionally”

“The information presented was very thought provoking and extremely helpful”

Qualitative Analysis

To undertake a more in-depth analysis of the forum efficacy, thematic analysis of the qualitative evaluation data from on-the-day and post-attendance surveys was also undertaken. This analysis focused on the:

- Acquired insights from the forums which attendees felt were applicable to ongoing practice
- Ongoing barriers to OOHC adoption work perceived by attendees post-forums
- Self perceived areas of future skill development need for OOHC adoption casework practice.

Evaluation of these three key focal areas of the Adoption Forums is presented in the following section of this report.

1. Acquired insights applicable to ongoing practice and training

Thematic analysis of participant feedback suggested that forums were particularly beneficial in lifting practitioner awareness and knowledge in four critical areas of practice, being:

- **Understanding of contact arrangements**

The Adoption Forums feedback suggested that they supported sector cultural shift towards opening communication directly between carer and birth families. Participants reported that the Adoption Forums supported family-focussed, family-lead contact arrangements, rather than continuing engrained practices of keeping carer and birth families separated through professionally-supervised contact. The following quotes on post-forum skill increases articulate this shift in perception, with participants indicating that they now had:

“The ability to help carers facilitate contact rather than having it supervised for no real reason “

“More knowledge and a different expectation to child/parent contact”

- **Being able to better see the benefits of open adoption for children in OOHC**

Forum participants identified the research content of the adoption forums enhanced practitioner knowledge and understanding of the benefits of open adoption for children and young people placed in OOHC. This is reflected in the following quotes on what participants felt the Adoption Forums provided for them:

“Research to support why adoption is a better permanency outcome for children in care”

“Talking to other professionals about the need for "felt security" for children and the research on outcomes for children who are adopted vs. long term foster care”

There are diverse ways in which information about the benefits of open adoption on children can be imparted. The Adoption Forums included a number of presentation formats to attempt to deliver material in an engaging manner.

Adoption Forum feedback identified that the multimedia and video vignettes and panel discussion sessions were effective in presenting the voices of real children, carers, birth parents and practitioners who have experienced the process of open adoption from OOHC.

“I enjoyed the balance of the use of media/videos and speaking”

“The videos were great, being able to hear from children and families directly”

“I enjoyed some of the ideas that were presented eg the perspective of the girl in the video and how she didn’t like going backwards and forwards from OOHC and restoration”

“Hearing real life stories and the effects they have on a child’s life long term”

Recommendation:

The video vignettes developed for the Adoption Practice Innovation Forums be distributed for ongoing FACS and NGO training.

- **Undertaking early conversations about OOHC adoption with birth parents**

The workshop session *Opening Conversations* focused on developing confidence and capability to discuss adoption with birth parents, adoptive parents and other professionals was identified as particularly useful. Practitioners felt it was effective in developing practice skills and professional confidence to undertake transparent, open and early conversations about the OOHC adoption with birth families. This is reflected in the following statements on the forum content which practitioners felt was particularly useful for their work:

“The focus on “early conversations” with birth parents about all permanency options, including adoption”

“To have the conversation early about adoption and acknowledge that it is a real option of placing children in stable care”

Recommendation:

The *Opening Conversations* workshop be rolled out to all FACS and NGO frontline practitioners and targeted to FACS child protection caseworkers, Managers Casework as permanency decision makers, and casework specialists.

- **Enhanced understanding of the permanency principles and Safe Home for Life reforms**

Increased understanding of the permanency placement principles was also identified by as a result of attending the Adoption Forums, with participants stating that post-forum they had a:

“Better understanding of permanency principles”

“A better understanding of the current reforms taking place in CS [Community Services/FACS]”

2. Barriers to implementation of open adoption work in NSW

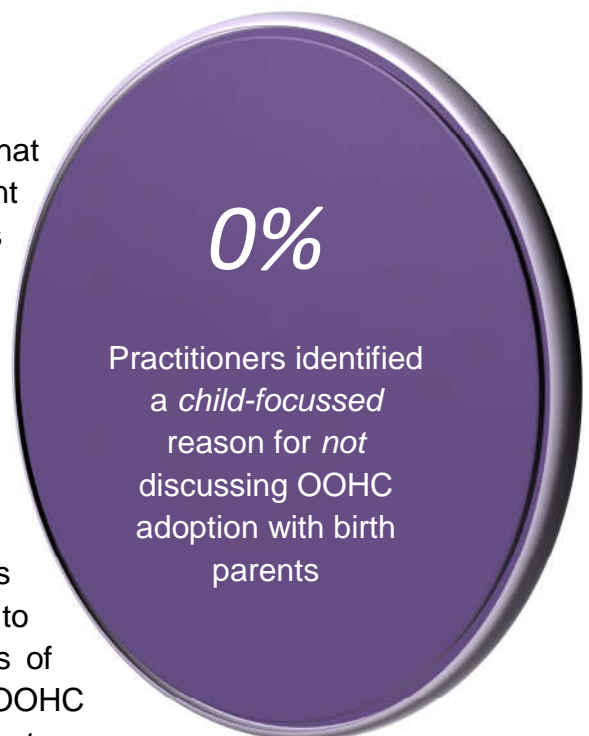
Post Adoption Forum attendance, participants identified two key barriers to implementing the casework that enables progression of OOHC adoption. They were:

- **Resistance**

There were four key areas of resistance to open adoption practice which were discussed by participants post- Adoption Forum attendance that they felt were likely to impact upon their practice. These were:

1. Over-identification with birth parents

Practitioners who attended the forums suggested that an over-identification with birth parents can represent a significant barrier to open adoption work. This finding was supported by observations made during the *Opening Conversations* presentation within the Adoption Forums, during which practitioners were asked to articulate reasons why they may not discuss open adoption with families when a child enters care. Throughout these sessions, child-focused reasons for not raising OOHC adoption with families were not apparent. Instead, rationales focused primarily on the potential for birth parents to create change as well as the practitioner’s feelings of burden around the very permanent outcome that OOHC adoption represents. The following survey quotes on perceived barriers to adoption practice illustrate that feelings of over-



identification with birth parents can represent a barrier for practitioners:

“ [adoption barriers include] capacity for parents to change later in the child’s life and the child wanting to live with them”

“Lots of barriers from other professionals in the OOHC area to adoption for children - sometimes from an over identification with birth parents”

Recommendation:

The Opening Conversations workshop be rolled out to all FACS and NGO frontline practitioners, as it contains a reflective session on identifying barriers to holding early, transparent conversations about the permanency placement options, including OOHC adoption.

2. Carer openness

Forum attendees also note that a lack of carer openness (i.e. carer capability to develop independently regulated relationships with birth parents), can also present a significant barrier for practitioners seeking to cultivate the level of openness necessary in OOHC adoption arrangements. The following quotes on barriers to practice are representative of the type of issues raised by practitioners :

“Resistance from carers or lack of understanding/empathy for [birth] families”

“The ability for the carers to supervise and organise contact with birth parents is often a big barrier”

“We need to create openness in fostering – building relationships between carers and birth parents to create an environment that better meets the needs of the child, and which will enhance the adoption process if pursued”

This finding aligns with the Practitioner Study which identified the work required to develop permanent carer’s openness towards birth families is resource and time intensive, and significantly influences the timeliness of moving cases towards adoption.

Recommendation:

That foster carer training and ongoing support services be enhanced to enable all authorised carers to have a higher level of openness with birth families from the time they are authorised.

3. Practitioner attitudes

A small number of practitioners commented in the online survey that personal attitudes of other workers towards adoption represented a barrier in implementing open adoption practice. The following quotes are included to provide insight on the ways in which these feelings manifested for practitioners. It is noteworthy that personal bias was not identified to be a major barrier to open adoption practice for the vast majority of forum attendees, nor in the previous Practitioner Study. When attitudes were referenced by participants, it was the personal resistance of 'other' staff which was highlighted, rather than respondents themselves. Feedback suggested that a range of factors associated with the child protection sector more generally may present a barrier to open adoption work. The issue of workload in particular was identified by some participants to be an obstacle to progressing open adoption, and is explored in more detail below.

“Some workers in the sector are resistant to the idea”

“I do anticipate resistance because staff in an anxious work environment find it challenging to change their practice”

4. Workload

The workload typically associated with OOHC is identified as a particular barrier for practitioners to undertake adoption work. It was argued by participants that the crisis-focus of OOHC environments, constrained the ability of frontline practitioners to devote the necessary time to progressing open adoption arrangements. This echoes the findings of the Practitioner Survey regarding sector OOHC adoption practice capacity. The following quotes on barriers to OOHC adoption practice reflect this perception:

“Workloads and crisis work making it difficult for staff to prioritise adoptions work”

“[adoption] will never be a priority when compared to placement breakdowns or child protection crisis work. We need specialised teams”

Recommendation:

That consideration be given to organisational restructuring as per NGO and international models that enable a subset of frontline based practitioners to be quarantined from crisis work in order to drive adoption casework and lift sector capacity to undertake OOHC adoption.

3. Identified areas of future skill need

Adoption Forum survey respondents identified a need for more information pertaining to specific issues including:

1. How to talk with birth parents about the prospect of adoption (49%)
2. Information on relevant government reforms (52%)
3. How to determine if adoption is or is not in the best interests of the child (48%)

Notably all three above identified information needs were incorporated into the content of the Adoption Forums through the Opening Conversations workshop and the Case Scenario session, where practitioners experienced identifying the best permanent placement for a child within a Care Plan in alignment with the Safe Home for Life Reforms. Reflecting this inclusion, these information requests were significantly lower than those of the baseline study, where 69% of practitioners requested information on how to talk to birth parents about the prospect of adoption, 69% sought more information on relevant government reforms and 67% of practitioners wanted to know how to determine if adoption is in the best interests of a child, respectively.

Three key areas are identified by Adoption Forum attendees as important targets for improving and lifting skills, awareness and sector-wide capacity to undertake open adoption work in the future, being:

- **Real-life experiences of OOHC adoption**

Attendees argued that the continuing inclusion of real-life experiences of adoption (i.e. sharing 'lived' adoption experiences) would help practitioners to inform their practice in the future. They suggested future training could include:

“Guest speaker of adopted children, birth parents and carers”

“Perhaps a story from a child who has been adopted would provide further information to caseworkers”



“Staff need much more exposure to GOOD NEWS STORIES about adoption”

As a result of feedback from both the Practitioner Study and the Adoption Forums, the FACS Adoption Research Initiative is launching a publication entitled *Journeys to Permanency Through Open Adoption Practice*, which will highlight a number of real examples of the practice and outcomes that adoption casework offers to children, birth and carer families. Additionally, the video vignettes of children and families which were utilised during the forums have been distributed for use in future FACS and NGO training.

Recommendation:

That the *Journeys to Permanency Through Open Adoption Practice* be distributed to FACS and NGO frontline practitioners to present real examples of adoption practice and outcomes for children and young people.

- **Targeted training**

Adoption Forum attendees argued that targeted training to managers as permanency decision makers, casework specialists, legal officers as well as Children’s Court Magistrates and child protection practitioners who work directly with families following the removal / assumption of a child in to OOHC is essential to lift the scope for open adoption practice to be undertaken across the child protection sector in NSW. Again, this feedback was consistent with the Practitioner Study previously undertaken. The following quotes affirm the importance of managers taking the lead in shaping local workplace cultures that are receptive to open adoption work.

“There needs to be an overall communication strategy / training plan to take messages out to more frontline MCW and caseworkers (CP and OOHC)”

“The legal system surrounding the Care Act (including magistrates, solicitors...) need opportunities to develop their understanding of open adoption and its role in the hierarchy of orders... Magistrates in the bush are NOT specialists in care law and often come with a family law presumption. If we could have particular pieces of research provided that we could include in the material we provide to the Court – that is one way of educating them, consistently across the state.”

Feedback provided by Adoption Forum attendees also highlights the value that practitioners place on access to ongoing training. For example, whilst 65% of

practitioners reported feeling equipped with skills and knowledge to assess the suitability of prospective adoptive parents after attendance at the forums, almost 60% indicated they wished to continue receiving information about the processes surrounding these assessments. As one respondent notes, training and skills can be reinforced through better workplace-unit skill sharing alongside external training opportunities:

“Why are we not utilising the expertise of senior caseworkers, foster care supports, casework specialists, MCW who are highly competent in being able to write adoption reports / assessments?”

- **OOHC Adoption Processes**

Adoption Forum attendees highlighted the need for ongoing support in understanding how to accurately and appropriately navigate the process of practice in open adoption cases. The following post-forum information requests highlight the need for ready access to resources which provide description of the full gamut of process tasks pivotal to the progress of open adoption:

“More information about the actual court process”

“Resources for step by step processes for parents”

“Some more detail or flowcharts about the detail of what is actually involved in the adoption process, what is required, what to expect, etc, to allow us to answer basic questions of the family, and other staff”

“[information on the] assessment process for dual authorisation of carers”

“[information on] more practical work that needs to be done. A lot of the focus is on why adoption is in a child’s best interests, which we know... [we need] to learn the process of moving toward practically doing this. What work needs to be done – breaking it down”

Rather than attempting to impart a prescriptive adoption process- which would have been difficult in light of the mixed NGO and FACS audience, the content of the Adoption Forums provided a background to adoption practice and guided staff towards specialist support such as legal officers and Regional Adoption Caseworkers (RACS) to step them through the adoption process in their practice. While the event provided some opportunities for practitioners to network and share experiences with other colleagues, it is clear that there is an ongoing need for increased networking between practitioners across the sector. It is possible that the Case Work Practice on OOHC adoption resource available for FACS staff, and the NGO version currently being finalised by FACS, may assist meeting this need.

Participants identified desiring more time for interaction, networking, discussion and reflection in their suggestions for future training:

“More interaction and perspectives between FACS and NGO workers”

“More set question and answer time. Maybe a chance to write questions and put them in a box where questions are chosen and answered at random.”

The role of ongoing question and answer sessions, either in person e.g. in team meetings with RACS present, or virtually via intranet and internet, could be explored to meet this need. The Practitioner Study identified 61% practitioners require research to practice notes on relevant topics to be available on the intranet and 48% would like information sharing to occur through regular team meetings. These modes of training could be considered for ongoing sector development. Alongside this need, it is clear that guidance on the adoption process must be provided in order to support OOHC adoption practice.

Recommendation:

Further training opportunities are implemented to continue the momentum of OOHC adoption learning. Training should be focussed on the OOHC adoption *process* including adoption assessments, Supreme Court legal proceedings and post adoption support. The training should provide adequate time for practitioners to reflect, network and participate in discussion and include presentation of real OOHC adoption experiences of children and young people, adoptive parents, birth families and practitioners.

- **Access for adoptive parents to post-adoptive supports**

Feedback provided by forum attendees indicated some concern with post adoption support availability, including ongoing financial support to adoptive families, particularly in regional areas:

“Worker issues with accountability [pose a barrier to practice]– post adoption support”

“It was recognised that kids with complex needs may not be suitable for adoption due to the need for ongoing support from the NGO or Dept. I think this is a disadvantage for these kids. Surely there is a way to move forward with adoption but to secure some ongoing support for the child and adoptive family.”

“Issues around financial assistance [pose a barrier to practice]”

FACS is currently planning research to scope post-adoption support needs in families adopting from care to address this area of identified need.

Forum Session Content Evaluation

The Adoption Forum series and Launch Event was designed on the basis of findings from the Practitioner Study with a number of sector capability, capacity, communication and cultural developmental goals as previously described. The following section of this report overviews feedback specific to the individual sessions contained within the Launch Event and Adoption Forums in order to shape future training activities.

The Launch Event featured a number of keynote speakers and panel sessions (Appendix A, Launch Program). Post-event, participants were sent feedback surveys to examine the satisfaction with the forum content. A total of 83% of respondents rated the Launch Event as either very good or excellent. All respondents (100%) indicated that the Launch Event was relevant to their work.

Following the Launch Event, the series of Adoption Forums were rolled out across the state as previously described (see program, Appendix B). These day-long forums were devoted to practice skill development and techniques covering the four key realms of activity which were found in the previous Practitioner Study to underpin open adoption practice (being capability, capacity, culture, communication). The workshop was initially delivered in Sydney, and subsequently rolled out to seven further regional locations in a road show format throughout NSW. Evaluation surveys examining forum content were distributed on the day itself, with an additional online survey distributed in the weeks post-attendance to examine the application of content to practice upon participants' return to the frontline.

An overwhelming majority of respondents (88%) to the post-forum survey agreed that overall the Adoption Forum content was helpful to them. Ninety percent of survey respondents agreed the forum was effective in supporting them in undertaking their OOHC adoption work. 63% of respondents agreed they are more open to OOHC adoption than before they attended the forum and 76% respondents agreed they are now more confident in regard to connecting with experts who can support their OOHC adoption practice.

The following responses to the evaluation survey item asking for suggested changes to the forums were emblematic of the positivity participants expressed about the forum content:



“Nothing, was happy with everything at the whole forum”

“Nothing. I’m amazed on how much information was provided”

“.... Today was just the beginning!”

“This training was higher than usual standard. I appreciated working through real issues caseworkers face rather than presenting only what’s ideal”

Analysis of the specific session content presented during the Adoption Forums is presented below:

Keynote Speakers

The keynote speakers utilised at both the Launch Event and Adoption Forums purposefully included a cross section of international speakers, local experts and academics in order to inspire practitioners and evoke discussion on what might represent innovative practice in the area of OOHC adoption. Based on the feedback provided by forum attendees, the speakers, workshop leaders and convenors met this goal.

The four keynote speakers at the launch event were:

1. Prof Michael Tarren-Sweeney, the University of Canterbury, presenting, “The Impact of Impermanent Care and Placement Instability on Children’s Development and Wellbeing”

This presentation provided evidence of the benefits of open adoption on children and young people who have histories of abuse and trauma and highlighted the value of early, good decision making. Additionally the detrimental impact of instability in foster care on the development of children and young people in care was presented. In doing so, this session supported significant practice culture shift through emphasising prioritising consideration of OOHC adoption over placement in foster care in alignment with the Safe Home for Life Reforms.

2. Prof Marc De Rosnay, University of Wollongong, presenting, “Young Children’s Identity Formation in the Context of Open Adoption in NSW: An examination of Optimal Conditions for Child Wellbeing”

This presentation provided the current evidence base for progressing OOHC adoption. It highlighted the impact of adoption on children and young people’s identity and demonstrated how adoption can meet the permanency needs of children and young people in OOHC.

3. Janie Cravens, Adoption Development Resources Texas USA, presenting, "The Adoption Journey"

This presentation dispelled myths and misconceptions about open adoption to foster culture change and sector openness for considering and progressing OOHC adoption. As an open adoption practice expert with vast experience in the USA, Janie focused on developing communication skills and practice capability of practitioners to work effectively with families through the adoption process.

Never lose sight of who in this journey holds your highest regard. That's the child. If you look at the experience through the eyes of the child, you'll be able to more clearly understand that the sorrow of the adults is tolerable. The sorrow of the child is not tolerable."

- Janie Cravens

4. Dr Trevor Jordon, Jigsaw Qld, presenting, "What Open Adoption Means to Me"

In recognition that the sector requires experiential knowledge in relation to progressing or seeing the positive outcomes that open adoption can provide, this presentation provided practitioners with the lived experience of a person who has been adopted. The presentation highlighted the linkages between thorough early child protection casework and progression of OOHC adoption.

The overwhelming majority of participants described the keynote presenters as knowledgeable and engaging (over 90% of participants endorsing these statements for keynote presenters Janie Cravens and Prof Michael Tarren-Sweeny, and over 80% for Prof Marc De Rosnay and Dr Trevor Gordon's presentations respectively).

The presenters at the state-wide Adoption Forums were also held in very high regard by participants. Feedback from Adoption Forum attendees indicate that the

speakers selected to deliver presentations provided the opportunity for practitioners to reflect deeply on open adoption practice and innovations surrounding the casework associated with this work. The following quotes are included to illustrate the diverse ways in which practitioners engaged with, and were inspired by the innovative practice accounts presented:

“Informative and provided another way of thinking around adoption. Has changed my thinking and looking at different options”

“Thought provoking information... always good to have conventions/beliefs challenged”

“I thoroughly enjoyed the enthusiasm of all the presenters – great to see child focussed approach and adoption as part of the conversation...”

“Very informative and speakers had various expertise and knowledge on many aspects of OOHC and adoption”

Further feedback on the presenters of the Adoption Forum workshops is presented under the relevant headings in following paragraphs.

Recommendations:

The recorded presentations from all four keynote speakers be published on the FACS internet and intranet for ongoing accessibility by FACS and NGO staff

The keynote speakers and presenters at the OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forums and Launch Event be considered for future OOHC adoption or permanency practice development opportunities.

Panel Sessions

The Launch Event program included two panel discussion sessions, designed to offer extensive opportunities for questions and open discussion:

1. Panel presentation – Current Practice Innovation

Sitting on this discussion panel were FACS Senior Legal Officer Brooke Bowman, Contracted Adoption Assessor Penny Haskins, Barnardos Australia Principal Officer Lisa Vihtonen and FACS Regional Adoption Caseworker Wendy Tu. The panellists were identified to provide experiential knowledge of OOHC adoption from different professional perspectives and to highlight professional roles available to frontline practitioners to support permanency decision making.

2. Panel presentation – How do we Create an Organisation that is Open to OOHC Adoption?

Sitting on this discussion panel were FACS Deputy Secretary Maree Walk, FACS Principal Research Officer Dr Melissa Kaltner, FACS Manager Casework Michael Buckley, Barnardos Australia Principal Officer Lisa Vihtonen, Uniting Care Project Officer Tracy Hinchcliffe and Life Without Barriers Director Practice and Quality Belinda Mayfield. This panel session encouraged participants to consider how they could support cultural change within their own organisations to ensure OOHC adoption is considered for children and young people who can not live with their birth families or kin.

Launch forum attendees indicated these panel discussions were highly effective, with 80% indicating that speakers on these panels provided relevant and useful information regarding OOHC adoption, and 71% of respondents agreed that the panel discussions were engaging and interesting.

In addition to the above panels, during the Case Scenario activity at the state-wide Adoption Forums a discussion panel was also included. These panels included a local Regional Adoption Caseworker, Legal Officer and FACS or NGO manager. These roles were selected to support local networking of frontline practitioners with local OOHC adoption experts to further support consideration and progression of OOHC adoption.

Participant feedback pertaining to the Adoption Forum Case Scenario panel sessions indicated these were considered a highly valuable opportunity for practitioners to hear direct practice examples from local experts, as reflected in the following comments on perceived forum strengths:

“Hearing from individual people about what they have ... done / what has worked”

“Panel was also very good – useful having different positions on panel”

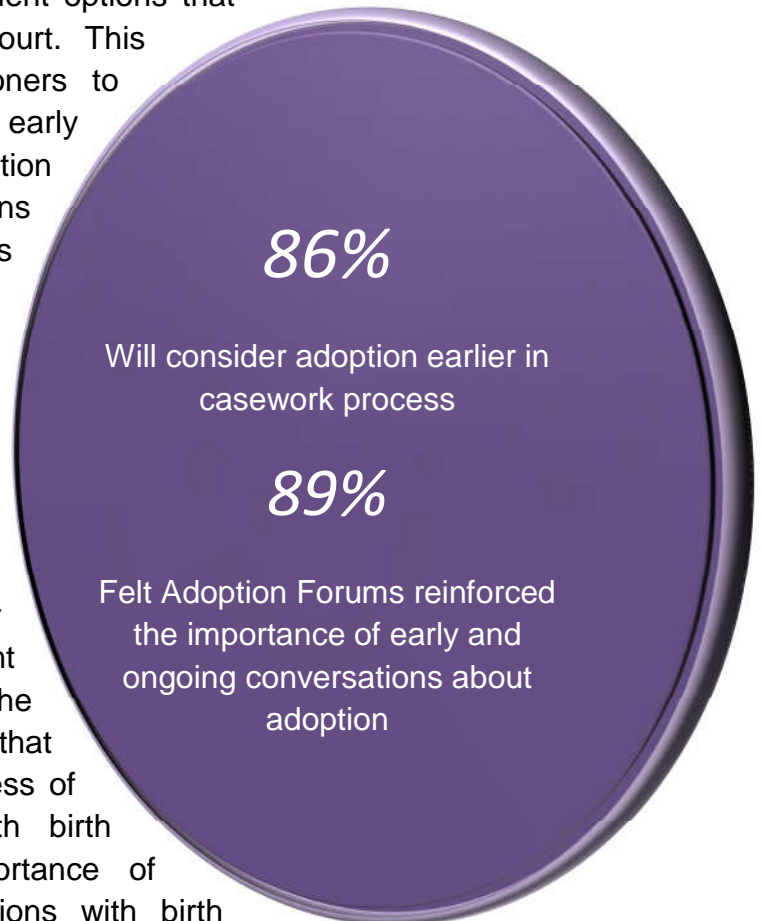
Recommendation:

That future OOHC adoption training continue to include time and opportunities for professional reflection, discussion and networking that links practitioners with practice support and expertise.

Opening Conversations Workshop

This Adoption Forum delivered workshop directly addressed the identified barrier of practitioners not understanding when and/or having the practice skills to have early and ongoing conversations about adoption. This session supported earlier consideration of adoption in practice and encouraged transparency with birth parents about the permanency placement options that are considered by the Children’s Court. This workshop provided time for practitioners to reflect on barriers to having early conversations about adoption, in addition to time to ‘practice’ actual conversations with birth families. This session was presented by FACS Adoption and Permanent Care Services Senior Project Officer Debra Hogan.

Participant feedback indicated that the Opening Conversations workshop was highly effective in educating and up-skilling participants to have early conversations about permanency planning, including transparent conversations about open adoption. The vast majority of participants indicated that this workshop increased their awareness of the importance of transparency with birth parents (91%), reinforced the importance of having early and ongoing conversations with birth parents about the possibility of adoption in permanency planning for their child (89%), and resulted in them considering adoption earlier in the casework process than they had previously (86%).



“[I] Enjoyed the group discussion. [It] opened my eyes to how to approach adoptions with families and the importance of this happening in the early stages”

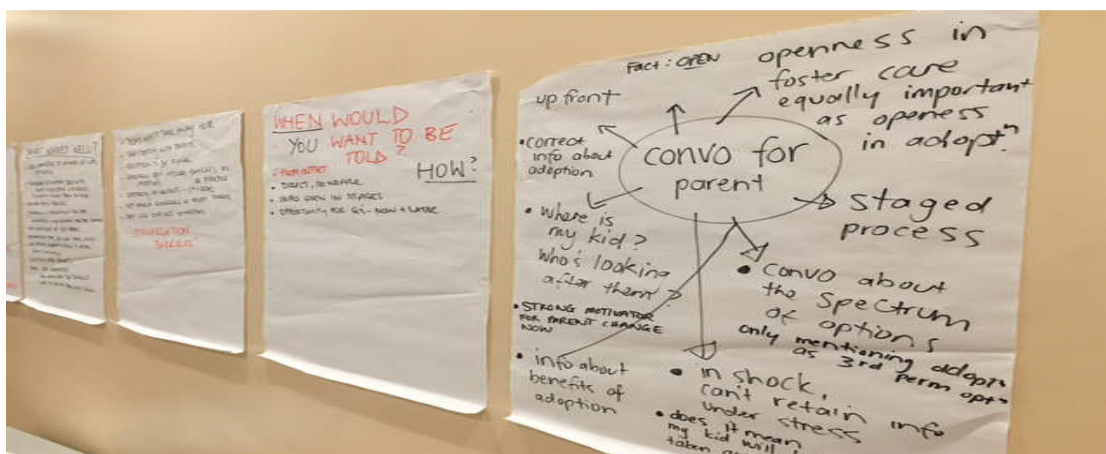


Figure 2. Brainstorming sessions at the Adoption Forum Opening Conversations Workshop.

Table 4 provides evidence of the value of the Opening Conversations workshop perceived by participants.

Table 4. Opening Conversations Workshop Participant Evaluation

| Item | AGREE (%) |
|---|-----------|
| I enjoyed this workshop | 89 |
| This workshop made me aware/reminded me of the importance of having early and ongoing conversations with birth parents about the possibility of adoption in permanency planning for their child | 89 |
| This workshop made me aware/reminded me that it is often helpful to consider adoption earlier than I have previously | 86 |
| This workshop made me aware/reminded me of the importance of transparency with birth parents | 91 |
| This workshop provided me with appropriate language about birth families that I can use | 77 |
| I found this workshop to be effective and helpful | 83 |
| I have been able to apply something that I learnt/was reminded of at this workshop to my practice | 60 |



Building Relationships Workshop

A workshop devoted to Building Relationships was included in the Adoption Forums to inspire organisational, practice and parenting cultures that are open with the benefits on children and young people in care at the forefront of this practice. The workshop focussed on building open relationships between carer and birth families, and identifying when openness is evidenced in communication styles, attitude and behaviour. This workshop directly challenged engrained organisational culture of keeping carer and birth families separate which then necessitates extensive casework to move towards adoption.

The Building Relationships workshop was effective in educating and up-skilling participants in fostering relationships between adoptive and birth families. Participants indicated that the workshop raised their awareness of the importance of early and effective relationship building between birth and adoptive families (90%), and challenged their ideas about how birth family contact should occur (89%).

“I particularly enjoyed the input of Penny Haskins [MC of Adoption Forums and presenter of Building Relationships workshop] who brought focus to real relationships and lived experiences as a

cornerstone of good outcomes for kids in OOHC (and all other kids for that matter) and their birth parents and carers”

“You can’t legislate relationships”

“Penny Haskins: fabulous, inspiring presentation. Makes me feel motivated to engage carers in building a working relationship with birth families. Love it! I’m sold”



Table 2. Building Relationships Participant Feedback

| Participant Evaluation | AGREE (%) |
|--|------------------|
| I enjoyed this workshop | 89 |
| This workshop made me aware/reminded me of the importance of early and effective relationship building between birth and adoptive families | 90 |
| This workshop challenged my ideas about how birth family contact should occur | 53 |
| I found this workshop to be effective and helpful | 84 |
| I have been able to apply something that I learnt/was reminded of at this workshop to my practice | 64 |

Case Scenario Workshop

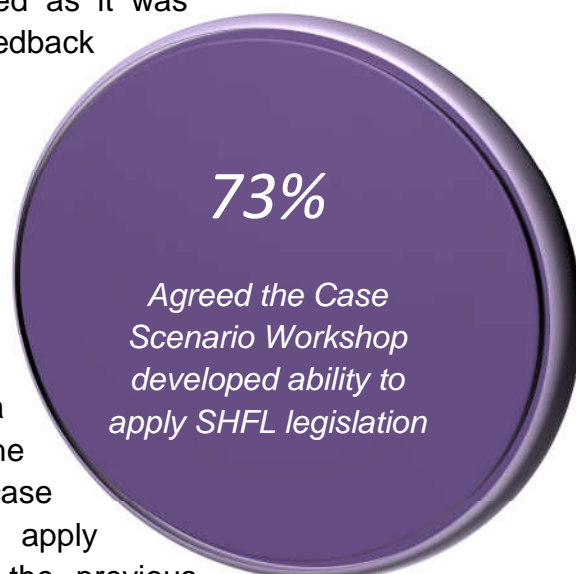
To develop sector understanding and experience in the application of the permanency placement principles during Care Plan development, a Case Scenario workshop was implemented at the Adoption Forums. This workshop presented a vignette (Appendix D Case Scenario) of a young child placed in statutory OOHC and required participants to apply evidence based, child-focussed practice to good early permanency decision making within their table groups.

Additionally, the Case Scenario prompted reflection on pertinent myths about OOHC adoption.

A panel discussion was held mid way through the Case Scenario Workshop to support reflection on issues arising directly with the panel members. The panel members included a local Regional Adoption Caseworker, Legal Officer and FACS or NGO manager to further support local networking with frontline practitioners. The panel supported participants in the process of identifying when adoption is in the best interests of a child or young person. At the conclusion of the Case Scenario Workshop, an example Care Plan pertaining to the vignette was provided to support child protection caseworkers to articulate when and why adoption is the most suitable case plan goal for a child or young person (Appendix E Care Plan).

Early feedback indicated a need for more time to be allocated for table discussions and as such the workshop was slightly modified as it was delivered across the state on the basis of feedback received in the first two Adoption Forums.

The workshop was found to be effective in developing practitioner knowledge about adoption practice, with participants agreeing that this workshop developed their ability to apply legislation to a case that involves the possibility of OOHC adoption (73%), developed their ability to apply their knowledge of the SHFL reforms to a case (73%), developed their ability to identify the suitability of OOHC adoption for a particular case (65%), and allowed them to solidify and apply knowledge and skills that they developed in the previous workshops (65%). The following comments were emblematic of participant feedback on the Case Scenario activity:



“[I] liked the case study and the panel session that followed”

“The child in the case study and his family were very typical of the families we work with and it is clear that we can do much better by our children, their families, and carers.”

Although feedback was generally positive for the Case Scenario activity, it should be noted that there were some difficulties in developing and delivering content which was relevant to the span of the audience, given the audience included a large cross section of child protection and OOHC speciality, NGO and FACS staff. Only FACS child protection caseworkers are responsible for writing Care Plans,

and FACS managers casework are solely delegated responsibility for determining the most appropriate permanent case plan goal within a Care Plan filed at the Children's Court of NSW. Given almost one third of Adoption Forum attendees identified themselves as OOHC caseworkers (32%) this session may have been less relevant to their daily work, as these practitioners are more likely to consider adoption where the Children's Court has already made a Final Order. It would therefore be beneficial for the Case Scenario Workshop training to be targeted to child protection caseworkers, FACS casework specialists and FACS managers casework as permanency decision makers.



Caseworker Interview

The Practitioner Study found that the low rates of OOHC adoption result in practitioners lacking experiential knowledge of OOHC adoption practice. Furthermore, practitioners are not provided with opportunities of seeing the positive outcomes and benefits that the permanency of OOHC adoption provides to children and young people, birth and adoptive families. In response to this identified knowledge gap, real life stories of OOHC adoption were presented during a caseworker interview session at the Adoption Forums. A local caseworker in each location described their experience of working on an OOHC adoption case, and the strategies they utilised to overcome any practice barriers. Through these opportunities practitioners were provided with the OOHC adoption experience through the lens of a fellow local caseworker. The following statements on perceived highlights of the Adoption Forums reflect the value participants placed on this content:

“Personal’ sessions – the interview with Jodie King”

“Discussion with Lisa Loveday about her adoption casework experience”

As already indicated, the *Journeys To Permanency Through Open Adoption Practice* publication is being developed to further deliver OOHC adoption practice experience stories to frontline practitioners. The publication is a practice tool to support understanding of OOHC adoption practice, in addition to highlighting the outcomes of OOHC adoption.

Practice Resources

In response to the Practitioner Study identifying 61% practitioners desired research information on OOHC adoption, the following practice resources were developed and provided in hard copy and electronically to Adoption Forum participants to build sector confidence in OOHC adoption practice:

1. OOHC Adoption Fact Sheet

This resource was developed by the FACS in collaboration with ACWA and the OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forums Steering Committee. Content included current adoption research, information about the Principles of the *Adoption Act 2000*, as well as direct quotes from key stakeholders involved in OOHC adoption including young people, Justice Brereton and a Regional Adoption Caseworker.

2. Barnardos Australia Search Action Kit

The Practitioner Study identified that good quality early casework practice which includes thorough family finding influences permanency decision making and timely progression to OOHC adoption. In response to this, Barnardos Australia provided their Search Action Kit resource to support sector practice in Family Finding.

3. Mandatory Written Information on Adoption: Information for Parents of a Child in OOHC

This existing resource was provided to further inform practitioners about OOHC adoption practice with information that birth parents are provided during the OOHC adoption process.

4. Fact Sheet: OOHC Adoption Background and Evidence Base

This resource was provided soon after the implementation of the Adoption Forums to further provide further research evidence on OOHC adoption as a permanency placement option for children and young people in OOHC.

5. OOHC Adoption Process (FACS)

In response to practitioner requests for succinct information pertaining to the OOHC adoption process, this flow chart resource was provided in hard copy to Adoption Forum participants, particularly for the benefit of FACS practitioners.

6. OOHC Adoption Process (NGO)

In response to practitioner requests for succinct information pertaining to the OOHC adoption process, this flow chart resource was provided in hard copy to Adoption Forum participants, particularly for the benefit of NGO practitioners.

7. CREATE Foundation Flier

This information resource was provided by CREATE Foundation to assist practitioners to support children and young people in care. It is identified that children and young people, whether remaining in OOHC or adopted from care, benefit from connection with others who share similar experiences.

Recommendation:

That the OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forum workshops Opening Conversations, Building Relationships and the Case Scenario be targeted to FACS / NGO managers, FACS child protection caseworkers and FACS / NGO specialists to enhance early, child-focussed permanency decision making, earlier permanency conversations with birth families and support earlier relationship building between carer and birth families.

Conclusion

The Adoption Practice Innovation Forums and Launch Event implemented during February and March 2016 effectively engaged almost 600 professionals working in the child protection sector in NSW to deliver practice supports for progressing OOHC adoption.

The forums were successful in lifting sector understanding of the research base supporting OOHC adoption for children and young people who cannot live safely with their birth families or kin. The forums enhanced sector knowledge, understanding and commitment to openness, as well as the Safe Home for Life permanency placement principles and detailed how they are applied in practice through: early and ongoing permanency discussions with birth families; enhanced family search action early in casework; earlier consideration of adoption as a case plan goal within Care Plans, and; enhanced relationship building between birth and carer families.

In line with the findings of the Practitioner Study, the Adoption Forum evaluation indicated that crisis response work typical in OOHC work environments is detrimental to the consideration and progression of OOHC adoption. Innovative work structures are required to lift sector capacity to undertake adoption work. Additionally there is a need for carers to have high levels of openness at the point of authorisation to reduce the time and intensity of work with carer and birth families required to progress open adoption.

The evaluation of the Adoption Practice Innovation Forums has identified a need for further targeted training about OOHC adoption, specifically to child protection caseworkers who place children and young people in OOHC as well as managers, specialist caseworkers and the legal fraternity as key roles in permanency decision making. Further opportunities for training in the area of OOHC adoption should include time for professional reflection, networking and interactive discussions and real stories and experiences of OOHC adoption. The sector specifically requires more information and resources in relation to the OOHC adoption process including assessment work, Supreme Court legal proceedings and post adoption supports.

Given the child protection sector is characterised by high staff turnover, with almost half of the sector having under two years experience in their current role (as identified in the Practitioner Study) the increased sector knowledge and skills from the OOHC Adoption Innovation Forums may be at risk of being lost if ongoing dissemination of information is not maintained. It is therefore vital that training on permanency planning and OOHC adoption and associated resources are made continually available and easily accessible.

There are a variety of means in which such training can be implemented, including presentations from RACS / Adoption specialists / Casework Specialists / guest speakers to FACS and NGO teams or work units. A subset of the adoption resources developed for the Adoption Forums and videos of keynote speakers will be published for ongoing training and access. Opportunities for work units, including carer recruitment and training teams, to reflect on their practice using these tools could also benefit the OOHC adoption capacity of work units.

Appendices

- A. Launch Event Program
- B. Adoption Forum Program
- C. OOHC Adoption Fact Sheet
- D. Fact Sheet OOHC Adoption Background and Evidence Base
- E. Case Scenario training activity
- F. Example Care Plan pertaining to Case Scenario Activity

Produced by:

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The authors wish to acknowledge the contribution of frontline FACS and NGO practitioners to this evaluation.

Appendix A: Launch Program

| OOHC Adoption Practice Innovation Forums Launch Program | | |
|---|--|---------------------|
| Time | | Room |
| 8:00am | Registrations open | <i>Aerial Foyer</i> |
| 9:00am | Forum room opens | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 9:05am | Video: Voices from Children and Young People About Adoption | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 9:15am | Welcome and introductions - <i>MC Indira Naidoo</i> | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 9:20am | Welcome to Country - <i>Uncle Allen Madden</i> | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 9:30am | Opening Address – <i>Maree Walk</i> | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 9:45am | Session 1: “The Impact of Impermanent Care and Placement Instability on Children’s Development and Wellbeing” , <i>Professor Michael Tarren-Sweeney, The University of Canterbury</i> | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 10:40am | MORNING TEA | <i>Aerial Foyer</i> |
| 10:55am | Video: Young People Talk About Foster Care | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 11:05am | Session 2: Keynote Speaker “Young Children’s Identity Formation in the Context of Open Adoption in NSW: An Examination of Optimal Conditions for Child Wellbeing” - <i>Professor Marc De Rosnay, University of Wollongong</i> | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 11:35am | Session 3: Panel Presentation – “Current Practice Innovation” <i>Brooke Bowman, Lawyer</i> <i>Penny Haskins, CAA</i> <i>Lisa Vihtonen, Barnardos Australia</i> <i>Wendy Tu, Regional Adoption Caseworker</i> | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 12:10pm | LUNCH | <i>Aerial Foyer</i> |
| 12:50pm | Video: Open Adoption | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 1:00pm | Session 4: Keynote Speaker “The Adoption Journey” - <i>Janie Cravens, Adoption Development Resources, Texas USA</i> | <i>Aerial Room</i> |
| 1:45pm | Reflections on Local Context. Facilitated Q&A - <i>Penny Haskins, CAA</i> | <i>Aerial Room</i> |

| Time | | Room |
|---------------|--|---------------------|
| 2:00pm | Session 5: Keynote Speaker "What Open Adoption Means to Me" <i>Indira Naidoo interviews Dr Trevor Jordon from Jigsaw, Queensland</i> | Aerial Room |
| 2:30pm | AFTERNOON TEA | Aerial Foyer |
| 2:45pm | Video: Adoption from Foster Care | Aerial Room |
| 2:55pm | Session 6: Showcasing Innovative Practice – Panel discussion facilitated by Simone Czech "How do we Create an Organisation that is Open to OOHC Adoption?" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Maree Walk - Family and Community Services Deputy Secretary, Programs and Service Design</i> • <i>Melissa Kaltner - Family and Community Services Principal Research Officer</i> • <i>Michael Buckley - Family and Community Services MCW</i> • <i>Lisa Vihtonen – Barnardos Australia</i> • <i>Tracy Hinchcliffe - Uniting Care Project Officer</i> • <i>Belinda Mayfield – Life Without Barriers</i> | Aerial Room |
| 4:00pm | Upcoming Launch: "OOHC Adoption Practice Stories" – <i>Maree Walk</i> | Aerial Room |
| 4:10pm | Closing Summary - <i>Wendy Foote, Association of Children's Welfare Agencies</i> | Aerial Room |
| 4:20pm | Final words from MC - <i>Indira Naidoo</i> | Aerial Room |

Appendix B: Workshop Program

| | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Start | |
| 8:30 – 9:00 | Registration |
| 9:00– 9:10 | Video presentation |
| Welcome & introductions | |
| 9:10– 9:15 9:15- 9:30 | Short introduction of MC Penny Haskins (Contracted Adoption Assessor NSW) Opening address: FACS Director Community Services and NGO Regional Manager |
| 9.30-10:15 | Adoption: What and Why? Presentation by Debra Hogan, FACS Adoption and Permanent Care Services |
| 10:20 – 10:35 Morning Tea | |
| 10:35 – 10:50 | Adoption: How? Presentation by Barnardos Australia Find a Family Program |
| 10:50 – 11:35 | Workshop 1: Opening Conversations Debra Hogan APCS and local Regional Adoption Caseworker (RAC) |
| 11:35 – 12:20 | Workshop 2: Building Open Relationships Penny Haskins |
| 12:20 – 12:30 | Whole Group Reflection Session lead by MC (Penny Haskins) |
| 12:30 – 12:35 | Movement Activity (MC Penny Haskins) |
| 12:35 – 1:15 | Lunch |
| 1:15 - 2:45 | Workshop 3: Case Scenario – Care Planning Panel <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal Officer • Regional Adoption Caseworker • Barnardos Australia • Local FACS Manager Casework |
| 2:45 – 3:00 | Interview with caseworker MC Penny Haskins with local caseworker |
| 3:00 – 3:15 | Afternoon tea |
| 3:15 – 3:25 | ACWA video: Justice Brereton |
| 3:20 – 4:00 | Group discussion: Where to from here? |

**Appendix C: Facts Sheet - Refer to electronic attachment
Tab A**

Appendix D: Case Scenario Activity

Activity Background

Participants at each table are provided with a paper to read out to the table their character in order of:

1. Child
2. Mother
3. FACS Caseworker
4. Father

There will be a panel of experts (legal rep, RAC, MCW, Barnardos FAF) to present their reflections on the key issues and information which will support participants to deduce the first permanency placement options of restoration then guardianship. Please note: Speaking notes were provided to panel members and can be supplied by the Open Adoption in OOHC Research Initiative team if desired.

Following the panel reflections the table groups then go back to read out the remaining information in order of:

5. NGO Caseworker
6. Mother
7. Carers
8. FACS Caseworker
9. FACS Manager Casework

The table groups then have discussion time to identify how a MCW can manage personal biases in order to make a child focussed decision as well as deduce whether adoption is in the child's best interests

The case scenario enables practitioners to determine adoption is the best case plan goal for the child, Thanh, and the process of progressing adoption from OOHC. Additionally practitioners will be provided with an example Care Plan relating to Thanh that addresses each permanency option and articulates why adoption is the best permanent placement option for him.

Aim of this Workshop Activity

This case scenario workshop activity:

- Provides practitioners with the experience of identifying when adoption is in the best interests of a child or young person, an area of need identified in the FACS OOHC Adoption Practitioner Study.
- Inspires culture and practice change through increased child-focussed thinking around the way permanency planning decisions are made.

- In alignment with the 2014 legislative reforms, this activity will provide practitioners with the experience of articulating, through a process of deduction rather than comparison, why a permanency placement option is NOT in the child's best interests before considering the next permanency placement option. This activity will respond to the sector's identified need to better understand the legislative reforms and their implementation, a key finding from the Practitioner Study.
- Support Care Plan development by way of provision of a Care Plan that aligns directly with the case scenario. Anecdotal feedback from Regional Adoption Caseworkers, the OOHC Adoption Innovation Forums Steering Committee and correspondence with current frontline practitioners identified a need for skill development with Care Plan writing, particularly around identifying or ruling out adoption as the case plan goal.
- Supports practitioner understanding of how evidence impacts on decision making (eg. poor evidence in contact reports impacts on longer care proceedings and good decision making; inadequate family finding impacts on permanency planning and efficient progression of adoption proceedings, lack of early relationship building between birth families and carers further impacts on the child and adoption proceeding timeliness)
- Supports FACS and NGO staff to better understand the impact of their work on outcomes for children and young people
- Develops professional networking and skill sharing, particularly linking practitioners with the adoption expertise of the panel member RACS, Legal Reps, CAAs, Barnardos FAF
- Increases practitioner skill and knowledge development in relation to adoption casework
- Strengthens knowledge development of Children's Court and Supreme Court proceedings

Further to this the activity provides opportunity to challenge barriers to OOHC adoption by providing practitioners with:

1. Adoption Process Myth Busting Opportunities, eg:
 - Clarifies birth parent consent requirements
 - Addresses myth that children need to be in their permanent placement for 2 years for adoption to be identified in a Care Plan or for adoption to be able to progress
 - Addresses concerns that identifying adoption as the case plan goal in a Care Plan means an Adoption Order will be made. Adoption Orders can only be made by the Supreme Court and only after assessments and ongoing caseworker have occurred that continue to identify adoption as the best case plan goal for a child.
 - Addresses myth that children from multicultural backgrounds can't be adopted by carers from a different cultural background

2. Opportunities for Challenging Personal and Professional Misconceptions, eg:

- Fear that birth families are a safety risk to carers
- Challenge prioritisation of birth parent needs over needs of children

Address contact myths including:

- Birth family contact should be 4 times per year when a child is in permanent OOHC and it should occur in a CSC
- Carers don't have the skills to supervise and facilitate birth family contact
- After an adoption order is made the adoptive parents won't continue with contact

Note: This activity will require staff with experience of OOHC adoption practice to act as table facilitators. It additionally requires input from experts at Panel Discussion points. Facilitators must be skilled and prepared to address the myths / concerns and any resistance/misinformation from frontline practitioners. The facilitator can collate pertinent questions from the table for the panel question time.

Group Task

The FACS child protection caseworker must file a Care Plan in relation to Thanh at the Children's Court in the near future.

In the Care Plan the caseworker must address the permanency placement options, as required by current legislation, in the following order:

1. Restoration
2. Guardianship to relative or kin
3. Adoption
4. PR to the Minister, placement with foster carer

At the end of the activity, as a group, you will become the Manager Casework delegated with deciding which permanent placement option would be in Thanh's best interests.

PART A – 10 minutes

Six table participants read out the scripts to the table. Listen to the views and evidence of each person involved in Thanh's life in the following order:

1. Child - Thanh
2. Mother - Maria
3. FACS Caseworker
4. Father – Long

Thanh, Child

I am 3 years old, I like playing outside and I love sharks and fish.

I have been in foster care once before when I was 15 months old.

I find it hard to trust new people and I need a lot of help with learning to play nicely with other kids. I get angry and upset easily and people see me as being "out of control". I feel butterflies in my tummy every day and I hide food under my pillow in my foster placement.

Sometimes people think I can speak another language because I don't look like them, but I only speak English.

Now that I'm in foster care again I go to childcare 2 days a week and it's taking me time to get used to. My carers Tom and Judy looked after me for 8 months the last time I was in foster care, it's taking me time to settle in again but it's helpful that I met them before. It wasn't quite as scary coming in to care this time. I didn't like being taken away from my mum at the time but I feel safe with my carers and I like going to the beach a lot and I'm doing things like swimming lessons and gymnastics now which makes me feel good.

I'll always say I want to go home to my mum because she's my mum. But I want to keep doing all the things I'm doing with Tom and Judy, they let me do fun things. I feel wanted and happy when they look after me.

I feel sad when mum doesn't come to see me sometimes. I miss going to McDonald's with mum and the local park with her, they're good memories I have. But I also feel really confused. I don't know how to behave when I'm around mum sometimes. I remember bad stuff sometimes when I see mum and dad and that can set me off. I hear police sirens sometimes and that makes me chuck up. Sometimes I bang my head against a wall to feel better and yesterday my caseworker saw me bang my head on the corner of a table and I didn't flinch or cry.

I haven't seen dad for ages. He used to live with me and mum before I was taken away again. I'm worried that dad might be hurt. He got punched up once, I saw his face. I don't know what to expect from dad either, sometimes he is really scary and he takes me places in the middle of the night so I don't get much sleep.

Maria, Thanh's Mum

I was sexually and physically abused and neglected as a kid. I have burn scars on my arms from when boiling water fell on me while my parents were high on heroin and I was trying to cook for myself.

I don't see my parents now, our relationship has been up and down and they were both in and out of jail throughout my childhood. They are really old now. My dad wasn't born in Australia.

I have been using ICE for the past 8 years, sometimes I use cocaine. It helps me block out the past and helps me to feel good. I tried rehab when Thanh was taken from me over a year ago but I busted. It's really hard.

I also have problems with my mental health. I have been picked up by the police a few times this past 3 years and they have taken me to a mental health facility involuntarily. My psychiatrist tells me I need to take medicine but I don't like taking it because it spaces me out and I feel numb and can't take things in.

I don't have any brothers or sisters, the only person that looks out for me is my neighbour who is 80 years old. She's the closest thing to a mum I have I guess.

I didn't plan to have Thanh but I love him and want him to be with me. I'm so angry with the FACS caseworker for taking him away from me again. I'm also angry with my ex for being violent to me. He gets in rages when he's high too. Every guy I've been with has been violent. Thanh is always in his bedroom asleep when the violence happens though.

I got Thanh back last time so I will get him back again. He needs to be with me.

The caseworker has told me I have to follow the case plan that we worked on together if the Children's Court is any chance of giving Thanh back to me. It's hard. I just need a couple of years to work things out once and for all. It will all work out in the end.

A professional has recently written a report saying that I could parent Thanh if I was drug free for a few years and followed my mental health plan.

FACS Caseworker

I've been working with Thanh and his mum Maria for a year now. My colleague used to work with them when Thanh came in to care the first time, this is the second time.

I'm a good networker and relationship builder.

I understand why Maria is so angry that Thanh has been removed again, it must be so hard for her. But it's about Thanh. He's showing real signs of trauma and problems with attachment. He's so obviously behind in his development compared to his peers. I have to focus on Thanh having his needs met now, he only gets one childhood and he doesn't have the luxury of time to wait and see if his mum and dad can work things out without any guarantee of success.

I've made referrals for Maria to go into long term rehab and I've tried to take Maria to appointments with her Psychiatrist but she has not been home when I arrive to pick her up for her appointments, as agreed. I have also set up random urine analysis testing for her but she has not been going. She always comes up with a reason for not attending which I find hard to believe. The two samples she has provided showed positive for ICE and cocaine.

I get contact reports from the NGO telling me that Thanh and Maria's contact is generally positive for both of them when she attends. Maria sang a song about Thanh during one contact that he loved and the NGO caseworker wrote down the words so that they both have a copy of their special song to remember. Maria needs a lot of support with managing Thanh's behaviour during contacts. Sometimes Maria doesn't go to contact and a couple of times contact had to be cancelled because Maria presented drug affected.

Thanh doesn't appear to be connected to his birth culture or traditions, so it's really important to identify connections that should/could be established and fostered. The

absence of existing connections doesn't mean that connections are not needed or would not be of significant benefit to Thanh's wellbeing.

I've tried to contact Thanh's dad but his last known phone number is disconnected. Maria said they have split up and he was last in Wollongong working a bit as a plumber. I need to search for him and any extended family members.

Long, Thanh's Dad

I disengaged with FACS after Thanh was removed because I am fearful of authority and governments. Our family came to Australia from Vietnam and the war there affected us.

When the FACS caseworker located me I said I wanted to care for Thanh but the assessment found that I'm not a good enough parent to look after him full time. I use ICE a bit and my drug screens came up dirty. FACS also thinks I'm violent but Thanh was always in his room when his mum and I fought so he wouldn't have known anything. She always started it. FACS said I could be involved in Thanh's life by having contact with him.

I've got a criminal court case coming up and might go back in gaol for a bit. I have been in before for selling drugs. My drug use gets in the way of having stable accommodation. Mostly I sleep in men's refuges or at my parent's place in Wollongong.

In Vietnam, often extended family and community help with the responsibility of raising children. I want Thanh to know about Vietnamese culture.

I need to know my son is safe, it worries me not knowing more about where he is living and what he is doing. I love him and I want him to be happy. I hoped that my family would be able to care for him but they are too old and their health is a problem so FACS doesn't think Thanh can live with them full time either.

Table Group Reflection time – 10 mins

What evidence / information stands out for you in the case of Thanh?

Panel Reflections on Case

PART B – 10 minutes reading

MC asks the room to continue reading through the case scenario out loud in their table groupings.

NGO Caseworker

I've been working hard to support Thanh in his placement with Tom and Judy.

Tom and Judy have some experience caring for kids with a trauma history. I've provided FACS with regular placement update reports. I've been really impressed with the way Tom and Judy have talked to Thanh in such a caring and non-judgemental way about why his mum can't make it to contact sometimes. Last week I heard them say to Thanh "*We know you are so important to your mum and she loves you so much. We know she would be really disappointed too that she couldn't attend contact with you today. We're disappointed that you both missed out on seeing each other too. I wonder if drawing a picture could help us feel a bit better and we could send it to her so that she knows that we are thinking of her?*"

Tom and Judy are authorised short term as well as long term foster carers. Last year they were caring for a child for over 12 months and the child was restored to the parents. It was really hard for them. Thanh is the first child they have cared for since the previous child left their care. They have indicated that they would consider adoption but they don't know much about adoption of children from OOHC.

I've given FACS weekly contact reports to evidence the relationship between Thanh and his mum too. I've worked hard to build up a direct relationship between Maria and the carers because it's better for children this way, no matter what the outcome at the Children's Court. The carers bring Thanh to contact and spend some time chatting with Maria about what Thanh's been doing. Tom and Judy are happy to be involved in all of Thanh's contact. They said it wouldn't feel right having a complete stranger pick him up and drop him back again.

Maria's relationship with Tom and Judy may get a little stressed around the time of the Children's Court hearing.

Maria, Thanh's Mum

The FACS caseworker told me upfront that she has worries about Thanh being restored to my care. She told me she heard some positive things about our contact but also that I don't always attend as planned and she knows contact had to be cancelled a couple of times because the contact supervisor thought I was drug affected. The FACS caseworker also said she's worried about me not doing the things in the case plan I said I would do. I'm trying, I went to one rehab appointment but it's so hard. I just need more time.

I'm really angry with FACS and I'm worried about what the caseworker is going to tell me next. The caseworker has told me about the permanent placement options if Thanh isn't restored to me. There is no way I'm supporting adoption. I won't see him again. I do like the carers Tom and Judy but I could never agree to adoption, I could never ever let my boy think that I was happy to give him up.

The carers have been giving me photos of Thanh and they have shown me photos of their house so I can see what kind of home Thanh is living in. They have put a photo of me in a frame by the side of Thanh's bed. And they asked me what my favourite food is so that they could make Thanh that meal too and talk about me that way.

But I can fix my problems in the next year or two though, I know it. I'll give up the drugs myself, I don't need rehab. I love Thanh and they can't keep us separated. They are cruel. They don't have a heart.

Thanh's Carers – Judy and Tom

We were caring for a little girl last year and she left our family quite suddenly because a distant relative of hers had been identified late in the piece who could care for her. It just showed us that nothing is set in stone. Foster care doesn't offer the permanency we thought it would bring for us or most importantly for the children we care for.

We previously provided short term care to Thanh and now are authorised long term foster carers so we really would love to provide Thanh with the nurturing family environment that he needs. We have noticed the impact his unsuccessful restoration with his mum has had on him. We have had to give him a lot of emotional support and guidance with his behaviour and he is responding, small steps but he is responding. It's totally understandable with what he has experienced. He really lights up when we take him to the beach and give him the childhood experiences he hasn't had earlier in life.

We know that Thanh can't go back to his mum or dad. He really needs to get on with his childhood and we would love to give him that childhood. A part of us does worry about Thanh moving again and we hold back a little.

FACS Caseworker

Thanh's dad has been incarcerated again.

Thanh has already experienced a restoration that wasn't successful. He needs to repair from all the trauma and to have stability and security and get on with being a kid.

I'm meeting with my Manager this afternoon to discuss Thanh's case. My Manager needs to make a decision about whether adoption is the best permanency option for Thanh. Restoration and Guardianship have been ruled out so we need to consider the third permanency placement option now. I'm going to write down some key points about Thanh's needs and the outcome of a consultation I had with our local RAC about Thanh.

ACS Manager Casework

I was a caseworker for 4 years and have been a manager for 6 months.

My partner was adopted in 1972 in a closed adoption. I have seen the impact of closed adoption on my partner, first hand.

I have never made a decision to recommend adoption in a Care Plan to date.

I have a long standing belief that children should be in a permanent placement for a couple of years before a decision can be made about progressing OOHC adoption.

Group Decision: 15 mins

You are now all a collective FACS Manager Casework who is delegated to make a decision about the permanency placement option you will be recommending in Thanh's Care Plan.

Facilitator ask the table participants:

QU: As the decision maker, how could you manage your personal biases in order to focus on making an objective, child-focussed decision about adoption of Thanh?

QU: Is adoption in Thanh's best interests? What evidence helped you make this decision?

Whole Group Reflection and Discussion time

At the conclusion of questions MC highlights the example Care Plan in relation to Thanh is available to take home.

Appendix E: Case Plan Example for Case Scenario- Refer to Electronic Attachment