



Adoption First Steps

WELL-PREPARED FAMILIES FOR INTER-COUNTRY ADOPTION

Chair Annual Report November 2019

The field of inter-country adoption is always a constantly changing landscape impacted by multiple international and local factors. Most of these are outside our control so it was not a surprise to see a drop in client numbers using our services this year. From steady numbers of around 20 Prospective Adoptive Parents (PAPs) choosing AFS for education and assessment services in the previous two financial years we had 14 this year.

We are always extremely vigilant in monitoring changes of this nature as they have the potential to impact enormously on our operations. As a Charitable Trust we operate on tight financial margins, so we immediately began analysing possible reasons. Our concern was whether it was an overall trend – possibly as a result of stricter requirements of countries from which New Zealand residents can adopt - or whether as an organisation we needed to change the way we offered services. However, we were extremely heartened when it appeared to be an inexplicable and short term dip and certainly by the end of the financial year, indications were that the number of PAPS choosing AFS to provide the first steps in the services required for inter-country adoption would be back to expectations. Apart from renewing confidence in the quality of services we provide it was a good exercise to test our response to trend that we know can occur at any time.

Overall 14 new PAPs opted to use our services bringing to 99 PAPS (86 couples and 13 singles) the total number of PAPs who have registered with AFS since our establishment in April 2014. Of the 99 PAPS nearly half have now completed the full education and assessment process with AFS while a further 15 are actively in the process. Some opted not to progress with adoption, and it is normal for around one third of initial registrations opting out for various reasons. While the role of AFS ends after the provision of education and assessment services, it was gratifying to learn that more of our PAPs have now been matched with children and brought them home. Some of these parents are now speaking at AFS workshops about their journey and the joys and challenges of their new families. This is much appreciated by PAPs attending the workshops and it enhances the knowledge and understanding of AFS social workers and staff.

Our services are offered throughout New Zealand but typically most of our clients still come from the North Island; predominantly Auckland, with only 11 from the South Island. And of the 45 PAPS who completed their Education and Assessment process with AFS more than half (26) are for adoptions from India, followed by Thailand (11) although the number of PAPS interested in adopting from Thailand is increasing.

Again, we reviewed our strategy but found no reason to change it or diversify our services. We wish to remain clearly focussed on our core offerings of providing assessment and education services for clients seeking to adopt from overseas. Our strategy document remains invaluable

as it clearly defines our mission and vision and makes sure we prioritise and address each critical area of our operations and manage the risks could impact on our overarching goals. However, the nature of our services mean they have always been extremely vulnerable to influence and risk from outside factors particularly, as mentioned, the changing requirements of countries. These are getting stricter and the characteristics and ages of children available for inter country adoption are moving more towards older children or those with special needs. Also, we have an increasing number of PAPs who are wanting to proceed with second adoptions and their education and assessment programs need to be more individualised. It means we operate in a dynamic environment and need to ensure we stay abreast of the requirements of countries from which New Zealand residents can adopt and account for them in working with our PAPs and other associated agencies. For example, some countries allow single women to adopt children; others don't. We also need to be flexible to work with the individual needs of PAPs who have already adopted and are wanting to adopt again as the requirements for further education and assessment vary depending on a range of factors such as the time elapsed since their first adoption and whether their circumstances have changed in that time.

Operationally, as I said last year, our systems and process are now streamlined and supported by appropriate technology and with this comes a greater level of risk management and governance. Having reached that point we thought it was time to review our Key Operating Policies and Procedures which guide and direct us on how we operate our organisation. They were first developed on our inception and so it was a good time to review it and bring it further in line with how we currently operate and importantly the standards and procedures we adhere to.

Financially, the fall in PAP numbers triggered a more in-depth review of our costs and fees to make sure we remained financially healthy while weathering the impact of decreased income. We are not profit driven and have a financial model designed to balance income with expenses which also helps smooth the sporadic nature of PAP numbers and the variable time frames over which they pay for services. We do, however, have fixed costs and need to ensure, independent of fluctuations in PAP numbers, that we have adequate funds for these and to ensure our ongoing viability. Our close monitoring of PAP numbers and potential impact on our budget meant we immediately assessed the financial risk and had measures in place to bring into play had we needed to. Fortunately, we did not have to increase fees to our PAPs.

As always, our AFS services are only as good as the people who deliver them and who work alongside us or to support us. Many of these organisations have now been our allies for many years but we do not take them for granted. Our heartfelt thanks to our auditors, legal support and web support for your professional and generously provided services.

Our relationship with NZCA is invaluable as we face new challenges and changing situations constantly. Working collaboratively with them means we achieve the best for our PAPs and critically the families they will form through inter country adoption. Similarly, we work closely with ICANZ and CFO as PAPs, after completing their education and assessment, work with them to be matched with a child or children from overseas.

Our Board of Trustees remained constant during the year, indeed as it has for many years now. For some organisations this poses a risk of becoming stale or complacent, but I am always impressed that the Trustees' enthusiasm and dedication to AFS never waivers. Made up of

people who have personal experience of inter-country adoption, the Trustees insight into the overseas adoption journey from various countries is invaluable. They are able to guide AFS through an ever-changing set of circumstances with the interests of the PAPs and their children at the centre of all decisions. Likewise, our Treasurer, Secretary, Director and Social Workers are of the highest calibre, working tirelessly in sometimes challenging conditions. Thank you again for another amazing year and never settling for anything less than giving your best personally and professionally.

In its sixth year of operation AFS is now well established and the hard years of evolving and developing a new organisation have morphed into a smoothly operating organisation. However, we are never complacent about the very dynamic environment in which we work. Certainly, the decline in PAPs this year was a clear demonstration of how things can easily change. Our biggest challenge this coming year will continue to be dictated by the countries from which New Zealand residents can adopt. The countries for which AFS is accredited to provide education and assessment services have not changed for some time - The Philippines, Thailand, Chile, Lithuania and India. However, within those countries we are seeing a general trend towards more requests for psychology reports and more detailed reports and whilst this does not seem to have impacted interest in overseas adoption it has made the journey a little more complex.

As always, a new year brings new challenges. However, this year has proven our resilience and preparedness to meet what confronts us. We will continue to keep doing our best for the reason we exist; our PAPs and achieving the utmost for the children they wish to adopt and the families they become.

Endless thanks to all of you who have worked with, and for, AFS this year. And to our PAPs, we thank you for the opportunity to work with you on the way to creating your very special families.

Marian Hudson
AFS Chair