



# Barnardos Australia—Looking After Children Electronic System

## Using ICT to enhance welfare services for children

Barnardos is Australia's leading children's charity. It provides services to prevent and reverse the effects of abuse, neglect and homelessness on children and young people.

Barnardos has developed an innovative ICT application which is helping it to constantly improve the care it offers to children suffering from abuse and neglect: the Looking After Children Electronic System (LACES).

### A streamlined case management system

LACES is an online case management tool allowing access to, and preparation of, multiple sources of information about children in care. It was designed to support the Looking after Children (LAC) system. LACES illustrates how ICT can be used to improve work processes and deliver better outcomes for clients, and enhance Barnardos' engagement with the community.

Barnardos operates an Australia-wide office network in 20 locations across New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania. In mid 2003 Barnardos employed 400 paid staff and had 200 registered carers and over 200 volunteers.

For the year ended 30 June 2003 Barnardos received 58 per cent of its revenue from state governments, 27 per cent from donations and 15 per cent from other sources. Its total expenditure was \$19.4 million. Barnardos spends four per cent of its annual budget on administration and public relations.

The Barnardos website accepts online donations and has excellent information for corporate donors who wish to donate time, money or resources. The website also supports e-commerce, and products can be ordered or bought online.

Barnardos Australia had introduced the paper-based LAC system in 1997. Its aim was to provide a greater outcomes-focused approach to its management of out-of-home care for children and to improve longer-term outcomes from Barnardos' child welfare services. LAC uses complex forms to capture required information and features detailed prompts, explanations and reminders for caseworkers.



The system traces a child's developmental, medical, and educational needs and helps seamless transfer from one carer to another with minimum disruption to a child's life. LAC makes information collection more efficient at a system and individual agency or carer level.

Each piece of information about a child is collected once only and, because LAC builds on information but does not duplicate it, paperwork is actually reduced over time. LAC uses the direct skills and knowledge of carers to collect information. This releases caseworkers to play more of a coordination role. A potential flow-on effect is that carers do not need to learn new systems as they move between agencies.

An initial problem when Barnardos staff first started using the LAC system was ensuring that caseworkers had adequate supplies of the forms and were able to update them.

With Barnardos operating out of so many locations, there was difficulty ordering and coordinating print runs. Too much stock was sometimes ordered and wasted when updates were required.

Barnardos management evaluated how ICT might help better manage this issue. In 1998 a small information technology team in Barnardos began working on an electronic system for LAC, in partnership with software developer Allette Systems. This was Barnardos' first major external software development and the relationship with Allette has been important in this process. This collaboration produced LACES, which was devised to work specifically with the information gained by the LAC case management system.

Barnardos decided to produce the forms in Adobe Acrobat format and make them available to all staff on its intranet to print in the required numbers. The benefits were twofold: print runs and wastage were reduced, and the updating of forms could be controlled better.

Allette hosts the Barnardos server and intranet, and this ensures the security and privacy of LACES data. Barnardos has developed an internal LACES helpdesk for staff, and Allette and Barnardos continue to work on further refinements to LACES. While the partnership between Barnardos and Allette is a standard commercial arrangement, Allette is supportive and committed to the project's goals, and has given Barnardos some discounts on its services.



Barnardos has successfully developed and implemented the LACES software package to create a streamlined case management system.



Barnardos' successful development of LAC and LACES has led to the launching of the LAC Project Australia. In partnership with the University of New South Wales, Barnardos now sells the licence to use LAC and LACES to governments and nonprofit organisations around Australia. LAC is now in use in the Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania and Victoria. Organisations use paper-based and/or web-based versions depending on their size and that of their client base.

## Benefits

Barnardos has successfully developed and implemented the LACES software package to create a streamlined case management system. This new system enables staff to share information more efficiently and provides scope for improved accountability and monitoring. LACES enables improved aggregation of information for improved care planning and review purposes, and quicker feedback and reporting loops between caseworkers, carers and management.

LACES was developed as an intuitive system that directly reflected the look of the paper-based system. This provides continuity for the staff and means that carers do not have to learn new systems as they move between agencies.

Since 1998 LACES has been through several versions involving software debugging and design changes that have made the package more user-friendly and ensured greater reliability. Updates and design changes reflect workers' comments and suggestions and new features have been added to LACES. These include a facility to generate additional LAC reports, an online workbook and a separate training database. The collaborative relationship



between Barnardos and Allette has helped ensure compliance, and Barnardos reports very high compliance with the system.

This year Barnardos became the first agency in New South Wales to be accredited for quality provision of out-of-home care for children and young people who have suffered abuse and neglect. They were able to easily meet the new standards because of the LAC case management system.

## Barriers

The social welfare sector is not known for its ICT proficiency and innovation, and Barnardos faced several barriers when it decided to automate the LAC system and introduce LACES. They included:

- comparatively low ICT literacy levels among staff and likely resistance to a rapid change from a paper-based system
- the need for the system to be designed so that it developed and enabled data entry by caseworkers as a direct part of their work rather than as a separate management tool
- computer access problem—initially there was one computer for four to five staff, this gradually improved and the organisation is moving closer to one-to-one access.



## Key lessons

- LACES demonstrates that ICT can be used to improve work processes, deliver better outcomes and enhance engagement with the community.
- ICT can be implemented successfully in organisations with little or no information technology experience. The crucial element for success is staff involvement and consultation throughout the process.

## References

Barnardos [www.barnardos.org.au](http://www.barnardos.org.au)

LAC Project Australia [www.lacproject.org](http://www.lacproject.org)

# COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

## More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

*Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006* emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

**For more information visit the DCITA website [www.dcita.gov.au](http://www.dcita.gov.au) or email [community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au](mailto:community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au).**

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