

CoramBAAF Conversations | Effective adoption panels transcript

00:00:00 Jo Francis

Hello, I'm Joe Francis. I'm CoramBAAF's manager for our publications department and I'm interviewing Elaine Dibben today. She's formerly CoramBAAF's adoption consultant and now she is an independent consultant. Elaine recently revised and updated our book.

00:00:20 Jo Francis

Effective adoption panels.

00:00:21 Jo Francis

So. Hello, Elaine.

00:00:25 Elaine Dibben

Good morning, Jo. Lovely. To be talking to. You

00:00:26 Jo Francis

So congratulations on the new addition, I know it.

00:00:30 Jo Francis

Was a lot.

00:00:30 Jo Francis

Of work. What do you think is?

00:00:32 Jo Francis

An enduring appeal here it just keeps going.

00:00:35 Elaine Dibben

Because it is the only book really that focuses completely on on adoption panel, and I think it has a variety of readers really. So I think, you know, obviously a lot of agencies will automatically buy the book for, I mean, new panel members and and very much kind of encourage panel members to.

00:00:53 Elaine Dibben

To read it to yeah, not just to kind.

00:00:56 Elaine Dibben

Of read it cover to cover.

00:00:57 Elaine Dibben

But to you know, to dip into it. And then there's cases coming to panel that they.

00:01:01 Elaine Dibben

May not so.

00:01:01 Elaine Dibben

Familiar with? They might give some. You know, that gives an opportunity to have a look at something. They'll sort of break it down for them into little bits of bits. So. So it's certainly something that's very much kind of used to inform them.

00:01:13 Elaine Dibben

Family members, but I think to be honest, you know, adoption workers as well. You know very much see it as their Bible really to kind of what needs to.

00:01:22 Elaine Dibben

Weapon in relation to adoption panel.

00:01:25 Jo Francis

The book is it primarily aimed at panel members, as you say, to provide them with the information they need to fulfil their roles properly and to make sure, of course, that they're they're following the law and regulations.

00:01:37 Jo Francis

But it is.

00:01:38 Jo Francis

Helpful for social workers as well.

00:01:40

Right.

00:01:40 Elaine Dibben

Absolutely no, absolutely. I mean, particularly obviously for panel advisors because they're in that key lolly of of organising panels of of organising the work that comes to panel.

00:01:50 Elaine Dibben

And of of raising with colleagues in social work teams and adoption teams and helping them make helping them to understand kind of what the purpose of panel is and and what the expectations are in.

00:02:00 Elaine Dibben

Terms of the.

00:02:01 Elaine Dibben

The work that needs to be provided, so I think panel advisors would certainly very much see as a go to publication for them themselves as well as wanting to provide it for their.

00:02:10 Elaine Dibben

Members, but you.

00:02:12 Elaine Dibben

Know, I mean, I think you know there is, we know that there's a significant turnover in terms of staff that are involved with adoption work, either children's social workers or or new adoption social workers. So I think you know there will always be people coming into this area of work that are perhaps less familiar with the work panels, not quite not quite so sure really about what their purpose is.

00:02:32 Elaine Dibben

And and you know, so I think you know the the book helps demystify some of that really and and certainly sort of still.

00:02:37 Elaine Dibben

Of people in in sort of thinking about the things that need to be considered either when they're presenting at panels or whether they're or sitting on panels and considering some of the work that comes.

00:02:48 Jo Francis

I mean, demystifying. I can really imagine it must be quite intimidating when you first have to go to a panel, be involved in a panel.

00:02:56 Elaine Dibben

And I think the new panel members, I mean you know, you know a variety of people who sit.

00:03:00 Elaine Dibben

On panels but.

00:03:01 Elaine Dibben

You know, always trying to bring in people who are new to panels.

00:03:04 Elaine Dibben

You know who?

00:03:05 Elaine Dibben

Perhaps have their own personal experience of adopting.

00:03:08 Elaine Dibben

Or being adopted themselves. Or they may come from, you know, other other professions they may be in education or in health.

00:03:15 Elaine Dibben

So you know.

00:03:16 Elaine Dibben

A panel is a concept you know in a way that we operate adoption and fostering panels is is very different to anything that they might have been.

00:03:22 Elaine Dibben

Involved in really.

00:03:24 Elaine Dibben

And you know, and I think for people who've for whom adoption is also a personal story, you know, it's also kind of recognising that there will often be triggers for them and things that, you know, that they'll, they'll be very.

00:03:35 Elaine Dibben

Well, and be sort of seeing it really in a different way to other.

00:03:38 Elaine Dibben

People and sit on the panel.

00:03:39 Jo Francis

Of course, what would you say then? Are the sort of most important things to remember? If you are part of the panel? I thought for me it it's really important that everybody who sits as a panel member.

00:03:53 Elaine Dibben

Recognises and feels that their contribution is as important as everybody else's, so I think you'll often hear people who are, you know, perhaps adopters or have been adopted themselves, who sort of, say, but I'm not.

00:04:03 Elaine Dibben

A professional, you know? Professional.

00:04:06 Elaine Dibben

And and it's like, well, no and that's.

00:04:08 Elaine Dibben

Good, because professionals who are sitting on the.

00:04:11 Elaine Dibben

Panel here and they obviously bring their own.

00:04:14 Elaine Dibben

And expertise and experience and understanding and they've got a wealth of of knowledge of you know of cases that have been before and and and ones that will come. But you know I think those personal experiences for people really helped to bring something quite unique to panel. So someone who's you know who knows what it's like to be trying to understand their adoption.

00:04:34 Elaine Dibben

Story someone who knows what it's like to be helping children.

00:04:37 Elaine Dibben

Who you know?

00:04:38 Elaine Dibben

Dealing with the after effects of trauma and abuse, you know those people, I think can bring a very different understanding and can often kind of ask questions that challenge doctors to sort of not just give the pet answer really, but to sort of really think about and connect with the things that we're talking about. So I think that the contribution of every single panel member, you know, should be absolutely.

00:04:59 Elaine Dibben

Values you.

00:05:00 Elaine Dibben

Know in this.

00:05:01 Elaine Dibben

There will be different contributions, but they nevertheless kind of contribute to the whole and the the overall value of the panel and the way in which it looks at information. And then, you know, just ensures really that all of the issues have been covered.

00:05:14 Jo Francis

Now I can see that would be really important inputs for sure. I mean it's it's it's a very human story, really isn't going going to panel. It's not just about as you say the professional view but of course talking about the professional view, I mean many social workers will have to attend panel. So what what were the most important things?

00:05:34 Jo Francis

Need to remember if you are attending a.

00:05:37 Jo Francis

Panel as a social worker.

00:05:39 Elaine Dibben

Well, I think it's quite funny. I think, you know, social workers will sometimes say that they're coming to an adoption panel is worse than going to court, which I I find a little bit difficult to understand, but because certainly none of us are very weaks. And I think I think for social workers, I mean, I I guess the the issue.

00:05:58 Elaine Dibben

The social workers is that they are aware that.

00:06:00 Elaine Dibben

You know is is effectively a quality assurance mechanism for checking the work that they've done so that there is an element of social workers feeling that you know that the work is being scrutinised and and you know and if there are questions that panel are asking they.

00:06:14 Elaine Dibben

May feel that.

00:06:15 Elaine Dibben

Their work is being challenged, really and you?

00:06:17 Elaine Dibben

Know, but I think I think.

00:06:19 Elaine Dibben

It's recognising that actually.

00:06:20 Elaine Dibben

And again, going back to the the answer.

00:06:22 Elaine Dibben

To the previous.

00:06:23 Elaine Dibben

Question really. But but.

00:06:24 Elaine Dibben

When you're look, when you're looking to a body of people who will bring very different knowledge and experience that people might just see things in a different way. So you know, social workers will have, will have presented information. But you know, other panel members.

00:06:38 Elaine Dibben

We want to kind of sometimes understand what was behind that decision making what you know what? What made you think that this was a good match for this child? What? What? The things that you saw in these adopters that you thought would make this a good match for the child. You know, if if.

00:06:51 Elaine Dibben

You've if you've had.

00:06:52 Elaine Dibben

Quite some adopters, you've had quite a challenging kind of an issue as part of the assessment.

00:06:58 Elaine Dibben

You know how? How is the social worker?

00:07:02 Elaine Dibben

Analyse that for themselves and how is the social worker being reassured that this is something that these adopters have worked their way through and that actually will be an advantage rather than a vulnerability in their role as an adoptive parent going forward? So I think it's for social workers to sort of recognise that that panel's playing a really.

00:07:16

I mean.

00:07:21 Elaine Dibben

Important one here and and and actually you know we're working together as a team to make sure that the people who you know who who are suitable to be adopters are approved and to make sure that most importantly that children are being then replaced with with families who can be their friend families.

00:07:40 Jo Francis

Definitely, yeah. I mean I I can see that although it it might.

00:07:44 Jo Francis

Well, be a little scary little nerve.

00:07:46 Jo Francis

Wracking for a for a.

00:07:47 Jo Francis

Social worker, I mean everyone is working.

00:07:49 Jo Francis

Towards the same aim, aren't they?

00:07:51 Elaine Dibben

And you know, I think certainly panels will always try to acknowledge the really good work that social workers have done and that behind every report, there's a lot of work that's already been done.

00:08:01 Elaine Dibben

You know, either in terms of an assessment or, you know, thinking about kind of what's going to, you know, what's going to come through? Is it a good match for?

00:08:08 Elaine Dibben

Well, so I think that, you know, social workers should be open to questions that panel members might have. But, but I mean, usually I think panel Members will also want to be really acknowledging the kind of it's the work that's.

00:08:18 Elaine Dibben

Going into things before.

00:08:19 Elaine Dibben

Work comes to the panel.

00:08:21 Jo Francis

Yes, of course. And and the last time I think this, this book was initially it was 2016 was the previous edition. And now of course we are.

00:08:29 Jo Francis

2022.

00:08:30 Jo Francis

So obviously we've all lived through a lot.

00:08:34 Jo Francis

Then, So what were some of the things that got updated in this edition, and what sort of things have changed in the world of panels?

00:08:41 Elaine Dibben

Well, you know, obviously the most obvious change has really been the impact of the pandemic. And prior to 2020, if you talked about holding a virtual panel, you know, I think most people would have know.

00:08:55 Elaine Dibben

That's not very good.

00:08:56 Elaine Dibben

Idea really. You know much better.

00:08:57 Elaine Dibben

To have panels face to face, you know and.

00:09:01 Elaine Dibben

So I think we generally.

00:09:02 Elaine Dibben

Weren't recommending that people should attempt for.

00:09:06 Elaine Dibben

Really. And then all of a sudden, we all had to. And yeah, and I think it.

00:09:10 Elaine Dibben

Was absolutely remarkable how.

00:09:12 Elaine Dibben

Quickly, agencies were able to kind of drag themselves drag their comments IT departments.

00:09:21 Elaine Dibben

And and all sorts of other people into setting up and running virtual panels. And it really did happen incredibly quickly. And, you know, with a huge amount of goodwill on everybody's part, really. So.

00:09:34 Elaine Dibben

I think you know what I was still working at Columbia at that time and you know, we tried quite quickly to pull together some sort of tips and some good practise for agencies that were operating, virtual panel. And so you know that it was obvious when we were going to be updating effective panels that we.

00:09:50 Elaine Dibben

Needed to include.

00:09:52 Elaine Dibben

And recognise the fact that.

00:09:53 Elaine Dibben

That panels certainly have been held virtually for the last two years. Yeah, I think some agencies are resolved to continue holding them virtually. Others are still considering where they might hold some kind of hybrid model and and some are very keen to get back to being face to face again. So I think that sort of we recognise that going forward.

00:10:13 Elaine Dibben

There may be slightly different models in the way that people are running their panels now, but it felt really important to to acknowledge that ineffective panels and to recognise that many different things that that might need to be thought about where panels are being done virtually so. So I took some of that guidance that we'd first produced probably back in 2020.

00:10:34 Elaine Dibben

Umm. And have continued to kind of update over time and I've really kind of included into that lots of discussions that I've had in meetings with other panel chairs and panel advisors and and talking with people about how they do things and what works best. And so all of that we've tried to kind of incorporate now into.

00:10:52 Elaine Dibben

This new building of effective panels, so that was the biggest thing.

00:10:56 Elaine Dibben

Really. And then I I guess you know.

00:10:58 Elaine Dibben

You have to do a lot of updating, you know 6 nothing in terms of legislation, nothing has changed really over the last six years, but practise has changed hugely. So yeah, you know we've got new models from best meal in thinking about.

00:11:12 Elaine Dibben

How we support and encourage contact between children and birth families and you know, and and trying to, you know, and I think the pandemic has really enabled us to perhaps be a bit more creative about how we do.

00:11:26 Elaine Dibben

Non direct contact as well as as well as you know I think best certainly encouraging people to think a bit more widely really about whether some direct contact might be feasible. So I think we've tried to feature some of that research and some of the thinking behind.

00:11:41 Elaine Dibben

That in the book.

00:11:43 Elaine Dibben

The other kind of piece of research that came out of the EA was the work on transitions in terms of.

00:11:49 Elaine Dibben

Children moving into adoptive placements, so again trying to reflect a bit about that and you know, and just signposting people to where they can find out more about those things, if that's something that.

00:11:58 Elaine Dibben

Interests them, really.

00:12:00 Elaine Dibben

I think something is just again just recognising that the world itself has changed quite a lot. So I think you know in a bit we still.

00:12:07 Elaine Dibben

Talked about you.

00:12:07 Elaine Dibben

Know whether people were married or not. You know, we still talked about sort of same sex couples as if that was still something that was quite new. What happened, you know?

00:12:16 Elaine Dibben

In reality, now you know adoption panels will be considering applications from LGBTQI applicants. You know, we we're certainly seeing, you know, more trans applicants coming forward for adoption and. And so we've really tried to sort of update some of the terminology in the book and some of the thinking really that that.

00:12:35 Elaine Dibben

Panels need to do.

00:12:36 Elaine Dibben

When they're looking at applications, particularly perhaps.

00:12:39 Elaine Dibben

They're they're not applications that they've necessarily looked at in the past. So just again sort of signposting and some other things to read and and just helping people to think some of those things through.

00:12:49 Jo Francis

Yeah, yeah, I mean that's that's clearly all of those points are very valuable and it's important to have something authoritative in the.

00:12:56 Jo Francis

Form of this.

00:12:57 Jo Francis

Book where that people can trust.

00:13:00 Elaine Dibben

Well, I think The thing is with, you know, with everything that we produce at calling back, it's never just one.

00:13:04 Elaine Dibben

Person's view.

00:13:06 Elaine Dibben

You know, as I say, I mean, although I've been instrumental in doing the updating.

00:13:11 Elaine Dibben

Of the book.

00:13:11 Elaine Dibben

You know, it's as a result of talking with a lot of colleagues, you know it's a lot of reading, a lot of information. So you know, hopefully what what we feel that what we're kind of suggesting to people.

00:13:21 Elaine Dibben

Is is what should be seen as.

00:13:23 Elaine Dibben

As good practise in in whatever I will be.

00:13:25 Elaine Dibben

Writing about, really.

00:13:26 Elaine Dibben

Yeah. The other thing that we did do, and this was to bring it in line with the effective fostering panels book was was updated all of those pro former templates that we give people. So I did some joint work with Sarah thinking about adoption having number.

00:13:46 Elaine Dibben

Places and and so the work that you've already done around that in terms of fostering panel members.

00:13:51 Elaine Dibben

We've kind of translated that across to think about how we can be.

00:13:54 Elaine Dibben

A bit more creative.

00:13:55 Elaine Dibben

In the way that we praise panel members for adoption panels.

00:13:59 Elaine Dibben

Yes. And we've also, I think issued a number of templates to help agency decision makers ensure that they cover all the things that they need to do as part of their decision making rule. Take it and that kind of incorporates the guidance from from statutory adoption guidance and also more recent.

00:14:17 Elaine Dibben

Very slow. So you know, we certainly trying to kind of update some of those things. And I know that the.

00:14:22 Elaine Dibben

Our formulas are all available for people to buy separately and then adapt and make their own, aren't they?

00:14:27 Jo Francis

Yeah. Yes, we sell those as a as a kind of a an electronic package. And I know you know, I mean it's a really rich resource. There's an awful lot.

00:14:36 Jo Francis

Of pro forma forms and.

00:14:37 Jo Francis

Letters and that sort of thing, and other documents. And it must make work life.

00:14:43 Jo Francis

A lot easier for people involved in in the administration of panels to be able to to buy those and then use them as they.

00:14:50 Jo Francis

Wish. Well, I I.

00:14:52 Elaine Dibben

Think the important thing.

00:14:53 Elaine Dibben

It's just it just it. It really makes sure that they don't miss anything. Yeah, and. And, you know, I think that that we've seen that in the past, perhaps with things that go to the, you know, that that when people decide to just write their own.

00:15:08 Elaine Dibben

Yeah, they they never to be just miss out bits that actually are supposed to be there. So I think you.

00:15:13 Elaine Dibben

Know we're not saying that, people.

00:15:14 Elaine Dibben

Don't adjust and amend the templates as they'd like to, but what we are saying is at least you'll know that you've got everything in there.

00:15:21 Elaine Dibben

That you need to have.

00:15:22 Jo Francis

Yeah, I mean that's that's very reassuring, I would imagine and.

00:15:26 Jo Francis

I mean we.

00:15:26 Jo Francis

Know that many agencies buy this book. Obviously it's a best seller and they ensure that all of their panel members have a copy. So what do you feel is the importance for agencies of having this book of having this guidance?

00:15:39 Elaine Dibben

I think I think the main thing probably is to know that you've provided panel.

00:15:44 Elaine Dibben

That's with the information that they need. I mean and that's you know that there's obviously a requirement when you recruit a new panel member then that they they should have an induction package and they and the agency is responsible really for ensuring that they have the information that they need to.

00:16:02 Elaine Dibben

Do their mail.

00:16:03 Elaine Dibben

Well, you know if agencies.

00:16:05 Elaine Dibben

Try to replicate what we've got and effective adoption panels that you enormous piece of work.

00:16:11 Elaine Dibben

And as it is, you know, all they need to do is buy this book and say, here's your copy of effective adoption panels, you know, dip into it, use it when you need to. And and I have to say that, you know, I've done panel member appraises sometimes and a pound mental say well, you know, one of the things I'm not too sure about is this. And we'll say have you looked in?

00:16:31 Jo Francis

Ohh page page 30. Away you go. Yes.

00:16:33 Elaine Dibben

They go. Ohh, that's.

00:16:34 Elaine Dibben

A cup on my shelf at the moment. So.

00:16:36 Elaine Dibben

You know, I think it's it.

00:16:38 Elaine Dibben

Certainly saves the agencies themselves from having to do an awful.

00:16:42 Elaine Dibben

Lot of work.

00:16:43 Jo Francis

Ohh and I'm sure every agency could definitely do with savings in that time for sure.

00:16:50 Jo Francis

I mean, of course, Corbett does do other things for panels. This book isn't the only thing that we do, or we if things for certain types of panel role. I know that we run a number of practise forums and and we do a range of training courses and I know that you have been involved with these over the years when you were working for quorum BAFF.

00:17:08 Jo Francis

What was that like? Did did people engage with with those the boys and the?

00:17:12 Elaine Dibben

I think the the group for adoption panel chairs has always been one of the probably the most valued groups, but call them back then because independent panel chairs are, as it says, independent, you know they're not.

00:17:13 Jo Francis

Training was it?

00:17:28 Elaine Dibben

To other people in the same way, and so that opportunity just to meet you on the panel chairs to sort of share some of the the challenges, some of the dilemmas, you know, get some advice has always been really welcomed by choice. And I think again, you know, the pandemic is terrible as it's been. It's opened up those opportunities so.

00:17:48 Elaine Dibben

You know, this used to be a a small group that met its in the longer lattice and now it's a long line group and so, you know, we have panel chairs who are attending from all parts of the country. And and I'm not working at cool enough anymore, but I still attend that group as an adoption panel chair. And I still really value it so.

00:18:06 Elaine Dibben

You know, I think that's that's that's definitely 11 group that's very much appreciated. And then the other one was a group that we actually started running probably in about 20 the beginning of 2020 I think. So it started off face to face and then very quickly went virtual and that's.

00:18:21 Elaine Dibben

The one for panel advisors.

00:18:23 Elaine Dibben

Who again are in a very unique role.

00:18:25 Elaine Dibben

And have really appreciated having that opportunity to sort of share and share practise and and share dilemmas and and discuss this.

00:18:33 Elaine Dibben

Who's the other panel? Advisors. So that's one for both adoption and fostering panel advisors, but there are so many parallels really in terms of the, you know, how panels themselves run that that, that, that actually kind of adds to the richness of the discussions very often. So I think that's another very popular form that's continuing to run. And then I guess that, you know, the, the the sort of panel.

00:18:54 Elaine Dibben

Roles specific training. So there are training events for panel chairs and base chairs. And you know, people are often coming move into that role and need that opportunity to make sure that they they know about the legislation.

00:19:07 Elaine Dibben

You know what's expected of them, but also just again to sort of talk about some of those sort of challenges and dilemmas that you have when you're.

00:19:13 Elaine Dibben

Managing a group.

00:19:13 Elaine Dibben

Of people really, there's another training course, which I've done in the past for panel administrators who are another group of people who, you know, without whom panels couldn't possibly operate and who often.

00:19:26 Elaine Dibben

Voting in isolation really, and and so they're another group who've really enjoyed just being able to come together with other people doing the same role and share some of the ways in which their powers operate and some of the things that they encounter. So that's always been a really enjoyable training course to run, actually.

00:19:43

OK.

00:19:43 Jo Francis

It must be lovely for these people to to get together to be.

00:19:46 Jo Francis

Able to network.

00:19:47 Elaine Dibben

And yeah, yeah. And certainly some of them will will exchange contact details and maybe kind of keep a few links going off. So that's all good. Well, umm well, I'm sure if if anyone is interested in any of that then on our website, there'll be plenty of details.

00:20:03 Jo Francis

Performs and indeed the draining. Well, Elaine, thank you so much for talking to me. That was fascinating, and hopefully it's inspired people to to have a think about going and looking up the book, which is also on our website if they're not already for.

00:20:20 Jo Francis

Familiar with it and anything further to say.

00:20:23 Elaine Dibben

I suppose the only thing to say actually is that.

00:20:26 Elaine Dibben

We won't be planning another edition for quite a number of.

00:20:29 Elaine Dibben

Years, but.

00:20:30 Jo Francis

I think, yeah.

00:20:30 Elaine Dibben

You know there will always be queries that come in over the years from people you know and and that's some of the things that have that some of things that have found their way into the book this time. You know there's someone sort of said to.

00:20:41 Elaine Dibben

Me. Have you got anything you know affected?

00:20:44 Elaine Dibben

Feels about, you know, the business meetings that we have between sort of chairs and agency managers and of course we didn't allow we do because that was just yourself to someone so would be helpful to have that really so, you know, I think you know that over time, you know, there are other things that come up that people feel that they would like to.

00:21:01 Elaine Dibben

See in the book.

00:21:01 Elaine Dibben

Next time, then obviously let us know.

00:21:03 Elaine Dibben

Through one of those.

00:21:04 Elaine Dibben

Phones and it will find its way there next time.

00:21:08 Jo Francis

Wow. Well, thank you very much.