

Key Issues for Agencies in Developing Best Practice for Adoption and Fostering Panel Virtual Meetings during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Elaine Dibben, Adoption Consultant

Legislation update

The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, which came into effect from 24 April 2020 and ended on 25 September 25 2020, amended the requirements on local authorities, fostering providers and adoption agencies to use panels as a part of their decision-making process. The accompanying guidance strongly indicated that the amended regulations should only be used where necessary and the reasons for making any changes be recorded in writing.

On 25 September, The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2020 (legislation and CoramBAAF summary at corambaaf.org.uk/coronavirus/legal/summary-adoption-and-children-coronavirus-amendment-no2-regulations-2020) came into force with Department for Education guidance for local authorities on children's social care also being updated (gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-childrens-social-care-services/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-local-authorities-on-childrens-social-care).

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers) (England) Regulations 2020 (legislation and CoramBAAF summary at corambaaf.org.uk/coronavirus/legal/summary-health-protection-coronavirus-restrictions-all-tiers-england-regulations) came into force on 2 December, and set out further details about the tier system operating from this date, but do not have any further impact on the work of panels.

Implications for adoption panels

There are transitional arrangements for dealing with adoption assessments that started between 24 April 2020 and 25 September 2020. The guidance states that:

Where an adoption agency is in the process of assessing the suitability of a prospective adopter before 25 September 2020 under Part 4 of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, they must continue to assess that individual as though all the amendments in the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, that came into effect from 24 April 2020, to the 2005 Regulations (Adoption Agencies Regulations) remain in force. This means that:

- an adoption agency can decide if it refers the case to a panel for a recommendation on suitability*
- a panel can still go ahead under reduced quoracy (not having enough members to carry out business and cast votes)*
- an adoption agency can move to Stage 2 of the process while still waiting for medicals and DBS checks. This is to avoid restarting the assessment process from the beginning for assessments in progress when the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 expired on 25 September 2020*

Where agencies need to make use of the reduced quoracy, then the minimum number of panel members required to make a recommendation will be three panel members: a Chair/Vice-Chair, a social worker with three years' qualification and the required experience, and one other independent person.

However, as set out in earlier guidance, the DfE has noted that agencies are utilising technology and holding virtual panels, which are working well, and it encourages the use of virtual panels to continue wherever possible. The guidance is clear that these "flexibilities" should only be used where necessary, and it would be hard to justify using transitional arrangements for some cases when other cases are being successfully considered under the post 25 September arrangements. CoramBAAF believes that the role of panels could not be more important in providing experience and expertise where there is a general sense of uncertainty resulting from the unpredicted changes that result from the pandemic. We are aware that the majority of agencies have continued to hold their panel meetings virtually and would support their continued use during this time of restrictions. These panels have been playing a key role in providing quality assurance of paperwork, independent scrutiny of the evidence, and providing recommendations to the agency decision-maker to assist them in what are life-changing decisions.

Decision-making when a suitability case is not referred to a panel prior to the agency decision-maker decision

If an adoption agency decides not to refer a suitability assessment started before 25 September 2020 to a panel, they will need to be able to justify why that is necessary, and record that reasoning. They will also need to consider what process they put in place and how the agency decision-maker would obtain any additional information they require if they have questions that need to be answered by the social workers responsible for the reports submitted, the medical adviser, or the applicants or carers themselves. The DfE coronavirus guidance suggested that the agency adviser would be used to provide quality assurance of the paperwork, and that medical, legal or professional advice can be provided in writing for the agency decision-maker to approve matches and approvals. It also stated that a record should be kept of all decision making.

Cases to be referred to the adoption panel

All other adoption cases as set out below must now be heard at a panel, under the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005:

- *whether prospective adopters, whose assessment was started after 25 September 2020, are suitable to adopt;*
- *a relinquished baby being presented for a recommendation that the child "should be placed for adoption";*
- *a prospective adopter being presented for termination of their suitability to adopt following a negative review; or*
- *a match between a child/ren and approved adopters*

Health reports

The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2020, which came into force on 25 September 2020, allow adoption agencies to progress from Stage 1 to Stage 2 and begin their assessment of adopters when the medical report required under AAR Reg 26(b) has not been received, as long as the prospective adopter/s are aware that they will

not be able to apply to the IRM if the agency then decides not to complete an assessment as a result of health information received.

The regulations are clear that the medical reports must be obtained and considered by the adoption agency before the agency completes their assessment and makes a decision about the applicant's suitability. See CoramBAAF guidance for further information:

corambaaf.org.uk/coronavirus/health/adult-medical-reports-family-placement-guidance

Implications for fostering panels

There are transitional arrangements for dealing with fostering assessments that started between 24 April 2020 and 25 September 2020. The guidance states that:

Where the fostering service provider has started the assessment process for a new foster carer before 25 September 2020 under regulation 26 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, it must continue to assess that individual as though all the amendments in the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 that came into effect from 24 April 2020, to the 2011 Regulations remain in force. This means that the service provider can continue to choose whether to refer the case to the fostering panel for a recommendation on suitability. It can still notify the applicant of a decision not to approve them as suitable to foster as soon as is reasonably practical, once all the relevant information has been gathered. This means that:

- a fostering service provider can continue to decide if it refers the case to a panel for a recommendation on suitability*
- a panel can still go ahead under reduced quoracy (not having enough members to carry out business and cast votes)*

Where agencies want to make use of the reduced quoracy, then the minimum number of panel members required to make a recommendation will be three panel members: a Chair/Vice-Chair, a social worker with three years' qualification and the required experience, and one other independent person.

However, as set out in earlier guidance, the DfE noted that agencies were utilising technology and holding virtual panels, which were working well, and has encouraged the use of virtual panels to continue where possible. The guidance is clear that these "flexibilities" should only be used where necessary, and it would be hard to justify using transitional arrangements for some cases when other cases are being successfully considered under the post 25 September arrangements. CoramBAAF believes that the role of panels could not be more important. We are aware that the majority of agencies have continued to hold their panel meetings virtually and would support their continued use during this time of restrictions. Virtual panels have been playing a key role in providing quality assurance of paperwork, independent scrutiny of the evidence, and providing recommendations to the agency decision-maker to assist them in what are life-changing decisions.

Decision-making when a case is not referred to a panel prior to the agency decision-maker decision

If a fostering provider decides not to refer a suitability assessment started before 25 September 2020 to panel prior to referring the case to the agency decision-maker, they will need to be able to justify why that is necessary, and record that reasoning. They will also need to consider what process they put in place and how the agency decision-maker would

obtain any additional information they require if they have questions that need to be answered by the social workers responsible for the reports submitted, the medical adviser or the applicants or carers themselves.

The DfE coronavirus guidance suggested that the agency adviser would be used to provide quality assurance of the paperwork and that medical, legal or professional advice can be provided in writing for the agency decision-maker to approve matches and approvals. It also stated that a record should be kept of all decision making.

Temporary approval as a foster carer under Reg 24

The guidance states that:

Where the responsible authority has started to assess a person as a temporary foster carer under CPPCR Regulation 24, or has approved a person under regulation 24, before 25 September 2020, the responsible authority can continue these assessments and approvals in accordance with the amendments made by the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020.

This means that temporary approvals for non-connected persons can continue if the assessment was started before or on 25 September, and that these placements can continue for up to 24 weeks.

The local authority can also request that the temporary approval continues for up to a further eight weeks under CPPCR Reg 25. The agency is required under CPPCR 25(4b) to seek the views of the fostering panel when extending the temporary approval of a connected person carer before this can be agreed by the agency.

Assessments of a connected person foster carer under regulation 24 which started on or after 25 September only allow the temporary approval of a connected person for a maximum of 16 weeks while an assessment of suitability is completed, with a further extension of eight weeks if applied for under Reg 25.

Cases to be referred to the fostering panel

All other fostering cases as set out below must now be heard at a panel under the Fostering Services Regulations 2011:

- *A prospective foster carer whose assessment started after 25 September 2020 for a recommendation that they are suitable to foster and their terms of approval*
- *A connected person foster carer whose assessment started after 25 September 2020 for a recommendation that they are suitable to foster, usually a specific child*
- *The first annual review of a foster carer and any subsequent reviews referred by the fostering provider, e.g. following an allegation, standards of care or recommendation for deregistration*

Health reports

The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2020 which came into force on 25 September 2020 allow fostering agencies ‘to proceed to obtaining the information required under regulation 26(2)(a) of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 without having received medical reports’. They were in fact already permitted to do that under the existing fostering regulations.

Guidance states that these:

...regulations do not remove the need for medical reports as they still must be obtained before the fostering agency can consider the suitability assessment of the prospective foster carer and their household. A final decision cannot be made without a medical report being obtained and considered as part of the suitability assessment. If medical reports are available at the initial stage, they should still be obtained and considered then.

If agencies are aware of medical history that could affect the outcome of the application, they may decide not to progress the application until the relevant information has been received from the GP or other health professional.

See CoramBAAF guidance for further information:

corambaaf.org.uk/coronavirus/health/adult-medical-reports-family-placement-guidance

The operation of virtual panels

It seems likely that over the winter months in 2020–2021, there could be a pattern of changing regulations and restrictions based on a tier system or levels of lockdown being put in place in response to changing levels of risk from Covid 19. Whilst in most of these situations there are exceptions allowed for work purposes, there is still a requirement to work from home where possible and, where this is not possible, to ensure a safe working environment and to take account and risk assess the implications for all staff, panel members and applicants and carers who would be asked to attend a panel. For this reason, we understand that most agencies are planning to continue holding virtual panels whilst ongoing restrictions are in place.

Factors to consider when setting up a virtual panel

- When the adoption agency or fostering service is holding virtual panel meetings, either by phone conferencing or video conferencing, it will need to ensure both the quality of the system set-up and the security of the process.
- Support should be available for panel Chairs when chairing a virtual panel and guidance for panel members about managing their conduct and interaction in the virtual meeting space.
- Technology should be used that is suitable to ensure that all participants in the virtual meeting are properly connected and remain so throughout. In some localities, this will include checks on the reliable broadband speeds available to all participants to avoid “drop out” and poor sound transmission. Some panel advisers or administrators have attended panel from their workplace to ensure access to better technology.
- Security issues must be considered, including a secure space from which each participant in the meeting “logs in”, and which remains secure and uninterrupted throughout any panel discussion.
- Technical support staff should be available on site to support the virtual meeting process. This includes security clearance of IT support staff, and if they are present during the virtual meeting, that there are clear arrangements regarding confidentiality.

- There should be compliance with the agency’s data governance policy and procedures to ensure that information discussed remains secure and confidential to the meeting. Compliance issues may need to be discussed with the Data Protection Officer.
- Choice should be offered to prospective adopters, foster carer applicants or foster carers being reviewed and providing practical and emotional support to ensure that their experience of a virtual meeting does not compromise their involvement in the panel’s decision-making process.

Which online or teleconferencing platform to use?

From information shared at practice forums about how agencies are enabling virtual panels, we understand that agencies are opting for:

- a video conferencing facility, using applications like Skype, Microsoft Teams or Zoom;
- a teleconferencing option, using BT teleconferencing or other options; or
- a hybrid of both facilities to meet the individual circumstances of panel members, social workers and applicants’ ability or confidence in using the technology.

Video conferencing has the advantage of all the participants being able to see each other and giving panel members a better sense of applicants whom they have not met previously, but where the technology has not allowed such meetings to take place or has proved problematic, then panels were initially able to achieve panel business through teleconference facilities. However, our understanding is that, wherever possible, they have now moved to using video conferencing, which allows for greater participation in the meeting.

Our feedback suggests that the use of virtual panels has ensured that agencies have been able to conduct panel business using one of these methods, albeit with an initial steep learning curve and ongoing challenges with technology and quality of signal, etc! The decision on which option to use has been determined by the technology available to the agency, panel members, social workers and applicants. It will be important for agencies to keep open a dialogue with their IT teams so that they are made aware of systems being updated which would improve the experience of panel members and those attending.

With most professionals or panel members working from home, the technology needed to enable online panels must be planned for, and that includes reliable wireless connections.

Ensuring all parties have access to the panel meeting

When arranging a virtual panel, it is important to have identified both a “Plan A” and a “Plan B”. There may be considerable work involved in setting up an online panel, including a period of testing and identifying what works well and what doesn’t.

Whilst panel members have now become familiar with how to join and engage with a virtual panel, there may still be technical issues which arise before or during a panel, and it is important that they are aware of where they can source support and what the back-up plan will be to enable their ongoing participation and ensure quoracy is maintained.

It is helpful to arrange a “dry run” before the panel meeting with applicants or carers and social workers– preferably at least a day before so that there is an opportunity to sort out any hitches that emerge. If any applicants/foster carers or workers are struggling with the technology or cannot access it in their local area, then consideration should be given to them

joining the meeting by phoning in or through a telephone conference call, with the panel adviser putting them on speaker mode so that they can be heard by all panel members.

Cumbria County Council noted in their guidance for panel members when they were holding a telephone conference meeting, that:

This is a non-visual way of communicating but everyone should be able to hear each other. It is important that we try to ensure that only one person speaks at a time during the conference call and if anyone logs out unexpectedly, the Chair requests a pause in panel business so that the panel adviser or panel administrator can try to make contact with them to ask them to log back in.

Confidentiality/data protection

There have been issues raised about the security provisions of different online platforms, and providers are continuing to introduce new security measures in response. It will be important that agencies liaise with their IT teams to ensure that all security issues have been considered and addressed as a key part of planning. The use of virtual waiting rooms which can be managed by the meeting host and passwords or personalised invitations to access the virtual meeting room should be in place. Where these are not available, agencies are using separate invitations for each agenda item to ensure the virtual meeting is kept secure. Where participants are joining by phone, workers should check who is joining by phone and whether the surroundings are appropriate to maintain the confidentiality of the call.

Most agencies have already introduced paperless panels, and panel members and social workers will have access to the papers they need through this route. Where paperwork is being sent through the post, panel members will not have the opportunity to return their papers at the panel meeting, and it is important that papers are securely stored until such time as they can be returned to the agency for shredding or are destroyed if panel members have the ability to do that in a way that preserves confidentiality. For agencies who have yet to introduce paperless panels the CoramBAAF Practice Note on the subject is a useful resource:

corambaaf.org.uk/books/practice-note-56-paperless-fostering-and-adoption-panels

All paperwork held electronically should be deleted in accordance with usual protocols – usually after the final minutes have been agreed. Any notes written on the day during the meeting should be kept securely until they can be safely disposed of.

All participants taking part in the meetings, whether through conference calls or video conferencing, should ensure that the conference is held confidentially. In some circumstances, that might require using headphones. Where individuals are participating from home, other members of the household should be asked to avoid making contact while the meeting is in progress. Where there are children in the home, this will need to be considered, especially if there is no one else available to care for them during the meeting.

Where video conferencing is being used, participants should be aware of what can be seen of their surroundings while they are on screen. Some programmes allow people to blur their background to give greater privacy.

When panel meetings are being recorded to provide a backup for the minute-taker, all participants should be aware and agree to the recording and aware of the arrangements for managing and deleting that recording.

Managing the panel process

Agencies will already have a clear process for managing their panel meetings, and CoramBAAF is aware from training events and practice forums that whilst these processes tend to follow a similar pattern, there are also agency variations. In considering the process for holding a virtual panel, agencies have needed to revisit and refine their panel processes to allow for the differences in holding a virtual meeting to be addressed. There are a few overarching messages which have been shared with us that are worth considering:

- There was considerable planning needed prior to holding the first virtual panel, with IT support being essential, but over time agencies have adapted well to using virtual panels.
- There are bound to be some technical difficulties, so it is important to stay calm, be patient and try to keep a sense of humour when things do not quite work as planned.
- Virtual panels require a lot of concentration, and in video conferencing, looking at a screen for long periods of time will be tiring for all involved, so it is important to factor in reasonable breaks for panel members, advisers and minute-takers who are involved in the meeting.

The following suggestions are intended as a guide only, and can be adapted to suit each agency's requirements.

Setting the agenda

- Set a realistic agenda that allows for technical hitches, reasonable breaks for panel members, and that gives time for reflection on the learning between cases and at the end of the panel meeting.
- Allow extra time for all cases being heard, particularly if applicants and carers are participating.
- Allow breaks between each case to allow panel members to take a comfort break, get a drink and have time away from the screen/phone.
- Some agencies have decided to limit the number of cases they hear to a maximum of four, or to hold more frequent half-day panels, and have adjusted payments to panel members where this means shorter agendas.

Before the panel

- Paperwork should be sent to panel members electronically or by post, and should be received at least five working days in advance of the meeting. NB: Royal Mail has stated that timescales for Special Delivery have been altered, and there may be some delays in postal delivery as the Covid-19 measures progress, so this needs to be taken into account when setting timescales. Discussion will be needed about how to manage any additional paperwork that becomes available or is requested after this time so it can be sent to panel members securely in advance of the meeting, or if there are occasionally documents that have to be shared at the panel meeting, that time is built in for these to be read on screen and reflected on.
- To assist the panel Chair in preparing for the meeting, some agencies have been asking panel members to prepare their views on the applicants' strengths and/or their questions

in advance of the meeting, and to send them to the Chair. It can be helpful to set a limit to the number of strengths, issues or questions being sent by each panel member. Panel Chairs will then be in a position to prepare a list of strengths and questions to ensure that the panel is focused on the key issues prior to the meeting. This does not prevent further discussion of the issues at the beginning of the panel meeting when the prepared strengths/questions are shared with all members. It can be helpful to note in the minutes that all panel members contributed to the questions, to evidence their participation in the process.

- If applicants/carers have chosen not to attend the virtual panel, then the panel adviser or administrator could ensure that the strengths and questions are sent to the social worker so that they can share the applicant's/carer's responses at the meeting. However, wherever possible, applicants and carers should be encouraged and helped to attend so that they can make a full contribution and be part of the meeting.
- Panel members and others attending the meeting should be reminded of the need to charge their laptops, tablets or phones prior to the meeting, if they cannot be used while plugged in.

The panel meeting

- Panel members should be advised to log in 10 minutes before the panel is due to start to allow time for the panel adviser, panel administrator or panel member to resolve any "hitches".
- The panel Chair will then either collect the strengths and questions from panel members, if these have not been submitted before the panel, or go through the prepared list of questions from those submitted in advance, inviting any significant amendments or additions.
- There should be consideration of how the details for the conference call or video conference will be shared with the applicants (and social workers) so that they do not join before the panel discussion has been completed. Usually, the panel adviser would take responsibility for the panel operation (unless IT help has been made available) and would invite them to join or contact them and advise them when the panel is ready for them to join.
- Where there is an appropriate facility available, some panel Chairs are meeting with applicants/carers prior to them joining the panel to introduce themselves/share areas of discussion. This is best practice and should be part of the process where possible.
- When applicants and/or social workers join the virtual panel, the Chair should invite each panel member to introduce themselves and their role. Where the facility is available, panel members would then be asked to mute their audio feed while questions are asked. Some panels have also found it helpful on video conferences for panel members' video feeds to also be switched off so all involved can focus on the primary speakers – the Chair, social worker, applicants/carers and, if required, the panel adviser. (Experience has shown that people will, without realising it, be fidgeting, moving about or looking around, which can be distracting to others.)
- Although most panels would usually have panel members asking questions of the social worker, applicants or carers, agencies initially reported that in virtual panels, it was more straightforward for the Chair to ask all the questions of the applicants and social workers, as agreed with panel members. However, over time, as people have become more confident in the virtual environment, many have now reverted back to all panel members being involved in asking questions.
- Some conference facilities include the option to record the meeting. This can be a helpful back-up for the minute-taker, but all participants in the meeting should be made

aware that the meeting is being recorded and should give their consent. A protocol should be put in place for the recording to be deleted once the minutes have been completed.

- Once the questions have been asked, in some agencies the Chair may ask applicants/carers to leave the meeting, while others would invite them to remain and be present for the panel discussion. This may depend on whether there is third party information to be discussed or concerns that are felt to need further clarification with the workers. Some agencies ask social workers to also leave at this point; others invite them to stay and hear panel deliberations.
- Panel members can then re-join the discussion with their video and/or audio if they were switched off, and the panel Chair will facilitate a discussion leading to the making of a panel recommendation.
- Some agencies then invite applicants/carers to re-join the meeting, while others ask the panel Chair, panel adviser or social worker to contact them and share the panel recommendation and reasons.

Case study

Adoption Counts set out their expectations of how a video conferencing meeting will run, which are shared in their information leaflets for social workers, applicants and panel members.

During the panel

- Be aware of your surroundings. If in a shared space, please use headphones to maintain confidentiality. Do not have any confidential or inappropriate items visible to the camera.
- Panel discussion will be managed in the same way as present; however, there are some additional disciplines to ensure that everything runs smoothly.
- When speaking, please be aware that people will be listening via headphones, so state your name and speak clearly and slowly. This will assist other people on the call, particularly the minute-taker.
- Please avoid speaking when someone else is speaking. If you have any additional questions or comments, wait for an appropriate break in speech to speak.
- The Chair will call you by name to introduce yourself.
- The Chair will call on each panel member individually to give their strengths, vulnerabilities and questions. Questions will be submitted prior to the panel, but the Chair will check in with panel members to ensure there is nothing extra to add. The Chair will ask questions on behalf of the panel.
- The Chair will then call on each panel member one by one to give their view of the match and reasons.

After the panel

- Time should be allowed at the end of the meeting for reflection and a debrief for panel members.
- The panel adviser should ensure feedback is sought from the presenting social workers, and applicants/carers. Some panels have found that the level of feedback has decreased now that they are not handed to those attending at the panel meeting. Some agencies are exploring the use of online forms/survey responses to try to improve the response rate.
- Minutes should be circulated and approved in the usual way by all panel members and signed off by the Chair for consideration by the agency decision-maker.

- Whilst panel members will not have any travel expenses, some may incur costs for use of telephone conferencing, which they should be able to claim for.
- The panel Chair and panel adviser should consider whether any changes need to be made to the process as a result of the feedback.
- Fostering Network published a helpful blog from a panel Chair after her first virtual panel, which may be of interest: <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/blogs/alfie-cross/conducting-virtual-panel-meetings>

Involving applicants in a virtual panel

- The social worker for the applicants and/or panel adviser should discuss with applicants and carers how they want to be involved in the meeting. Where possible, this would be helped by having an information leaflet that can be shared with them.
- Panel leaflets for applicants should be updated to reflect expectations of the virtual panel meeting, the process and the practicalities of the method being used to host the meeting and, if possible, include a couple of accounts from carers and applicants who have attended a virtual panel.
- Particular thought should be given when the panel is considering a Standards of Care report, a deregistration, or a recommendation that applicants are not suitable to foster or adopt, on how the applicant or carer will be supported by their social worker before and after the panel, and how the panel recommendation will be shared with them.

As some of this early feedback below shows, some applicants/carers wanted to be involved in a virtual meeting, while others preferred their social worker to represent them.

We did offer to include the adopters, but I think they were stressed enough already and were confident that the social workers could represent them well.

We completed an approval with the applicants on the call (that bit was good but not brilliant, but they were pleased to still be involved).

The positive was that the adopters/applicants still felt that they were part of the process. Not sure how the applicants would be supported if it was a more difficult application or match.

One foster carer, who doesn't like talking in groups, found the experience difficult. The support and skills of her supervising social worker were important in helping her find her voice.

The carers were connected persons who, whilst doing well in caring for their grandson, didn't feel confident in being part of panel discussions using this medium (teleconferencing). Their social worker rang them beforehand to gather any views they wanted to put forward and presented these.

As applicants and carers have become more familiar with being involved in interviews and meetings using virtual platforms, they have become increasingly prepared to participate in virtual panels where they have been given the right support to do so.

The following reflections from prospective foster carers and adopters and approved adopters and foster carers who attended a virtual panel during the last few months highlight what helped them to have a positive experience, despite any technical hitches or drawbacks.

We both agreed that the virtual panel was a success; although we had some difficulty logging on to begin with, once it was up and running the whole process ran quite smoothly. The joining instructions could have been a little clearer but other than that no further comments.

(Foster carer review)

My personal feedback from the virtual panel was excellent, but I think this was led by the preparation beforehand to underpin the confidence which I felt sitting in the comforts of my own home. Secondly, I believe the Chair was excellent in that he projected confidence and an air of calm which helped me to relax; he did not seem judgemental or intimidating. Therefore, I believe the key to future virtual panels is preparation and confidence in the equipment that you possess and the panel appearing non-judgemental and reducing the fear and anxiety that could exist. I think the feedback from the Chair was very helpful and the conduct is a skill and comes from experience, I suppose. I also believe that the fact that only one person asked the questions but there was an awareness of the source of the questions was important. As I had been in the process for such a length of time, I was more aware of processes and information. I was prepared for the panel because I ensured that I read and understood my report and its contents. I think making notes of the panel members and who they were was helpful because you have an awareness of their background and possibly why they would be asking such questions.

(Prospective foster carer)

We felt fully prepared and well supported for our panel meeting by both social workers. We were in regular contact before the day and the way that panel would run was explained clearly so we were fully aware of the process. It was a good experience and it ran smoothly, we did however miss the face-to-face contact where you can build a rapport with people.

We were made to feel at ease as soon as the meeting started and we were welcomed by each individual panel member. The individual introductions gave us some context of each panel member, which was nice. The questions asked were what we expected them to be and we feel they were relevant and appropriate for matching panel.

We thought hearing the panel recommendation directly from panel members was a really positive part of the panel. It was lovely to hear the individual recommendations from each person. Everyone's comments were lovely and it was a nice way to bring the meeting to an end.

(Adopters at matching panel)

We felt well prepared and felt that we knew what to expect. Virtual panel was a good experience and similar to "real panel". Having more than nine people meant we couldn't see everyone on the screen all the time and sometimes couldn't see the person asking the question which was a little frustrating, but did not cause us any real issue.

We were made to feel at ease and the panel members were welcoming and friendly. The questions were along the lines that we were expecting and seemed entirely appropriate and relevant and we had a very positive experience hearing the panel members giving their recommendations individually and very much welcomed hearing the lovely feedback that they had about us.

(Prospective adopters)

We felt well supported and prepared. We knew what type of questions we might be asked and we had all the relevant training and an understanding of the process. We found it not too different from the adoption approval panel we had face to face. The Zoom platform worked very well and the panel hearing was well prepared and chaired. The panel members were very professional and courteous. Being at home feels probably more comfortable anyway but we felt at ease. The questions were all relevant and we feel that panel take their job very seriously. All we did was answer questions honestly and truthfully rather than thinking about a right or wrong answer. Everybody was approachable and the process was very well explained by the Chair. It was good to hear the reason for the decision from each member.

(Adopters at matching panel)

This has been a learning situation for all involved, and we will continue to gather further feedback from agencies about what has worked well or what challenges those involved have encountered and resolved.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to Adoption Counts, Cumbria County Council, Ambitious for Adoption, Action for Children and others for sharing their experiences and processes with us so we can pass on their learning.

Note

We will be discussing these issues at our Regional Practice Forums (corambaaf.org.uk/practice-forums) and our Adoption and Fostering Panel Advisers and Adoption Panel Chairs meetings, which we will be holding virtually while we cannot hold them in person at the London Coram campus. Contact erica.bond@corambaaf.org.uk to join the mailing lists. You can also contact Elaine Dibben on elaine.dibben@corambaaf.org.uk to share your experiences.