This article examines the processes and outputs of an adoption panel and is the second by Terence O’Sullivan to report on an observational case study. The research investigates how representative and participative panel members were, how attendee presence was structured, what the panel focused on and how conclusions were reached. The panel considered social work proposals in relation to looked after children whose permanence plan was adoption. A scrutiny process was observed that took the form of identifying issues, asking questions, being reassured (or not), coming to a conclusion and giving feedback. The importance of the panel’s work stems from its scrutiny of social work proposals and the article suggests various ways in which this could be made more effective.

Introduction
This is the second article in Adoption & Fostering to report on an observational case study of an adoption panel that took place during the first half of 2003, in the midst of national change in terms of legislation and policy and local change in terms of panel personnel. In the context of a relative lack of published research on the workings of adoption panels, the aim is to study a particular case in order to identify processes and issues that may have significance for the operation of adoption panels. The first article (O’Sullivan, 2004) focused on inputs to the panel, namely social work reports, social worker attendance and applicant attendance, and found that the work of the panel would be enhanced by greater clarity regarding its role and the various inputs being more effectively matched to this purpose. In this paper the picture of the purpose and operation of the adoption panel is further developed by considering how the panel responded to the inputs from social workers and applicants. Information about the research context and design and details of the case are given in the first paper and will not be repeated here.

At the time of writing, the British Government has published a consultation draft of new adoption regulations and guidance (DfES, 2004) that will implement the Adoption Act 2002. These clarify and make more coherent the role of adoption panels and time will tell what impact their implementation will have. Since the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983 first required adoption agencies to have adoption panels, their work has become more demanding and most of the panel’s work was in relation to the adoption of looked after children, an area of considerable complexity and uncertainty. Of the 42 social work proposals considered, the panel supported all but two and made recommendations to the agency decision-maker.

When Howe (1998) reviewed the findings of adoption outcome research, he concluded that there was incomplete knowledge of the factors that influence adoption outcomes. In such circumstances, particular care is needed to ensure sound decisions are made. Koch and Ridelgy (2000, p 382) state that when there is no identifiable, definitive ‘correct’ choice, decisions are better reached by an inclusive, socially appropriate process rather than relying solely on expert opinion. This paper will investigate whether the adoption panel provided such social legitimation and quality assurance by exploring the hypothesis that the panel process was more significant than its recommendation to the agency decision-maker, and that the value of the panel relates to how effectively it scrutinised the agency’s proposals. In asking whether the panel process was effective, the paper will consider how representative and participative the panel members were, how attendee presence was structured, what the panel focused on and how it reached its conclusions.
Panel member representativeness and participation

It is clear from government publications (Department of Health, 2002, p 37; DfES, 2004, p 15) that the intention is that adoption panels have available to them a mixture of expertise including social, experiential and professional expertise and that panel membership reflects the communities they serve. Koch and Ridgley’s (2000, p 390) conclusion to their research was that the potential of the heterogeneous jury lies in the diverse types of knowledge members bring to the group task and that such differences mean that decisions are more likely to be both professionally and socially acceptable.

The case study panel featured both difference and similarity, giving a range of expertise and a variety of perspectives. The panel members were similar in terms of broad age group, gender and ethnicity but different in relation to background and expertise. The regulatory requirement that adoption panels include at least one man and one woman was met as the panel comprised eight female members and one male. Both the non-member panel advisers were female. All panel members and advisers were white European and one had a physical disability. The other differences reflected the requirement to have at least three independent members to include, where practical, an adoptive parent and an adopted person. There were four independent members; one worked for another adoption agency and three were lay people. Two of the lay members had personal experience of adoption, one as an adopted person and the other as an adoptive parent. No panel member was identified as a birth parent of an adopted or looked after child. Although to a degree the panel provided a variety of perspectives and expertise, a greater gender and ethnicity balance would enable it to scrutinise better the agency’s work from different viewpoints.

A simple measure of group member contribution was calculated by counting the number of times that panel members were stated in the minutes as adding to the discussion. The average number of contributions per member per meeting was: chair 25; medical adviser 21; professional panel members 11; professional and legal advisers to panel five; and lay panel members three. Although this takes no account of the length of comment made or style of minute-taking, it does show an uneven pattern of contribution among the different kinds of panel member. Of particular interest is the relative dominance of professional members compared to lay members; however, this needs to be placed in the context of recent changes in the panel, including the appointment of two new lay members and the sudden resignation of the chair. There are a number of factors that may influence patterns of panel member participation and the potential exists for professional dominance in all mixed panels. Generally there was a supportive and open group climate but lay members may not always feel confident that they have relevant contributions to make, hence the particular attention that needs to be given to their training and facilitation by the chair.

Another factor affecting group contribution may have been the relatively large group size of eight to 11. There are conflicting views on what effect group size can have on participation. Firstly, as group size increases, a smaller percentage of individuals have the opportunity to contribute to group discussion (Pennington, 2002, p 80). Baron and Kerr (2003, p 7) state that:

This is apparently due both to the members’ heightened fear of participation, and the simple fact that there is less chance or time for individuals to express themselves.

On the other hand, in smaller groups individuals may be more self-conscious and feel under more pressure to contribute (Pennington, 2002, p 80). Whether the lay members want to say more and whether they would feel more or less able to speak in a smaller group is unknown.

An optimum panel size would provide a variety of perspectives and expertise, be sustainable in terms of recruitment and retention of members and enable inclusive discussion. However, there is a tension between the potential for groups
to be too big for inclusive participation and too small to reflect fully the communities they serve. Department for Education and Skills Guidance (DfES, 2004, p 18) reduces the quorum of panel members needed for a formal meeting from six to five. The effect of retaining a relatively large panel membership and reducing the required number of panel members is currently unknown. The proposal will lessen the risk of panel meetings not being able to take place because of low attendance but may in practice also reduce the potential range of expertise and community representation at any particular meeting. How the lay members would experience a smaller group is uncertain; some may feel more able to have their say, while others may feel under pressure to voice opinions.

Table 1 sets out how the panel organised the attendance of social workers and applicants. As in my previous article (O’Sullivan, 2004, p 43), the work of the panel will be thought of in terms of three items of core business: best interest items, approval items and placement items. Processes tended to range from being relatively simple in best interest items, to being more complex for the adoption of a specific child. For best interest items, the child’s social worker joined the panel for the entire item. If the quality of the social worker’s report needed to be discussed, this was raised after the item was concluded and the social worker had departed. The child’s social worker and family placement worker joined the panel for the whole of placement items. In comparison, approval items were more complex, with panel discussion being followed by the social worker and applicants joining the meeting together. The applicants left on completion of their time with the panel, while the social worker remained to the end. Not surprisingly, the adoption of a specific child took the most complex form as the three items were dealt with on the same occasion. The process involved panel discussion, followed firstly by the child’s social worker joining the meeting, then the home study social worker. The applicants then joined the meeting for their time with the panel, with the two social workers remaining until the end of the item.

There are many possible permutations and combinations of who attends, when and for how long. One consideration is whether the social workers should have been present for the entire item or whether the panel needed pre- and post-discussion time on their own. The former has merits in terms of full participation but does not give the panel the opportunity to prepare for the social worker’s attendance or to arrive at a conclusion without them being present. Having such periods of time would strengthen the case study panel’s scrutiny role but limit the participation of the social workers.

What the panel focused on
The Government’s Fundamental Review of adoption panels asks ‘the extent to which it would be helpful to give guidance to agencies on the issues to be considered by panels’ (Department of Health, 2002, p 43). Given that the case study adoption panel allocates between 25 and 45 minutes to agenda items, there is a limit to the number of issues that could be considered in any depth. The panel operated on the basis that it had the flexibility to identify particular issues from reading the social work reports and hearing from the medical and legal advisers. Recurring or particularly relevant themes have been
selected for examination in relation to the significance of what was, and what was not, discussed. Being able to identify relevant issues and formulate pertinent questions are important aspects of the scrutiny process. The answers to such questions may not alter what the panel recommends to the agency decision-maker but may be the source of valuable feedback to the agency.

Best interest items
During the course of the six observed meetings, the panel considered whether adoption was in the best interests of 21 children having an average age of three years five months. Only one child was a baby relinquished at birth; the others were children in the looked after system. The comparatively young age of the children may reflect the success of initiatives to address permanence planning earlier (Sargent, 2003, p 50; Kamiuk, 2004, p 71). There were ten males and 11 females, 20 children of white European ethnic origin and one mixed heritage child. The panel was concerned to know that all reasonable efforts had been made to rehabilitate the children back with their parents and that there was no wider family willing, able and suitable to care for the child. There was also the concern that if adoption was to be the plan, the child was not deprived of future contact with their siblings unless there were good reasons. There is a complex range of issues behind why some looked after children are not successfully rehabilitated back with their parents and the attending social workers were not always well prepared to explain clearly and succinctly why the rehabilitation programme had been unsuccessful.

For 11 of the 21 children, substance misuse was the prime reason given to why the parents had not been able to care adequately for their children despite social work intervention. The 11 children came from seven families. In six of these family situations the substance was an illegal drug; in the remaining situation it was alcohol. The proportion of children considered to be adversely affected by their parents’ dependency is high, reflecting an awareness of parental substance misuse as a risk factor for child harm (Alison, 2000, p 9). Forrester (2000) found that parental substance misuse was considered by social workers to be a cause for concern in 52 per cent of 50 families with children on the Child Protection Register in an inner London area.

There is a difficult balance to be struck between making ‘all reasonable efforts to rehabilitate’ children back with their parents and ‘the damage which might be done to children where time is allowed to pass without any visible signs of their future being secured’ (Department of Health, 1998, p 2). The case study social workers’ main argument tended to be that rehabilitation plans had been unsuccessful due to the parents’ continued substance misuse and their resulting non-co-operation and inability to change. The panel on a number of occasions summed up this scenario in the phrase ‘unable or unwilling to put needs of child above their own’. Murphy and Harbin (2000, p 7) highlight this trend of substance misuse having a negative impact on the willingness and ability of parents to co-operate with social workers when they state:

Research from the United States indicates that problematic drug use impacts detrimentally on the willingness of parents to work with agencies following the identification of child concern [. . .]. This, in its turn, makes it less likely that children will remain in the care of their parents or return to their care after a period in the looked after system. These trends are becoming visible in the UK, where the impact of substance misuse on child protection and looked after systems is increasing.

Fraser and Cavanagh’s (1991) research supports the idea that continuation of drug misuse is a critical factor in the failure of many rehabilitation plans and Murphy and Oulds (2000) highlight the need for co-operation between childcare workers and drug addiction workers. Such co-operation was not mentioned in the exchanges between panel members and the attending social workers, yet it cannot be taken for granted that in all the cases
considered by the panel co-operation had been good. As Murphy and Oulds (2000, p 114) state:

. . . the quantity and quality of co-operative working and co-ordination varied immensely between one area and another, and that it was normal for levels of co-operation to fluctuate even within a given area.

Approval items
Over the course of the six meetings the panel considered 12 applications to be adoptive parents. All of these applicants were of white European origin; 11 were heterosexual couples and one a single female heterosexual applicant. The panel scrutinised the agency social workers’ assessments of the suitability and capacity of the applicants to meet the needs of adopted children. The panel’s approach was to discuss with the social worker and the applicants, if attending, any issues raised by the completed BAAF Form F.

For two of the applications, the home study social workers made an interim report to the panel, as they believed there were strong indications that the application would not be successful. These initial reports gave insight into the circumstances in which agency social workers assessed that applicants would be unable to meet the needs of an adopted child. In each, there were multiple concerns about the couple’s capacity to parent an adopted child adequately. In one, the concern was with the way one of the applicants dealt with stress and their partner’s comparative lack of commitment to adoption, combined with an unrealistic expectation of the demands on adopted parents. The prime issue in the second application was a breakdown in trust between agency and applicants that was hindering the home study. As a consequence, the home study social worker was pessimistic about being able to assess a number of issues that were giving concern.

Three of the applications were for the approval of current foster carers as adoptive parents to a specific child. Although complex in terms of process, these raised fewer issues and on each occasion the panel checked out the applicants’ plans about future foster placements. The average age of these children was eight-and-a-half and they had lived with their foster parents for periods of just under three years to over seven. The relative straightforwardness of these applications in terms of issues may be explained by Cousins’s (2003, p 14) statement that:

The significant feature of foster adoptions is that they are examples of a truly child-led approach where reality is the baseline for decision-making.

Cousins argues that the adoption of children by their former foster carers may provide a model for reform of the linking of children with adoptive families, as there is less emphasis on speculations about the kind of child applicants can parent and the kind of family a child needs, and more emphasis on living-together reality.

Five of the couples were applying for general approval as adoptive parents and had completed the assessment process. At least one issue was discussed in each of these, including a change in the wider family situation since completion of the BAAF form, an applicant’s health and weight, a comparatively recent experience of loss, the impact on own children of the addition of an adopted child and lack of information on a member of the wider family. Four of the five couples attended their meeting, giving the panel the opportunity, where appropriate, to raise these issues with the couples themselves. The fifth couple’s decision not to attend significantly limited the panel’s opportunity to directly explore the issue of loss.

The remaining two applications were reviews of approvals made two years ago, in which the prospective adopters had not been successfully linked with children despite many children waiting nationally for an adoptive home. The panel was prepared to recommend a wide range of people to be approved as adoptive parents, irrespective of age, physique and single status, but such parents still had to be accepted by a child’s social worker as being able to meet the needs of a particular child. Both of these reviews involved reflecting on the original approval, the
use made of the intervening period and the potential links the prospective adopters had been associated with. In one, these reflections resulted in a confirmation of the original decision that the couple would provide a loving home for a child in need of an adoptive family, the problem being linking child and family together. The family placement worker explained how social workers, on meeting the couple, found it hard to accept them as a possible placement for ‘their’ child. A picture emerged of a child’s social worker and family placement worker acting as brokers for ‘their’ child and ‘their’ prospective adopters respectively; the child’s worker endeavouring to find what they consider the best placement for ‘their’ child and the family placement worker attempting to find the kind of child suited to the capacity and wants of ‘their’ adoptive family.

Bell et al (2002, p 12) confirm how the entrance of a child’s social worker adds further complexity to an already complex process and Cousins’s (2003, pp 9 & 12) assertion that aspects of the BAAF forms hinder matching by presenting frozen, definite pictures of child and family may not go far enough. As this research shows, beyond the forms, the expectations of the child’s social worker in terms of the age, physique and lifestyle of suitable adoptive parents may exert considerable influence. When this happens, family placement workers appear to be put in the position of having to sell the applicants to the child’s social worker.

The other review reached the conclusion that the vulnerability shown in the original application was now more apparent and the intervening period had not been used to strengthen her position in relation to being the parent of an adopted child. Failures to identify guardians to care for the child in the event of death and to develop close support were also discussed. It is difficult to determine whether giving emphasis to such matters represents a higher approval threshold for single adopters (Owen, 1994, p 160) or legitimate concern about the practical realities of adopting a child.

Placement items

Over the six observed meetings, the panel considered the placement of five children with adoptive parents, excluding the three adoptions by foster carers. All five children were under 16 months old, with an average age of ten months. All were of white European parentage, had difficult early histories and significant health problems. Of necessity, these linking proposals were well established before going to the panel and the family placement worker and the child’s social worker agreed about the appropriateness of match between family and child. There was little evidence of the complex brokerage processes that had been apparent from observing approval reviews. The chair consistently asked each of the two social workers in turn what attracted them to this match. The social workers always had a response but the answers tended to be of a general nature that would apply to most adopters and most children in need of adoption. This included a general expectation that adopters had ‘a positive attitude to contact’, which tended to mean indirect post-adoption contact, confirming that so-called letterbox schemes have become common practice (Hill, 2000, p 60). There were no plans for any of the five children to have face-to-face contact with their birth parents after adoption. Specific reasons for the match were occasionally given, for example, the adopters’ location or the opportunity to be an only child, but not as often as might be expected given the wide range of factors potentially involved (Lowe et al, 1999, pp 161–9).

An important reason given by the social workers for the appropriateness of the proposed placements was the positive attitude that the prospective adopters had towards sibling contact. All the proposed placements involved the children living separately from their siblings and four would have brothers or sisters living in another adoptive family. Agencies may make every effort to keep siblings together but for a variety of reasons placing them in the same adoptive family is not always possible. As Ludvigsen and Parnham (2004, p 58) point out, sibling relationships are clearly only one aspect
of a child’s needs and children may have been removed from their birth parents at different points in time. The panel was concerned that the four children had direct contact with their siblings, recognising the enduring personal significance of sibling relationships and how sibling contact was an important investment for the future. This view is supported by recent research into adults seeking contact with adopted siblings that shows that:

**even when adoptions take place in infancy and siblings have had no contact throughout their childhood and youth, birth siblings feel emotionally very connected to their adopted sibling.**

(Ludvigsen and Parnham, 2004, p 58)

Draft practice guidance on work with adopted adults and their siblings reiterates this point further when it states that:

**Sibling relationships are potentially the longest relationship one may experience [and that] individuals may feel as passionately about a sibling with whom they have never shared a home, as one with whom they shared many years of childhood.**

(Department of Health, 2001, p 7)

The panel’s focus on direct sibling contact is not surprising considering it appears to be the most common form of post-adoption direct contact with birth relatives. Smith and Logan (2004, p 66) found that in their sample of adoptive families, a third of the arrangements for direct contact with birth relatives were sibling-only contacts. Seventeen of a possible 27 children in the Thomas and Beckford (1999, p 99) study had contact with at least one of their separated siblings. Nevertheless, contact arrangements can be a source of strain as well as support and a lay panel member, who was an adoptive parent, did express a note of caution during one of these discussions. For her, sibling contact had been a mixed experience and she wondered whether there was published research on the outcomes of direct contact between siblings placed in different adoptive families.

The references to direct sibling contact in the social workers’ placement reports tended to be general, with little specific detail of a contact plan, a finding similar to that of Quinton et al (1998, p 67). When specific detail was given, this referred to the facilitation of an initial meeting between the families and the availability of future support if requested. The potential for the two families to get on with one another was not addressed, yet Macaskill (2002, p 96) found that the success of direct contact between siblings had depended on adoption family compatibility. Adding this as yet another factor to be taken into account when linking child and family would be a challenge but as Macaskill has written:

**When children are placed with different adoptive families, contact arrangements are most likely to achieve enduring success, where families share similar values and find each other’s company mutually rewarding. Where there are marked differences between adopters in relation to status, class and interests it is much harder for contact to survive on a long-term basis.**

Given the uncertainty that surrounds whether contact plans will ever be implemented by the adoptive parents once the adoption order is made (Bell et al, 2002, p 13), there is a limit to what agencies can do to ensure arrangements withstand the test of time. This makes it even more important that before the adoption order is made, adoption agencies do all they can to prepare and plan for contact to be sustained. To this end, the panel needed to ask the agency for greater clarity and specificity about the proposed contact arrangements and what has and will be done to increase the chances of them being sustained (Department of Health, 1999, p 50). The new adoption regulations and guidance, as currently drafted, extend the role of adoption panels to giving the agency advice on contact arrangements (DfES, 2004, p 68). A danger of such a change of role is that panels become seen as sources of advice, distracting from the scrutiny function of requiring social workers to explain the contact plan.
This section has considered the adoption panel's focus when dealing with the different items. The research found that the panel selected issues from their reading of the social work reports and listening to the legal and medical reports. Whether a standard list of issues would have helped the panel is open to question. The nature of such lists is that they tend to be long and potentially gone through in a perfunctory way, with the danger that the panel would lose its flexibility to identify relevant issues. However, guidance may be useful at the report reading stage to help panel members to identify issues. This would be particularly so if panel members had relevant training on recurring local issues such as parental substance misuse and direct contact between siblings. Such knowledge would have the added benefit of equipping panel members to ask social workers for more details about their proposals.

How conclusions were reached
The panel had a set amount of time to spend on each item and reach a conclusion. As the planned finish time approached and issues appeared to be clarified, the chair would ask if there was agreement. This was followed by the establishment of a consensus about what to recommend to the agency decision-maker. On all but two occasions, the consensus was to support the agency social worker’s proposals. On one occasion, it was decided to recommend to the agency decision-maker non-approval when the social worker’s proposal was to approve. On the other occasion, the consensus was to postpone the decision until a particular issue had been clarified. Baron and Kerr (2003, p 121) refer to a group’s required degree of agreement as the group’s decision rule. The panel did not have an explicit or formal decision rule like majority or unanimity established by voting. Rather, use was made of an implicit decision rule of general indications of agreement from around the table but, more significantly, the absence of overt disagreement.

There are a number of ways of reaching decisions in groups, one of which is consensus (O’Sullivan, 1999, p 79). Schein (1988, p 73) states that a consensus exists when there is a clear option that most stakeholders subscribe to, communication has been sufficiently open and the group climate has been sufficiently supportive and all group members feel they have had a fair chance to influence the decision. In common with many decision-making forums both within and outside social care, the way agreement was established in the panel potentially left it unclear whether all members did actually give their active agreement. There is no means of determining from observation alone whether one or more members were publicly conforming to the prevailing group view while privately disagreeing. Such compliance conformity (Forsyth, 1990, p 148) can be defined as when a person indicates either through silence, nod or words that they agree, while privately they disagree. The draft of the new adoption regulations and guidance state that ‘[The chair] should, in a constructive manner, ask each panel member to explain the reasons for their views’ (DfES, 2004, p 14). Members in turn being asked for their recommendation and reasons in this way may lessen the chances of compliance, but skilful chairing would be required to stop this becoming a time-consuming, threatening and repetitive experience.

On the establishment of a consensus, attention turned to identifying the reasons for the recommendation so that they could be recorded in the minutes, something required by regulation (Lord et al, 2000, p 16). Explicit reasoning of this nature is comparatively rare and it took time to identify and carefully draft the reasons in accurate and non-judgemental language. Reasons recorded tended to recur. For example, of the four reasons given for each of the five child placement proposals, the following three were more or less common: positive attitude to contact, ability to meet health needs of the child and offering a loving stable home with supportive network. The main outputs of panel meetings were the recommendations to the agency decision-maker, with reasons, together with the minutes that also recorded details of the discussion. On each occasion the agency
decision-maker accepted the recommendation of the panel.

Panel effectiveness
A considerable amount of time and energy is invested in the adoption panel’s scrutiny of the social work proposals, and it is appropriate to ask whether this investment is the best use of the resources in question and whether the panel is effectively carrying out its role. It has been suggested that adoption panels can simply be a ‘rubber stamp’ on social work proposals (Pennie, 1993) but deeper analysis shows a different picture, with the panel addressing three pertinent questions:

- Is the social work proposal sound?
- Have all issues been clarified to some degree of satisfaction?
- Are there any shortcomings in the agency’s work?

Is the social work proposal sound?
The panel’s consideration of items is at the end of a number of processes and the amount of work completed before the cases get to panel is substantial. The exception in this study was interim reports on applicants to adopt, when relatively early in the process the panel was asked if it was appropriate to proceed with the application. A number of processes are likely to have happened before items get to panel; for example, deliberations, negotiations and self-exclusions. In this context it should not be surprising that in the vast majority of cases that reach the panel, the social work proposals are confirmed as sound. The ‘rubber stamp’ view of adoption panels also ignores the impact on agency social workers of going through the panel process. The role of the panel was to scrutinise the social workers’ proposals before they go to the agency decision-maker. The prospect of this scrutiny is likely to induce a thoroughness that may not have otherwise been there. The adoption agency social workers have to anticipate the panel’s examination of their work and removal of the panel from the process may allow standards to fall. Nor should the small minority of cases be ignored when the panel exercises an important safety net function and determines that the social work proposal is unsound.

Have all issues been clarified to some degree of satisfaction?
The present and proposed regulations give the panel the power to request further information from the adoption agency before making a recommendation. This potentially exerts a strong influence on agency practice, as it means the item is deferred and progress stopped until a vacant slot can be found in a future meeting. There was one example of the case study panel postponing its decision because it had insufficient information about a member of the applicants’ wider family. Such decisions were not made lightly as they brought about considerable delay and disappointment. A particular issue was the amount of delay such decisions cause since it was difficult to reschedule items in the already crowded meeting programme. The impact of the panel exercising its authority in this way was considerable and likely to increase the pressure on agency teams to avoid requests for further information by providing full reports in the first place. Equally there was pressure on the panel not to cause delay by making such requests.

Are there shortcomings in the agency’s work?
On occasions the panel commented on both particularly good and particularly poor practice. There were a few instances when the panel observed inadequacies in practice, including an unresolved conflict between a child’s social worker and the family placement worker over the need for a freeing order, failure to check the agency archive, lack of specialist support for a hospital social worker and poor report writing. These resulted in the professional adviser or agency manager going back to the adoption team or childcare team with concerns. This relatively informal way of dealing with such matters has its strengths, but there may be a case for the panel to record and collect together such instances and follow up the impact its feedback is having on
agency practice. There is a danger that formalising the process could result in yet another form to fill in and be treated as an end in itself. It is important to note that the panel’s role in highlighting such shortcomings in the agency’s work does not necessarily show in the number of times the panel reverses a plan or delays supporting it. The panel’s recommendation was rightly based on whether the social work proposal was in the child’s best interests, not the standard of agency policy or individual practices. There were no instances in the six observed meetings of inadequacy of practice resulting in a reversal of the social worker’s proposal but, from observing how the panel operated, it would have no hesitation in reversing a plan deemed to be against a child’s interests.

Conclusion
A strength of the case study method is its potential to identify concepts, processes and issues from the in-depth study of a particular case that may be useful in the understanding of other cases. To this end, this article has explored how the panel outputs were produced with the aim of shedding light on the appropriateness of the adoption panel’s processes and their value. The introduction posed the hypothesis that the panel process was more significant than its outcomes and that the value of the panel relates to how effectively it scrutinises the agency social workers’ proposals. It was found that during the six observed meetings the panel scrutinised 42 social work proposals and its effectiveness as a scrutiny group did not depend on overturning proposals or adjoining items but rather on being reassured about identified issues. The case study panel’s support for all but two of the proposals indicates that, on examination, most were found to be sound, with all identified issues clarified to the panel’s satisfaction. On the two occasions when the panel did not feel reassured, the item was deferred or the social work proposal reversed.

A schematic representation of the panel process, as observed, can be stated as: identifying issues, asking questions, being reassured (or not), coming to a conclusion and giving feedback. It has been shown that to a degree the case study adoption panel process was effective in scrutinising social work proposals. However, this process may be assisted by the following:

- organising the presence of panel attendees to fit more with the scrutiny role;
- keeping the flexibility to focus on pertinent issues, while providing guidance on identifying relevant issues at the report reading stage;
- increasing panel member awareness of factors involved in the success and failure of rehabilitation, placement and contact plans;
- informing social workers that they will be asked to justify adoption being the permanence plan;
- asking for more detail of how and why child and family were linked together;
- requiring social workers to be specific about contact plans and how they are to be achieved;
- enabling lay panel members to participate more fully;
- establishing whether there is a consensus in a more explicit way;
- giving feedback to the agency in a systematic manner, while not allowing this to become a bureaucratic task.

Such improvements aim to enable panel members to ask for what they need and provide a process more finely tuned to scrutiny. Effective scrutiny tests the reasoning behind the social work proposals and panels need to be proactive in asking agency social workers the reasons for their plans. However, this necessitates a spirit of co-operation, with any panel developing their role in this way needing to take care that they do not cross the line between constructive scrutiny and negative inquisition. To prevent anything like the ‘torture chamber’ identified by Pennie (1993) developing, there needs to be a climate of mutual respect in which social workers and panel members have the
confidence to enter into open dialogue. Such respect requires each party to have knowledge, confidence and clarity in their own and each other’s role, and a starting point may be joint training in relation to the respective roles within the panel process.

The identified processes and issues are specific to a particular adoption panel, at a particular point in time and further observational research would be needed to test any general validity of the findings. The panel continues to change and develop and the research represents a snapshot of a time when the panel had a newly appointed chair, professional adviser and independent members. During the research period the national context was also characterised by change in the form of the continuing development and introduction of a new regulatory and guidance framework. The study was of necessity exploratory, there being comparatively little previous research into the work of adoption panels. It is hoped that the concepts, processes and issues identified may help panel members, adoption agencies, policy-makers and researchers in their endeavours to understand and develop other panels. It is in this context that gratitude is owed to the case study panel for their openness to scrutiny, which enabled more to be learnt about panel processes.

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