Inviting applicants, birth parents and young people to attend adoption panel
How it works in practice

Based on their experience as advisers to the Isle of Wight Adoption Panel, Sarah Pepys and Jennie Dix examine the practice of inviting adoption applicants, birth parents and young people to attend adoption panel when their plans or assessments are under consideration. They look at the setting up of a pilot scheme in 1994, which focused on preparing panel members, drawing together procedures and addressing practical problems, and describe subsequent developments and reviews. The authors argue that inviting all parties to share their views leads to better informed panel recommendations and enhanced planning for children for whom adoption is being considered. Mindful of the forthcoming implementation of the Human Rights Act, with its emphasis on fairness and the need to consider each individual's rights, it is timely for adoption agencies to consider how they demonstrate the openness of their practice.

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Introduction
In the summer of 1994 we decided to look at how our adoption and fostering panel might become a more open forum. This was triggered by our awareness of increasing trends towards participation in other contexts within children's services, eg parents attending case conferences and planning meetings, access to records, children and their parents attending reviews. We decided we needed to enhance our means of decision-making on all issues under consideration by the adoption panel and that, if applicants and other relevant parties were present, an extra dimension would be added to the assessments already available to panel.

At that time, the Isle of Wight had a joint adoption and fostering panel. Consequently, any decisions that we agreed relating to visitors to panel would apply to all applicants, birth parents and young people old enough to present their views. We looked around at practice in other authorities and found few on which to base our pilot scheme.

Aims
Our primary objectives were to aid the decision-making process by providing information additional to that contained in written reports. It was hoped that the attendance of applicants, birth parents and young people at the adoption panel would enable panel members to put direct questions to those concerned and explore issues more thoroughly. At the same time, it was vital to make the process a positive and healthy experience for everyone, ensuring that visitors were made to feel at ease by thorough preparation.

Preparation of the panel
It was important for all panel members to feel committed and confident, and to this end we set up a training day following some preliminary discussions. First, we considered the processes of participation and devised guidance.

How it would work in practice
The social worker would be invited into panel and asked to update members and outline the matter up for discussion. Panel members would prepare specific questions to be put to visitors, seeking information not previously provided. It was decided that birth parents would be invited to make or read a statement expressing their views on the future of their child(ren) and stating whether or not they felt that adoption would be in the child's best interests. Panel members could then ask questions to clarify or elaborate on those views. The social worker and those attending for linking, panel members would put the questions to them. These would be allocated to members beforehand and follow an agreed order. It was important that questions should be open ended and asked in everyday language that could be easily understood.
Before the meeting, the social worker would introduce the Chair to the visitors and the Chair would welcome and prepare them for their appearance at panel. This would include an indication of how many people were in the room and how long it was likely to take. The Chair would also acknowledge how anxious they might be feeling. It was recognised that some visitors, notably birth parents, might prefer to impart their views to the Chair alone, in which case she or he would then pass those views to panel.

On arrival in the panel meeting room, members would introduce themselves by name and role. The questions would follow, with panel members free to ask for any necessary clarification. It would next be the visitors’ turn to ask questions of panel members but on the clear understanding that they were not obliged to do so. Visitors would then be invited to wait in a separate room to hear the recommendation to be given by the family placement team advisor. Following attendance at panel, a letter would be sent to each visitor seeking their views on the experience.

Guidance for members
Guidance was devised/written and included the following points:

- Panel members should not view non-attendance negatively since any invited visitors were free to decide whether or not they wished to attend panel.
- Members were free to explore in their questions any areas where they felt a need for clarification.
- There would be no place at the panel for oppressive or discriminatory language or behaviour.
- It was likely that panel members would already know a number of visitors to panel. However, unless an ongoing professional involvement or personal knowledge might affect their judgement, they would be expected to sit in on all matters.
- The Chair ought to be the final decision-maker.
- Panel members needed to realise the extent of ‘visitors’ anxiety. It was recognised that it would be important for visitors not to be kept waiting and that the Chair should take responsibility for good time-keeping.

Training
To help prepare panel members for the innovation we decided to use a role play, with two members of the family placement team taking the part of a married couple applying to become adoptive parents. The scenario was based on anonymous details from a real Form F assessment that had been considered by an earlier panel (excluding the present membership). Through the role play members recognised how anxious they felt and stumbled over the wording of questions. They felt very positive about how the additional information they learnt regarding the couple’s skills compared with the written assessment. The role-playing social workers reported feeling extremely sensitive to the panel’s reactions, particularly when one member made a flippant remark. A second element of the training involved a member of the family placement team, who had recently been approved as a foster carer by Barnardo’s, sharing with panel members her experience of having attended panel. This had left her feeling included and party to the decision.

Practical arrangements
Social workers needed to be reminded of the importance of supporting birth parents to attend, either by paying for transport or collecting them. Consideration needed to be given to childcare arrangements where this might preclude people from attending. A budget was identified to meet these costs.

We discussed various logistical concerns related to visiting arrangements and seating, which needed to be easily available for up to five people and close to the door. In some cases the social worker and team manager would attend, in addition to applicants and their family placement social worker. Two private waiting rooms were required where visitors would be told the outcome of panel’s deliberations. Birth parents who no longer lived together needed to wait and be seen.
separately. If two couples were being considered for linking, thought had to be given to where they should wait.

In order for each item to be given the necessary time for deliberation, and to avoid panel members becoming too exhausted, the frequency and length of panel meetings were considered. This presented particular challenges to independent members who had work commitments.

**Preparation for visitors and social workers**

The family placement team designed a pamphlet which contained profiles and photographs of panel members, a clear explanation of the panel procedure, the role of the social worker and the visitor to panel, and the length of time the item was likely to take. (It was anticipated that visitors would spend no longer than ten minutes in panel.) The pamphlet also outlined the legal framework and how panel members were appointed.

Standard letters were created for each type of visitor to the panel. Those intended for applicants would be sent out by the family placement worker, while social workers would notify children and parents. Emphasis was placed on the need for social workers to prepare visitors and to feel positive about their own attendance. Thorough preparation was seen as key to the success of this process. Social workers needed to advise the booking clerk of any visitors in order for extra time to be allowed on the agenda. They should also help birth parents identify who to bring as support. If birth parents chose to be accompanied by their legal representative, they needed to be clear that she or he was in a supportive not a legal role. Panel members have a responsibility to ensure that the birth parents’ own views are being presented. Birth parents were encouraged to write their views down and present them to panel members, either in written form or verbally.

**Review of the new arrangements**

After four months the pilot scheme was reviewed and a report was submitted to the Adoption and Fostering Subcommittee of the Social Services Committee. We recognised the importance of involving elected members – something which has become even more crucial with their additional roles of governance and scrutiny. Fourteen applicants (both prospective foster carers and adopters), two birth parents and two young people had attended panel. A feedback questionnaire had been completed in each case and the responses indicated overwhelming support for the practice. The questionnaire sought visitors’ views on how well they had felt prepared for attendance at panel, whether they were made to feel welcome, if they felt they were given the opportunity to present their views and, if not, why. Visitors were also asked if any questions had been put at the panel which they felt to be inappropriate or upsetting, and whether they felt their views were listened to and considered. Further questions related to whether they would attend panel if the opportunity arose again, whether anything about the experience might have caused them anxiety and whether the outcome had been to their satisfaction.

Responses varied but the main positives were that all visitors felt that panel members had listened to their views and taken them into account. Visitors also expressed the view that they had been involved as part of the process and that attendance had helped them better understand how decisions are made. Negative responses included being kept waiting, the formal atmosphere of the panel meeting and the lack of clarity in certain questions.

The views of panel members were ascertained at a specially convened training session. Many said the new process enabled them to check things out personally with the applicants and hear their views without going through a third party. They felt it had positively affected their subsequent recommendations. There had been an increase in the time taken up by each item so that strong chairing and timekeeping were essential. Sensitive issues were experienced by members in a much more powerful way, heightening people’s sense of responsibility towards their work. There were no significant financial implications and those travel
claims that had been submitted had been easily met. The review concluded that the practice should continue.

A further review was conducted in November 1998 to consider the previous year’s business. During this year there were 39 potential visitors to panel, of whom 34 (87 per cent) attended and were sent feedback letters. Of these, 22 (56 per cent) replied. Again, the findings were largely favourable. All, apart from one birth parent, said they felt well prepared and that everyone had been made to feel welcome. Only one potential adopter felt they were given insufficient opportunity to present their views. This particular applicant stated that the panel’s questions had not been enlarged upon. This lack of discussion made him feel nervous and thus affected how he answered subsequent questions. One birth parent felt that the questions were not appropriate. Everyone believed their views were listened to and considered. Nineteen participants indicated that they would attend panel again, though three were unsure. In answer to the question, ‘Did anything cause particular anxiety?’ 16 replied ‘No’. However, comments by the six who answered in the affirmative included: ‘I didn’t realise there would be so many people’; and ‘The situation, given its importance, was more stressful than a job interview’. Further remarks were: ‘The waiting before panel made us feel anxious’; ‘Panel members were very friendly and made me feel at ease’; ‘Panel may like to consider avoiding the boardroom situation’; and ‘It was the first time I had been asked what talents my son might develop’.

Reflections six years on

Inviting visitors to panel is now an established way of working. Clark, McWilliam and Phillips (1998) have described their pilot model of assessment and inclusion of applicants in the panel process. In May 1999, the Isle of Wight Adoption and Fostering Panel split into two separate panels to comply more easily with adoption agencies and Children Regulations (1997), but it was agreed that we would continue to invite visitors to both settings. Below are the strengths and difficulties of this in relation to the adoption panel.

- Applicants are well prepared for the issues for which panel may seek clarification, although they are also made aware of potential further areas on which the panel may want to question them.
- Feedback from adoptive applicants remains consistently positive in that, despite the experience being nerve-racking, they have remained party to it and been involved in the process throughout.
- In one case, panel members were minded not to recommend approval but the fact that the applicants had attended panel and were later invited to make further representation to the agency decision-maker left them feeling more confident that they had been fully involved in the process. Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby (1997) emphasise the importance of the partnership between adoption agencies and applicants.
- We have built attention to the process into the training programme for prospective adopters. Our practice has presented problems when other agencies are involved. This affects linkings being considered, either where our adopters are not invited to attend another agency’s panel or where adopters from another agency are invited to our panel but without any previous experience of attending.
- The introduction of parallel planning, as required by the Circular Achieving the Right Balance (Department of Health, 1998), has presented some challenges when birth parents are invited to present their views on a plan for adoption before the courts have reached their decision. It has required the Chair to be very clear with parents as to the panel brief. Our experience is that most birth parents wish to bring a representative with them. However, almost all of them represent themselves and their wishes for their children better than their advocate. We find that birth parents who are relinquishing their children voluntarily are happy to leave their social worker to represent them in panel, unless they feel that members are likely to disagree with a fundamental request, such as area of placement or type of family. It has raised social workers’
awareness of the need to work openly with birth parents and be seen to incorporate their views.

- In many cases the Form E emphasises the birth parents’ deficiencies, and panel members have commented on how meeting the birth parents has presented a more balanced and positive picture. In one case, at subsequent linking, members were able to reinforce the need for the adopters to meet the birth mother rather than just read about her.

- Where young people are old enough to present their views, it has been extremely helpful for members to hear their wishes directly. This has also helped the young person to feel part of the process.

- Accommodation has been an ongoing problem. Finding a venue with a panel room, two private interview rooms and a receptionist sensitive to these particular issues has not been easy.

- The Chair must have the skills to keep to the agenda times as delay creates anxiety and irritation for all concerned.

- Since our pilot scheme, a number of other agencies have decided to invite visitors to their panels. We already share practice issues and findings within the South Coast Adoption Consortium and have invited members of other consortium panels to observe our practice, convincing them that it is a positive way forward.

**Overall conclusions**
The pilot scheme helped to persuade panel members of the positive gain of having birth parents, applicants and young people attend the adoption panel. Although panel members had broadly supported the pilot, there had been some nervousness about how it would work in operation. It has helped ensure that panel members attend having read all the papers and given some thought to the questions they would like to ask. The independent members, who are themselves a birth mother, an adopter and an adoptee, have been able to empathise with visitors and will often explore areas of particular importance to them. By having all parties present, panel members have been more aware of the subtleties and problems of the assessments social workers are being asked to make.

There is an ongoing debate about the length of time visitors should be in panel, as well as increasing pressure from birth parents and their advocates for them to be included in the whole meeting. However, panel members are clear that they need to have time to deliberate without visitors present. Although it has not always been the practice for social workers to share the Form E with birth parents, this is now imperative so that they are aware of the material panel members have had to read. Social workers are asked to record if birth parents are not willing to sign the Form E.

Major problems have been one of inadequate accommodation and the need to have a receptionist who is sensitive to the high levels of anxiety felt by visitors and who has the ability to make people feel at ease and welcome. The Chair’s role is crucial in time-keeping while allowing adequate time for discussion. Prolonged periods of waiting, for all visitors but especially birth parents, are undoubtedly stressful.

On balance, we believe that having visitors attend panel has enhanced the recommendations being made. It is now such a well-established way of working on the Isle of Wight that it is difficult to remember a time when social workers presented their reports in private.

**References**
Adoption Agencies and Children (Arrangements for Placement and Review) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations, 1997

44 Adoption & Fostering Volume 24 Number 4 2000