Guidance on Assessment and Approval in a Pandemic

How this guidance was produced.

RAAs have worked together to develop this guidance. They have sought the views and experiences of their assessing social workers and have reviewed the guidance that was initially produced at the outset of the coronavirus. This Guidance was endorsed by the RAA Leaders Group at its meeting on 23 June 2021.

Aims

- **To develop levels of professional competence in completing prospective adopter assessments.**
- **To share practice knowledge and experience gained from transitioning to virtual working.**
- **To agree consistency of approach in the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters.**
- **To promote a fair and equitable service as far as possible in a changing environment.**

Purpose

This guidance is to be read alongside existing statutory guidance concerning the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters and RAAs own policies and procedures. It has been developed to address issues that have occurred due to the coronavirus and that are likely to inform new ways of flexible and hybrid working as we move forward post pandemic.

Principles

- Regardless of the impact of Covid 19, to maintain a clear focus on safeguarding, the RAA recruitment and approval processes should be robust and rigorous.

- RAAs should make local decisions about adopter recruitment, based on staffing issues for example, and taking account of the local prevalence and impact of COVID19.

- The number of direct visits to the home as part of the assessment will be matter of professional judgement, agreed by line managers, **that will be decided and recorded on a case by case basis**, depending on the applicant's circumstances. However, no prospective adopter's assessment report is to be presented to the adoption panel without a home visit/s to the prospective adopter's home being completed.

- An adoption assessment plan commonly known as the Stage 2 Agreement, should be agreed with prospective adopters, making explicit the need to undertake the assessment process both remotely, and in person.

- Assessment will be risk assessed on an ongoing basis in response to changing circumstances, and maybe paused where a prospective adopter has to self-isolate, shield or where COVID-19 is confirmed in the home/family network.

Service requirements

- **Information event:** These can be successfully delivered remotely. Events should signpost the opportunity to speak to an RAA worker where they are seeking clarification around any queries or questions.

- **Initial conversations:** The initial meeting can be conducted remotely.

- **Registration of Interest (ROI):** Provision should be made for prospective adopters to submit their ROI electronically. Agencies should have arrangements in place to follow up why enquirers do not progress to an ROI.

- **Stage 1 Agreement and Checks:** Confirmation of the adopter's identity should be checked as part of the assessment process. These can be verified on a video call. DBS and medical checks will be requested without delay. RAAs should ensure that all potential adopters have a medical report and that current local arrangements are followed.

- **Preparation groups and training:** Adopter preparation groups can be effectively delivered via remote means. This includes the use of webinars, and by providing adopters with learning materials. The course facilitators should be aware of the impact of virtual working and a written evaluation should be provided to inform the assessment, giving evidence of insight, participation, and learning.

- **Learning from other adopters and network development:** Prospective adopters can learn from the experience of established adopters. This can be delivered in peer groups via online chat, through the sharing of materials, telephone calls or video conferencing, buddy systems or virtual learning opportunities.

- **Stage 2 Agreement:** It should be mutually agreed about the number and length of sessions and how these will be conducted e.g. methods of voice and video calls, appropriate times for calls and their frequency. The adopter's views about this should be recorded. Both the assessing social worker and prospective adopter should ensure that the assessment is conducted in an environment that is conducive to confidential virtual working.

- **Views of children in the household:** Consideration should be given as to the most appropriate way to explore the contribution of children in the household based on their age, level of functioning and ability to engage in a remote way.

- **Adoption Panels:** Virtual adoption panels have been successful and continue to comply with regulatory requirements. Consideration to be given to how the

participation of prospective adopters is enabled through virtual means. Arrangements need to be kept under review to ensure their ongoing effectiveness.

Minimum requirement for direct contact as part of the assessment process

- Health and safety check
- Focussed visit(s), to discuss specific or sensitive issues which have arisen in assessment, including reference issues, and other confidential matters.
- Second opinion visit.
- Possible reference visit if a virtual visit is not possible or the issues are complex, and a direct contact visit is deemed necessary.
- Possible meeting with children in the household where a virtual discussion is not appropriate or possible.

Day to day working and responsibilities.

The approach to adopter assessment that is based on a mixed model of virtual and direct home visits may result in an extended assessment process as virtual and online meetings are likely to be shorter in duration than home visits and more visits are likely to be required

Whist there is no recommendation for minimum home visits, assessment visits should be conducted prior to presentation of the application to the adoption panel for recommendation in order that the minimum requirements are satisfied and so that any complex or emotionally charged issues can be discussed and assessed on a face to face basis.

Throughout the assessment process there should be repeated checking with adopters that they are content with the process of assessment – this is good practice and should mitigate against later challenge.

Where homework is provided that is used to inform the assessment, appropriate training should be delivered to the assessing social worker to analyse and assess the homework and plan their continued assessment.

The supervising managers responsible for supporting staff and monitoring caseloads should keep under review **and record their decision on the management of the adopter assessment on the adopters' case record**.

Assessing social workers may benefit from increased opportunities for reflective individual and group supervisions that should be provided alongside guidance about how to work effectively using technology.

Common challenges and advice.

Identified challenges and potential limitations of virtual assessments	Practice advice / Considerations
There can be challenges with technology and the devices used, e.g. smart phones which limit visibility.	The Stage 2 Agreement should detail what is required in a video session for applicants and the social worker, e.g. both applicants need to be visible to the assessor and physically together for the joint sessions. This might be an opportunity to demonstrate transparent practice; explain to family why social worker needs to see people together. The communication needs for some applicants may mean that virtual working is not an option for them. Reasonable adjustments should be discussed and agreed in the Stage 2 Agreement.
Connection difficulties, overtalking etc makes it very difficult to have a consistent and organised/structured meeting/assessment	The Stage 2 Agreement can set out mutually agreed ground rules and permissions to challenge where overtalking is problematic. Sharing the session plan with the applicants can allow for a shared responsibility for staying organised.
Participants can seem to take virtual sessions less seriously, e.g. looking at phones, notifications popping up on screen or other distractions during the session.	The Stage 2 Agreement can set out the expectations of the session, in order that those moments of distraction for all parties can be challenged within the agreement.
Participants can cancel sessions with less notice in a way that feels different from in person working.	The Stage 2 Agreement sets out mutual expectations. This is a useful area for exploration in reflective supervision in order to ensure that assumptions are not made about motivation or capacity to work with professionals in the assessment. The impact of the social worker cancelling the session may be more significant in virtual working to the applicant for the same reasons. Sessions may be easier to reschedule with virtual working so cancellation have less impact upon timescales or the flow of the assessment.

The assessment of applicant's motivations may be more complex as there may be different perspectives on the same issue e.g. availability to engage in an online meeting	In the absence of in person working, the assessing social worker should be cautious about ascribing meaning without checking this out with the applicants.

A mid-way review of assessment with the applicants by the line manager will be appropriate in some circumstances where complex issues are apparent.

Psychometric assessments and adopter 360 assessments may have a role to inform lines of enquiry and the adopter assessment process. |
| Social workers have insufficient time to reflect during the process of a session | Where agency arrangements have involved more than one person in the prospective adopters journey through the preparation and assessment process their views should be captured and used to inform both the ongoing direction of the assessment and the final recommendation where appropriate.

Sufficient time could be scheduled for sole, peer or supervisory reflection time in the way that travel time is factored into planning for face to face sessions.

This may require diarising as there are fewer opportunities for team room discussions.

Reflective supervision / case discussions could include all workers who have had contact with the applicants. |
| Dealing with emotionally charged information does not work well in an online setting. | No assessment should be fully virtual. The Stage 2 Agreement should include consideration, on the basis of the stage one materials, of which sessions will need to be face to face.

Management oversight should be sought where this will lead to an extended timescale.

Social workers should develop confidence in explaining that these are areas that require face to face working and therefore this may need some practice and preparation with colleagues or in supervision. |

It can be additionally difficult to engage with children who are already living in the household.	What lessons can social workers draw from safeguarding and monitoring visits undertaken by colleagues in Children's Services? This element can be undertaken face to face where virtual means will compromise the quality of the assessment or the capacity to understand the family functioning.
Any areas where there is conflict or concerns may be exacerbated by virtual sessions.	The Stage 2 Agreement can address this possibility or likelihood and make explicit that face to face sessions may be required as the assessment proceeds. Supervision discussion and records can address this and record any reasons for an assessment to deviate from the original Stage 2 Agreement.
It can take longer to build trust and rapport virtually, rather than face to face.	The Stage 2 Agreement can address the need to do this with the applicants and to articulate this with them from the outset. Starting the assessment with a face to face session, possibly the stage two agreement planning session, helps to establish connection. A review of the balance of face to face and virtual working should take place in supervision and with the applicants. Virtual working can offer an enhanced opportunity to be inclusive and to meet individual needs and to build trust and rapport as it can require more conscious communication and rely less upon non-verbal communication which is not culturally universal.
When discussing difficult emotional issues, it is hard to know how much empathy comes across to the applicants.	Regular check in with applicants, reflective observations, working in the here and now in the room are key social work skills that you can used to good effect. Social workers should identify any training needs with line managers if they are concerned about the absence of empathy in virtual working.
Challenge can feel more difficult to deliver in the absence of body language and limitations in demonstrating empathy.	It will be more important to articulate the intention and meaning when delivering challenge in a virtual session as it will not be possible to rely on non -verbal communication to the same extent.

Virtual assessments can feel less robust than face to face assessments because it is harder to evidence how the applicant's function and relate in person.	More weight might be given to references, which need to be tailored to test hypotheses in the assessment. The regulations permit agencies to undertake additional references where this might be helpful. Social workers should look to triangulate the information that has been gathered with the stage one materials and the references. Virtual assessments can enable articles and information to be shared more directly during sessions through the share screen button. This enables the social workers to look at case studies in an immediate way and to test out response and understanding in the moment.
The need to see home/bedroom as part of the assessment then webcam is not ideal, and applicants may only want to show what they want to be seen.	The Regulatory requirement is for a home visit, so this needs to be in person as part of the assessment.
Time taken to complete assessment may vary according to individuals	Timescales for the completion of an assessment can be set out at the Stage 2 Agreement planning meeting and agreed with the line manager in supervision. Timescales vary in face to face assessments also, and there may be some gains with virtual sessions with regards time taken. Case records should record any decisions to lengthen an assessment beyond the timescale set out in the Stage 2 Agreement and these changes should be confirmed and explained to the applicants. Some social workers have shared that virtual working has resulted in speedier and more efficient assessments. Shorter more frequent sessions that are more easily facilitated virtually work better for some prospective adopters.

It is harder to get a sense of the relationship when assessing a couple as they are both looking at the screen	Assessment of adopters interactions with others can be achieved through remote discussion with referees, case study questions, exploration of their life experience, observed interactions via virtual means - e.g. virtual preparation groups, interaction with family members and network meetings/training Assessment of relationship can be supported by assessment tools and by specific exploration within the written and in person references. Virtual reference meetings can allow for a wider range of referees to be interviewed where this is helpful without impacting too much on time and resources.
Applicant seem to become tired more quickly than when we meet face to face.	Shorter sessions with breaks and opportunities to check in with what has been covered and what is left to cover in the session can be accommodated more easily when there is no travel involved. Social workers to agree the length of sessions in the Stage 2 Agreement so that applicants have the chance to discuss their needs or limitations.

Quality assuring the assessment

- RAAs will need to ensure that additional scrutiny of the assessment process is in place and promote greater reflection, specific training for staff and targeted oversight including a focus on staff welfare, caseloads, and triangulation to ensure that there is not a decrease in standards and safeguarding.

- Professional responsibility is given to assessing social workers to shape the approach to assessments and each social worker will require adequate supervision to support them to reflect and make confident decisions on the suitability of adults for adoption. This supervision should also consider the unconscious bias of the social worker.

- Feedback from panels and ADMs will be regularly reviewed, learning noted, and the practice adapted as necessary.

- It is the role of the manager to quality assure the assessment in signing off the assessment – they need to be satisfied about the robustness of the assessment given the different approach to assessment and the lower physical contact with the potential adopter and their household. The assessment report should have a

description of how the assessment was conducted including the number and type of contacts, remote or direct, and how the applicants responded to the process.

Remote working can cause fatigue and change how people are perceived supervisors need to continuously consider how they are supporting staff and addressing unconscious bias. See https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting.