



Guidance on Assessment and Approval of Adopters in a Pandemic

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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.

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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

Whilst 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**

There can be challenges with technology and the devices used, e.g. smart phones which limit visibility.

Connection difficulties, overtalking etc makes it very difficult to have a consistent and organised/structured meeting/assessment

Practice advice / Considerations

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.

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.