# Top Tips for Virtual Panels

Below are some ‘top tips’ collated from several services and panel chairs who have been involved in developing and running virtual panels.

**Fostering services:**

* Once you have decided which platform the panel is going to use to undertake a virtual panel, all panel members should be supported in having access to and using the platform. Members have used a variety of platforms including telephone conferencing, Zoom, Skype for Business, Gotomeeting, Google Hangout, Microsoft Teams and a mixture of these platforms.
* Good preparation is the key to a well-run virtual panel.
* Some agencies are considering who should be in a meeting room and who could be home based (eg whether all participants can be at home, or whether there is a need for certain members such as the chair, panel advisor and minute taker to be together (appropriately at a distance) in one room).
* A test run prior to the actual panel is essential to identify and resolve any potential IT difficulties. Check that the connection will not suddenly time out after a set period. Audio can sometimes be improved by using headsets and/or muting sound when not speaking. Also, it was useful to start the panel half an hour earlier and to have access to an IT technician on the day in case of any immediate difficulties.
* It is useful for a person in addition to the panel administrator to be on hand to call carers and social workers when they need to join the meeting.
* Ensure any additional people involved (IT, additional administrators etc) understand confidentiality of panel and sign agreements where necessary.
* Some platforms enable meetings to be recorded. This can be a useful aid to the minute taker but informed consent from all participants should be obtained, and any recordings deleted once panel minutes have been written and signed off in the usual way.
* It has been vital to have the mobile telephone numbers of all involved: social workers, carers, applicants and panel members to hand so that they can be contacted if connectivity fails.
* Prioritise what cases and information panel need to see and be prepared for panel taking longer until all involved become used to a different way of working and any IT glitches are ironed out. Therefore, panel agendas may need to be shorter, and breaks scheduled to give people time away from the screen.

**Panel chair and members:**

Panel members should have guidance on, and be clear about, how the panel is going to be run and the expectations of their involvement. One panel chair found it useful for all members to send her their views on the quality of the reports and questions to be asked prior to the panel commencing.

* Panel members should consider the most suitable place to be when being involved in the virtual panel: a quiet, confidential space where they are not likely to be interrupted.
* It is important for the chair and panel members to be clear when a carer /applicant and social worker have joined and left the meeting to ensure any confidential information is not accidentally shared.
* A difficulty with virtual forums is that people can unknowingly talk over each other or not know when they can speak. It has been useful for the chair to lay down ground rules such as the chair asking for each member’s comments in turn or to put a hand up to alert the chair when they want to speak.
* A headset is not necessary but may help with audio quality. Consideration might need to be given to the muting of headsets unless a person is speaking.
* The panel chair will need to be very organised and will need to check regularly that all participants can see and hear them.
* Panels may have shorter agendas and may benefit from scheduled breaks.

**Carers/ applicants:**

* Some carers/applicants are skilled and confident in using virtual platforms to be a part of the panel discussion and have their voices heard. However, some may not be and may need some support in this area.
* The support and skills of the supervising social worker are important in helping the carer/applicant in accessing the technology or finding their voice.
* Carers /applicants should be supported in planning their involvement with the panel virtually or by telephone: where to sit that is comfortable, quiet, away from day to day noise and others activity and where they are not likely to be overheard or distracted.
* Carers/applicants may feel they need a supporter with them, and they and their supervising social worker should ensure the panel are aware of anyone additional in the room.
* If the carer/applicant does not wish to use virtual platforms, are they willing and able to be involved by telephone? If they do not feel comfortable at all about being involved in this way, their views can be sought by their supervising social worker to share at panel on their behalf.
* If the carer /applicant does not participate directly, consideration should be given as to how to share relevant information from the panel discussion with them afterwards.

**Supervising social workers:**

* As well as managing their own contributions to the panel, the supervising social worker has a key role in ensuring carers and applicants understand and can engage with panel.
* The supervising social worker should contact the carers prior to panel to offer reassurance by explaining panel make up, teasing out potential questions and helping them to explore how they would wish to join and contribute to the panel virtually themselves.