

Insights Report on Panel Ethnic Diversity Within Regional Adoption Agencies in England



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Commissioned by the Regional Adoption Agencies National Team.



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Summary

In December 2021, the National Regional Adoption Agencies Team (NRAAT) commissioned Agency Connection (AC) to support the development of ethnic diversity of panel members across the Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) group. Agency Connection completed this series of events from December 2021 to June 2023.

It is worth highlighting that this work represents a pioneering effort, as it marks the first instance in which a comprehensive initiative focused on panel diversity across the entire adoption services was undertaken and commissioned by the RAAs. This holds particular significance given the scarcity of research conducted on adoption panels in England to date. Consequently, this survey is likely to be ground-breaking work, as it offers an unprecedented focus on the ethnic diversity of adoption panels.

It was a very commendable decision by the RAAs to commission this work as it demonstrates their proactive stance, showcasing not only a desire to understand the existing gaps that contribute to the lack of ethnic diversity within RAA panels but it also evidences their strong commitment to implement strategies to rectify this disparity.

The initial progress of this project was steady during the initial months, with some RAAs displaying enthusiastic involvement in initiatives which propelled their journey towards achieving panel ethnic diversification. Notably, a period was required for other RAAs to fully understand the need for more diverse panels and take steps towards achieving it.

The first activity involved conducting a survey of RAAs. This involved asking questions regarding the:

- diversity of existing panel membership
- panel arrangements including expenses
- recruitment processes
- location (in person/virtual) and
- frequency

The survey asked questions relating to whether a specific RAA was looking to recruit panel members from more diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and if they were interested in the offer made available from the RAA national team for AC to support them to make links between RAAs and prospective panel members registered with AC.

For the purposes of the survey, all 32 Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) were invited and 24 agencies responded to the survey. This was a very good outcome with a 75% response rate. The information gained from the survey has contributed to a far better understanding of how to promote diversity within the adoption workforce. The outcomes of the survey are contained within the body of this report.

The findings in this report were obtained through a survey which was conducted on the ethnic diversity of Regional Adoption Agencies panels. When the surveys were completed, all RAAs were also invited to attend a consultation with Agency Connection for an opportunity to expand on their survey responses and comments. These conversations with each RAA also allowed AC to explore in further detail the challenges they experienced with panel member recruitment, with the aim to increase ethnic diversity of their panels. They were provided with practical suggestions and strategies to help them overcome the scenarios they presented to AC during those follow-on consultations.

Furthermore, this was followed by a range of virtual interviews with Panel Members, Panel Member Candidates (in the process of onboarding to RAA panels), Social Workers, Panel Chairs and Panel Advisors employed by the RAA, either commissioned or working in partnership with them.

The survey information gathered from the 24 RAAs (75% of the 32 RAAs) and the interviews that were conducted all form part of the findings and analysis contained in this report.

This survey has been crucial to the data gathering process, as it has provided opportunities to explore and gather information about both good practices, within the participating RAAs in relation to panel recruitment and further evidence of the gaps regarding the representation of ethnic diversity on panels.

The second activity commissioned, included supporting the RAAs with increasing the number of panel member recruitments. This recruitment drive was particularly focused on proactively engaging individuals who self-identify as Black or as part of the Global Majority.

Where RAAs expressed interest in the services of AC to support them with the introduction of panel members from an ethnically diverse background, further direct contacts were made. Of the 24 agencies who completed the survey, 20 were interested in further support to recruit more diversity in their adoption panels.

In total, over 100 candidates registered their interest to become panel member, 61 completed their profiles and started the process of introduction to RAAs, only half of those candidates were successfully connected and completed the onboarding process with AC. 28 panel member connections were made with RAAs in the period of this project (Dec 2021 – June 2023).

In terms of recruitment, the approach involved AC undertaking targeted advertising to attract specific individuals or groups of people required for each panel. Once potential candidates were identified, an initial vetting process was conducted for each individual to check motivation, transferable skills and experiences, for wanting to serve on adoption panels. AC held initial conversations with the candidates. They were then assisted to put together profiles which were used to introduce them to relevant RAAs. Once the RAA expressed an interest in the candidate's skills, characteristics and experience, a connection was made between the RAA and the individual.

It was agreed that each RAA would conduct their own vetting processes, such as DBS checks, and follow their own recruitment processes as necessary, to ensure the suitability of each candidate.

The third strand of the project task was to provide mentoring to each new panel member candidate for an initial 3 months. On reflection, this part of the project was vague at the planning stage. The mentorship was meant to take place in groups, but this did not occur in group format as initially expected, because all candidates had initial one to one interview as part of their onboarding process.

Most of the candidates started at different stages, and this made it challenging to group candidates together and offer them group sessions. Most candidates were new to the process of panel membership, although some candidates had panel experience through their own experiences as foster carers, adopters or through their independent Social Work roles.

At the end of the project, AC conducted two webinars, which offered a concise overview of the research findings to panel personnel associated with RAAs. Roughly 34 participants secured spots and were well-received by the majority of those who had reserved slots. The webinars facilitated discussions on the findings, the exchange of exemplar best practices, and conversations around the challenges faced by RAAs during recruitment efforts.

Feedback received from the sessions was positive; however, due to the limited duration of each two-hour session, time constraints limited the discussions. It became evident from the feedback that RAAs desired more extensive opportunities for in-depth discussions that would enable them to gain a deeper understanding and share experiences more comprehensively. Some RAAs expressed their recognition of the necessity to enhance the diversity of their panels, yet they expressed the need for further assistance in developing effective strategies, particularly when it comes to engaging with and reaching out to underrepresented communities.

Introduction

The survey and interview findings provide insight into current practices, highlighting successful aspects, areas for improvement, and sharing good practice as examples within RAA panels.

The RAAs consider the ethnic diversity on adoption panels a significant area that needs addressing hence focusing efforts to commission this work to get a deeper understanding.

This report focusses on the findings from survey and consultation from participating RAAs but shares learning in the context for all RAAs across England.

Lack of ethnic diversification on adoption panels has significant implications for children who have both Black heritage and care experience. These children face a disadvantage as they lack adult role models who share their cultural background and understand their unique hair and skin care needs. Namely, adults who comprehend the joys and challenges associated with their racial identity. While unintentional, this situation constitutes a form of racial injustice, putting them in an unequal position compared to their counterparts in care who aren't confronted with these disparities. Rectifying this matter is crucial to establish equity and impartiality in the adoption process, guaranteeing fairness for every child, irrespective of their background.

Racial disparity can have far-reaching and detrimental effects on both individuals and whole organisations. Instances of racism even unintended can occur within panel settings and have profound consequences. Whether someone is a victim, perpetrator, or witness of racism, it often results in heightened stress, anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions that significantly impacts mental and emotional well-being.

These detrimental effects can hinder an individual's ability to make sound decisions, further exasperating the issue at hand. Recognising and addressing racism within panel settings is crucial for fostering a healthy and inclusive environment that supports the overall well-being of all individuals involved with adoption panels.

In terms of the key findings from this work, this report provides the following:

1. A noteworthy shift has occurred in the way RAA panels convene, with virtual meetings taking centre stage, driven primarily by the impacts of COVID-19. The pandemic initially triggered this change but the transition to virtual meetings has yielded positive results both socially and environmentally, and many RAAs appreciate this change.
2. In terms of meeting arrangements, the survey unveiled diverse patterns among the 24 participating RAAs. Notably, 88% embraced a virtual model, 9% opted for a hybrid approach, and 3% continued with in-person sessions.

Additionally, 49% of RAA panels adopted permanent working arrangements, 20% employed temporary ones, while 31% were yet to define their future.

3. The survey exposed significant variations in panel fees among different regions, with 68% of RAAs expressing dissatisfaction with their panel's ethnic diversity. Despite the challenge, only 12% of the surveyed RAAs engaged external recruitment efforts. RAAs relying on personal networks to recruit panel members may inadvertently limit diversity. The absence of clear guidance and accessible routes for potential candidates further complicates the recruitment process.
4. Promoting diversity and inclusion is imperative and RAAs are encouraged to adopt targeted strategies to engage underrepresented communities. A concerted effort towards inclusive advertising and outreach is essential to attract a wider range of candidates. Inclusion of young care leavers and adults with lived experiences should be a priority, requiring mentorship, support networks, and accessible pathways for their engagement.
5. A lack of age diversity on panels was evident, with underrepresentation of individuals aged 25-36. Efforts to recruit younger members should consider their unique challenges, such as time constraints due to education and work commitments. Additionally, a balance between experienced members and new recruits is crucial to maintain expertise while incorporating fresh perspectives.
6. Efforts to increase ethnic diversity on panels face hurdles, including a lack of targeted recruitment strategies and over-reliance on personal networks. RAAs should consider standardised recruitment methods, ensure inclusive language in advertisements, and actively engage with underrepresented communities.

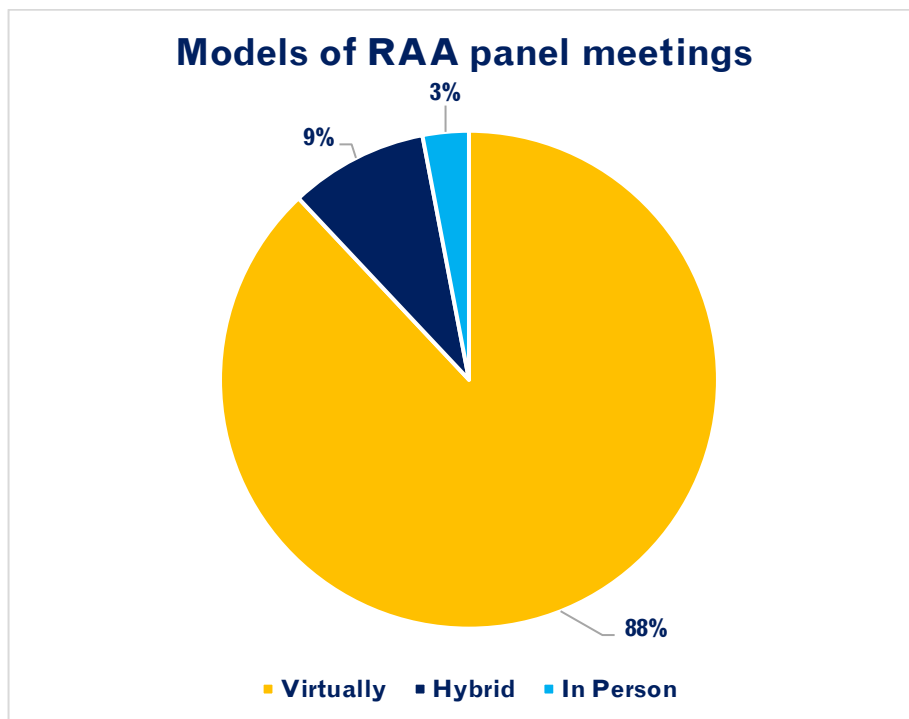
Key Findings

Arrangements for how RAA panels meet.

The survey outcome identified a shift to virtual panel meetings as one of the most significant changes that the RAAs experienced over the last two years. Whilst COVID-19 initiated the main reason for this change, moving to virtual panel meetings has had a beneficial impact on the RAAs from both a social and environmental perspective that many RAAs appreciate.

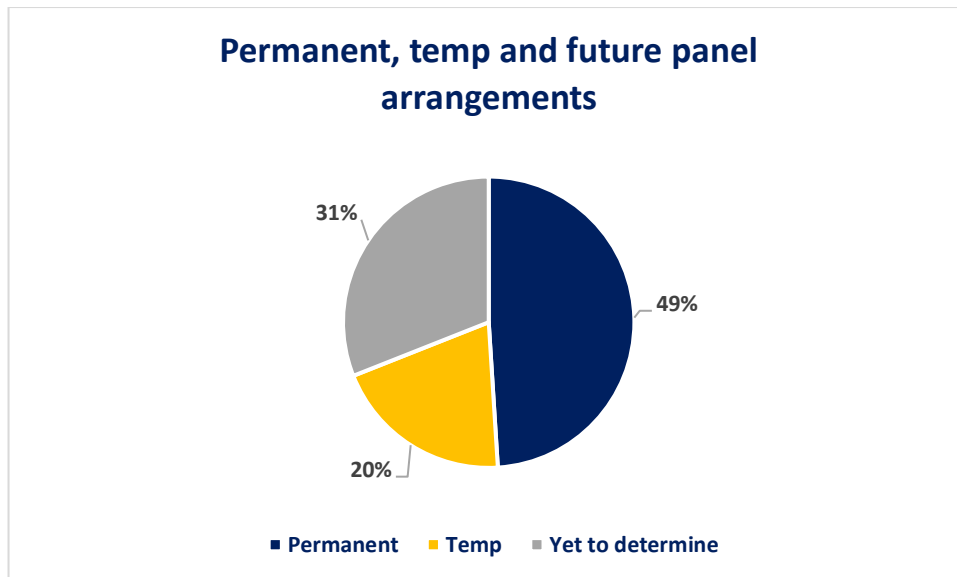
In terms of practical arrangements for how and when panels meet, the survey identified the following breakdown at the time the data was gathered from the 24 RAAs who completed and engaged with the survey. The survey outcomes revealed that:

- 88% of RAAs had a virtual model.
- 9% of RAAs had a hybrid model.
- 3% of RAAs had an in-person model.



Additionally, the survey outcomes revealed panel meeting arrangements where:

- 49% of RAA panels had permanent working arrangements in place.
- 20% of RAAs had a temporary working arrangement in place.
- 31% shared their future panel arrangements were yet to be officially determined.



Benefits of Virtual Panel Meetings include:

- Environmental impact - Eliminating travel, virtual meetings contribute to reducing carbon emissions.
- Travel times – Reduced or removed as there is no need for commuting.
- Financial costs to both participants and RAAs are significantly reduced.
- Ease of access – Participants can join from anywhere in the world.
- Recruitment of diverse panel members – Most RAAs can engage panel members from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and locations easier.
- Home Based - Particularly beneficial for individuals with health or mobility challenges or personal circumstances that make traveling difficult.

The move to virtual adoption panels brought about many positive changes to RAAs from both a social and environmental perspective. Equally, some of the RAAs also mention barriers they experienced during their interviews as part of this piece of work. *See ¹Dibben (2020) for the fuller context of pros and cons of virtual panels: “Key Issues for Agencies in Developing Best Practice for Adoption and Fostering Panel Virtual Meetings during the Coronavirus Pandemic”.*

Barriers of Virtual Panel Meetings include:

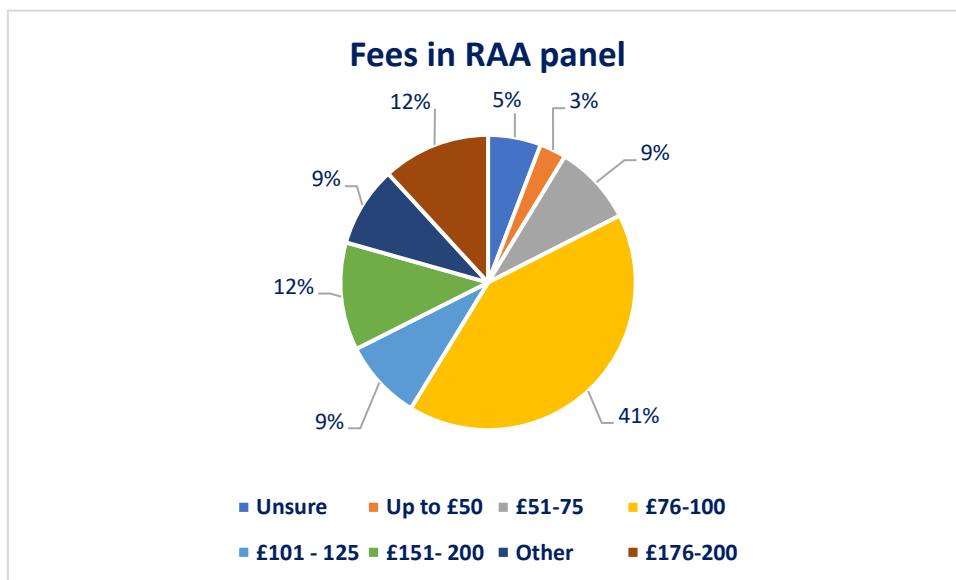
- Technical Challenges - Poor internet connections and audio/video issues. These challenges can disrupt the flow of the meeting and hinder effective communication.
- Culture change – Mindset shifts in individuals and within RAAs has not been easy to achieve in some cases.
- Technical confidence - Unfamiliarity with meeting platforms and lack of knowledge has led to low engagement and participation for some individuals.

Fees for Panel Members in RAAs

The survey found that there is a significant variation in the amount set by different regions when it comes to the panel fees and allowances offered to independent panel members by RAAs per panel. (The survey only asked questions in relation to panel members only and not panel chairs or vice chairs). The figures obtained from the survey are detailed below.

Additionally, AC found that 58% of agencies thought their rates were about the same as others, 26% were unsure where on the spectrum they were positioned in comparison to others, 13% thought they offered higher rates than other and 3% thought they offered less than others.

5.8%	Unsure
2.9%	Up to £50
8.8%	£51-75
41.2%	£76-100
8.8%	£101 - 125
11.8%	£151- 200
8.8%	Other
11.8%	£176-200



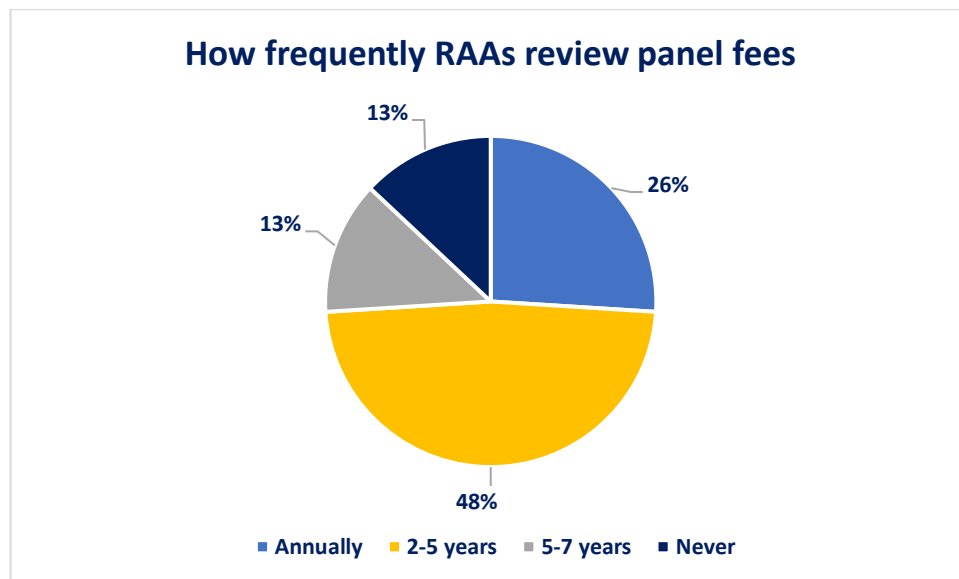
This may suggest that for many panel members, participating in this type of work may be more a labour of love than a means of generating income.

The survey outcomes also highlighted that the RAAs who offered higher fees found it easier to recruit panel members. The timeline for reviewing panel fees also varies between RAAs.

Review of RAA panel fees

The survey outcome revealed that RAAs had the following pattern in place for reviewing their panel fees:

- 26% of RAAs review their panel fees annually.
- 48% of RAAs review their panel fees every 2-5 years.
- 13% of RAAs review their panel fees every 5-7 years.
- 13% of RAAs never review their panel fees.



The survey outcome indicates that RAAs may not be adapting their fees and allowances in accordance with inflation or market changes.

The figures suggest that the low fees offered by many RAAs, poses a significant challenge in attracting skilled and experienced panel members from all communities.

In consultation with panel member candidates as part of the work commissioned, some withdrew from the process at the on boarding stage due to the financial reward being insufficient to compensate for their time and expertise required to undertake the panel member tasks.

It is important to recognise that fair compensation is necessary if we want to increase diversity within panels. The current system appears to favour those who do not need to rely on the financial reimbursement for doing this work.

During this period, consultation took place with a group of adoptees from a global majority background regarding panel membership. Some adoptees from this group expressed a desire to serve on RAA's adoption panels, but also noted that the low fees offered is a barrier for them.

Children and young people in the care system come from diverse backgrounds, including different heritages, ethnicities, cultures, races, faiths, ages, and more. It is important that those in the workforce engaged in the assessment of adopters and care planning reflect the diversity of children in the system.

All Adoption Agencies should consider broadening their panel membership and to look wider than former employees in some cases.

By including a diverse group of panel members with different backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences, new ideas and innovations are more likely to emerge. It is a missed opportunity not to have greater diversity in panel membership.

Panel members who were interviewed suggested an agreed range for panel fees can help streamline the process of setting up and managing the panel. Panel organisers will know exactly what to budget for and can avoid spending time negotiating fees with individual panel members.

Establishing a clear fee range can help enhance the professionalism of the panel. It sends a message that the panel is serious and values the time and expertise of its members. This can help attract higher quality panel members and improve the overall quality of the panel and effectively attract panel member candidates who bring the unique insight and experience to understand the diverse needs of Black children.

Considerations

- RAAs to consider a national standardised panel fee.
- RAAs to agree a national pay review for panel members.
- RAAs to consider, review and increase the financial expenses and allowances they offer panel members.

Providing support network for candidates, new and existing panel members

In supporting new panel members through mentorship within this project, AC gleaned some insights from the candidates, in terms of the types of issues that create barriers for them as prospective candidates applying for panel member roles. As a result, AC adapted and refined some of the processes that were in place at the beginning of the project, to make the path smoother, easier and more effective for candidates during the onboarding process.

For example, there were a few individuals who did not have CVs either in digital format or otherwise for various reasons. These individuals needed guidance to produce a CV that highlighted their skills and abilities that were relevant to the panel process. AC provided examples of CVs and profiles that help capture their transferable skills and present them in a way that agencies will recognise and appreciate for their panels. Additionally, candidates were prepped for their interviews with RAAs and for their panel observations, to help prepare for questions that may be asked of them and the types of questions they could ask RAAs to help gain further understanding of processes.

There was a need to explain terminologies, which are commonly used on adoption panels but are unfamiliar to candidates. We discussed types of relevant questions that may come up during panels, to help them prepare for panel observations or for their first sitting for panel discussions with prospective adopters.

Candidates had lots of opportunities to check-in with AC at various stages such as after their interviews and panel observation. These check-ins were in various forms including emails, phone, videocalls and text messages. Not all candidates needed the same level of support, as some were more confident and therefore needed less input.

There were a few candidates who did not complete the onboarding process despite the additional assistance provided and contacts made to encourage them. It could be assumed that they were not motivated enough to complete the initial checks. It is difficult to be definitive as they did not provide feedback. However, in AC's experience, when candidates are not motivated to complete the basic steps, they generally struggle with the commitment required to undertake the tasks of serving on adoption panels, where panel members are required to read long documents and prepare questions for assessors or applicants.

Two candidates pulled out completely for personal reasons after they were onboarded, but they still provided positive feedback about their experience of joining a panel, although they could no longer commit to the tasks given their change in circumstances.

Feedback was actively sought from candidates and RAAs alike, to identify areas for improvement to benefit both the RAAs and the candidates. This feedback has been valuable in helping to ensure necessary adjustments were continuously made to AC's processes throughout the duration of the project. *"... Potentially nearly 12% of our central list would have come from referrals made by Agency Connection within a six-month timespan".*

Additionally, most of the candidates engaged in this commissioned project concerning the diversification of the adoption panel, expressed that having the chance to receive support while joining the panel central list, boosted their confidence and provided reassurance throughout the process. Many of them had previously invested considerable time in trying to figure out how to become panel members, yet they were uncertain about the steps involved. Furthermore, they had not come across advertisements for panel member roles in their local area.

Feedback from the panel member candidates included remarks such as, *"Ade has been incredible—offering guidance and mentoring, helping me explore suitable opportunities, and notably boosting my self-assurance..."*

It may be unrealistic to expect that RAAs could provide support to an intense level described in this report, given the level of workload already involved in their daily delivery, caring for children and families, and responding to their changing, competing needs. However, the report findings demonstrate that providing a support network for potential panel members has been highlighted as beneficial.

Some RAAs shared that they have a buddy system where they pair new panel members with more experienced panel members, but the survey questions did not explore the details. Furthermore, their "buddying" benefit only kicks in after the candidate becomes a panel member. It appears some prospective panel members need to be supported during the initial stages to help prepare for the future of what is to come as a panel member.

Panel members and some RAAs involved in this project also shared that a model of mentorship/network can help prevent burnout and provide a sense of community and belonging for current panel members, especially those who may face unique challenges in their role.

By prioritising mentorship and community-building efforts, RAAs can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for their panel members, which can ultimately lead to improved retention rates and better outcomes for children and prospective adopters. It can also provide an inclusive environment, which offers training and support to prevent racism, and provide opportunities for panel members to connect, network, receive and offer peer support.

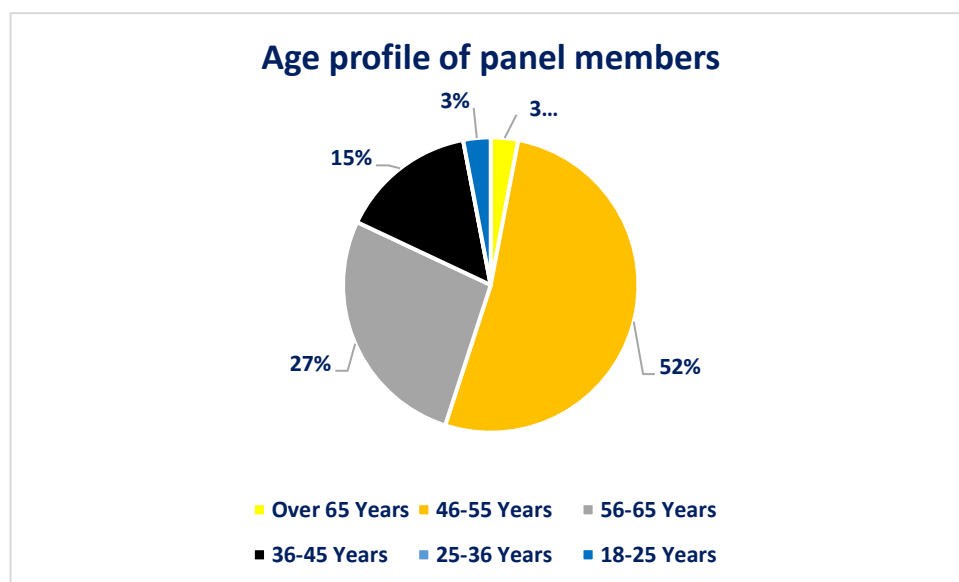
Considerations

- RAAs need to explore more targeted, proactive, and diverse recruitment approaches.
- RAAs to consider the use of a mixed approach, which includes advertising through press and agency websites to raise the offer.
- RAAs to consider the support that is in place for current and prospective panel members.
- RAAs to prioritise offering greater support and mentoring for prospective and new panel members and it is critical to ensure greater retention of new panel members.

Age Diversity and Challenges in Recruiting Young Panel Members

During the review, the age profile of panel members within the RAA cohorts was assessed and here are the findings:

- 3% age range over 65
- 52% age range of 46-55
- 27% age range of 56-65
- 15% age range of 36-45
- 0% age range of 25-36
- 3% age range of 18- 25



Anecdotally, during discussion with RAAs following the survey completion and from comments made as part of survey completion, AC found that most RAAs reported their panels were made up of predominantly middle-class, white, females.

Also, it's important to mention that none of the RAAs that took part in the study had any panel members aged between 25 and 36, typically called Millennials or Gen Y. From AC's perspective, it's worth looking into why the results showed 0% representation for this age group. This outcome might be connected to how RAAs recruit panel members. Different methods work better for different age groups and life stages.

According to an article from "Smart Insights" titled "7 Ways to Reach and Influence Millennials using Social Media Marketing," Millennials consider social media platforms as places where they can get everything done at once. So, if RAAs want

to engage people in this age group and encourage them to apply for panel roles, it's a good idea to rethink their strategy.

The survey findings clearly evidenced that almost 30% of panel members fall within the age bracket of 56 to 65. Through discussion with RAAs in their consultation, it was identified that these individuals had more available time, with many retired or semi-retired. Therefore, this may be the reason for the high percentage within this age bracket. AC also found that whilst some candidates in the younger age category did not wish to continue due to the low panel member fees offered, some panel member participants interviewed as part of this research, shared that they did not mind receiving low remuneration, or even volunteering their time on panels.

Additionally, RAAs shared that some panel members had been serving for around 20 years. This level of experience provides consistency and valuable knowledge on the panel which is essential. However, it also means that some panel members may be far removed from current practices, or care lived experiences of young people today due to their length of service. AC found that some RAAs may be hesitant to pursue diversifying their panels, as it would entail requesting some current panel members to step down to make room for new recruits. This approach creates some nervousness as the existing panel members possess a wealth of experience that is highly valued.

I don't perceive diversifying the recruitment process as a challenge. Nevertheless, to accommodate new recruits, it might be necessary for some panel members to step aside. Honestly, I'm hesitant to initiate this because our current panel boasts of a wealth of experience. For me to proceed, I would require a robust and well-defined strategy.

The limited representation of young people on adoption panels (only 3%) means their voices and perspectives are significantly underrepresented in adoption decision-making. This hinders great opportunities, insights into their experiences and needs, and risks overlooking crucial aspects of their lives. Increasing their involvement ensures their voices are heard, and their experiences considered in decision-making processes.

During the discussions with participating RAAs, it was encouraging to uncover that a significant number actively pursued the recruitment of panel members with personal experiences of care. They displayed readiness to implement essential modifications to assist these newcomers. These RAAs expressed that their search for care experienced people is not always successful and a few also shared that their young care experienced panel members tended not to serve for long periods (approximately 18 – 24 months), compared to other members at different stages of life. Certain RAAs are inclined to explore alternative approaches for involving care-experienced individuals in their panels. However, they seek guidance on how to accomplish this in a manner that upholds equity and fairness.

However, a few RAAs expressed apprehensions regarding the inclusion of young panel members who had backgrounds of being in care. They voiced concerns that the conversations and report information could potentially trigger challenging

emotions for these individuals, given the sensitive nature of the subjects closely tied to their own past encounters.

Through consultation with the adoptees, of whom some were younger panel members involved with the RAAs, they reported the following barriers to applying for panel member roles on an adoption panel:

- Language used in panel member adverts can sometimes be discouraging to younger people, causing them to feel unqualified or inexperienced.
- The timing of panel meetings may also be a factor, as they often clash with education, work, and other commitments for young professionals.
- Hesitation from some RAAs to include young care experienced people on panels, as they are concerned about the potential for triggering traumatic memories or experiences.
- Resources to provide the necessary support and training to help less experienced panel members develop their skills may be limited.
- Young adults may struggle to afford the costs such as transport or childcare (if a young parent) whilst attending in-person panels.

Considerations

- In pursuit of uniformity and impartiality, RAAs should work together to formulate a nationally standardized method for advertising adoption panel members. This concerted strategy will guarantee transparency and fairness in the recruitment process across different regions, extending equal opportunities to individuals interested in participating on adoption panels.
- RAAs to prioritise the recruitment of more young people, particularly those with lived experiences, to serve on adoption panels and individuals within the age bracket of age 18-36.
- Support for young care leavers and young adult adoptees on panels
- RAAs to be intentional about the use of inclusive language in recruitment activities.
- RAAs to provide guidance and support to RAAs that are interested in adopting alternative methods to include care-experienced individuals on their panels. Offering clear directions on achieving this while maintaining principles of equity and fairness can facilitate their efforts in building more inclusive and representative panels.
- RAAs may consider a term of service for panel members

Promoting Panel Ethnic Diversity

The survey findings demonstrate that 68% of RAA's that completed the survey were not satisfied with the ethnic diversity of their panels, below is an example of statement captured from RAAs during the research regarding the current makeup of the panels.

Our setting is primarily composed of white British individuals, and although we have children of diverse ethnicities requiring placements, only one panel member represents a different ethnicity. Most of our panel members are in their retirement years, while those joining the panel tend to be aged 25 or older. While the current membership is predominantly female, we are experiencing a notable influx of male adopters participating in the panel.

The survey highlighted several factors contributing to the lack of diversity on RAA panels. One of the key reasons is the absence of targeted recruitment strategies and insufficient understanding of how to engage with underrepresented communities.

Insights gleaned from the survey feedback and RAA interviews highlighted that RAAs frequently rely on personal connections panel recruitment rather than looking widely for new members. While this approach has proven largely effective in securing panel members who grasp the role's requirements and display a tendency for prolonged commitment, it has simultaneously emerged as a significant major barrier to achieving inclusivity in panel recruitment.

The survey highlighted that, 56% of the RAAs surveyed reported that they approach their networks for recruitment of panel members. 21% indicated that they use other methods, although they did not share what these were. 11% use a mixed approach, which includes advertising through and agency websites, word of mouth, sharing vacancies via newsletters, carers and adopters' groups. 12% of RAA's use social media and local press for recruitment.

Overall, only 12% of those RAA who completed the survey utilised external recruitment for panel members (including recruiting for panel chairs).

It's important to note that studies have shown people tend to associate with those who share similar characteristics, such as gender, race, hair colour etc (see articles by Matthew Smith, one third of white Britons don't have any friends from an ethnic minority background and another by Sherri Gordon, Why It's Important To Diversify Your Friendships).

There are significant societal implications when it comes to panel recruitment that can apply to RAA panels. When services rely heavily on existing panel members to recruit new ones, there is a risk of bringing in individuals who are like individuals already serving on the panels. To address this, RAAs need to be intentional about inviting applications from diverse communities, particularly where there may not be a natural connection. Such connections can broaden perspectives, expand knowledge and understanding, and foster mutual respect and empathy. Therefore,

it is crucial to recognise the tendency towards similarity and actively seek out opportunities to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds to promote a more inclusive panel recruitment process.

AC's strategy in working on this project involved, executing focused advertising campaigns to draw individuals or groups necessary for each panel. Upon identifying potential candidates for panel member roles, an initial screening was conducted, evaluating their motivation, transferable skills, and experiences pertaining to their interest in participating on adoption panels. AC initiated preliminary discussions with the candidates, subsequently aiding them in crafting comprehensive profiles aimed at introducing them to pertinent RAAs.

A few of the participating RAAs shared they wanted to advertise their panel member roles with the intention of creating opportunities to attract candidates from diverse communities. They were also interested in targeting specific communities when seeking panel members.

However, they were informed by HR that they couldn't specifically mention a particular community when advertising for panel members due to legal reasons. This meant they would have had to use a more general advertising approach, which would not have helped to attract applications from the communities they wanted to target. This issue was notable because their existing central list of panel members was already sizeable. As a result, there was little need to add more panel members unless the specific goal was to improve the overall diversity of their panel membership.

In consultation with other RAAs from another region, a few revealed to AC that they had been successful with their recruitment drives using a targeted recruitment approach which had led to recruitment of panel members from specific communities. This highlighted this method does work for some, but also evidences that there are different approaches to targeting specific communities across the different regions.

A significant number of candidates connected with RAAs in this project reported that they had spent considerable time attempting to figure out how to become panel members but were uncertain about the process. They also stated that they had not come across advertisements for panel member positions in their local area.

The report indicates that many candidates face challenges when attempting to navigate the process of becoming panel members. There is no clear route or guidance nationally available for potential candidates, making it difficult for those not connected to RAAs to understand how to approach and inquire about possible panel member or chair roles. One of the candidates shared that in working with AC, they gained panel member role and this opportunity allowed them to learn more about the process "*..... She has helped me navigate the process with efficiency and ease. As an adoptive mum from a minority background, I am passionate about diversifying Panels - but just didn't have a clue how to get my foot in the door*".

It's noteworthy to highlight the feedback provided by a panel member who has a visual impairment. Their experience involved being introduced to two different RAAs. The process was quite smooth, and they had no trouble providing the necessary documents for the initial check in one case. However, the situation was different with the other RAA. In this instance, the second RAA asked for additional documents, which proved challenging for them to provide due to their visual impairment. They described the process with the second RAA as "lengthy and challenging," ultimately leading to their inability to successfully complete the onboarding process for that RAA.

In consultations with the RAAs, AC found that some of the survey question served as a catalyst for some of the RAAs to conduct panel audits, evaluated their current panel composition and recruitment processes. As a result, some services have acknowledged the importance of increasing inclusivity, diversity, and representation in their recruitment processes and as a result started acting more proactively to address these gaps. On the other hand, some RAAs stated that although they recognised the significance of having strategies in place to enhance their representation and promote ethnic diversity on panels but require additional support to achieve their goals.

Considerations

- RAAs to consider developing a national standardised method for recruiting adoption panel members.
- RAA's to ensure that the recruitment process is inclusive and can be accessible by all including information provided on websites and onboarding process.
- RAAs should regularly undertake annual panel audits to monitor and evaluate progress towards enhancing panel ethnic diversity and adjust recruitment strategies as needed to achieve these goals. This can include tracking the demographic makeup of panels over time and soliciting feedback from panel members and applicants.
- RAAs to provide guidance and support to RAAs that are interested in adopting alternative methods to include care-experienced individuals on their panels. Offering clear directions on achieving this while maintaining principles of equity and fairness can facilitate their efforts in building more inclusive and representative panels.
- RAAs to provide standardised panel member CPD that helps to monitor and increase awareness, knowledge and attitudes towards to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have emerged from the considerations mentioned throughout this report from each section:

1. RAAs to regularly undertake annual panel audits to monitor and evaluate progress towards enhancing panel ethnic diversity and adjust recruitment strategies as needed to achieve their goals. This can include tracking the demographic makeup of panels over time and soliciting feedback from panel members and applicants.
2. RAAs should develop, set, and regularly monitor a diversity and inclusion strategy that outlines clear goals and targets for addressing racism, implement effective anti-racist measure. This should include CPD and support for equipping panel personnel to identify and recognise racist behaviour and implement effective anti-racist measures.
3. RAAs should prioritise training programs (CPD) that equip those involved in panel activities and panel member recruitment with knowledge, proactivity and confidence needed to effectively recruit panel members from diverse backgrounds.
4. RAAs to provide a safe and supportive space for panel members facilitated by individuals who are experts through their own experiences, for panel members to connect, share their experiences, and receive peer support and training.
5. Striving for consistency and neutrality, RAAs should collaborate to devise a nationally standardised approach for the selection of adoption panel members. This collective effort should come with explicit directions and assistance for prospective candidates. This unified approach will ensure openness and equity throughout the recruitment process in various regions, providing an equal chance to individuals keen on contributing to adoption panels.
6. Taking swift action in the upcoming 6-12 months is crucial to tackle the age and racial imbalance present in RAA panels. This will also help rectify the noticeable absence of young individuals, particularly those aged 18-36. It is imperative for enhancing the representation of people from marginalized communities.

7. RAAs to institute a standardized national rate and time frame to review the rates set for panel member fee to ensure fairness and equality across all individuals participating in panels membership.
8. RAAs should offer more flexible scheduling for panel meetings to accommodate the work and education schedules of young professionals. This can help increase the availability of younger panel members and those who work in other professional settings.
9. RAAs should consider innovative approaches to re-evaluate the participation of young individuals with lived experience of care. This could involve involving them as paid advisors for panels, capitalizing on their perspectives without necessarily appointing them as permanent panel members.
10. RAAs should consider the concept of establishing specific terms of office for panel members. This approach supports the maintenance of a dynamic and progressive representation, while also ensuring the infusion of fresh viewpoints and a harmonious blend of the panel members' diverse and rich wealth of experiences.
11. RAAs to integrate models crafted by professionals who have personal, lived experiences. This step is essential in guaranteeing the effectiveness and inclusivity of recruitment endeavours.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this report captures the commissioned completed and conducted by Agency Connection between January 2022 and April 2023 has provided valuable insights into the representation of diversity and the challenges faced in adoption panel recruitment processes.

The findings of this review emphasise the need for greater ethnic, age, and experiential diversity within adoption panels to better reflect the children and families they serve. The shift to virtual panel meetings has emerged as a significant change, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, and has brought numerous benefits to adoption agencies.

The review also shed light on the significant variation in panel fees offered by adoption agencies, with lower fees acting as a deterrent to recruiting skilled and experienced panel members from diverse communities.

Promoting panel ethnic diversity has been identified as a pressing concern, as most panel members tend to be white, British and older. It has been encouraging to see the emphasis that the RAAs place on increasing representation on adoption panel, but there is need to continue to make further intensive steps to maintain and improve the work already started as part of this project.

Age diversity is another aspect that requires attention, as most panel members fall within the middle-aged and retired category. Whilst their experience is valuable, it is essential to strike a balance and incorporate younger panel members with lived experiences, ensuring the perspectives of young people are adequately represented.

The recommendations presented in this report provide valuable guidance for Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) to build a diverse panel of members who can support families throughout the adoption process. By implementing these recommendations, RAAs can create a more inclusive and equitable environment, ensuring that all applicants, regardless of their background, are represented and heard.

References

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About Agency Connection

Agency Connection is an award-winning¹ service that operates nationwide across England, dedicated to enhancing diversity within Adoption and Fostering services. We have a vision to enhance diversity within Adoption and fostering services in England.

Our mission is to connect services with individuals from underrepresented or disadvantaged communities, with a specific focus on the global majority. As the only service of its kind in England, we offer a unique platform that prioritises diversity, particularly emphasising ethnicity.

We firmly believe that ethnically diverse adoption and fostering panels enrich the decision-making process by adding cultural perspectives, humility, experiences thoughts and ideas. It also offers invaluable guidance and support to children and prospective adoptive and fostering families, sharing insights, resources, and networks within specific ethnic communities.

At Agency Connection, we are committed to fostering an inclusive representation and diverse landscape in Adoption and Fostering services, to help support outcomes that best meets the unique needs of Black children and families alike.

Ade Larigo is the CEO of Agency Connection, with 18 years' experience as a Social Worker. She is an anti-racist practitioner who is deeply passionate about culture and heritage. Ade has addressed the select committee at the House of Lords, spoken at the UK Black Business Show, Hosted the Home For Good Road show (June 2023) and Spoken at the Home for Good Summit (May 2022). She is a strong advocate for children.

¹ Agency Connection - Awarded Professional Services Start-Up of the Year 2023. Adefunke Larigo – Awarded Thought Leader of the Year 2022 by Baton Awards.

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