



Centre for excellence
for Children's Care and Protection



Experiences of virtual Children's Hearings: A rapid consultation

Parent and carer report

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building brighter futures

About the research

The coronavirus pandemic and the restrictions this has brought about has meant that Children's Hearings have been held online using video links, since April. This is a significant change from face-to-face Hearings, and we were interested in how people had experienced this new method of convening Hearings. We hope that this will help us to think about ways to make virtual Hearings better.

We created an online survey open to anyone who had taken part, or had wanted to take part, in a virtual Hearing. In total, 276 responses were included in the report, allowing us to hear from young people, parents and carers, and a range of professionals.

Four parents, and four family members, told us about their experiences of virtual Hearings. No one who took part identified themselves as a kinship carer, however six foster carers and two residential carers took part.

Parents and carers said

All parents, family members and foster carers who took part in the survey had been involved in a virtual Hearing, as well as one of the two residential carers. Parents and carers had mixed experiences of virtual Hearings. The positives of attending virtual Hearings included: getting paperwork updated; not having to travel; that everyone was listened to and able to take part; and that the Hearings were still going ahead.

"I needed to get the paperwork updated and that was done" (parent)

"Being able to see everyone taking part" (family member)

"Being able to continue during lockdown" (foster carer)

However, some parents and carers were very clear that they did not find the virtual Hearing a positive experience.

"Didn't like it. Wasn't personal. As everyone's voice or chairperson was difficult to make out" (parent)

"The only positive thing about virtual Hearing is we were apart so we were all safe from COVID 19" (parent)

"I don't think that there were any positives to attempting to hold Hearings in this way" (family member)

"There was absolutely nothing positive about the experience" (foster carer)

Most parents and carers said they were supported by professionals before, during and after the virtual Hearing. Support prior to the Hearing included help to join online, help understanding what would happen, and receiving a practice call. However, one person

said they received 'very little' support before the Hearing, and others said they did not receive or need support.

"I had emails telling me how it worked and how to download the app. I also had a test call before each of my Hearings" (parent)

"Had a call from Reporters' office and talked through how to download app. Then again day before they checked that I could log on" (foster carer)

Parents and carers said the sound quality was poor in virtual Hearings, making it difficult to hear or be heard. Others reported having problems with technology, communicating with other people in the Hearing and being able to find a private space to attend a Hearing. This led to some feeling that the Hearing had not been fair as they didn't have an equal opportunity to take part.

"I found the Children's Hearing very difficult. I had trouble hearing and understanding what everyone was saying" (parent)

"Trying to understand all that was being said as there was a lot of breaking up" (family member)

"Hearing everyone, speaking to everyone, being able to communicate with our legal reps, being able to engage with the panel and all involved at the Hearing" (parent)

"Being able to effectively put across a view that was understood" (foster carer)

Parents, family, and carers were also asked what they thought would help children and young people take part in virtual Hearings. Some reported they did not think virtual Hearings were suitable for children and young people. This was because they felt they did not receive the same opportunities to talk with the panel members as they would during a face-to-face Hearing. They were also concerned that younger children might get upset during the Hearing.

"My son did take part in the virtual Hearing and I don't feel like it was suitable for him because he didn't get to speak to the panel members on his own in private like he would get to do at a face to face Hearing. I feel like because my son didn't get to do this it was very difficult for him to understand everything that was going on and it was very hard for him to speak his mind when everyone was listening to what he was saying" (parent)

"I don't think it's good for young children to be part of the video call as can be very upsetting but...social workers could spend time with children asking them about how they feel etc. and write a small report based on it. If children are old enough they could possibly be recorded having an interview with panel member" (foster carer)

What other people said

Different groups of people responded to the survey including: children and young people, panel members; children's reporters; social workers; safeguarders; advocacy workers; solicitors, and; those who identified themselves as having 'other' roles within the Hearings.

Young people said that they received support before the Hearing, but less during the Hearing. They also said it was important for young people to speak with the panel alone if they wanted.

"For us to have a chance to speak to the panel before hand" (young person)

Overall, most people were positive that Hearings were able to continue and decisions were able to be made for children and young people.

"Was good to have video and that a Hearing was able to proceed to allow for things to move forward for the children" (safeguarder)

Other benefits of virtual Hearings included that less time was needed for virtual Hearings. It was also thought that allowing children, young people, parents and carers to participate in their own space might be more comfortable, and make them less anxious.

"No travel, easier to fit in with my day, less time required" (panel member)

"Also it reduces travel time and can attend more Hearings in one day than I could if I had to attend in person across large geographical areas" (safeguarder)

"Enabling family members to join in the meeting even though they live miles away" (social worker)

However, a number of negative experiences and issues were also raised. Access to appropriate equipment was raised as a barrier to everyone taking part. This included access to a fast internet connection, devices to call in to the Hearing, and the ability to use this technology. This also included people being able to access the papers online. There were also specific barriers to joining the Hearing using the software, Vscene.

"There were times that relevant persons were unable to connect to Hearings and this led to deferrals and delays in decisions being made for children" (reporter)

"That some people you would want to participate could not because they did not have the technology or knowledge to do so" (panel member)

During the Hearing, many people mentioned it was difficult not being able to see everyone at once or their reactions. They also found it hard to know who was in the Hearing, as well as worrying about the privacy of the Hearing, and how children, young people, parents and families were helped if they became upset.

"As a chairing panel member it is far more difficult to manage and ensure Hearing is fully inclusive" (panel member)

"Being able to see only a head shot of half of those "in the Hearing" made me feel I was more of an observer than a participant, even though I was asked for my views" (safeguarder)

"at one of the Hearings someone else was in the room and we didn't know until the person started shouting while the social worker was speaking" (panel member)

"The hardest thing, in my opinion, was the distress the mum was in and she was alone in front of her phone" (panel member)

Across the groups of people who took part, many highlighted that it is not possible for children and young people to speak to panel members away from the rest of the Hearing. This is an important aspect of face-to-face Children's Hearings, and some worried that decisions might be made without all the available information, and how this affected the fairness of the decision-making.

What we concluded

We produced a report from the responses to the survey which provides an overview of peoples experiences, what they found worked well and less well about virtual Hearings and some recommendations for the future. This report is available on the CELCIS website: www.celcis.org.

Views across and within groups of people who responded were mixed as to whether virtual Hearings are a good idea or not. We also learnt that many of the things that people found difficult about virtual Hearings were linked, meaning that to make improvements, we probably have to think about all of these things when coming up with solutions. We learnt that virtual Hearings affects participation in many different ways. While some people thought it was better, others thought that virtual Hearings made it harder for people to take part in Hearings. We also learnt that some people were worried about the fairness of virtual Hearings, because of difficulty participating, and the way information and reports were shared. Finally, we noticed that many of the things people talked about in relation to virtual Hearings are just as important in face-to-face Hearings, although some of them may be more noticeable in virtual Hearings.

We selected seven recommendations of things that could be improved:

1. Children and young people should be able to speak to the panel on their own if they or the panel want.
2. Everyone should be helped to participate in the Hearing equally.
3. There should be support if people get upset during a Hearing, especially if they are on their own.
4. Panel members need to be clear in how they facilitate a Hearing.
5. Everyone should be able to see a list of who is at the Hearing at any time.
6. Papers should be given to everyone who needs them in enough time for them to read and understand them.
7. People in virtual Hearings should be able to speak privately with their solicitor, advocate or other representative during the Hearing.

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