**Fostering Voices and fostering messages** An evaluation of new strategies to promote research utilisation

Linnie Price, Judy Ravenscroft and Sandra Nutley report on the perceived effectiveness of a set of materials (the *Fostering Voices* pack) aimed at disseminating the messages emerging from research in the field of fostering services. Having commissioned a review of the body of research on fostering, the DfES funded production of materials – a combination of video CDs and targeted leaflets – to ensure that the research messages were taken up in practice. Two questionnaire surveys of a range of stakeholders (including social care practitioners, foster carers, young people in foster care, education advisers and managers) and researchers were used to gauge the effectiveness of the pack, including its actual and intended use. The multifaceted *Fostering Voices* pack was perceived to be a successful and effective mechanism for communicating relevant information and messages, with both the content and format highlighted as particular strengths. An overwhelming majority of stakeholders indicated that access to the pack would change their practice.

**Introduction**

In 2004 a review of research on fostering was commissioned and funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). This was a synthesising overview of 16 core Department of Health-funded studies and was published in the form of a report (‘the report’), *Fostering Now: Messages from research* (Sinclair, 2005). Its main aim was to make research messages accessible to a wider audience of key stakeholders in fostering services.

In the same year, the DfES also commissioned from the research utilisation organisation, Research in Practice, a range of products designed to promote uptake of the report’s research messages. These products included leaflets and video materials. Six leaflets summarised research messages from the report and were produced in order to target dissemination of the review findings to key stakeholders in the fostering arena: elected members; professionals; families; foster carers; relative foster carers; and children and young people who are fostered. Each of these *Fostering Now* leaflets was custom-written by a journalist. The accompanying video *Now* leaflets contained four video clips which were complementary to the leaflets, highlighting positive aspects of fostering and featuring the views of those most keenly affected by the fostering service: foster carers; young people looked after by foster carers; and a member of a family with a young relative in foster care. The video CD and the leaflets were packaged together in a DVD case as *Fostering Voices*. The pack aimed to provide an accessible resource that would convey the report’s research messages to those deemed unlikely to read the full report. It was hoped, however, that some people would also be encouraged to read the full report. It was anticipated that the pack would be used by stakeholders to inform their understanding and practice within fostering services, and also that it would be used for training purposes. Five thousand of these packs were produced, with a thousand distributed by the DfES during 2004 to local authorities and other agencies involved in foster care.

The leaflets and video CD were part of a broader package of initiatives to support the implementation of the messages of the research review. Eight regional dissemination seminars took place, mainly during June and July 2005, each consisting of a whole day of related presenta-
tions and discussions, involving about 60 participants. Additional information and a set of developmental exercises related to the review report are available on the DfES’s Choice Protects (www.dfes.gov.uk/choiceprotects) and Research in Practice (www.rip.org.uk/publications/multimedia/fostervoice/all-exercises2.pdf) websites.

**Background**

Research impact in the fields of social care, health care and education is the subject of growing interest. However, it is difficult to construct a clear evidence base either for the effectiveness of research dissemination strategies or for the impact of research messages on practice. Communication pathways, from research outputs to practice knowledge, are messy and unpredictable, and the ways in which research knowledge is integrated into policy and practice cultures are equally complex (Davies *et al*., 2005). Most research impacts are not susceptible to easy measurement or evaluation. Even when research findings are codified into guidelines and protocols, implementation will be vulnerable to the possibly countervailing imperatives of organisational processes and professional conventions and interests (Gabbay and le May, 2004). However, there is a growing body of literature on the influence of research on practice and what serves to hinder and enable this. Barriers to research uptake have been shown to include insufficient time, lack of research skills, poor access to resources, a paucity of accessible, summarised research information, the perceived lack of relevance of much research to practice, and the preference of practitioners to rely on other sources of knowledge, such as talking with colleagues, supervision sessions or their own experience (Hughes *et al.*, 2000; Nutley *et al.*, 2003; Stevens *et al.*, 2005). Perceived lack of relevance relates to the poor fit between research and practitioners’ needs, due in part to the lack of consideration of outcomes in much research and the paucity of unequivocal messages (Pettigrew and Roberts, 2003).

Research dissemination is not the same as research implementation. Knowing about research is not the same as using it and the effective dissemination of research messages will not guarantee their implementation into practice, although this may be a necessary starting point. A number of factors seem to underpin the successful translation of research into practice. In particular, organisational characteristics, such as the existence of a research-aware culture, the extent to which research is integrated into training, positive leadership and management and the enthusiasm of individuals within organisations, appear to be significant (Walter *et al.*, 2005). Well-designed dissemination materials may be able to address some of the barriers to research awareness and research uptake. Summaries and reviews of research are perceived to be helpful, particularly when they are fairly short and when practice or policy implications are made clear. Dissemination materials also need to be attractively presented and user-friendly. They need to be seen as relevant, timely, not too complex and not negative or counter-intuitive (Hughes *et al.*, 2000). Multi-faceted dissemination strategies that target specific barriers to change seem to be more effective than stand-alone dissemination materials (NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 1999; Nutley *et al.*, 2003; Walter *et al.*, 2005).

Despite interest in the routes by which research passes into practice (or fails to do so), there is a paucity of literature on the impact of specific research dissemination and implementation strategies and tools on practitioner knowledge and on practice itself, although what there is can provide useful insights into the effectiveness of various discrete strategies (Walter *et al.*, 2004). Two fairly recent evaluations of distinct research dissemination materials targeted at practitioners are particularly relevant as background to the current paper (Weyts *et al.*, 2000; Hagell and Spencer, 2004).

Hagell and Spencer (2004) evaluated another Research in Practice product, an audiotape about young people leaving care that was one of a series designed to keep social care staff up to date with
recent research findings. They found that a third of their 20 respondents reported following up the research or references cited on the tape and eight respondents said they had looked at related research as a result of listening to it. More than half the respondents reported discussing the issues raised in the tape at team meetings. A similar proportion reported both a general raised awareness and increased knowledge of specific issues, such as facts and figures, the role of relatives and the needs and experiences of care leavers, as a result of listening to the tape. A quarter of the respondents believed that policy had been influenced by the findings summarised in the tape and nearly half felt services had been influenced.

The main components of influence were reported as: strengthening the case for improving a service; providing an agenda of issues to be addressed; providing material for project groups and information for a user group; stimulating a review of provision; and helping to improve consultation between service providers.

Weyts and colleagues (2000) evaluated the dissemination of ‘the Blue Book’, a review of 20 research studies about child protection (Department of Health, 1995). The Blue Book was disseminated through extensive circulation of free copies, together with a high-profile ministerial launch and a series of regional one-day seminars. A survey conducted two-and-a-half years after the Book was originally distributed assessed the extent to which its contents were known about and used. Over half of the 292 respondents said the Blue Book had added to their knowledge about child protection and a similar proportion understood most of its messages and could identify key ones. A similar proportion reported that the Book had affected their practice. This happened in four ways: by increasing knowledge and awareness of issues, which in turn increased confidence; by enabling changes to be made in the day-to-day work of staff; by triggering policy, process and service changes in organisations; and as a training resource. Nearly a third of respondents said the Book had changed the way they thought about the topic; in particular, thinking shifted towards seeing child

**Fostering Now**, the research report on which *Fostering Voices* is based, was similarly launched at a series of well-publicised free events (the eight regional seminars referred to above) to which a range of key stakeholders was invited. Each delegate received a free copy of the report, as well as the *Fostering Voices* pack and other materials relevant to fostering. Presentations were made about these and other relevant dissemination materials, with the opportunity for discussion after each presentation. A number of agencies had stalls displaying relevant related materials.

**Aims and objectives of the evaluation**

The main aim of this evaluation was to assess the perceived usefulness and the actual and/or intended use of the *Fostering Voices* pack by stakeholders in the field of fostering services for children and young people. There was a further aim to assess whether professionals and those who design and develop fostering services would be more or less likely to read the main research report as a consequence of seeing and using the *Fostering Voices* package. In addition, the evaluation aimed to assess the views of researchers in the fostering field about the content and usefulness of *Fostering Voices*.

The specific objectives of the evaluation were to assess:

- how useful the form and content of the materials were considered to be;
- whether the materials were successful in making the research messages easily comprehensible;
- what messages people are taking from the materials;
- whether different audiences are taking similar or different messages from the materials;
- whether and how the materials have made people think differently about fostering;
- how the different groups had used or intended to use the materials, for
example, whether they have been or will be used for training or service development purposes;

- what changes, if any, might be made to future materials in order to increase their usefulness to their intended audiences as a means to implement research messages into practice.

Methods

The evaluation took the form of two surveys: a survey of stakeholders and a researchers’ survey. It was originally intended that these would be supplemented by focus group interviews, both with young people who were fostered and with foster carers. However, this plan was thwarted by the difficulty of gaining access to these groups within the limited time available to complete the evaluation. Therefore, as with most studies aimed at assessing research use (Walter et al., 2004), this evaluation relates to the self-reported use and impact of the pack among key stakeholders.

The stakeholder survey

A questionnaire was developed to address the aims and objectives of the evaluation using a mixture of fixed-choice response and open-response questions. It was distributed to an opportunistic sample of stakeholders in fostering services: participants at seven of the eight ‘Fostering change’ events organised by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) to launch the report Fostering Now in England. The Fostering Voices pack was distributed to all participants at the seven events (N = 377). In addition, three of the film clips were shown throughout the day, providing the opportunity for participants to become familiar with the materials before completing the questionnaire. Two hundred and thirty-one of the 377 participants responded to the survey, a response rate of 61 per cent, ranging from 53 per cent to 74 per cent across events.

While this sample was neither stratified nor randomly selected, it did provide access to a wide range of stakeholders in fostering services. It also had pragmatic advantages in terms of speed of response and low survey cost. Two hard-to-reach stakeholder groups – family members of young people being fostered and foster carers who are related to the young person they foster – are not represented in the sample, and there are also no local authority elected members. The composition of the sample is represented in Table 2; 12 people cited more than one role.

Table 1

Response rates per location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of delegates</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Response rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taunton</td>
<td>06/06/05</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge</td>
<td>17/06/05</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newcastle</td>
<td>21/06/05</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>23/06/05</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>05/07/05</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham</td>
<td>11/07/05</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td>15/07/05</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Constitution of the sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder group</th>
<th>Number of sample</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social care practitioner (CSD)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social care practitioner (independent sector)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carer</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspector</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustee of an independent fostering provider</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff development/trainer in CSD</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young person who is in/has been in foster care</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency director</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultant/trainer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education adviser</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, eg university lecturers, nurses and support workers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The researchers’ survey
Fourteen researchers were asked if they would contribute to the evaluation. All were co-authors of one of the research studies summarised in the Fostering Now report. Twelve researchers responded to the request, of whom six agreed to take part. These six were sent a copy of the pack and later asked six evaluation questions by email. Five people responded and their responses were analysed for key themes.

Evaluation questions for researchers
1. In your opinion, are these kinds of materials likely to be an effective way of disseminating research findings to practitioners and other stakeholders in fostering services?
2. What is your general impression of the form and content of the Fostering Voices pack (strengths and weaknesses)?
3. In your opinion, are the targeted leaflets contained within the pack a reasonable reflection of the research findings reviewed in Fostering Now?
4. Did you find the films appropriate as complementary material to the research findings contained in the report?
5. Were you aware of the existence of the Fostering Voices pack before I asked for your help in its evaluation?
6. (If you are involved in teaching or training) Are you likely to use the Fostering Voices pack in teaching or training?

Results

The survey
The Fostering Voices pack had been available for over a year prior to the first regional ‘Fostering change’ meeting. To judge the effectiveness of distribution systems, the analysis of the survey responses considered how many people had in fact received the pack and whether there were discernible patterns of distribution. Seventy-three (32%) of the 231 delegates who responded to this question had received the pack, while 154 (67%) had not. Four people did not know whether they had received it. This was useful in that it made it possible to compare the way those who had received the pack had used it with how those who had not received it said they were going to use it; ie it provided a naturally occurring ‘control’ group which would enable some assessment of the likely relationship between what people say they will do and what they actually do. However, the high proportion of the sample who had not seen the pack prior to the seminar led to a low response to some questions.

Were some groups more likely to have received the pack than others?
Young people who were or had been fostered were most likely to have received the pack (100%). This reflects their small number in the sample and the highly selected nature of the young people at the meetings, most of whom were giving presentations on their experiences of the fostering service and were therefore very untypical of the general population of young people who are fostered. Directors were the second group most likely to have received the pack (83%), which may reflect their relatively small numbers but may also be linked to a trickle-down distribution policy. Social care practitioners from children’s services departments were no more likely to have received the pack than those from the independent fostering sector. For the other groups, the numbers are too small to be meaningful.

Had/will the pack been/be used?
Of the 154 people who had received the pack for the first time at the seminar, 129 (84%) said they intended to use it, and of the 73 people who had received the pack before the meeting, 38 (52%) had already done so. Of these, 32 described how they had used the pack. The majority had used it in more than one context: for example, ‘in team meetings with my staff and in foster carer support groups’; ‘children of foster carer groups, staff development, foster carer training’. The most frequently cited use was work with foster carers or potential foster carers, mentioned by 25 people. Respondents who intended to use the pack in the future indicated a similar range of predicted uses.
Seventeen (23%) of those who had already received the pack reported that they had not made use of it, although 14 (82%) of these intended to make use of the leaflets and the same number intended to use the films. Six people reported that they had not yet had time to use the pack.

Two people felt that the pack was not relevant to their particular role:

I don’t have involvement with pre-approval training but thought it could be useful here.

One delegate from an independent fostering organisation did not feel it was useful for that particular group of foster carers:

I found the film too general and all encompassing, eg for recruitment. [It] could be misleading to applicants about the type of fostering they will be able to do with my organisation.

Four people reported technological barriers in their agency to using the films, such as having no speakers on their computer, no data-projector for group sessions and lack of facilities in general to play the films.

Was the format of the Fostering Voices pack useful?
Two hundred and nineteen people responded to this question. Of these, 197 (90%) reported that it was useful or very useful, four people (2%) said it was not very useful and 18 did not know.

Of those who found the pack very useful or useful, 103 (52%) gave their reasons. The most frequently mentioned factor here was its clarity and accessibility and the fact that it was easy to read and understand, followed by the choice of formats that made it a versatile resource. The fact that it targeted different audiences was valued, as was the range of views it covered. Respondents also appreciated its compact presentation, which made for easy storage.

Only four people said that they did not find the format of the pack very useful. One reported that their team had ‘not found the CD very good’, with too little discussion of the shortcomings of the fostering service, a comment that related more to content than format. Another felt the leaflets would get separated or lost and would have preferred everything in one book. There were three mentions of problems in playing the CDs and one of the film’s perceived limited relevance for independent fostering providers (IFPs).

The problem of access to a PC for playing the CDs had been anticipated and respondents were asked about this. In fact, a very small proportion (20 people, 9% of those who responded to the question) did not have access to a PC. Fifteen people (7% of 202 responses) would change the format. Half of these wanted a different format for the films, either video or DVD or a choice; one wanted the material in book form and another as a poster.

Was the content of the Fostering Voices pack useful?
Two hundred and fifteen people responded to the question about the usefulness of the content of the pack, of whom 165 (77%) found it very useful or useful. Forty-eight people (22%) said they did
not know if it was useful, four of whom commented that they had not had the opportunity to review it sufficiently to answer this question. Two people said the content of the pack was not very useful. One explained that it was because it focused solely on local authority foster carers. The other did not give reasons.

What changes would people like to see in the content of the pack?
Ten of 201 respondents (5%) wanted content changes. Three people reiterated that the material focused on local authority carers and was less relevant for those working for IFPs:

- It features LA [local authority] carers, and whilst issues are common, some parts of the content are not.

Other people mentioned their wish for information on allegations, on cultural and identity formation, children who foster, the perspective of children needing placement and specialist or fee-paid foster carers. Two people requested that the material be updated regularly.

Were the messages easy to understand?
All or some messages of the pack were considered to be easily understood by 81 per cent of the 202 respondents to this question.

What were the messages?
Participants took a number of common messages from the pack. There were no differences between those who had received the pack before the seminar where the questionnaire was distributed and those who had seen it for the first time that day, nor between the different stakeholder groups represented. The importance of communication and listening, particularly to young people and foster carers, was the most commonly mentioned research message, followed by emphasis on partnership working and consultation with stakeholders in fostering. The need to invest in the service, to value and support foster carers, to treat young people as individuals with different needs and a positive view of fostering also emerged as strong messages from the pack. Some participants focused on the need for research-based practice and others for clear strategies and adequate resources and investment in services:

- Put more weight behind getting views of foster children and foster carers. Try harder to understand where they are coming from and where they are at. (Regulation inspector, Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI))
- Respect for all parties concerned. Working together. (Care leaver)
- Carers require ongoing support and training. The whole department needs to support fostering services. (Social care practitioner, children’s services department (CSD))

Did the messages from the pack change the way people think about fostering?
In order to assess the impact of the pack on people’s knowledge and understanding of fostering, they were asked if the messages from the pack had changed the way they think about fostering. There were 191 responses to the question. Of these, 85 (45%) said that the messages had certainly or possibly changed their thinking, 59 (31%) said they had not and 24 per cent did not know. These proportions were consistent whether or not people had received the pack before the meeting, although those who had done so were twice as likely to say it had not changed their thinking (47%) than those who had not (23%). The latter were nearly three times as likely to say they did not know (31%).

How the pack changed thinking
Participants were asked to expand on their answer to the previous question, whereupon 28 of the 85 people said the pack had definitely or possibly altered the way they think. Answers focused both on specific areas of practice, such as after-care provision or kinship care, and on more general principles like consulting children and foster carers and paying more attention to what they say, and being aware of the range of stakeholders. Other comments related to more general raised awareness and improved knowledge:
Listen to children in a more open and non-complicated way. Check with young people if they experience love and affection rather than concentrate on physical conditions. (Inspector, CSCI)

Long term, ie post 16, is an area I hadn’t thought about. (Social care practitioner, independent sector)

It’s given me thoughts about consultation of young people in recruiting foster carers. (Social care practitioner, CSD)

It’s raised its status in my eyes and improved my knowledge-base. (Education adviser, Corporate Parenting)

Reasons given by people who said Fostering Voices had not changed their thinking mainly focused on the fact that they were already aware of the issues raised by the pack:

While it has not necessarily changed the way I think, it has made me pause and reflect on what we could do better. (Director, IFP)

It has reinforced my previously held beliefs. (Project manager, local authority children’s services)

Did/will the pack change practice?
In order to assess the potential impact of research messages on practice, respondents were asked to say whether the messages in the pack had changed or were likely to change their practice. There were 191 respondents to this question, of whom 139 (73%) reported that the messages from the pack would definitely or possibly change their practice.

Those who had received the pack before the meeting were more likely to report definite changed practice (40%) than those who had not (28%), but more than twice as likely to say that the messages from the pack would not change their practice (22% vs 10%). Those who had not received the pack before the meeting were more likely to say they did not know (15% vs 10%).

How the messages from the pack will change practice
Participants said the messages from the pack would influence their practice in a number of ways, including listening more and paying more attention to the views and needs of young people and foster carers, a greater commitment to consulting, incorporating the messages into training of social workers and foster carers, using the messages in the development of the service and to inform inspections and the more general intention to incorporate research evidence into practice. Some reported that the messages raised their existing awareness of and commitment to good practice:

There will be more attention paid in my next inspection to the role, training and support foster carers receive. Issues [include] termination of placement and meeting outcomes for young people. (Inspector, CSCI)

Use more research information. To inform practice. (Social care practitioner, CSD)

Fostering Voices video had a positive impact on me and how I work in future. Spend more time with the young people when visiting. (Inspector, CSCI)

It has enhanced my own observations and highlighted any issues that are missing in my work. (Foster carer)

Use more when assessing new carers and promote use with existing carers. Greater input needed into Fostering Panel from young people. (Social care practitioner, CSD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported effect of pack on practice change</th>
<th>All (N = 191)</th>
<th>Received pack prior (N = 63)</th>
<th>Not received pack prior (N = 125)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibly</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes/possibly</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants who said the messages from the pack would not change their practice said this was either because they did not feel they were ‘new’ messages or because they felt the messages reinforced their existing practice:

_Our household interacts very well with young people, both educational and fun times. Working well, no need yet for change._ (Foster carer)

_I strongly believe in the message. Tool supports beliefs and gives avenue into delivering on all-round joined-up services with equal contribution from all._ (Foster carer/staff trainer, CSD)

_Will the pack make people more likely to read the report?_ There were 216 responses to the question asking if respondents had already read the report prior to the meeting at which the questionnaire was administered. Fifty-seven people (26%) had already read the report at the time of the survey, 155 had not read it (72%) and four people said they did not know whether they had read it or not.

There were 201 responses to the question asking whether the _Fostering Voices_ pack was more likely to encourage them to read the report. One hundred people (50%) said that the pack made them more likely to read the full report, 22 (11%) said the pack made no difference, and two people (0.1%) said they were less likely to read the full report, having received the pack. Seventeen people (8%) said they did not know.

Reasons given for being more likely to read the report focused on the fact that the pack had whetted appetites for messages from research, leading people to want to dig deeper into research evidence, and that the seminars themselves (of which receipt of the pack was a part) had raised interest and awareness of the importance of research and provided information on how to access it:

_Very keen to find out actual research findings to inform knowledge._ (Care leaver)

_It has sparked my motivation to read the research._ (Social care practitioner, independent sector)

_I like to be kept informed and up to date with research._ (Foster carer)

_I feel stimulated to learn more about research findings._ (Trustee of an IFP)

_It has raised both my awareness and interest._ (Education adviser)

_It refreshes my interest in research._ (Social care practitioner, CSD)

Respondents who said the pack would make them neither more or less likely to read the full report mainly reported that they would have read the report in any case, although the need for greater accessibility and more time were common qualifications to this response:

_I’m interested to read the research regardless of the pack – just haven’t got round to it. Will read it now I’ve got a copy from the conference._ (Social care practitioner, independent sector)

_Dependent on availability of time._ (Social care practitioner, CSD)

_I try to stay up to date with research as far as possible to inform my practice and team development._ (Social care practitioner, CSD)

Only one of the people who said the pack would make them less likely to read the report responded to the question asking them to expand their answer. This respondent found research inconclusive:

_I find a lot of the research evidence is not conclusive and can be read several ways._ (Inspector, CSCI)

_General comments on the Fostering Voices pack_ Most of the 74 responses to the question asking for general comments on the pack were positive, mentioning its usefulness, particularly for training purposes, its conciseness, relevance and ease of use, and the fact that it provided a synthesis of research findings and promoted a positive but realistic view of fostering and a range of perspectives. The accessibility and
impact of the videos were valued, as was
the inclusion of the leaflets in the pack
and its general presentation. Some re-
spondents reiterated that the CD format
limited the pack’s accessibility, and one
felt there were no ‘new’ research
messages:

Fantastic to have a concise and relevant
piece of resource that I can use easily.
Saves me rummaging around for bits of
relevant information. (Social care
practitioner, CSD)

Great. It is the drawing together from a
wide variety of sources that adds its value
– less of ‘this school of thought’ and ‘that
school of thought’. (Social care practi-
tioner, independent sector)

Very good format. Informative. Honest
and realistic. (Inspector, CSCI)

Good images, cross-section of society.
Easy to read clear messages and colourful,
useful resources and follow-up links on
material. (Social care practitioner, CSD)

Could be on DVD format for use with
families who don’t have appropriate
computer facilities. (University lecturer)

From what I’ve seen today it looks excel-
ent, though general overall messages
nothing new – common sense for good
practitioners. (Inspector, CSCI)

Survey of researchers
Researchers were also positive about the
form and content of the pack and felt the
materials could be useful, particularly for
training purposes. The materials were
perceived to be well produced and suc-
cinct and to convey valuable information
effectively:

I think the overall design, layout, etc is
excellent. I very much liked the individual
leaflets and the idea of addressing these
to different groups, and identifying the
key points in the research particularly
relevant to the various stakeholders.

However, one respondent wondered
whether the CD would be used by busy
practitioners and another raised issues
about the effective distribution of the pack.

Views on the videos were mixed.
Some felt they were a good introduction
to fostering for people not familiar with
the issues and found the films interesting,
varied and balanced. The range of views
expressed by fostered young people was
felt to be a particular strength because it
conveyed both positive and negative
factors well. For others, however, the
messages were felt to be ‘bland’ and
superficial. They thought that a comment-
ary was needed to make the material a
more effective resource for discussion and
to make explicit links to the research.
One researcher suggested stopping scenes
to emphasise discussion points, or an
interview format to create a more
structured narrative.

The leaflets were generally perceived
as excellent. Positive comments empha-
sised the skilled translation of ‘social
science jargon’ into ‘plain English’, the
targeting of material towards different
audiences while maintaining consistency
across the whole range, and the useful
pointers to further information. The
information for families – a difficult area
– was felt to be particularly well handled.
While the leaflet for relative foster carers
was felt to be good on the whole, there
was a suggestion that some people, such
as grandparents, who may regard the
children as their own, might feel patron-
ised by references to ‘placements’ and the
statement that they ‘may’ know the child
quite well.

Those researchers who had not been
aware of the pack before being approached
as part of the evaluation did not feel it
would encourage people to read the
report. They also said that they were
unlikely to use the materials in training,
although one requested advice about their
relationship to the new post-qualifying
framework. However, they did feel the
materials were a reasonable reflection of
the research findings:

Yes, within the limits of space, etc. As an
academic it is always difficult to see years
of sweat and toil reduced to a few senten-
ces but this is a necessary evil for com-
municating research findings effectively. I
thought the leaflets were very recognisable
from Ian Sinclair’s overview book.
Summary
The results of this evaluation suggest that the Fostering Now research dissemination pack is a useful addition to the repertoire of materials intended to facilitate the integration of messages from research into practice. Of those respondents to the survey who had received the pack before the dissemination meeting, 52 per cent had already used it and 82 per cent of those who had not used it yet intended to do so in the future, as did 84 per cent of those who had not received it earlier. The pack had been used in a range of practice contexts, in particular with foster carers for recruitment, assessment, training, support and induction, for staff development and with children and young people who were fostered. Ninety per cent of the sample found the format and 77 per cent found the content useful, and 81 per cent said the pack made the messages easy to understand. The main research messages communicated by the pack concerned the importance of listening and communication, particularly with young people and foster carers, and of the value of working in partnership with all involved in the service. The messages were consistent across all the stakeholder groups represented in the sample. Forty-four per cent of the respondents said the pack had definitely or possibly changed their thinking about fostering. Changed thinking about general principles such as the value of consultation and communication were mentioned, as well as in substantive areas such as aftercare provision or kinship care. There were also reports of increased knowledge and raised awareness. Seventy-three per cent reported that the pack would change their practice in ways that included listening more to young people and including them in consultation, and incorporating the research messages into training and service development and inspection protocols. Half of the respondents said the pack had made them more likely to read the report, and most of those who stated that it would make them no more nor less likely to do so said this was because they intended to read it anyway.

Several learning points arise from this study, which are pertinent when considering possible changes to ensure that future materials are more effective in increasing research implementation. The most significant of these relates to the CD. Nine per cent of respondents had no access to a PC on which to play the films, and there were other problems like not having speakers or a data projector. Disseminating material on CD is therefore a barrier to research dissemination for a minority of respondents who requested a different format, eg videos or DVDs, or a choice of formats. In addition, while there was considerable appreciation of the compactness and ease of storage of the pack, packaging a CD in a DVD case might confuse some users. A further point in relation to the films was that the content was considered by some to be too general and superficial to be useful; the exception was for use in the recruitment of foster carers and in working with groups of fostered young people. The evaluation suggests a need for such complementary materials to be more explicit in their relationship to research messages and structured so that discussion points are easily identified. There was also a strong message from participants from independent fostering organisations that materials of this kind need, in future, to address explicitly the full range of providers of foster care.

Conclusion
This evaluation demonstrates an overwhelmingly positive response to the Fostering Voices pack among key stakeholders in fostering services. The pack is considered accessible and friendly, and the targeted leaflets and multimedia approach were particularly appreciated. It is likely to be well used in a number of practice and training contexts, suggesting that it will facilitate the widespread dissemination of messages from research among service planners, inspectors, managers, practitioners and users of social care services. It is considered attractive, clear and accessible, presenting a summary of research messages in an easily understood format that addresses well-recorded barriers to research uptake. These findings reinforce the conclusions from previous evaluations, of the Blue
that materials which present research messages in an accessible and practice-related format facilitate getting research into practice. Common themes across all three evaluations are a general raised awareness of research messages and improved knowledge of specific information. In all three evaluations, recipients were able to identify key research messages propagated by the dissemination materials, and all reported actual or intended practice change. While Weyts and colleagues’ and Hagell and Spencer’s work indicated that the materials they evaluated would change the practice of 50 per cent of their respondents, this evaluation suggests that Fostering Voices would do so for 73 per cent of stakeholders in fostering services. This may be indicative of the wider constituency of the respondents to this evaluation. It may also suggest that a combination of targeted messages, a range of media and a multifaceted dissemination and support strategy may reach the parts other research dissemination strategies do not reach.

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