

Report of an Action Research
Project to Improve the Quality
of Family Placement
Assessments

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1 Introduction

The idea for this project started at a teaching session on hypothesis formulation in child welfare. It was recognised by the Family Placement Worker (FPW) who attended the session and his managers that there was a need for more evidence and reflection on hypothesis formulation in family placement assessment. A research proposal was subsequently requested.

The study aimed to improve the quality of assessments through:

- A literature search of key texts/ papers that would act as a developing resource throughout the project to improve the evidence base of practice;
- The methodology of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001 and co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2001) to promote mutual support and group reflection on the formulation of hypotheses in family placement assessment;
- The participation of foster carers and adopters in the study through the use of co-facilitated focus groups to ascertain their views on the assessment process and to feed back the findings into the Inquiry group;
- The dissemination of findings to those not directly involved in the project at local and national level within agreed anonymity and confidentiality protocols.

This report begins by outlining the project methodology and how the study was launched in Autumn 2003. It then goes on to describe key messages from the two focus groups with approved foster carers and adopters held in March 2004, which were fed into the later meetings of the Inquiry group. The findings from the eight meetings of the Inquiry group from November 2003 to June 2004 are then reported, and the project evaluated. Section 8 summarises thematically all the project findings and recommendations; and the final section offers an Executive Summary.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Method

The method chosen for this project was action research. Over the past few years there has been an increase in the use of this method within professional settings in general (Reason and Bradbury, 2001), and within health and social care settings in particular (Bate, 2000; Randall, Cowley and Tomlinson, 2000; Waterson, 2000; Treseder, Jones and Glennie, 2003). The advantage of action research is that it is **participative, qualitative** and **practical**. The world of social work practice is characterised by the unpredictable; the reflective space needs to address why and how people do things as much as what they do. Action research involves people as co-researchers, shaping their inquiry as the group moves between action and reflection, exploring and evaluating ways of improving their practice; it has the potential to provide a supportive, learning environment for the group as a whole and for the individuals within it.

Rather than a traditional researcher studying people as passive subjects, action research involves people as active agents, co-researchers in a community of inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2001). This ensures ownership by group members and promotes acceptance of findings and recommendations at a higher level within the organisation.

Finally, the emphasis on qualitative data in action research encourages practical outcomes. Action research aims to be creative in exploring how to do things better. The practical nature of the method requires that it should be valid and useful for practitioners, producing outcomes that are actionable and make a difference (Heron & Reason, 2001).

In this Inquiry group, family placement workers worked together to make sense of their experience and assessments of the families. They cycled between action and reflection, exploring different hypotheses, their evidence base and ways of making changes to improve their practice.

In addition, part way through the study, a small sample of foster carers and adopters met in two Focus groups (Morgan, 1997) to explore their experiences of the assessment process. Participants were invited on the basis of recent approval so that the experience would be fresh in their minds; they were drawn from across the authority to represent a geographical spread. The two Focus groups were co-facilitated by the Researcher and a member of the Inquiry group who had not previously acted in a key worker role with any of the group members. The main findings were fed into the Inquiry group following each Focus group.

Notes were made at each Inquiry and Focus group session by FPWs and circulated to members. Sessions were also tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim with contributions being rendered anonymous during transcription and after editing.

The methodology of this project was underpinned by the concept of 'knowledge-based practice', defined as the triangulation of research findings, practitioner wisdoms and service user perspectives (Humphreys *et al.* 2003). In this case a literature search around key themes, and photocopying of relevant papers and ordering of texts was undertaken prior to the first meeting of the Inquiry group; reflection and action cycles, using various tools, occurred within and between Inquiry groups to share evolving expertise; and the views of approved foster carers and adopters on the assessment process were sought part way through the study to provide service user perspectives from the two groups.

2.2 Ethical Considerations

This project was managed through a research project agreement and protocol which covered: the mutual responsibilities of the Researcher and the Department; information sharing arrangements; anonymity, confidentiality and data protection; insurance and professional indemnity; payment schedule; progress monitoring against the original proposal; and arrangements for publication and dissemination.

Informed written consent was sought at three levels in this project: from group participants themselves; from prospective adopters and foster carers whose assessments might be reflected upon in the Inquiry Group; and from the approved carers who agreed to come to the two Focus Groups held in March 2004. Initial approaches to prospective and approved carers were always made through their FPW, who took along two copies of the consent letter containing the project brief, and discussed the project with them. The consent letter was left with the carer(s) for a few days for their consideration. It was made clear that participation in the study was entirely optional i.e. work would continue in the normal way if carers chose not to participate. If consent was given, then the carer(s) retained one signed copy of the consent letter, the Researcher was given a signed original by the FPW, and a copy was kept on file. Those prospective or approved carers who gave their consent could elect to receive a full copy of the Final Report or the Executive Summary; these will be distributed through their FPWs.

In both the Inquiry Group and the two Focus Groups, participants agreed their own set of ground rules at the outset. These typically covered issues such as confidentiality; and respect for others' opinions, even if agreement was not reached.

3 Management of the Project

The early stages of the project from May to November 2003 were managed through a series of five minuted meetings between the Family Placement Development Manager, who commissioned the study, and the Researcher.

Prior to the commencement of the Inquiry Group and as part of the Research Project Agreement and Protocol for this project, the Researcher was subject to a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check, which was arranged by the Family Placement Development Manager.

From December 2003 the project was overseen by the Advisory Group, which comprised the Researcher, the Family Placement Development Manager, a Senior Manager (Children Looked After), a Family Placement Worker from the Inquiry Group, and a Senior Manager who acted as Chair.

The group's terms of reference were to:

- Manage the interface between the Project and the Department;
- Comment on the draft interim and final reports;
- Assist with dissemination strategies.

The group met on five occasions between December 2003 and June 2004, and considered messages arising from the project on an ongoing basis. The future of the Advisory Group and its role in dissemination and implementing the project's recommendations will need to be reviewed by the Department in the autumn.

4 Early Stages – July to October 2003

4.1 Literature Search

The literature search was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved the appointment of a research assistant, an experienced foster care worker who had recently completed the PQ Child Care Award. The second stage, after the draft search had been conducted, was to seek additional views and references from an independent child care consultant who acted as an expert witness in the placement needs of looked after children. Several key texts relating to the assessment of foster carers and adoptive parents were already familiar to the research assistant prior to beginning the literature search for this research project. In particular he was aware of three key themes in the family placement literature which related strongly to the assessment of prospective carers, these being broadly concerned with the *value base* on which assessment is founded, the range of *theoretical perspectives* advocated as a basis for the method of assessment, and the more pragmatic theme of enquiry into 'outcomes' and 'what works' in family placements.

Guided by the influence of the Assessment Framework on current child care practice (Department of Health *et al.*, 2000; Department of Health, 2000) and these and other themes and issues in the family placement literature, for example, on loss, children of foster carers, contact and diversity, a search was conducted for relevant papers in leading journals including *The British Journal of Social Work*, *Child and Family Social Work*, and *Adoption and Fostering*. The ASSIA search engine also proved useful in finding articles and papers in other journals, such as *The Journal of Family Therapy*, *Child Welfare* and *Families in Society* which were pertinent to the research topic. Relevant books were added to those that we were already familiar with by using a University library on-line catalogue.

The draft literature search was then sent to the consultant. Drawing on her extensive experience in the field, she made some further suggestions, particularly concerning relevant book chapters, which are often harder to find in database searches. In order to keep the resource down to a manageable size some older references were then dropped from the original search to permit space for her recommendations.

The literature search was concluded in October 2003 (Appendix One). One photocopy was made of each article and book chapter on the list and these were filed under the various literature search sub-headings in a large ring binder file. Recommended texts were ordered through the Commissioning Manager of the project, and a system set up for their loan. From time to time group participants added their own recommendations from a local contact on the experience of being adopted (Beyer 2004), and from Internet searches on, for example, adoption and adult attachment (Anna Freud Centre), and talking about sex and relationships (Parentline Plus 2003; Gottman Institute; Psychology Today; BBC Health). Other material, published after the commencement of the project, was also circulated e.g. Social Care Institute

of Excellence knowledge-based reviews on foster care and adoption (Rushton, 2003; Sellick and Howell, 2003), recent extracts from DfES policy documents, and two papers from *Adoption and Fostering* on assessing adopters and 'children who foster' (Cousins 2003; Spears and Cross, 2003).

Participants in one team found the literature search materials of significant use and maintained the resource folder in the team room so that other Family Placement Workers could access relevant research as and when required. Part way through the project they started a second file of research papers and aim to use this as an ongoing resource, including newly published materials as they become available.

4.2 Launch of Project and Selection

An open invitation to the launch event and a copy of the research proposal was sent to Family Placement staff in August 2003. The launch in September 2003 was well attended by a range of managers and family placement staff. The Family Placement Development Manager opened the morning with a brief outline of the project. The Researcher followed on by outlining the thinking behind the research proposal; the research method; application and selection to become a member of the group; and consent issues. There was also time for participants to discuss and feed back on three questions to begin the inquiry process:

- Why is family placement assessment so challenging?
- How can the quality of assessments be improved?
- What initial question or questions should the Inquiry group consider?

Responses on flip chart paper were typed up and were later circulated to group members as part of the early stages of the Inquiry process.

Thirteen people, drawn from across the authority, were nominated by their line managers for twelve places. These were considered at a Family Placement Managers' meeting in October; and one person who was on another training programme at the time was asked to stand down.

4.3 Period of Induction

During October the Researcher received a three-day induction programme into Family Placement work. The induction offered a range of experiences across the authority:

- Meetings with Family Placement Managers and FPWs on an individual and group basis;
- Home visit with an FPW to a baby who had been placed for adoption;
- Reading papers for Panel and attendance at Panel as an observer;
- Observation of a Resources Panel to consider placement requests;
- Meeting with a Senior Manager (Children and Families) who subsequently chaired the Advisory Group;
- Meeting with an adoptive parent where difficulties were experienced in the placement and it broke down.

The induction offered a good foundation in how the Department managed its services for children looked after from initial placement to the granting of

an Adoption Order. It also gave a balanced view of the 'highs' e.g. a child thriving in a successful placement, and the 'lows' of practice e.g. the emotional fall-out from disruption for all the parties concerned. The need to focus more attention on linking children to adopters was also raised.

5 Findings from the Focus Groups with Carers

5.1 Planning for the Two Groups

As indicated in **2.1 Research Method**, the aim in this study was to achieve a triangulation of research findings, practitioner wisdoms and service user perspectives (Humphreys *et al.*, 2003). Focus groups (Morgan 1997) were selected as the preferred method to consult carers because they were cost-effective and offered a participative, dynamic, and potentially creative and problem solving way of involving them in the study.

The two Focus groups were co-facilitated by the Researcher and two different members of the Inquiry group who had not previously acted in a key worker role with any of the group members. Prior to the sessions the Researcher met with the two Co-facilitators to plan the sessions and our respective roles. Group members were also asked the areas that they would like feedback on from the carers. In this way the questions and topics for discussion came from the Inquiry group as a whole.

However we were concerned to allow carers sufficient space to work on their own agenda first. Therefore each group began with carers breaking down into twos and threes to work on the broad question, 'How could the process of assessment be improved?' Feedback in the whole group followed and, as we explored their concerns, our own questions were answered: there was a lot of overlap between the areas the Inquiry group wished to cover and the issues carers raised spontaneously.

5.2 Feedback from the Focus Group with Foster Carers

5.2.1 Introduction and Content

The group was attended by six people for the first half, and was joined by a seventh carer for the second half. The group reflected a cross section of newly approved and experienced foster carers. The sample was representative in terms of types of caring done across the area. There were five men and two women. One person was a single carer. All participants were white/ European and none had special needs. Initial findings were fed into the March Inquiry Group.

5.2.2 Issues Discussed and Key Messages

5.2.2.1 How best could we facilitate/improve recruitment?

Some group members expressed concern about the change in tempo from the initial phone call and visit followed by a silence and a long wait. Quite sensibly they felt that if people have to wait a long time social services might lose them: "*It's like a sales deal, isn't it? You've got a warm sale, it's hot and then it goes cold.*" Overall a lack of consistency across the authority was noted. One suggestion was to have regular feedback about how long the waiting was

likely to be with an explanation for the delay; another suggestion was to have a monthly newsletter, which apparently used to be published in the past.

The group was realistic in appreciating the potentially complex logistics of running preparation courses across the authority; and they were also fulsome in their praise of the courses: *"The quality of courses, you can't fault that really."*

It was felt that it would be useful to have dates and course venues a year ahead so that prospective carers could indicate first, second and third choices: some might be prepared to travel further afield to get on a course sooner. A schedule (i.e. initial visit, course, home study, panel) detailing what was likely to happen when was felt to be useful in order to anticipate approximate timescales to approval. An overriding message was that social services needed to respond to and value potential carers much better than they were doing at present. The following dialogue illustrates the nature of the problem:

The situation, we've got some friends that have volunteered to be baby sitters and they're actually asking about being foster carers. They've been waiting that long now they've gone. It's not worth the aggravation.

So see then you've lost a hot lead there of potential foster carers.

Well, the initial phone call to getting a visit, the social worker to come out was quite quick we all said. And then after that there's a big . . .

A huge void with no communication at all.

If you do a newsletter it would give them a sense of inclusion anyway, if you're going through the assessment.

Yes it would.

Yes, you've become a member of the team, haven't you?

It's that basic form of communication.

Key messages:

- **SSD needs to support and value carers; they will then promote foster caring to friends, babysitters etc.**
- **Much better basic communication and dialogue between the Department and prospective foster carers e.g. monthly newsletter;**
- **A schedule is needed to detail what (i.e. initial visit, course, home study, panel) was likely to happen in order to anticipate likely timescales to approval;**
- **Promotion of inclusion for carers going through the approval process in order to feel a member of the Team;**

- **Courses need to be area-wide but centrally co-ordinated with dates and venues a year ahead so carers can select 1st, 2nd, and 3rd preferences.**

5.2.2.2 How could we improve the home study process?

Foster carers generally appreciated the opportunity to be honest about their lives, but some felt that the questioning could have been more penetrating. Questioning about applicants' sex lives was discussed with carers appreciating the reasons they were being asked certain questions:

Yeah no they really did go into my [sex life], not in a sort of graphic way but they do go into it and they ask you questions if it's normal. And I also asked the questions about 'Why are you asking me these questions?' And I learnt a lot on why they asked them, they have to ask them.

You know fostering is the honey pot of every paedophile, they must be knocking on your door picking that phone up and they still will.

Another person praised "the inoffensive way", the "most offensive questions" were asked by the FPW, who slowly "warmed up" applicants:

And he would go into this sideways on if you like, but he got the same answer in the end you know. "What do you think of pornography, what do you think of these page three women?" He'd lead you in there, then you was answering ten minutes later you was on paedophilia, cold, hard you know facts, what your views were. He didn't ask it directly.

Another carer felt that he was not given "the third degree":

It snowed . . . and the social worker didn't come, and she come a couple of weeks later and then I was up half the night, what questions they going to ask me and all that. And I was like, and then we got into it, it was all right. They didn't ask any really, really in-depth questions.

On the question of racism, one person strongly felt that questioning in this area could have been more sensitive rather than asking a direct question like "Are you a racist?" at the beginning of the discussion. A more explorative approach was called for, perhaps asking about their networks and if carers had friends from black and ethnic minority groups.

Carers valued the opportunity to receive drafts of Form Fs in advance in order to suggest edits: this practice provided an opportunity to include parts of a carer's life that might be missing e.g. the period from 18 to starting a family, or to correct the use of adjectives used inappropriately e.g. "stubborn". One person described a process where the FPW regularly reported back what she was going to write so the Form F was dynamically produced and therefore its content did not come as a surprise.

Key messages:

- **The importance of learning from best practice when questioning people on sensitive issues such as their sexuality and values;**
- **Carers value thorough but sensitive questioning in the Home Study and the opportunity to see and comment on draft Form Fs in advance;**
- **Important to stress that honesty/truthfulness is all-important in answering questions**

5.2.2.3 How could we better prepare your children for fostering?

When assessing foster carers, it was felt important to value carers' children as individuals; the need to prepare child-friendly 'warming up' questions was highlighted:

Well it was a bit difficult, the first question they asked was "What do you think of fostering?" and that was the first question the FPW asked my children really. Didn't really say, "Oh what's your favourite colour?" . . . actually now they really look forward to her coming but it was just a bit unusual I thought.

Another point was made about foster carers' own children needing to be 'on board' with timescales especially when it involved sharing a room. One foster parent felt that his child had been let down because the looked after child did not move on within the anticipated timescale.

Particular attention needs to be paid to carers' children's feelings when looked after children move on, especially if this happens suddenly. Given that some children may stay a long time, quite understandably carers' children become attached to them; they need to be prepared for the move and be reassured e.g. through visits so that they see for themselves that the child will be fine in his/her new home and has settled in.

Key messages:

- **Treat carers' children as individuals and use age-appropriate tools to find out their views on fostering;**
- **Be careful about timescales slipping and the implications for carers children e.g. when a child has agreed to share her/his bedroom on a time-limited basis;**
- **Pay particular attention to moves and helping carers' children cope with their attachment to the looked after child**

5.2.2.4 What is needed to retain carers?

In the month or so prior to Panel, carers would like to receive the Foster Carers' handbook or even just the introductory material: when they're approved a child is normally placed quite quickly and then there isn't time to read.

The financial implications of being a foster carer were discussed at some length, and the fact that there was no pension plan, no security, and they

need to be home based. Essentially it was felt that social services needed to increase the money paid to carers. If this is not done there is a distinct possibility that carers will move to Independent Fostering Agencies. Carers felt it would be helpful to have the financial considerations discussed in a more 'up front' way during the preparation course and again during the home study.

Speeding up Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for babysitters was felt to be essential so that carers could have much-needed respite and evenings out together from time-to-time.

In terms of retention, the financial issues and the general disorganisation of social services and other lead agencies were seen as potentially extremely off-putting.

One participant described it as "a shock" how "disorganised" social services were:

I think it's absolutely appalling and I think that's down to communication. Whether it be FPWs, social services, core groups and psychiatric whatever, I think the whole system and you let down the children, not me, you let down the children.

I think there should be more support for your first placement. I mean . . . our first placement was a big farce.

Ours too.

And you know no social worker visits, no nothing. And because it's your first one you haven't got time to digest that information and what should be happening when you're lost. And I got walked over really.

But when it's your first everybody should really be spoon-feeding. And the whole thing from start to finish was a farce and every review . . . said this has all been done wrong.

I'm sure all of us feel like we're fighting the system for the benefit of the child.

We've had all these things [Quality Protects, Choice Protects, Every Child Matters] but social services . . . if it was run as a business it would've been broke, it could not survive as an independent business because it doesn't deal with the issues, it goes round them. And there are people trying to do their job and they're not given the funds and the resources . . . to do it. And it all comes back to whittling down the funding from the top. It's not just about what's best for foster parents, it's what's best to recruit and retain social workers, good quality social workers that drift off.

Key messages:

- **The children are let down by a poorly co-ordinated department;**

- **Financial considerations of becoming a foster carer need to be addressed by the SSD, in particular, pension plans, and they need to be given more prominence during the Preparation Course and the Home Study;**
- **CRB checks need to be speeded up, especially for babysitters;**
- **Receiving the Foster Carers' Handbook in the month prior to approval would be useful;**
- **Much more support is needed for the first placement;**
- **Social services need to value staff and carers so that they don't move elsewhere.**

5.3 Feedback from the Focus Group with Adopters

5.3.1 Introduction and Content

Apologies were received from several adopters who were unable to make it on the night. The Group was attended by four people, which consisted of an adoptive couple and representatives from two other couples. There were two men and two women. All were White European and none had special needs. The group reflected couples at different stages in the adoption process. One person already had a child placed with him and his partner, another two had been approached with a possible link and the third was awaiting a link. The small sample represented both the east and west of the authority.

In general terms, the issues raised by the adopters were almost the same as we had intended to raise with them.

5.3.2 Issues Discussed and Key Messages

5.3.2.1 How well did you feel the course itself and course material prepared you for the process of adoption?

Overall adopters felt that the course itself was intense but very good. There were very few criticisms of it: the material on abuse gave a good insight into the difficulties children may have, and reminded them they might not get "the perfect child".

However this information needed to be carefully conveyed in such a way that children were not objectified, as the following quotes from a group dialogue demonstrate:

It's just about the way the children . . . are discussed.

Yes. As if they're cars or they're objects. I mean social workers . . . can't get emotionally tied to children because it would destroy them . . .

It's like a second hand car really. You know "If this child isn't the one for you, you can say no and we won't hold it against you."

Yes it was very, it was a bit of a shock really . . . how the children were almost described really. I mean foster carers were absolutely brilliant, but it's as if they weren't personalities. But I suppose they're not, I suppose they're not to the social workers, they can't be.

When we think of children, we think of little children you know not objects. It's possibly like being a doctor or surgeon.

Key messages:

- **Generally a high level of satisfaction with the course;**
- **Children need to be portrayed as individuals with real personalities;**
- **Child vignettes based on a few children's characteristics would be helpful to bring across the real sense of children who were being placed for adoption.**

5.3.2.2 How did you feel about the way in which your Home Study was carried out?

There was a general satisfaction regarding the Home Study and how it was conducted. If anything it could be longer and more thorough; adopters appreciated the need for it to be in depth: "I think you got it somewhere near about right. I wouldn't be insulted if it went a lot more in-depth because you've got to get the home studies right, you've got to be happy with us as parents."

Key message:

- **Adopters value an in-depth Home Study**

5.3.2.3 Were there any areas of your life that were not covered by the BAAF assessment format that you feel should have been shared?

Adopters did not feel it was intrusive. Some said they enjoyed the assessment: it taught them about themselves and one participant felt it helped him and his partner become better parents.

Key message:

- **A good assessment has the potential to be therapeutic and help adopters become better parents.**

5.3.2.4 How well do you think the matching considerations section worked out?

Adopters appreciated that the Local Authority looks for the right parents for the right child; and it made them think about what kinds of behaviours they could deal with. They realised that they needed to be open and honest about their limitations, and acknowledged that deep down they would prefer a 'normal' child. They worried about how their preferences might be perceived by the FPW if they were too "picky" wanting one "that's got blonde hair and blue eyes and two foot six and can speak Japanese or something!"

Key message:

- **FPWs need to be aware of how adopters might feel their preferences are being perceived so that a full and honest discussion can take place.**

5.3.2.5 What Post Approval Training and Support would be helpful before a suitable match is made?

Adopters felt that during Home Study stage they have a lot of contact and support from FPWs, and then post approval there is a gap and they do not

hear anything. In effect their lives are put on hold as they wait for a placement:

The gap between being approved and then the placement, you read in the press and on the television there's all these children to be adopted, and when you've been approved all of a sudden where are these children?

It seems like a god-awful long time.

They [family and friends] must've been thinking that we were lying, that we weren't approved at all because there was no child in sight, you know and you have all sorts of doubts rushing through your mind.

You put your life on hold, don't you?

You do, pause, that's what I call it, pause button.

Shall I book a holiday or not?

We won't move house, we won't do this, we won't do that [laughs]

In order to cope with the "pause button" period of their lives, group members would value discussing options in terms of how their FPW could update them from time to time by phone, e mail, text message or newsletter. It would be important to establish the preferred means of staying in touch during the Home Study.

Finally, as a means of preparing themselves and staying in touch, group members liked the idea of a forum to look at specific issues with a practical focus e.g. coping with temper tantrums. They also said that they would feel comfortable using the new post Adoption service.

Key messages:

- **Adopters need updating and better communication with the SSD in the period post approval when anxieties can run high and their lives are on hold.**
- **FPWs should keep in touch by an agreed medium e.g. letter, phone email or mobile text, as well as Newsletter post approval and prior to any link.**
- **Other supports such as a forum to look at specific issues such as behaviour problems could be offered.**

5.3.2.6 What would encourage you to return for another link?

Some group members stated they were not asked if they would like to be considered for another placement. This should be explained during the assessment process. Perhaps more importantly, their desire for a sibling for their child might be construed negatively by their FPW:

Is it, having got one child, now is it greedy to ask for another one, does that make us seem ungrateful? It isn't explained the next step really. I mean if we decided we wanted one . . .

Do we need to go through the preparation course again? I've got no idea. You know we've not had that explained to us.

So if it was discussed at an earlier stage then you'd know that and you'd know it would be alright to ask and you'd know it would be alright to talk about but you're not being ungrateful, do you know what I mean?

But group members were unanimous in wanting a sibling for their child: they came from sibling groups and felt this would promote sharing and offer more security to the adopted child:

Because you go through life when you have problems and you don't want to tell your parents about it . . . because you're only going to worry them. But you need your sister or a brother you can talk to and tell them about it. So I think it is . . . good to have a brother or a sister, or more if you can really.

Key messages:

- **FPWs need to take on board the feelings of prospective adopters and how the desire for a sibling for their child/ children might be perceived;**
- **SSD needs to enquire about the potential placements that could be available with adopters who already have a child or children placed with them.**

5.3.2.7 Other issues raised by the group

Group members felt that the legal process was too long, but appreciated that the power to speed this up generally fell outside the social worker's remit.

They also felt that the Panel process took too long, both in terms of waiting for a Panel date for approval and then for a link. They suggested that Panel meet on a more regular basis.

Some felt they would have liked to attend Panel; others felt it was a “*foregone conclusion*” and therefore would not have felt threatened. Applicants would see who sat on Panel, but expressed concern that if they were not approved how would applicants feel sat there in front of Panel members.

Key message:

- **Panel to meet on a more regular basis to speed up approval and links.**

6 Findings from the Inquiry Group

6.1 Group Membership and Process

The Inquiry Group met for a total of eight half-day mornings during the period November 2003 to June 2004. Originally the Group comprised twelve FPWs from across the authority, but three people left in this period due to sickness, workload and change of role. Attendance in the group has varied between eleven at the first meeting and six, with average attendance being around seven or eight. During the first meeting of the group particular attention was paid to group process with the formation of ground rules; sharing views on why participants had opted to join the group; and what was most delightful and challenging about the work.

Practical issues such as:

- 'Buddying' arrangements to cover absence;
- Informed consent;
- The role of the Advisory Group and election of a representative;
- Arrangements for sharing the resource file of papers from the literature search.

were also discussed. The pending inspections affected members of the group directly and indirectly; it was therefore agreed to 'ring fence' discussion on organisational climate to allow space for more discussion on practice.

The normal pattern for each group session included:

- Introductions, which focused on the organisational climate during the run-up to the inspections in order to save time;
- Practical issues such as gaining consent from prospective and approved carers and borrowing resources;
- Agreeing co-facilitators for the Focus groups with foster carers and adopters or considering the findings;
- Formal input from one or two members e.g. on the Assessment Framework or after trying out one of the tools in an assessment;
- Action to be taken between one session and the next i.e. who would do what or try what tool and report back;
- Evaluation as verbal or brief written feedback.

6.2 Themes, Outcomes and Recommendations

6.2.1 Child-centred practice

A theme that has run throughout the Inquiry group was how to improve the matching process so that it came together around the child, and facilitated a successful placement. A clear joy was articulated by group members in "getting it right, the right children with the right families." It was felt that improvements needed to be made in the way link reports were put together:

the Children Looked After worker frequently did not know the child as well as the Family Support worker, and yet good up-to-date information about the child was seen as central to the child having his/her needs met by the placement:

The LAC [looked after children] workers sometimes get the case at the point it's almost like in the hand and out of the hand . . . they don't know the flavour of the child, they haven't had time to build up the relationship with the foster carer so they . . . have a sense of the child . . . what is vital is about the family support worker because they have the wealth of knowledge in their head . . . and you know a lot of them are willing to actually meet with adopters, but sometimes aren't asked.

The consequences of not having good, current information about the child could cause a placement to break down with potentially severe consequences for the child: "If we haven't got the quality of information about the child, potentially we're leading ourselves to disruptions."

The Group felt that more time, attention and practical support was needed during the matching process with adopters going with the FPW and child's social worker to the foster carers' house first and then vice versa:

In that discussion with the carers I record very carefully everything that the carer shares with those adopters about that child's routine and needs . . . if it's been left for a bit of free-for-all we've had adopters saying, "Oh, the carers didn't tell me that."

During the last three meetings of the Group, our attention was focused on when and how to move babies. This discussion was triggered by a placement breakdown, which had a devastating effect on a very experienced worker:

. . . For the first time I've had this breakdown of the introduction of an eight month old baby with a childless couple. And I'm just absolutely gob-smacked. I couldn't have foreseen this coming . . . anyway . . . which way . . . I couldn't believe it could happen.

Group members shared their own experiences of moving babies: when the best time might be to move a baby or toddler; how introductions were managed (e.g. use of overnight stays) and over what time period; should babies go to a minder or nursery on a regular basis to help form different attachments?

During the course of the Inquiry group members:

- ✓ Contributed to guidance being prepared by the Permanence Planning Group (Adoption and Permanence Taskforce 2004), and to the development of the new style, improved Link Report and Baby Portrait form;
- ✓ Constructed three child vignettes, based on merged data on actual children's needs, behaviour and personalities. These were designed to provoke discussion of carers' knowledge of child development and their subconscious expectations of children during the assessment

process. The views of adopters about not objectifying children were also taken on board (see **5.3.2.1**).

Recommendations for further action:

- The development of a structured child-focused, needs-led feedback form for Practice Managers and Service Managers to feedback their comments when they read the documentation;
- More training needed on the placement needs of babies, research and best practice, in particular, when and how to move babies to promote secure attachment;
- The availability of electronic files of carers for children to have access to, which would include up-to-date information on carers' families, pets, houses and interests; and could be downloaded from an authority wide database as required.

6.2.2 Home Study: Use of tools

6.2.2.1 Assessment Framework

In the early stages of the group, members who had been trained in the Assessment Framework (DoH 2000, DoH *et al.* 2000) and had used it in previous family support positions, offered to lead a session for other members. A comprehensive set of handouts was provided. The group looked particularly at the domain of parenting capacity:

When we do the Form F we look at people's personal profiles, we look at things like them growing up in families, so that can come under emotional warmth. Guidance and boundaries, that's their parenting and what they've brought to, or they think they will be able to bring to the job of parenting another child.

Those less familiar with the Assessment Framework were encouraged to read some of the texts on it within the resources box, for example, *The Child's World* (Horwath, 2001). Others experimented with the Parenting Daily Hassles questionnaire (Department of Health, Cox and Bentovim, 2000) with foster carers who have had their own children: "*That's been quite interesting to reflect on how it was when her children were young . . . and how she feels it would be now, x number of years on, when she's not used to that age group.*" The questionnaire was also used hypothetically with adopters "*to highlight to non-parenting couples, things that might be glitches.*"

In March all members of the Group received a copy of Appendix A 'Practice guidance for assessing the suitability of prospective adopters' from the *Draft Adoption Regulations and Guidance for Consultation. Adoption and Children Act 2002* (DfES, 2003). This appendix offers a very helpful guide to how the various dimensions within the Parenting Capacity and Family and Environmental Factors domains from the Assessment Framework can be used within an adoption assessment.

Two group members who had little previous experience of the Assessment Framework undertook to experiment with Appendix A and some of the tools

provided alongside the Framework. Unfortunately due to absence through sickness only one member was able to report back. This experienced FPW felt that adapting the dimensions of parenting capacity and family and environmental factors was potentially useful, but there was still a problem around assessing how prospective adopters who were childless might meet a child's developmental needs: as such it was felt to be hypothetical. In this regard the vignettes, developed by the group, could be used to provoke a more reality-based discussion, but this still fell a long way short of observing parenting capacity with a child in situ. The importance of checking out adults' experience of and attitudes towards play in general, and playing games (e.g. learning to take turns and being co-operative) was felt to be important to test their ability to offer stimulation and set appropriate boundaries for any children who might be placed with them.

One member of the group, who had used the Adult Wellbeing Scale, the Recent Life Events Questionnaire and the Home Conditions Scale, was particularly critical of the Home Conditions Scale:

. . . if I were faced with the kitchen floor soiled, covered in bits, crumbs, floor covering in the other room soiled . . . general decoration poor, kitchen sink, draining board, work surfaces not washed, I don't think I need an inventory to actually think, we've got a problem here, because we're looking at somebody who's fostering or adopting.

The group had a lively discussion about the expectations they placed on prospective carers and whether by setting the standards too high they could be regarded as excluding some people. These prospective carers might be warm, caring people with potential, but needed clear feedback on improving conditions in the home, which might then be subsequently monitored for clear signs of improvement. In the end a brainstorming exercise was advocated over the next couple of months to discuss and agree expectations around the home conditions of prospective carers. This would draw on existing material such as the Home Conditions Scale, the National Minimum Standards, and the existing Health and Safety form, which is used in the early stages of assessment.

The Adult Wellbeing Scale was similarly felt to be of limited use: the trigger statements (e.g. I lose my temper and shout and snap at others; I feel I might lose control and hit or hurt someone) were felt to be rather extreme, transparent and naïve such that, "*. . . if I'm coming forward to foster or adopt . . . even if I had some of those feelings I wouldn't answer Yes, definitely . . .*" Greater subtlety was called for.

Finally, those who were less familiar with the Assessment Framework felt they would benefit from further training with family support staff who had substantial experience of using the framework to assess birth families. They felt that this practical focus could help them make better adjustments to the Framework for use in family placement assessment.

Recommendations for further action:

- A Brainstorming exercise to take place, involving group members meeting on a one-off basis this autumn, to develop a suitable Home Conditions Scale for assessing prospective carers.
- A practice-sharing event to be organised for FPWs, on how experienced Family Support staff assess birth families using the Assessment Framework, to promote their use of the Framework when assessing foster carers and adopters. This could be included as part of the good practice forum.

6.2.2.2 Competence-based assessment

Many members struggled with the way the current competency-based forms were being used. Some felt that they were not being used in a competency based way; others felt that they discriminated against less literate and working class applicants who struggle to evidence the competencies, but who nevertheless had the capacity to provide a loving home. One member said "*I'm more interested in their resilience and their working together as a couple and their openness and their support networks and strategies, rather than someone going away and coming back each session providing me with this tick box list of what they've done.*" Another reinforced the human element in a slightly tongue-in-cheek way:

You can pick up the vibes, you know who's going to sort of root for the child . . . I can think of some foster carers we've got now who are passionate about children, who will fight tooth and nail, they can be a pain in the you know [laughs] from our perspective, but . . . they are there for the child. And it's that missing element . . . that is not going to come through in a questionnaire.

It was recognised during the early stages of the group that additional tools needed to supplement this approach, in particular the Assessment Framework and other tools to assess adult attachment. The group therefore did not experiment further with this approach.

6.2.2.3 Assessing Adult Attachment

The group agreed that attachment theory was central to their work and were keen to try out new ways of assessing attachment. Information on the adult attachment interview (AAI) (George, Kaplan and Main, 1985) and on useful texts (Howe *et al.* 1999) was circulated amongst group members. One member of the group had received training on the AAI; and she reported back on how she had used the five memories exercise with a couple: each person was asked to give five adjectives to describe their relationship with each parent. The male applicant struggled with this task and the FPW was given vague words to describe his mother; this was in sharp contrast to the female applicant's memory of her childhood relationships with her parents. The FPW decided to conclude the AAI interview at that point and take it up again on the next visit. On this visit she moved onto other areas: significant previous relationships and present relationship. She then moved back into the AAI on a subsequent visit starting with, "*How has childhood influenced the kind of*

person you are today?" and then asked, "Why do you think your parents behaved the way that they did?" This generated valuable information from the female applicant, where she reflected on her parents' marriage and family relationships. The male applicant became much more engaged and, just as the FPW was leaving, "dropped in" that his mother had had a breakdown, which had not been mentioned during the individual history gathering. The FPW returned two days later to probe more deeply. The information she gained offered an insight into family relationships around the time he was eleven years old, and generated different hypotheses to explain the relationship between him and his mother, her breakdown, his behaviour at the time and if it was a problem now. Her view was that the issue was now irrelevant, but had the couple shared this information and should she include the information in the report? If so, how might it be viewed by others reading it? Could it be wrongly construed and therefore potentially stigmatising?

The FPW used her supervision sessions to address these questions. The detail of the male applicant's early history was not included in the final report as it was not felt to be of relevance now; in addition the FPW was able to confirm that his partner was well aware of his early and subsequent history. She confirmed that she had known about this beforehand.

The FPW thought that the AAI had helped her understand the male applicant's avoidant attachment; she found that sometimes it was more difficult to access the emotional, reflective side of men, who frequently remembered activities with a parent such as fishing, but not a lot else.

The emotional effect on the worker of using the AAI in this interview to engage with applicants' childhood experiences highlights the support for workers doing this kind of work, which is often seen by others as a 'soft option':

I said to my husband I just feel like I've been eaten alive, I need some space, so just gave myself space doing the chores and other things I needed to do. And just space out, like I sat in the car park here, I arrived early to at least dictate half of that visit . . . But that's not recognised in our work that we need space after a home visit and space to offload.

Following this feedback others have been encouraged to experiment with this tool. One FPW used it very effectively with another male applicant to find out about his relationship with his mother:

I tried the five adjectives and it was quite interesting because the male partner had a very sort of closed off view of his mother because of his experiences as a child. She was quite distant and . . . they lived on a sheep station . . . [on another continent] and they moved back to England. But his mother was originally from [the other continent] and I think by the sounds of it was culturally isolated. She'd gone from like a . . . rural, in the middle of nowhere space to . . . a country that . . . operates differently. And she had mental health problems and she was so, therefore . . . distanced and flat in her emotion towards the children . . . His parents . . . divorced and the children chose to go and live with their father until the time they went to boarding school . . . Unfortunately his

mother died last year and . . . he was disappointed in his relationship with his mother, he, you know it was more he went to see her out of a duty and not out of a love or a compassion for her as she got older and . . . more ill. And it opened all of that up, those five adjectives, it was just really useful.

But the FPW urged caution in where to place the tool in the interview:

. . . I didn't do it as a first off, I did their individual history gathering, then I did that. So I'd actually got lots of information about childhood, mum, dad, granny, granddad, all the other stuff you gather and then I did the questions. And that actually gave me a mental map of where they were to start with and it gave them sufficient time to be in the frame of mind to be thinking on that area. So although the questions themselves came as a bit of "Oh," because they need to be, it's supposed to be a surprise to the unconscious, the questions. They were actually mentally in that space in time and thinking about their past, their childhoods, their family experiences . . .

Testing for the resilience of applicants was an important theme that came up in the group from time to time and could be explored further after the AAI questions or through the "Mr and Mrs interview". This way of interviewing was seen on a recent sponsored visit to a Scandinavian country; and was conducted by two workers who interview each applicant at the same time, but in different rooms.

One worker advocated an unstructured part of the home study: "*I think it's quite nice to let them muddle along because a lot of them don't like silence.*" Another supported applicants in drawing their responses on the family form rather than writing them: "*What I got in those pictures was such a strong sense of grounded people . . . this picture actually said so much to me about that person, it was wonderful.*"

Overall, group members valued the Adult Attachment Interview Five Memories exercise, but it was recognised that it could potentially raise significant personal issues for some applicants. It was felt that further training would be useful in this tool.

One of the Inspectors had recommended Bifulco's attachment style interview (Bifulco 2002) as a safer alternative, and gave the group some training materials on this to consider. Unfortunately, the information did not provide quite enough detail to use the attachment style interview with any confidence. However, group members were very keen to undertake proper training in this tool either through Royal Holloway College, where Antonia Bifulco works, and/or Parents for Children.

Recommendation for further action:

- Training on the Adult Attachment Interview and the Attachment Style Interview to be arranged.

6.2.2.4 Questioning applicants about their attitudes towards race and culture

During April and May the findings from the two Focus groups with Carers were considered by the Inquiry Group. One person in the Foster Carers' group felt strongly that questioning to probe applicants' racial attitudes could have been much more sensitively handled: a softer, more explorative approach was called for, perhaps starting with an exploration of applicants' friends and networks within black and minority ethnic groups (see **5.2.2.2**).

Group members acknowledged that the ethnicity of most of the indigenous population of the authority raised a consultation and training need to ensure that prospective carers promoted positive racial and cultural attitudes for all children placed with them. The Researcher agreed to contact the Manager of a Family Placement service in a multi-cultural unitary authority to see how they assessed carers' racial and cultural attitudes. This authority bases its expectations on its policy statement and integrates these expectations throughout the whole assessment process. The Manager would be willing to be consulted and share good practice; group members welcomed this offer.

Recommendation for further action:

- Managers and FPWs to consult with neighbouring authorities on how best to incorporate policy statement expectations and appropriate questions re race and culture into various stages of the assessment process. Consultation event to be arranged.

6.2.2.5 Questioning applicants about their sexual relationships and attitudes

Once again the catalyst for discussion on this topic initially came from the Foster Carers' Focus group (see **5.2.2.2**). Both foster carers and adopters valued thorough but sensitive questioning in the Home Study. One carer praised the "inoffensive way" the "most offensive questions" were asked by one of FPW who slowly "warmed up" applicants by going in "sideways on". Clearly there is an art to asking the right questions in a sensitive manner and in the most appropriate order on this important topic. During the latter stages of the Inquiry group when trust was well established, members spoke very honestly on this topic: for example one worker talked about how she felt when sexual issues were raised on a preparation course: "*I could feel myself going really red, although I don't have a problem with it. I feel like I look embarrassed even though I'm not particularly, so I know I give that out.*"

Another person commented that the only time she had been asked by Panel about a prospective carer's sex life was when they were a wheelchair user, which was potentially discriminatory in her view. She felt that her response had perhaps been misconstrued by Panel as this being of no relevance, when, in fact, she felt the matter should be considered routinely by Panel.

The Group agreed to consider this topic a priority at the June meeting. One member, with the permission of her manager, had conducted some research on the Internet and found some useful references and materials. Unfortunately, as this was the last session there was no time to test these

materials in practice and report back, but they approached people's understanding of sexual relationships as adults (BBC Health; Gottman Institute Psychology Today) and as parents offering guidance to children (Parentline Plus 2003). Group members also spoke positively about using a locally produced toolkit to prevent teenage pregnancy and promote sexual health. It was felt that this could be very useful for current carers and could be adapted for the assessment process to test the attitudes of prospective carers.

Recommendation for further action:

- How best to (1) assess sexual relationships and attitudes of prospective carers and (2) support approved carers in promoting young people's sexual health needs to be taken forward by a small group of staff to increase FPWs' knowledge and confidence in this field.

6.2.2.6 Other Assessment issues in the Home Study

Probing people on their relationships and motivation could pose particular problems as one FPW revealed on a home visit to terminate an assessment:

"You think you've been assessing me all these months, don't you X", he said, " but I've been assessing you ". He said that to me. . . you know just that comment alone said such a lot about my assessment. And you know, it can be quite disabling though having an individual like that, particularly when they're in that home environment, on their territory.

Such assessments were felt to be particularly challenging by group members when the prospective carers were established and perhaps influential, senior figures in the community. Group members identified with this FPW's experience and felt that they needed training in how to manage conflict, perhaps even more so when the need to control and manipulate was not immediately obvious as in this case. Following a further discussion on this topic at the May group meeting, the Researcher circulated some papers on power relationships in residential child care, which she had written after a series of inquiries in the early 1990s (Jones 1993; Jones 1994; Jones 1995): there were some comparisons with the way the individuals concerned sought to control those who might challenge them.

Recommendation for further action:

- Training in assessing potentially manipulative carers and managing conflict.

6.2.3 Organisational Issues

6.2.3.1 Preparation courses

Several staff commented on working in family placement being like a "conveyor belt" with concerns about inappropriate applicants being invited to preparation courses prior to the checks being completed in a rush to push "numbers through the door". In some instances expectations had been raised inappropriately with some unfortunate consequences, such as a person with

mental health problems coming to a group. The view of the group was that this rushing through of applications had occurred over the past two or so years: previously a manager took responsibility for sifting people out. The group was unanimous in its view that the kindest thing to do was to counsel people out on the basis of unsatisfactory references, medicals and other serious issues coming to light. Moreover with a clear government policy directive to place more children in foster care and for adoption, the words "dangerous" and "a false economy" were used if the net was widened without due process taking place:

I think there's been a push, because they're so desperate for task-centred carers in particular, so even if checks aren't back, certainly in our team, we've invited people. And I think that's so dodgy because you don't know, you don't know.

It was felt that the co-ordination of preparation courses might best be done for the whole authority so that group numbers would be easier to arrange. This view was shared by the Foster Carers' Focus group, which thought that a centrally co-ordinated list of preparation courses with the different venues and dates, several months ahead would be helpful. They could then indicate a first, second and third choice on a reply slip (see **5.2.2.1**).

Recommendation for further action:

- The co-ordination of preparation courses to be arranged on a authority-wide basis, with several months notice being given to prospective carers so that they can select first, second and third choice venue and dates.

6.2.3.2 Contacting and supporting adopters post approval

As a result of the feedback from the Adopters' Focus group on the need for some form of contact post approval (see **5.3.2.5**) a member of the Inquiry group, who was also a member of the Permanency Group, ensured that this was incorporated in the new Permanency Planning guidance.

Grandparents were seen as a valuable source of potential support for some adopters and a request was made to the April Advisory Group for additional copies of *Related by Adoption: A handbook for grandparents and other relatives* (Argent et.al 2004) to be purchased.

6.2.3.3 Encouraging adopters to return for a subsequent link

As mentioned previously (see **5.3.2.6**) some adopters felt that their desire to increase their family after one successful placement might be construed by their FPW as them perhaps being considered "greedy" or "ungrateful".

When this finding was discussed in the Inquiry group, it generated considerable energy: if the Department could find a way of contacting people who had adopted previously, and who would like to adopt another child or more children then this could significantly increase the number of

placements available in the authority. The following extracted dialogue gives a flavour of the group discussion as FPWs began to see that a more proactive approach to recruitment might be called for:

Do we just wait for people to come forward, which we seem to do, don't we?

*We should be more aggressive in many ways or, you know, a bit more brash about it.
Yes.*

Or even more informative that there are older children that need adopters . . .

[We] could have a resource out there . . . that we aren't tapping.

The discussion then shifted quickly to the 'How?' of contacting previously approved adopters. Once again this was an animated discussion. Extracts are printed below to give a flavour of the exciting 'Aha moment!' when the Letterbox scheme was seized upon as the best way of contacting previously approved adopters:

It could be like in the next press release that does promote adoption, there could be another general piece that goes in it that we're also interested in people who've adopted previously who, maybe, need to think about: Would they like to do it again?

Or thinking about exchange of information, using that, because we'd be sending letters out, through the letterbox. Yes we'd be sending letters out to them.

Oh yes! What a smart [idea]!

We have a central letterbox where we exchange information between adopters and birth parents and it's done centrally.

And they send out, when it's time for an exchange of information, they send out a letter to the adopters to remind them. So they would actually have the central list of all those people.

. . . Who've done it donkey's years ago.

*Hang on though, because we're making loads and loads of work for ourselves here [laughs].
But it's not going to be all at once.*

But we'd need things in place, like policies like do they have to come on another training course . . . ?

If we did it via the letterbox then . . .

It would be gradual over the year.

The Letterbox scheme was felt to be the most effective way of reaching previously approved adopters who might like to return for another link.

Recommendation for further action:

- The establishment of a working party to develop policy and procedures to take forward the suggestion of using the Letterbox scheme to access previously approved adopters about returning for another link.

6.2.3.4 The effect of disrupted placements on staff

One topic about which the group was concerned was the effect of disruptions on them:

Could I just say about disruptions generally that the impact on you as a worker if you have them or if you have more than one quickly because . . . it's a time when you need . . . an awful lot of support because you do look to yourself, you do blame yourself, you do feel a lot of guilt and it's a very difficult position to be in, to support people. And actually you might be quite angry with them and upset with them. And if they haven't been honest with you or truthful with you that hurts as well.

There were several suggestions about what type of help and support would be beneficial:

I think it's the practical stuff . . . because it's like you may have this disruption which blows your head apart and your emotions and you have to deal with it. And your colleagues are what you need but what you don't get is the practical support, because what you need is a bit of space in your caseload

. . . We can be as loving, huggy, squeezey, caring as we like, sympathetic, listening but no one is taken off the foster supports, no one is moving any of the other work so X has got some space. I feel that's what I would want.

How I've coped with it is I've just withdrawn a bit, mentally I've withdrawn. I've actually spent less time in the office . . . I'm doing that extra bit at home so I'm just away from the pressure and the hassle. And I'm working slower there's no doubt about it, I've got people I should've contacted yonks ago and I haven't . . . So you actually have to, I think, take the time yourself, don't you?

Another person said they “crawled into a corner”. The group then discussed the counselling service provided through ‘Relate’ and one person had used this with good effect to discuss a family issue.

However group members felt that they would like a regular booked session every couple of months with an independent person to discuss the emotional impact of the work on them: testing carers' motivation through the use of tools like the AAI could potentially raise personal issues for the FPWs, which needed to be discussed. Supervision was not considered the right place to discuss the emotional impact of the work.

Recommendation for further action:

- Consideration be given to the request for additional support to discuss the emotional impact of the work e.g. the effect of disrupted placements.

6.2.3.5 General staff support issues

Group members did not feel generally valued by the organisation at the beginning of the study as the following dialogue from the December group meeting illustrates:

I just think social services in general, not just [here], are rubbish at supporting their staff.

They are, but how many times do we say this?

You know that's been said year after year and nobody does anything about it.

But I look around and I see a lot of sadness in a lot of people's faces that's working in this Department and that's worked in the Department for many years. And that bothers me. I think . . . crikey they're not getting much out of the job, they give, give, give, give, they're at saturation point.

I think I'm one of those.

Plodding along. Do you know what I mean by sadness?

Mm I can identify with that, I identify with all of that.

And yet they are required to support and value the important work being done by carers (see also **5.2.2.1** and **5.2.2.4** for Foster Carers' views on recruitment and retention). FPWs also wanted quality work to be valued and shared, with a forum to discuss and celebrate it. These issues, the current conveyor belt feel to assessment, the impact of disruptions on staff and training in conflict management have been fed back to the Advisory Group for consideration.

It is important to note that there was a marked shift in the group's mood in later meetings, when anxiety about the inspections had dissipated and the focus was exclusively on practice. Organisational issues were not raised during this period, except some members expressing concern that the Department take on board the findings from the study.

Recommendation for further action:

- The creation of a forum to celebrate good practice and value practitioners' contributions.

7 Project Evaluation

7.1 Methods of Evaluation and Interim Feedback

Ongoing evaluation took place either verbally at the end of a session or in the form of brief written feedback in response to questions. At the end of the final session group members were given a written evaluative questionnaire to take away and complete; they were also sent an electronic file of the questionnaire (Appendix Two). They were thus able to choose whether to complete the form online or in handwriting, using the postal service to return it.

Verbal feedback at the end of the January 2004 session was overwhelmingly positive with the majority finding the inquiry stimulating with new ideas to try out in their practice. At the end of March 2004 members were asked to respond briefly in writing to two questions:

- What, if any changes have you noticed in your practice so far?
- What would help you the most (in this Inquiry group) between now and June when the group ends?

Once again, interim feedback was positive with respondents reporting being more analytical and reflective, and using theory (especially attachment theory) more. In terms of the second question there were mixed responses, but several respondents cited time as the key factor e.g. for reading, further discussion and reflection.

7.2 Final Evaluation

There was a 100% response rate for the return of the evaluative questionnaire with several group members giving helpful and detailed feedback. Responses are summarised under the main headings:

7.2.1 Respondents' overall view of group facilitation and suggestions for improvement

Overall, respondents considered that the group had been well or very well facilitated with the sessions being led in a *'relaxed but clearly defined manner with a consistent agenda and time keeping that was kept to'*.

7.2.1.1 Facilitation of group

In terms of suggestions for improvement, two respondents commented that some of the quieter members of the group might have been encouraged to contribute more thus promoting a greater all-round contribution from all group members. One person felt the group was too large to begin with, but another was concerned that some people, who had furthest to travel, dropped out. Another commented on the poor representation from her area.

7.2.1.2 Reflections on practice

One respondent considered that 'As the composition of the group was mainly from one team, the varying practice was not as obvious or discussed as broadly as it might have been'. All other respondents indicated considerable benefits from being a member of the group. Typical responses included:

The Group enabled me to focus on why we did things in a certain way and look at other ways of obtaining the information required in order to make a better assessment and how information obtained is analysed and used subsequently. Although I had reflected previously on how the Framework for assessment could be used within our assessments, I found the discussion within group and the use of other assessment "tools" has enabled me to progress this further.

This was very useful, and I gained a lot of insight into the practice of others, and my own. I gained a lot of extra ideas, which I have started using in my assessments.

The process also gave real opportunity to reflect on previous work and enabled me to consider using different tools to obtain a more in depth analysis of future prospective carers.

Thought this was an excellent process in all sessions . . .

7.2.1.3 Incorporation of the views of foster carers and adopters

Overall respondents were unanimous in the value they placed on the carers' feedback. One respondent would have liked the opportunity to meet some of the carers face to face; another suggested that a carer might have been a permanent member of the group. Two respondents would have liked wider representation, perhaps involving more meetings in other parts of the Authority. Other responses included:

Having participated in the Adopters' focus group, I was very interested in the feedback from those who attended and feel that further groups on the same lines would assist us, as workers, to evaluate how we work with those wishing to adopt or foster and to improve practice further.

This was . . . fascinating feedback. It was useful to give them a forum, which has not really been done before. I have already started to incorporate their comments into my practice.

The views of foster carers and adopter's need to be taken on board and ways of doing this needs to be found . . . I think it was reassuring that workers and carers don't have completely opposite views of the process.

7.2.1.4 Any other factors

Various suggestions were made under this heading, for example, a request for the group to meet informally to discuss the further application of the Assessment Framework; and a recommendation to interview children of carers as part of the study.

7.2.2 Overall use of literature search journal papers, book chapters, and books

Three respondents reported 'little use', four respondents 'some use' and two respondents 'a lot of use'. One team used the literature search journal folder as an ongoing resource and is now on a second folder.

Other comments on usage included: lack of time, the late issue of books, needing to give a lot of personal time, and geographical distance. More time was given as the main factor in making more use of this resource.

Recommended texts:

Group members recommended a wide range of references from the original list; a majority of the following references were mentioned by more than one respondent:

- British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (1999) *Making Good Assessments: a practical resource guide*, London: BAAF
- Browne, D., and Moloney, A. (2002) 'Contact Irregular: a qualitative analysis of the impact of visiting patterns of natural parents on foster placements' *Child and Family Social Work*, 7, 35-45.
- Daniel, B., Wassall S., and Gilligan R. (1999) *Child Development for Child Care and Protection Workers*, London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Department of Health. (2000) *Assessing Children in Need and their Families. Practice Guidance*. The Stationery Office: London.
- Department of Health, Department of Education and Employment, Home Office. 2000. *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*. The Stationery Office: London.
- Department for Education and Skills. (2003) *Draft Adoption Regulations and Guidance for Consultation. Adoption and Children Act 2002*. DfES: Nottingham, esp. Appendix A.
- Horwath J. (Ed.) (2001) *The Child's World: Assessing Children in Need*. Jessica Kingsley: London.
- Howe, D. (1995) *Attachment Theory for Social Work Practice*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press
- Schofield, G. (2001) 'Resilience and family placement: a lifespan perspective. *Adoption and Fostering* Volume 25 Number 3, 7-19

Recommendation for further action:

- The Department to consider the wider purchase of these recommended texts as a geographically based team resource.

7.2.3 Self reported improvements in assessment practice and use of tools

One respondent did not complete this section. I have included the responses from the other eight respondents in full:

I have been more reflective and aware of my own subjectivity; confirmed the need for evidence based assessments but also highlighted the difficulties this can bring.

To re-frame the questions; developing a hypothesis; more stimulating, thought provoking assessments; question issues more deeply – analysis with evidence

Assessment Framework; evidential writing; evidencing; experimenting with different tools; sharing with colleagues – listening to different views

Adult attachment

Use of attachment interview

Better understanding of attachment theory

I feel that I am focusing more on the analysis rather than the descriptive report within assessment; a greater understanding and awareness of adult attachment interviews and how these can be used (with caution in interpretation) in our assessments.

*Looking at the patterns of attachments in a more analytical way
Considering the views of applicants waiting to be linked, and being assessed; not thinking of the form F as a treadmill to get to the end of, but the basis of an assessment which can be built on.*

Respondents reported trying out a wide range of materials: the Adult Attachment Interview; the Assessment Framework and associated questionnaires etc; the questionnaires on relationships/ sexuality; and the vignettes. The Adult Attachment Interview materials were felt to be generally useful, but further training needed to help analyse the information from carers. The tools from the Assessment Framework were not considered particularly useful and require adaptation.

7.2.4 Dissemination

Five members of the group indicated a willingness to be involved in dissemination. A sixth person subsequently expressed an interest as the staffing situation had improved in her area since the summer. Several suggestions were received for dissemination: local and national study days and meetings; managers' forum and feedback to staff; local events for foster carers and adopters; local press; and through e-mail locally and in *Community Care* nationally.

The dissemination strategy will need to be considered by the Department at the earliest opportunity.

7.2.5 Future professional development needs

Many of the needs cited are already contained in this report's recommendations. To summarise respondents would like: the time and space to reflect routinely on practice; and easy access to current research and thinking. Some mentioned more training in the various tools (e.g. Adult Attachment Interview and Styles, Assessment Framework, sexual health and relationships), and on child development and attachment theory.

7.2.6 Other feedback

Once again, the four respondents who completed this final optional section showed a clear appreciation of the group's contribution to their professional development. The view of one respondent sums up the overall flavour of responses throughout the questionnaire:

Not only did the research group bring together a large number of FPWs to look at and discuss methods and techniques used in the assessment process, it allowed us time to undertake further reading and research which we do not always have time to do. On the whole an enjoyable, thought provoking experience which is hopefully just the start of looking at practice issues.

To summarise, the project was well evaluated with respondents valuing the time away to reflect on practice; and reporting improved analysis and rigour in their assessments, especially in the use of attachment theory.

7.3 Review of the Project's Aims

The original project brief, stated at the beginning of this report, was to improve the quality of family placement assessments through:

- A literature search of key texts/ papers that would act as a developing resource throughout the project to improve the evidence base of practice;
- The methodology of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) and co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2001) to promote mutual support and group reflection on the formulation of hypotheses in family placement assessment;
- The participation of foster carers and adopters in the study through the use of co-facilitated focus groups to ascertain their views on the assessment process and to feed back the findings into the Inquiry group;
- The dissemination of findings to those not directly involved in the project at local and national level within agreed anonymity and confidentiality protocols.

The first aim was met, although due to time pressures some group members made only little or some use of the resources deriving from the literature search. With hindsight at least half a day per month study time should have

been built into the project to make reasonable use of this resource; one study day per month would have been ideal. The books were frustratingly slow in arriving, which hampered some members' access to them. However, it is encouraging that one team decided to update the resource as new materials are published and is now on a second folder.

The second aim was met and is evidenced in **6. Progress of Inquiry Group**, and in the previous section on project evaluation. The group functioned very well with some excellent contributions from several members.

The third aim has met through the two co-facilitated Focus groups with foster carers and adopters in March 2004. Findings from the Foster Carers' group were verbally fed into the Inquiry Group the following day; and the views of the Adopters were written up and circulated to group members the same month. These were carefully considered at the April Inquiry group meeting. Later in April the notes of the Foster Carer group were also typed up and circulated for consideration at the May Inquiry group.

All Focus group participants were written to thanking them for their time and enclosing the draft notes of the session for any edits. In the event no edits were received. Whilst a few of the focus group recommendations can be implemented by FPWs individually, most require greater scrutiny by the Department as a whole and corporate endorsement and action.

The fourth aim, the dissemination of this project, has already commenced with the DfES Professional Advisers on Fostering and Adoption receiving a copy of the Interim Report and coming in June to meet members of the group to discuss the project and their use of the Assessment Framework. A further dissemination event for children looked after and family placement staff occurred in October.

Finally to take forward the key messages and recommendations contained in this report, an implementation and wider dissemination strategy needs to be formally agreed and endorsed by the Senior Management Team (Children and Families).

8 Key Messages and Recommendations

8.1 Summary of Practice Issues

The following summary is intended to pull together the findings and key messages from the Inquiry Group and Focus groups. It should be noted that no particular priority has been given to any of the messages and recommendations; this will need to be determined by the Department.

It is encouraging that some of the messages contained in the Interim report of the Project have already been implemented or are in the process of being implemented. For example, in the spring some members of the group contributed to guidance being prepared by the Permanence Planning Group (Adoption and Permanence Taskforce 2004), and to the development of the new style, improved Link Report and Baby Portrait form; and dissemination of this project's findings is planned at an autumn event to launch the new guidance.

Three child vignettes, based on merged data on actual children's needs, behaviour and personalities, have also been developed. These have been designed to provoke discussion of carers' knowledge of child development and their subconscious expectations of children during the assessment process. The views of adopters about not objectifying children were also taken on board in the design of the vignettes (see **5.3.2.1**).

On an individual basis, some FPWs reported actively taking on board the views of carers in their current practice.

8.1.1 Child-centred practice:

Key messages:

- Both looked after and carers' children need to be seen and treated as individuals;
- Much better intra and inter-agency co-ordination to meet children's needs: the children are let down if this does not happen;
- In order to reduce the potential for disruptions, more time and attention is needed to the matching process from all the workers who know a child;
- Piloting the now completed new-style Link report and Baby Portrait form (see above);
- Pay particular attention to moves, especially sudden ones, and helping carers' children cope with their attachment to a looked after child by supporting visits by them to the child in his/her new home;
- More training needed on the placement needs of babies, research and best practice, in particular, when and how to move babies to promote secure attachment;

- The availability of electronic files of carers for children to have access to, which would include up-to-date information on carers' families, pets, houses and interests; and could be downloaded from an authority-wide database as required;
- Social workers need to be careful about timescales slipping and the implications for carers' children e.g. when a child has agreed to share her/his bedroom on a time-limited basis;
- A structured child-focused, needs-led feedback form for Practice Managers and Service Managers would be useful for feeding back comments when they read the documentation.

8.1.2 Best practice in preparation courses and home studies

Key messages:

- Inquiry group members urged caution in the "conveyor" belt approach to preparation courses: all the checks on applicants needed to be received before invitation to a course;
- Courses needed to be authority-wide but co-ordinated centrally with dates and venues arranged up to a year ahead so that carers could select 1st, 2nd and 3rd choices;
- Preparation courses were generally well thought of by foster carers and adopters;
- A monthly newsletter is needed for both foster carers and adopters to aide communication and promote inclusion;
- A schedule is needed to detail what (i.e. initial visit, course, home study, panel) was likely to happen in order to anticipate likely timescales to approval;
- On courses children need to be portrayed as individuals with real personalities. For example, vignettes based on a few children's characteristics would be helpful to bring across the real sense of children who were being placed for adoption (completed in June 2004).
- Foster carers and adopters value thorough questioning in the Home Study and the opportunity to see and comment on draft Form Fs in advance;
- A Brainstorming exercise to take place, involving group members meeting on a one-off basis this autumn, to develop a suitable Home Conditions Scale for assessing prospective carers.
- A practice-sharing event to be organised for FPWs, on how experienced Family Support staff assess birth families using the Assessment Framework, to promote their use of the Framework when assessing foster carers and adopters. This could be included as part of the good practice forum (see 8.1.5).
- Training on the Adult Attachment Interview and Attachment Style Interview to be arranged;
- The Department to consider the wider purchase of the shortlist of recommended texts, derived from the survey in the Project Evaluation (see 7.2.2), which could be as a geographically based team resource.
- FPWs to generate sensitive questioning techniques, especially on issues such as applicants' sexuality and values;

- Managers and FPWs to consult out of the authority on how best to incorporate policy statement expectations and appropriate questions re race and culture into various stages of the assessment process. Consultation event within the authority to be arranged.
- How best to (1) assess sexual relationships and attitudes of prospective carers and (2) support approved carers in promoting young people's sexual health needs to be taken forward by a small group of staff to increase FPWs' knowledge and confidence in this field.
- FPWs need to be aware of how adopters might feel their preferences are being perceived so that a full and honest discussion can take place;
- A good assessment has the potential to be therapeutic and help adopters become better parents
- FPWs need to stress that honesty/truthfulness is all-important in answering questions during the home study;
- Carers' children to be treated as individuals; use age-appropriate tools to find out their views on fostering;

8.1.3 Valuing and supporting Foster carers

Key messages:

- SSD needs to support and value carers; they will then promote foster caring to friends, babysitters etc, and will not move elsewhere;
- Much better basic communication and dialogue between the Department and prospective foster carers is needed e.g. schedule with timescales, newsletter etc. in order that feel included and a member of the Team right from the outset;
- Central co-ordination of preparation courses strongly recommended by both Inquiry group and Focus group members;
- Financial considerations of becoming a foster carer need to be addressed by the Department (in particular pension plans) and given more prominence during the Preparation Course and the Home Study;
- CRB checks need to be speeded up, especially for babysitters;
- Receiving the Foster Carers' Handbook in the month prior to approval would be useful;
- Much more support is needed for the first placement.

8.1.4 Valuing and supporting Adopters

Key messages:

- Adopters need updating and better communication with the SSD in the period post approval when anxieties can run high, as their lives seem on hold then.
- FPWs should keep in touch by an agreed medium e.g. letter, phone email or mobile text, as well as Newsletter post approval and prior to any link.
- Other supports such as a forum to look at specific issues e.g. behaviour problems could be offered.

- FPWs need to take on board the feelings of prospective adopters and how the desire for a sibling for their child/ children might be perceived as “*ungrateful*” when in fact they would very much like a second link;
- SSD needs to enquire about potential placements that could be available with adopters who are in the process of successfully adopting a child or who have already adopted one or more children;
- The establishment of a working party to develop policy and procedures to take forward the suggestion of using the Letterbox scheme to access previously approved adopters about returning for another link;
- Consider involving the wider family in the assessment process so that they can be a potential source of support (see, for example, Argent *et al.* 2004);
- Panel needs to meet on a more regular basis to speed up links.

8.1.5 Valuing and supporting staff

Key messages:

- Social services need to value staff so that they maintain motivation and curiosity and continue working for the Department;
- The emotional impact of the work on staff and of disruptions, in particular, need to be carefully considered by management: Inquiry group members expressed a need for planned, regular support that went beyond supervision;
- Training for FPWs in assessing potentially manipulative carers and managing conflict is required;
- A forum, which meets regularly, to disseminate and celebrate good practice should be set up.

8.2 Implementation of the Project's Recommendations

The Advisory group has operated at the interface between the Project and the Department. Thus far it has played a pivotal role in discussing and acknowledging the messages contained in this study at the interim stage. It is now timely for an Implementation group, involving senior management, to perhaps replace the Advisory Group, in order to review, prioritise and progress the recommendations contained in the report and agree a dissemination strategy. As part of the dissemination strategy it is recommended that those members of the Inquiry group who have expressed an interest in dissemination are given the opportunity to take the project out to those who have not been directly involved with it. This is commensurate with the methodology of the project, which promotes participation and ownership of findings at local level.

9 Executive Summary

This summary report provides a synopsis of the Family Placement Assessment Action Research Project.

9.1 What were the Project's aims?

The project was commissioned to improve the way in which Family Placement Workers (FPWs) undertook assessments of prospective foster carers and adopters. The study aimed to improve the quality of family placement assessments through:

- A literature search of key texts/ papers to improve the evidence base of practice;
- The methodology of action research to promote mutual support and group reflection on assessments;
- The participation of foster carers and adopters in the study through two focus groups to ascertain their views on the assessment;
- The dissemination of findings to those not directly involved in the project at local and national level.

9.2 How was the Research conducted?

9.2.1 Research Method

Action Research was the chosen method for this study. The advantage of action research is that it is **participative**, **qualitative** and **practical**.

Action research involves people as co-researchers, shaping their inquiry as the group moves between action and reflection, exploring and evaluating ways of improving their practice; it has the potential to provide a supportive, learning environment for the group as a whole and for the individuals within it.

The methodology of this project was underpinned by the concept of 'knowledge-based practice', defined as the triangulation of research findings, practitioner wisdoms and service user perspectives. In this case a literature search around key themes, and photocopying of relevant papers and ordering of texts was undertaken prior to the first meeting of the Inquiry group; reflection and action cycles, using various tools, occurred within and between Inquiry groups to share evolving expertise; and the views of approved foster carers and adopters on the assessment process were sought part way through the study to provide service user perspectives from the two groups.

Sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim; FPWs also took notes or minutes at all the meetings which were circulated to group members.

9.2.2 Research Process and Timescales

The project commenced with a launch event in September 2003, which was followed by a short period of induction for the Researcher. During this time the literature search of key texts and journal papers in family placement assessment was also completed. Informed written consent was sought from group participants themselves; prospective adopters and foster carers whose assessments might be reflected on in the group; and from approved carers who agreed to come to the Focus groups.

Family placement workers met at a central location for eight morning sessions from November 2004 to June 2004 as part of the Inquiry group.

In March 2004 a small sample of foster carers and adopters met in two co-facilitated Focus groups to explore their experiences of the assessment process. The main findings from each Focus group were then fed into the Inquiry group.

9.3 How was the Project managed?

The project was managed by an Advisory Group, which comprised the Researcher, the Family Placement Development Manager, a Senior Manager (Children Looked After), a Family Placement Worker from the Inquiry Group, and a Senior Manager who acted as Chair,.

The group's terms of reference were to:

- Manage the interface between the Project and the Department;
- Comment on the draft interim and final reports;
- Assist with dissemination strategies.

Consideration will need to be given to the future of the Advisory Group as part of the implementation and dissemination strategy.

9.4 How was the Project evaluated?

The project was evaluated through verbal and written feedback at the end of sessions; and after the final session through a semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix Two).

There was a 100% response rate for the return of the evaluative questionnaire with several group members giving helpful and detailed feedback. Respondents considered the group to have been well or very well facilitated, and thought it offered a productive forum to reflect on practice. Several indicated a willingness to be involved in dissemination; and reported more attention being given to their evidence base (especially attachment theory), and greater analysis. In terms of their future professional development needs, respondents would like: the time and space to reflect routinely on practice; and easy access to current research and thinking. Other suggestions are included in the next section.

9.5 Key Messages and Recommendations

The following summary is intended to pull together the findings and key messages from the Inquiry Group and Focus groups. It should be noted that no particular priority has been given to any of the messages and recommendations; this will need to be determined by the Department.

It is encouraging that some of the messages contained in the Interim report of the Project have already been implemented or are in the process of being implemented e.g. the new style, improved Link Report and Baby Portrait form.

Three child vignettes, based on merged data on actual children's needs, behaviour and personalities, have also been developed by group members.

On an individual basis some FPWs have reported actively taking on board the views of carers, as expressed in the two Focus groups, in their current practice.

9.5.1 Child-centred practice:

Key messages:

- Both looked after and carers' children need to be seen and treated as individuals;
- Much better intra and inter-agency co-ordination to meet children's needs: the children are let down if this does not happen;
- In order to reduce the potential for disruptions, more time and attention is needed to the matching process from all the workers who know a child;
- Piloting the now completed new-style Link report and Baby Portrait form (see above);
- Pay particular attention to moves, especially sudden ones, and helping carers' children cope with their attachment to a looked after child by supporting visits by them to the child in his/her new home;
- More training needed on the placement needs of babies, research and best practice, in particular, when and how to move babies to promote secure attachment;
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- A structured child-focused, needs-led feedback form for Practice Managers and Service Managers would be useful for feeding back comments when they read the documentation.

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Key messages:

- Inquiry group members urged caution in the “conveyor” belt approach to preparation courses: all the checks on applicants needed to be received before invitation to a course;
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- On courses children need to be portrayed as individuals with real personalities. For example, vignettes based on a few children's characteristics would be helpful to bring across the real sense of children who were being placed for adoption (completed in June 2004);
- Foster carers and adopters value thorough questioning in the Home Study and the opportunity to see and comment on draft Form Fs in advance;
- A Brainstorming exercise to take place, involving group members meeting on a one-off basis this autumn, to develop a suitable Home Conditions Scale for assessing prospective carers;
- A practice-sharing event to be organised for FPWs, on how experienced Family Support staff assess birth families using the Assessment Framework, to promote their use of the Framework when assessing foster carers and adopters. This could be included as part of the good practice forum (see 9.5.5);
- Training on the Adult Attachment Interview and Attachment Style Interview to be arranged;
- The Department to consider the wider purchase of the shortlist of recommended texts, derived from the survey in the Project Evaluation (see 7.2.2), which could be as a geographically based team resource.
- FPWs to generate sensitive questioning techniques, especially on issues such as applicants' sexuality and values;
- Managers and FPWs to consult out of authority on how best to incorporate policy statement expectations and appropriate questions re race and culture into various stages of the assessment process. Consultation event within the authority to be arranged.
- How best to (1) assess sexual relationships and attitudes of prospective carers and (2) support approved carers in promoting young people's sexual health needs to be taken forward by a small group of staff to increase FPWs' knowledge and confidence in this field.
- FPWs need to be aware of how adopters might feel their preferences are being perceived so that a full and honest discussion can take place;

- A good assessment has the potential to be therapeutic and help adopters become better parents;
- FPWs need to stress that honesty/truthfulness is all-important in answering questions during the home study;
- Carers' children to be treated as individuals; use age-appropriate tools to find out their views on fostering;

9.5.3 Valuing and supporting Foster carers

Key messages:

- SSD needs to support and value carers; they will then promote foster caring to friends, babysitters etc, and will not move elsewhere;
- Much better basic communication and dialogue between the Department and prospective foster carers is needed e.g. schedule with timescales, newsletter etc. in order that feel included and a member of the Team right from the outset;
- Central co-ordination of preparation courses strongly recommended by both Inquiry group and Focus group members;
- Financial considerations of becoming a foster carer need to be addressed by the Department (in particular pension plans) and given more prominence during the Preparation Course and the Home Study;
- CRB checks need to be speeded up, especially for babysitters;
- Receiving the Foster Carers' Handbook in the month prior to approval would be useful;
- Much more support is needed for the first placement.

9.5.4 Valuing and supporting Adopters

Key messages:

- Adopters need updating and better communication with the SSD in the period post approval when anxieties can run high, as their lives seem on hold then.
- FPWs should keep in touch by an agreed medium e.g. letter, phone email or mobile text, as well as Newsletter post approval and prior to any link.
- Other supports such as a forum to look at specific issues e.g. behaviour problems could be offered.
- FPWs need to take on board the feelings of prospective adopters and how the desire for a sibling for their child/ children might be perceived as "ungrateful" when in fact they would very much like a second link;
- SSD needs to enquire about potential placements that could be available with adopters who are in the process of successfully adopting a child or who have already adopted one or more children;

- The establishment of a working party to develop policy and procedures to take forward the suggestion of using the Letterbox scheme to access previously approved adopters about returning for another link;
- Consider involving the wider family in the assessment process so that they can be a potential source of support (see, for example, Argent *et al.* 2004);
- Panel needs to meet on a more regular basis to speed up links.

9.5.5 Valuing and supporting staff

Key messages:

- Social services need to value staff so that they maintain motivation and curiosity and continue working for the Department;
- The emotional impact of the work on staff and of disruptions, in particular, need to be carefully considered by management: Inquiry group members expressed a need for planned, regular support that went beyond supervision;
- Training for FPWs in assessing potentially manipulative carers and managing conflict is required;
- A forum, which meets regularly, to disseminate and celebrate good practice should be set up.

These key messages and recommendations offer a thematic, multi-faceted and comprehensive view of how to improve the family placement assessment service in the authority.

9.6 Review of the Project's Aims

The original project brief is contained in **9.1**.

The first aim relating to the resource folder and purchase of key texts was met, although due to time pressures some group members made only little or some use of the resources deriving from the literature search. However, it is encouraging that one team decided to update the resource as new materials are published and is now on a second folder.

With hindsight at least half a day per month study time should have been built into the project to make better use of this resource.

The second aim was met and is evidenced in **6. Progress of Inquiry Group** and **7. Project Evaluation**. The group functioned very well with some excellent contributions from several members.

The third aim was met through the two co-facilitated Focus groups with foster carers and adopters in March 2004 and is evidenced in the messages contained in **5. Findings from the Focus Groups with Carers**.

Whilst a few of the focus group recommendations can be implemented and are being implemented by FPWs individually, most require greater scrutiny by the Department as a whole and corporate endorsement and action.

Finally the fourth aim, the dissemination of this project, has already commenced with the DfES Professional Advisers on Fostering and Adoption receiving a copy of the Interim Report and coming in June to meet members of the group to discuss the project and their use of the Assessment Framework. A further event for children looked after and family placement staff occurred in October. The need for a wider dissemination strategy is discussed below.

9.7 Implementation and Dissemination

The Advisory group has operated at the interface between the Project and the Department. Thus far it has played a pivotal role in discussing and acknowledging the messages contained in this study at the interim stage. It is now timely for an Implementation group, involving senior management, to perhaps replace the Advisory Group, in order to prioritise, endorse and progress the recommendations contained in the report and agree a dissemination strategy. As part of the dissemination strategy it is recommended that those members of the Inquiry group who have expressed an interest in dissemination are given the opportunity to take the project out to those who have not been directly involved with it. This is commensurate with the methodology of the project, which promotes participation and ownership of findings at local level.

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11 Appendix One: Literature Search, October 2003

Theory and Methods - Overview

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Systemic Hypothesizing

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McCracken, S., and Reilly, I. (1998) 'The systemic family approach to foster care assessment' *Adoption and Fostering* Volume 22 Number 3, 16-27.

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Department of Health (2000) *Assessing Children in Need and their Families: Practice Guidance*, London: The Stationery Office

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Selwyn, J. (1994) 'Spies, informers and double agents – adoption assessments and role ambiguity' *Adoption and Fostering*, Volume 18, Number 4, 43-47

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Loss

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Hopkirk, E. (2002) 'Adoption after bereavement', *Adoption and Fostering*, Volume 26, Number 1, 15-24

Pizey, C. (1994) 'Issues of identity and loss in the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters of young children', *Adoption and Fostering*, Volume 18, Number 2, 45-49

Nature v nurture

Turnpenny, P. (1995) 'Genes, identity and adoption' *Adoption and Fostering* Volume 19 Number 1, 25-33

Howe, D., and Feast, J. (2001) 'The long-term outcome of reunions between adult people and their birth mothers' *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, 351-368

The children of foster carers/adopters

Part, D. (1993) 'Fostering as seen by the carers' children' *Adoption and Fostering*, Volume 17, Number 1, 26-31

Pugh, G. (1999) 'Seen but not heard? Addressing the needs of children who foster' in Hill, M. (ed.) *Signposts in Fostering: policy, practice and research issues*, London: BAAF

Farmer, E. and Pollock S. (1999) ' Sexually abused and abusing children: their impact on 'foster siblings' and other looked after children' in Mullender A. (ed.) *We are family: sibling relationships in placement and beyond*, London: BAAF

What foster /adoptive children want

Sinclair, I., Wilson, K., and Gibbs, Ian. (2001) 'A life more ordinary: What children want from foster placements', *Adoption and Fostering*, Volume 25, Number 4, 17-26

Contact

Browne, D., and Moloney, A. (2002) 'Contact Irregular: a qualitative analysis of the impact of visiting patterns of natural parents on foster placements' *Child and Family Social Work*, 7, 35-45.

Macaskill, C. (2002) *Safe Contact? Children in Permanent Placement and Contact with Birth Relatives*, Lyme Regis: Russell House, esp. Chap 9

Sykes, M. (2001) 'Adoption with contact: a study of adoptive parents and the impact of continuing contact with families of origin' *Journal of Family Therapy* 23, 296-316

Diversity

Argent, H. and Kerrane, A. (1997) *Taking Extra Care: Respite, shared and permanent care for children with disabilities*, London: BAAF, esp. section 3 'Training, Preparation, Introductions and Support'

Hicks, S. (2000) 'Good lesbian, bad lesbian... regulating heterosexuality in fostering and adoption assessments' *Child and Family Social Work* 5, 157-168

Thoburn, J., Norford, L., and Rashid, S. (2000) *Permanent Placement for Children of Minority Ethnic Origin*, London: Jessica Kingsley

Health

Mather, M. (2001) 'Health issues for substitute carers' *Adoption and Fostering* Volume 25 Number 3, 81-83

Use of theory in caring for foster/adoptive children

Cairns, K., (2002) 'Making sense: The use of theory and research to support foster care' *Adoption and Fostering* Volume 26, Number 2, 6-13

Daniel, B., Wassell, S. and Gilligan, R. (1999) 'It's just common sense, isn't it? Exploring ways of putting the theory of resilience into action' *Adoption and Fostering* Volume 23 Number 3, 7-15

Schofield, G. (2001) 'Resilience and family placement: a lifespan perspective.' *Adoption and Fostering* Volume 25 Number 3, 7-19

Motivations to foster/adopt

Andersson, G. (2001) 'The motives of foster parents, their family and work circumstances' *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, 235-248

What works (and doesn't) – research indicators

British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (1999) *Exchanging Visions: Papers on best practice in Europe for children separated from their birth parents*, London: BAAF

Butler, S. and Charles, M. (1999) 'The past, the present, but never the future: thematic representations of fostering disruption' *Child and Family Social Work*, 4, 9 -19

Dando, I., and Minty, B. (1987) 'What makes good foster parents?' *British Journal of Social Work* 17, 383-400

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Moffatt, P. and Thoburn, J. (2001) 'Outcomes of permanent family placement for children of minority ethnic origin' *Child and Family Social Work* 6, 13-21

Triseliotis, J., Borland, M., and Hill, M. (2000) *Delivering Foster Care*, London: BAAF

Triseliotis, J. (2002) 'Long-term foster care or adoption? The evidence examined' *Child and Family Social Work* 7, 23-33

Empowering/involving

Clark, I., McWilliam, E. and Philips, R. (1998) 'Empowering prospective adopters adoption and fostering', *Adoption and Fostering*, volume 22, no 2, 35-43

Adoption/Permanence – general

Lowe N. *et al.* (1999) *Supporting Adoption- reframing the approach*, esp. chap. 16 'Adopter's expectations were they met?'

British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (1999) *Making Good Assessments: a practical resource guide*, London: BAAF

Policy and Standards

DH (2001) *Planning and Providing Good Quality Placements for Children in Care* sections as follows: 'Planning and Delivering Good Quality foster carer services' page 22-30 and also 'Planning and Delivering Good Quality adoption services' page 32-35.

DH National Minimum Standards (for both fostering and for adoption)

12 Appendix Two: Evaluative Questionnaire

Evaluation of Family Placement Assessment Study – June 2004

The Family Placement Assessment Study began in Autumn 2003 and aimed to improve the quality of foster carer and adopter assessments through:

- A literature search of key texts/ papers that act as a developing resource throughout the project to improve the evidence base of practice;
- The methodology of action research and co-operative inquiry to promote mutual support and group reflection on the formulation of hypotheses in family placement assessment;
- The participation of foster carers and adopters in the study through the use of co-facilitated focus groups to ascertain their views on the assessment process and to feed back the findings into the Inquiry group;
- The dissemination of findings to those not directly involved in the project at local and national level within agreed anonymity and confidentiality protocols.

This questionnaire seeks to evaluate the project against these stated intentions. The dissemination phase is planned to take place in Autumn 2004 after the final report has been completed.

Thank you in anticipation for spending the time giving feedback; this will be incorporated into the final project report.

1. Facilitation and group process

Please can you give an overall view about how the sessions were facilitated?

Were there any ways in which the facilitation of the group could have been improved concerning:

(a) group process

(b) reflections on practice

(c) incorporation of the views of foster carers and adopters from the focus groups

(d) any other factors?

2. Literature search journal papers, book chapters and books

How much use have you made of the literature resource file and books?
A lot of use Some use Little use No use (circle one)

Comments:

Were there any books or papers that you found particularly relevant?
Please list up to five references:

What would have helped you make more use of this resource?

3. Improvements in your practice

What improvements, if any, have you noticed in your assessment practice and report writing as a result of being a member of the group? Please list up to three improvements, starting with the most significant:

What tools and questioning techniques have you experimented with?
Please describe:

How useful were these tools/ questioning techniques?

4. Dissemination of the project

The project brief includes a dissemination phase in the autumn. What suggestions do you have for:

(a) local dissemination (b) national dissemination?

Would you like to be involved as part of the team disseminating this project?

5. Future professional development needs

Please indicate, in priority order, up to three of your future professional development needs arising from this project?

6. Any other comments

If willing, your name