

Chapter 10

Receiving Information by Post

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What is reading but silent conversation?¹

Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking makes what we read ours.²

Silent conversations may be an important element in the process of personal reflection which the Family Law Act anticipates. One way of making it possible for people to create their own inner dialogue after attending an information meeting is to provide them with the material in such a form that it is available whenever it is required. Hence the production of the information pack that was given to all information meeting attendees. In the pilots, the written material was supplementary to the information delivered by presenters or via CD-ROM.

In October 1998 a special study was launched to examine the value of providing written information by post. This study ran until the end of January 1999 and aimed to establish whether the information required by the Family Law Act could be conveyed effectively through the medium of leaflets and to enable us to consider how far actual attendance at a meeting makes a difference in terms of how information is received and acted upon. It was clearly not an information meeting pilot as such, since no meeting was involved. People who requested information were sent an information pack through the post. This pack contained all the leaflets that were provided to people who attended an information meeting, including a parenting plan and an invitation to attend a meeting with a marriage counsellor.

The study was managed by the Greater Manchester pilot and covered the geographical area of that pilot and the area covered by the London pilot. Thus, it focused on the areas in which Model C meetings had been held. When the postal pack study started, the London pilot had terminated, while the Manchester pilot had ceased providing individual meetings but was continuing to provide group presentations for people involved in divorce proceedings. The availability of information packs was advertised within each of these pilot areas. People who wanted the pack telephoned the Manchester pilot and received their information pack through the post, or arranged to collect it at an address within their local area. During the study period 1,468 applications for information packs were received, of which 660 came from people within the Greater Manchester area and 808 from people located in the London area. The process of data collection from postal pack applicants is shown in Figure 10.1.

As Table 10.1 shows, most people who asked for an information pack (83%) had learned of its availability via the media. The media was also the most important source of

¹ Walter Savage Landor [English poet and writer], 'Aristotle and Callisthenes', *Imaginary Conversations* (1824–53).

² John Locke, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1706), p. 20.

information for people who attended an information meeting, although fewer (64%) information meeting applicants had learned of the existence of information meetings via the media. The fact that many people had received information about meetings from the courts primarily accounts for the lesser impact the media had on information meeting applicants. During the period July 1998 to end January 1999, an invitation to attend an information meeting was sent out from the courts to people who were involved in divorce proceedings. This practice was abandoned in the London area from September 1998, but continued throughout the special study in the Manchester area. Manchester-based applicants who were involved in divorce proceedings were allocated to a group presentation instead of being sent an information pack. This explains why only 1 per cent of postal pack applicants had learned of the availability of the pack through the court. It also seems that divorce-associated professionals were less likely to recommend applying for a pack than they were to suggest that people should attend an information meeting. Only 3 per cent were informed about the availability of postal packs by a solicitor, a mediator, a counsellor or a Citizen's Advice Bureau. This contrasts with the 12 per cent who were informed about information meetings via one of these sources.

Table 10.1 Sources of information about meetings

Source of information	Manchester	London	All postal pack applicants	Information meeting applicants
	%	%	%	%
Media	86.3	79.3	82.5	63.6
Court	1.1	1.2	1.2	12.2
Solicitor	0.8	0.6	0.7	2.2
Mediator	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.4
Counsellor	0.8	0	0.3	5.1
CAB	1.1	2.5	1.9	4.2
Family	4.6	8.4	6.6	1.8
Friend	3.6	4.4	4	3.6
Other	1.7	3.5	2.7	6.8
Total (100%)	659	800	1,459	9,993

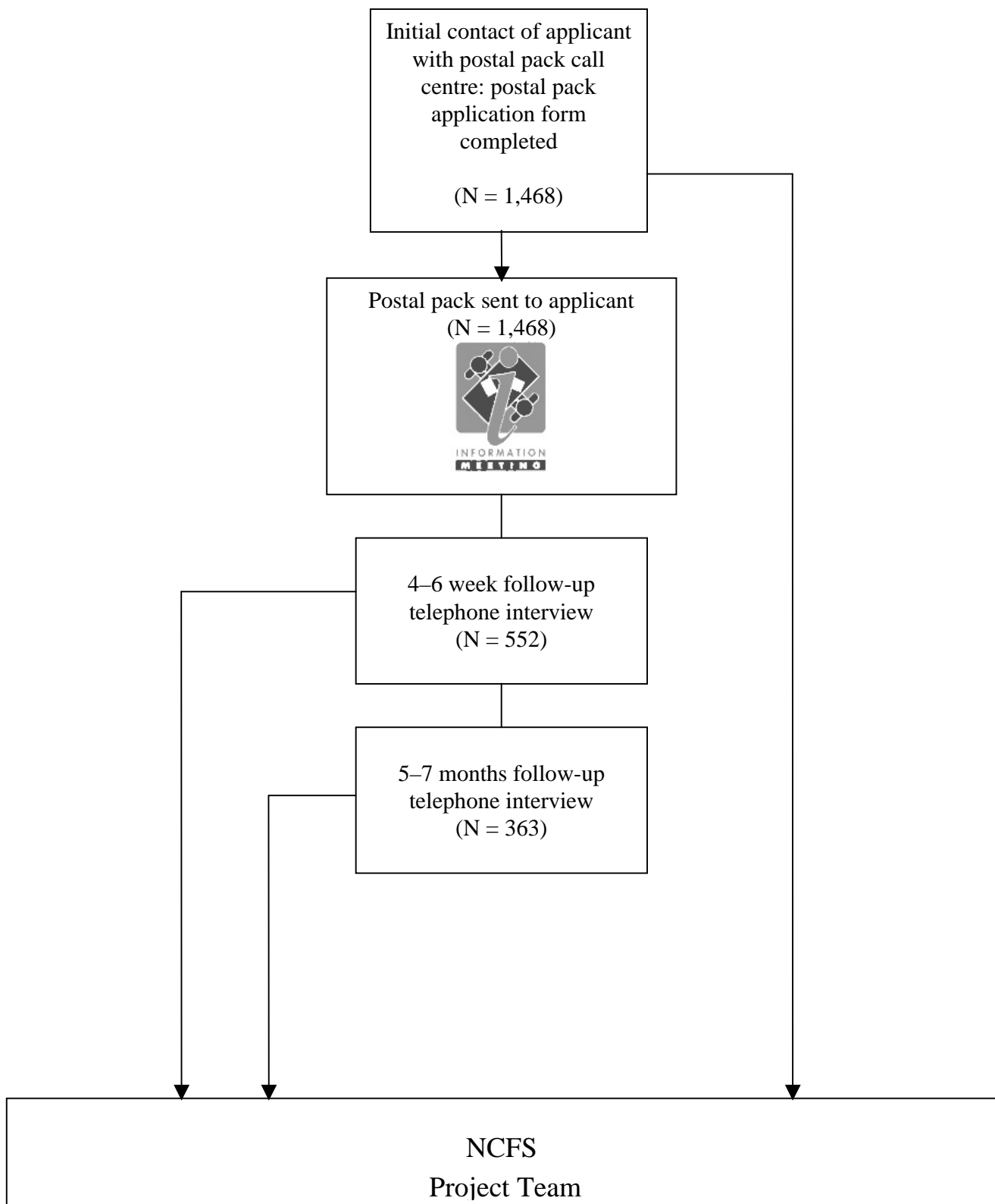


Figure 10.1 Data from applicants in respect of the postal pack study

The Applicants

More women than men applied for a postal pack: 41 per cent of the applications received were from men, and this represents a marginally higher proportion of men than applied to attend an information meeting (36% of applications).

Some applicants (69) did not provide information about children. Of those who did, 15 per cent had no children and 16 per cent had children aged 18 or over. Thus, 69 per cent of postal pack applicants had children under 18. Indeed, 25 per cent had children under 5 and 56 per cent had children under 12. Nevertheless, people who asked for an information pack were less likely to have children under 18 than were those who applied to attend an information meeting, 74 per cent of whom had dependent children.

More than half (53%) of the postal pack applicants were living apart from their spouse. Table 10.2 shows that of those who were separated and had children, men tended to be the non-resident parents and women tended to be the resident parents. In this respect, postal pack applicants were similar to those who applied to attend an information meeting.

Table 10.2 Parental status of applicants who were living apart from their spouse

	Males		Females	
	<i>information meeting applicants</i>	<i>postal pack applicants</i>	<i>information meeting applicants</i>	<i>postal pack applicants</i>
	%	%	%	%
Resident	21.6	18.7	90.2	84.9
Non-resident	71.7	72.9	7.1	13.7
Shared parenting	6.7	8.4	2.8	1.5
Total (100%)	1,461	262	2,103	344

People from the Manchester area who were involved in divorce proceedings were allocated to a group presentation, but a few (9) were sent postal packs. On the other hand, 18 per cent of people from the London area who received postal packs were involved in divorce proceedings at the time they applied. As was the case with applicants for information meetings, males who applied for an information pack were more likely to be involved in divorce proceedings (14%) than were female applicants (8%). As Table 10.3 shows, males involved in divorce proceedings tended to be respondents, while 76 per cent of the females involved in proceedings were petitioners. Indeed, the data suggest that where divorce proceedings were current, women were the petitioners in 70 per cent of them.

Table 10.3 Applicants' involvement in divorce proceedings

	Males %	Females %	All applicants %
Petitioner	34.7	76	51.6
Respondent	65.3	24	48.4
Total (100%)	72	50	122

Chi-squared = 20.13; $p < .001$.

The majority of applicants were in their first marriage (88%) while 11 per cent were in their second marriage and 1 per cent in their third marriage. The median duration of current marriages was 15 years, which is similar to that of people who attended an information meeting. As Table 10.4 shows, however, information pack applicants tended to have been married longer than members of the divorcing population.

Table 10.4 Duration of marriages of postal pack applicants compared with those of information meeting attendees and the divorcing population¹

	Postal pack applicants %	Information meeting attendees %	Divorcees %
Under 5 years	11.2	10.9	23.2
5–9 years	22.6	19.8	28.3
10–14 years	21.2	20.0	17.1
15–19 years	14.6	18.5	12.1
20–24 years	12.6	14.2	8.8
25–29 years	9.0	9.1	5.8
30 years and over	8.8	7.5	5.6
Total	1,394	7,721	172, 973
Mean	15.17	15.39	11.85
Standard deviation	9.62	9.62	8.84

¹ Data on divorcing population provided by ONS.

Sixteen per cent of applicants had attended marriage counselling in the year before they applied for an information pack, while 3 per cent had been to mediation, and 33 per cent had consulted a solicitor. For 59 per cent of applicants, the information pack represented their first port of call in that they had not been to counselling or mediation, nor had they consulted a solicitor or applied for a divorce.

Table 10.5 Ages of postal pack applicants and of the divorcing population

Age	Males		Females	
	<i>applicants</i>	<i>divorcees</i>	<i>applicants</i>	<i>divorcees</i>
	%	%	%	%
Under 26	0.9	3.5	1.7	7.9
26–30	7.3	15.8	12.7	20.8
31–35	19.4	22.3	19.7	22.8
36–40	20.1	18.8	21.7	17.5
41–45	17.1	14.2	17.2	12.5
46–50	13.9	11.8	12.4	9.6
51–55	10.0	6.7	7.9	4.8
56–60	5.2	3.7	3.8	2.3
60 and over	6.1	3.0	3.0	1.6
Total (100%)	561	173,005	822	173,005
Mean	42.83	39.35	40.43	36.86
Standard deviation	10.26	9.94	9.52	9.44

The age structure of applicants for information packs was similar to that of the population who had attended an information meeting. However, as Table 10.5 shows, applicants tended to be older than members of the divorcing population.

Few of the applicants described themselves as unemployed; 85 per cent of men and 70 per cent of women were either in employment or were self-employed. It would seem that there was an over-representation of people who were in work, especially in respect of male applicants (Table 10.6).

Table 10.6 Employment status of applicants and of the general population

	Males		Females	
	<i>applicants</i>	<i>Great Britain</i> ¹	<i>applicants</i>	<i>Great Britain</i> ¹
	%	%	%	%
Employed full-time	73	58.8	35	35.3
Employed part-time	3	4.8	31	26.5
Self-employed	9	12.8	4	4.7
Unemployed	8	7.0	3	4.1
Other	7	16.6	28	30.0
Total (100%)	568		834	

¹ Source: *Social Trends* 28, ONS (1998), Table 4.2.

We allocated applicants to the Registrar-General's socio-economic categories – an indicator of social class – and found that applicants were drawn from across the social

spectrum. There was, however, evidence of a slight class bias, especially among female applicants, who were drawn disproportionately from the managerial and technical strata (Table 10.7).

Table 10.7 Social class of attendees and of the general population

	Males		Females	
	<i>applicants</i>	<i>United Kingdom</i> ¹	<i>applicants</i>	<i>United Kingdom</i> ¹
	%	%	%	%
Professional	8	8	4	3
Managerial and technical	24	29	33	28
Skilled non-manual	22	12	36	37
Skilled manual	32	31	11	8
Partly skilled	9	15	13	19
Unskilled	5	5	4	6
Number of cases (100%)	456		545	

1. Source: *Social Trends 28*, ONS (1998), Table 1.11.

Two-thirds of postal pack applicants agreed to participate in the research. Applicants who had children were more likely to consent (69%) than those who had no children (60%), and it seemed that consent was more forthcoming from people who were at more advanced stages of divorce/separation. For instance:

- applicants who were still living with their spouse were less likely than those living apart from their spouse to consent: 53 per cent of the former and 77 per cent of the latter consented
- applicants who were involved in divorce proceedings were more likely to consent than applicants who were not involved in divorce proceedings: 77 per cent of the former and 65 per cent of the latter consented
- applicants who had previously been to see a solicitor were more likely to consent: 77 per cent consented, as against 64 per cent who had not been to see a solicitor
- applicants for whom the information pack was the first port of call were less likely to consent than those who had already been in contact with other agencies: 59 per cent of the former and 76 per cent of the latter consented

Factors which had no apparent effect on propensity to agree to participate in our evaluation were geographic location, gender, employment status, social class and number of marriages.

We intended to interview people within six weeks of their receiving the pack. In the event, we were able to contact 58 per cent of them. We therefore have information from 552 postal pack recipients concerning their views about the information provided and its immediate impact on behaviour. We were unable to contact 8 per cent of those who consented, owing either to telephone problems or to other extenuating circumstances, while a further 5 per cent were contacted but indicated that they were no longer willing to be interviewed. The remainder were not contacted simply because of pressure on research time (the postal pack study was introduced towards the end of the pilot period) forcing us to make a decision that we would target 550 as a sufficient research sample.

Of the 552 people who were interviewed:

- 57 per cent were female and 43 per cent were male
- 56 per cent were from the London area and 44 per cent from the Manchester area
- 70 per cent had children under the age of 18
- 32 per cent of applicants from London, as against 18 per cent of applicants from Manchester, were involved in divorce proceedings at the time they were interviewed
- 4 per cent of applicants from the London area were already divorced

Receiving the Information

All those whom we interviewed had received their packs through the post, and most indicated that the packs had reached them without any problems. Three applicants experienced delivery problems, which could have been problematic in respect of confidentiality. These problems related to the size of the pack:

My husband didn't know that I'd sent for it and the postman left it on the windowsill and my husband took it in but didn't open it. (F)

It was too big to go through the post box so it was left outside on the doorstep. It had been opened, but I'm not sure whom by. It didn't upset me but it might upset others. (M)

Couldn't post it. I had to collect it, as it was too big for the letterbox. (M)

Another three applicants received packs that had been damaged in the post. One of these – who happened to be a packaging supervisor – was critical of the packaging, feeling that the envelopes used were far too flimsy. Another received an envelope that no longer contained any leaflets, while the other told us:

It was a bit bashed, and when I saw it was all ripped. I was a bit concerned that my husband could have seen the contents, but he didn't. (F)

Clearly, if it were to become standard practice to provide information through the post serious consideration would need to be given to the size of information packs and to the packaging.

Getting the Right Information

Sixty-two per cent of the 552 people interviewed indicated that they had been seeking specific information when they had applied for an information pack, and Table 10.8 provides a breakdown of the type of information that they required.

Table 10.8 Specific information sought by applicants

	Those living at same address as spouse %	Those living apart from spouse %	All those who wanted specific information %
Legal process of divorce	50.9	46.6	47.9
Finance	33.9	25.6	28.2
Children – general	26.8	23.5	24.5
Property	23.2	15.0	17.4
Children – contact and residence	10.7	18.8	16.2
Children – CSA maintenance	10.7	18.4	15.7
Children – effects of divorce	11.6	16.2	14.5
Role of a solicitor	8.9	11.1	10.5
Mediation	8.0	6.4	6.8
DIY divorce	3.6	8.1	6.8
Counselling	8.9	3.4	5.1
Legal aid	2.7	5.6	4.6
Benefits/welfare	4.5	4.3	4.3
Reconciliation	2.7	3.0	2.8
Changes to divorce law	0.9	3.4	2.8
Emotional issues	0.9	3.4	2.6
Pensions	1.8	2.6	2.3
Support groups	1.8	1.7	1.7
Domestic violence	0.9	0.9	0.9
Other issues	2.7	1.3	1.7
Total (100%)	112	234	351

Note: five people did not provide information about their living arrangements. These people are included in the final column.

The most common type of information sought by 48 per cent of those who wanted specific information was that which related to the legal process of divorce. Twenty-eight per cent of those hoping for specific information wanted to be informed about the financial implications of divorce. Twenty-five per cent were hoping for general information about children, 16 per cent for information about contact and residence issues, 16 per cent for information about child maintenance and/or the CSA, and 15 per cent for information about how divorce might affect children.

There were some differences between people who were still living at the same address as their spouse and those who had separated. The former were more likely to have been specifically seeking information about finances and property, while the latter seemed more concerned about children's issues. Only 5 per cent of those who said they were seeking specific information referred to information about counselling, while just 7 per cent were specifically seeking information about mediation. It seems that only one in a hundred was seeking information about domestic violence.

Most people (74%) who were looking for specific information claimed that they found it in the pack they received. It seems, however, that some types of information were harder to find than others, especially those relating to finances. Only 63 per cent found the information they were seeking about finances, and just 59 per cent found the information about property that they hoped for.

Opinions about the Information Pack

Forty per cent of those who were interviewed (N = 552) claimed they had read all the leaflets in the information pack, while 2 per cent indicated that they had not read any. The most-read leaflets were those that described the divorce process (read by 79%) and those that gave information about finances, which were read by 74 per cent of recipients. There were no apparent gender differences in respect of which leaflets were read.

Thirty-nine per cent of the 552 interviewees said the pack was what they had expected, while 41 per cent said that it was not what they expected and the rest apparently did not know what to expect. Nearly all those interviewed (98%) thought the pack was a good way of giving information. Over half (57%) found the pack very helpful and 34 per cent found it quite helpful, while only 9 per cent had not found it helpful. Seventeen per cent, however, indicated that they would have preferred to have attended a meeting where they could have had the information provided explained verbally, and a further 16 per cent indicated a preference for a meeting and receipt of the information pack. Nevertheless, the majority (64%) indicated that they were happy to have received the pack in the post and would not have wanted to attend a meeting.

In an attempt to understand which people were likely to express positive views about the information pack, we conducted a logistic regression analysis to calculate the odds of attendees finding the information 'very helpful'. The results indicate that the information pack tended to be most helpful for people who had not yet consulted a solicitor or been to a counsellor (as Table 10.9 shows), and those who had been married for less than ten years.³ Nevertheless, it seems that even those who had used counselling or consulted a solicitor tended to find the information pack helpful.

³ See Annexe 5, Table A5.20.

Table 10.9 Views about the helpfulness of the pack by use of other services

	Contacted solicitor or counsellor	No contact with solicitor or counsellor	All respondents
	%	%	%
Very helpful	50.6	63.4	57.1
Fairly helpful	38.2	30.8	34.4
Not very helpful	9.0	4.3	6.6
Not at all helpful	2.2	1.4	1.8
Total (100%)	267	279	546

Chi-squared = 11.16; p = .011.

Nearly all those interviewed (97%) said that they understood the leaflets and found them easy to read. Most (62%) indicated that they had found it easy to find their way around the information, while 36 per cent found it fairly easy. Some interviewees (37%) identified information that they were unable to find in the pack that they felt might have been useful, or information they felt did not have sufficient depth. Nineteen per cent of these people simply wanted more general information on the divorce process, while 3 per cent wanted help with DIY divorce and 2 per cent felt some guidance on filling out legal/financial documents would have been useful. Twelve per cent wanted more information on children (specifically, information about contact and residence, children's emotions and counselling). Two per cent wanted information about parental rights for children over 16. Twelve per cent wanted more information on finances, including information on pensions, wills and the cost of divorce. Eight per cent wanted more local contact numbers, while 8 per cent wanted more information on counselling and emotional issues. Seven per cent wanted more information on property rights.

One in five people offered suggestions for how to improve the pack. Twenty-four people suggested a booklet should be provided rather than leaflets, and eight people suggested there should be fewer leaflets. Fifteen people commented on the print size:

The print size is far too small. The leaflets are too throw away – too much loose material – it needs to be made easier to play around with. (M)

Some of the writing was a bit small. I had no problems with it, but I think others may. (M)

People with dyslexia may have problems and may need larger print particularly with the form examples, as they are very small and hard to read. (F)

Twenty-four people thought the leaflets could be better-presented:

Colours are very bland but otherwise very good. Need more bold colours, especially leaflets that could be shown to the children. (M)

Poor presentation – leaflets not in order and no plastic wallets for the leaflets. (M)

Other suggestions included simplifying the language, using languages other than English, making the pack more user-friendly, including information relevant to ethnic minorities, and producing better children's leaflets.

Only 15 per cent of the 552 interviewees had contacted an organisation that was included among those listed in the pack. The majority of these had contacted CAB (19) and marriage guidance agencies (19). Nine people had contacted a mediation service and five people had contacted the Child Support Agency. Other bodies contacted included Gingerbread, Families Need Fathers, Asian Women's Rights, the Legal Aid Board, the Department of Social Security, the tax office and courts.

Only 14 per cent of those who received an information pack had shared the information with their spouse. Posting information does not, therefore, solve the problem of ensuring that both parties have the information. The other party could, of course, apply for the information themselves, but would not know that their spouse had the information unless they were told so. Alternatively, the other party could be sent information if their partner were to make a statement of marriage breakdown or, under current legislation, petition for divorce.

Information for Children

Two of the leaflets were designed to be given to children; one of these was targeted at younger children (under ten) and the other at children over ten.⁴ Seventy per cent of those interviewed had children under eighteen, but only 7 per cent of them had given the children's leaflets to their children. One in four of those who had not given the leaflets to children indicated that they felt the children were too young. What parents felt to be too young varied, however. The children parents described as 'too young' were aged anything between one and twelve. Over half of those who had not given leaflets to children indicated that they did not intend to do so. Of the 153 people who gave reasons for not having done so, 53 said they preferred to adopt, or had already adopted, their own approach. One said:

I'm already very open with the kids and will deal with the issues in my own way. I have nothing against the leaflets. They were interesting for me, but if I show them directly to the children, they might be stigmatised. (mother of children aged 7, 9 and 11)

Twenty-five people indicated that they did not intend to give the leaflets to their children because they wanted to protect them:

I want to protect them and I don't want to upset them. (father of children aged 4, 8 and 11)

I don't want to involve them at the moment. My daughter is in the middle of her GCSE year and I don't want to upset her. (mother of children aged 8, 15 and 18)

I don't want to worry them too much until it is final and I have decided myself what is happening. When things are final, we will talk to them. (father of children aged 1, 6 and 8)

⁴ We discuss the provision of information for parents and for children in more depth in Chs 23 and 24.

It is too soon. They are shocked and angry. (mother of children aged 13 and 16)

Nineteen people commented that they did not think they had reached the appropriate stage to be telling the children:

We're trying to sort things out at the moment. (mother of children aged 2, 4 and 8)

Depends on whether we separate or not. (mother of children aged 9 and 11)

I am not that far down the line yet. (father of one child aged 16 and three aged over 18)

It is too early in the process – [we are] not even separated yet, and [are] hoping to sort out problems in the relationship. (father of children aged 6 and 11)

Seven people commented that leaflets were not appropriate for children of sixteen and over:

Nothing in there [is] of any interest to him as he's nearly seventeen and he sees his dad whenever he wants. (mother of child aged 16)

Ten people had either not read the pack yet or had not thought about showing the leaflets to their children. Five had not had an opportunity to show the leaflets to their children, owing to lack of contact with them. Some had apparently been warned off:

I'd like to [give the leaflets to my children], but my wife's solicitor has stopped me discussing anything about divorce with the children. (father of children aged 7, 10 and 13)

I have talked to him and my wife went mad and told his solicitor. So I daren't give him anything in case I get into trouble. (father of child aged 6)

Almost one in three parents (N = 370) had talked to their children about the leaflets. Of those who had not, 38 per cent said they would discuss them in the future, 29 per cent said they would not discuss them, and 33 per cent said they did not know whether they would discuss them or not. All these findings are similar to those for information meeting attendees.

All the applicants with children should have been provided with a parenting plan booklet. Eighty per cent (N = 381) indicated that they had received one, but 5 per cent said they had not, while 15 per cent did not know if they had. Almost half (44%) of those who had received the parenting plan said they found it useful. Moreover, 46 per cent said they would consider using it. At the time they were interviewed, however, only 6 per cent of those who had received a parenting plan had actually used it, while 39 per cent indicated that they did not intend to use it.

Given that the research interview took place only six weeks after the interviewee received an information pack, it is not surprising that few parenting plans had been completed. Indeed, only 11 of those interviewed said they had completed a parenting plan, and only

two had involved children in the process. Two people apparently changed the arrangements for their children as a result of having completed the plan.

A total of 228 of those we interviewed at the follow-up stage (some 5–7 months after they had attended an information meeting) had dependent children, but only one in ten of these had shown the leaflets written for children to their children. Thirteen per cent (N = 160) claimed they had completed the parenting plan, while a further 22 per cent felt they might complete it at some point in the future. In addition, despite not having completed the plan 15 per cent indicated that they had found it useful, and only 32 per cent indicated that they did not intend to use it in any way.

Saving Marriages

All those who were not already involved in divorce proceedings at the time they applied for a postal pack (N = 1,315) were sent an invitation to a meeting with a marriage counsellor, but only 41 (3%) chose to take up the offer. In this respect, receiving information by post has significantly less impact than an information meeting. Even the least effective of the information meetings (Model E) resulted in a three times greater take-up of the MWMC than was achieved by the provision of information leaflets. This suggests that an information meeting has an impact that goes beyond that which could be achieved by simply making written information available.

At the time of our telephone interview, approximately six weeks after receipt of the information pack, 153 people were involved in divorce proceedings. More than half of these (59%) had become involved since receiving the information pack. It is noteworthy that 65 per cent of those who applied for an information pack (N = 552) felt that they were receiving the information at just the right time, while 26 per cent felt it had come too late to have any real impact on them. There was a significant difference, however, between those who had already started divorce proceedings and others. Almost two-thirds (64%) of the former (N = 153) thought they were obtaining information too late, whereas only 21 per cent of those who had not started proceedings when they had applied for the information (N = 1,315) felt that way. There was no difference regarding perceptions of timing between people who were still living at the same address as their partner and those who had already separated.

Longer-term Changes

We interviewed some people who had received an information pack a second time 5–7 months afterwards. At this stage we managed to conduct 363 interviews, 151 with men and 212 with women. At the time they had requested a postal pack, 126 interviewees were still living at the same address as their partner and 222 were separated (15 did not give information about their living arrangements). At the time of the follow-up interview, 4 per cent of those who had been living with their partner had divorced and 30 per cent had separated. Of those who were living apart from their partner, 10 per cent had divorced when we contacted them again, while 6 per cent had returned to the same address as their partner. A third of those who had been living together when they requested a postal pack were still living together at the time of the follow-up interview and reported that they would be continuing to do so. Another 20 per cent were still living with their partner but were uncertain about the future.

Table 10.10 Intentions of applicants regarding divorce following receipt of postal pack

	Residence at time of attending information meeting		
	<i>with partner</i>	<i>apart from partner</i>	<i>all interviewees</i>
	%	%	%
Involved in divorce proceedings	22.2	40.1	33.6
Intending to petition	13.5	17.6	16.1
May petition	34.9	25.2	28.7
Will not petition	27.0	11.3	17.0
Other	2.4	5.9	4.6
Total (100%)	126	222	348

Chi-squared = 24.92; $p < .001$.

As Table 10.10 shows, a third of those interviewed had become involved in divorce proceedings since receiving an information pack, while 16 per cent indicated that they were intending to do so and 29 per cent felt that they might initiate proceedings. There were indications that the information pack had helped those who received it to find their way through the divorce process. For instance, one interviewee who was planning a DIY divorce with his wife said:

It clarified things we were not sure of. For instance, whether we needed a solicitor and how to get to mediation. All that was made clear. It also civilised us and made us realise that, if we were at each other's throats, we would need a solicitor. So maybe it saved us money. (M)

Other comments indicated how their having the information available helped people to make key decisions about what to do:

It straightened the brain out, and said 'Come on, stop waffling', 'Answer this question', 'What do you really think?' and things like that. It helped answer the straight and simple things like 'Do you actually believe your marriage is over?' ... It literally brought the strands together and made me focus. It taught me not to be pushed around, or be told what to do, and that helped a lot. (F)

Some parts of it were useful. It made everything more logical, and gave me a pathway to go down for different situations. It calmed me down and made me think properly. (F)

It is the opportunity to have information at my disposal, to look through it in my own time and go back to. Initially there is so much going on, and so many people telling you what to do, and giving you contradictory advice. This is neutral and lets you come to your own decision in your own time. (F)

The issue of time and timing has been a continuous one in our evaluation of information meetings, and has suggested many questions. What is the right time to give information about mediation? At what point in a marriage breakdown is it reasonable to harbour expectations of the marriage being saved? What is the optimum point at which to provide

a parenting plan? Divorce is clearly a process rather than an event, and information on how to negotiate a way through that process might be needed at different points. One person who had received a postal pack told us:

The whole thing is a gradual process. You can't believe 'this is happening to me'. Looking through the pack, you start to come to terms with all this, at a time when you are starting to make very big decisions. It gave me a feeling of 'I am in control of what I will do next because I have the right information'.
(M)

Seventeen per cent of those with whom we conducted follow-up interviews (N = 363) indicated that they did not intend to petition for divorce. Those who were still living with their spouse when they had requested a postal pack were less likely to be intending to divorce than were those who had already separated. Nevertheless, only 27 per cent of them were certain they would not be seeking a divorce. Twenty-five people who had been separated from their partner at the time they had sent for an information pack indicated that they were not intending to divorce. Fifteen of these people had become reconciled with their partner at the time of the follow-up interview, and ten did not intend to seek divorce although they were living apart from their spouse. Approximately half said that they had consulted a solicitor about divorce since receiving an information pack, and a further 20 per cent were contemplating doing so. More than half (53%) of those who had been to a solicitor indicated that they had arranged to do so before receiving the information pack. Only one in five interviewees indicated that they did not intend to consult a solicitor, and a third of these indicated that this was because they were opting for DIY divorce. Only 9 per cent of those interviewed indicated that they had no need to consult a solicitor.

Just three people (1%) had been to mediation since receiving a postal pack: significantly less than the 7 per cent of information meeting attendees who attended mediation. The low take-up of counselling and mediation among people who received only written information suggests that going to a meeting to receive information does make a difference to what people do afterwards. However, this finding should be treated with some caution. By attending an information meeting attendees have demonstrated a willingness to discuss their problems with a third party. On the other hand, people who send for a postal pack may be doing so because they do not want to involve a third party.

Eighteen per cent of interviewees (N = 363) indicated that, although they had not been to mediation, they had seriously considered it. Most of these indicated that they had been influenced to do so by information about mediation that they had gleaned by reading leaflets contained in the information pack. Nevertheless, most of those we interviewed (80%) indicated that they had no intention of going to mediation. The main reason, given by 34 per cent of those with no intention of going, was a feeling that mediation was not necessary. A further 13 per cent indicated that their spouse was unwilling to attend and 10 per cent said they could not see the relevance of mediation. We suspect that some people did not fully understand what mediation is about, and their responses concerning it may have been the result of their misunderstanding its purpose.

A third of the interviewees told us that their partners were aware that they had got the information pack. The reaction of partners to this seemed varied. One in five partners (N = 123) apparently offered no reaction, but others were shocked (21%), angry (3%), interested (12%), uninterested (4%) or dismissive (4%). In 5 per cent of cases (N = 363),

tension between spouses increased as a result of one of them sending for an information pack. On the other hand, 30 per cent of partners engaged in discussion about their marital problems when they became aware that the pack had been requested. Thus, on balance it seems that the outcome of partners being made aware was positive.

Providing Information by Post

The postal pack proved a useful but limited means of providing information. It was useful primarily because it was able to reach so many people in a short period. An average of 76 packs were sent out per week. During the first two weeks in January 1999 the weekly number of applications for packs reached over 180. By contrast, attendances at information meetings in the two pilot areas involved never rose above 43 in any week, and averaged around twenty per week. Moreover, those who received a pack were generally appreciative of it. For instance, when asked 5–7 months afterwards, 95 per cent of the 363 information pack recipients whom we interviewed said that they were glad they had received the pack, and only 2 per cent wished they had not sent for it. Over half the recipients claimed that they had learned something new through reading the leaflets. Eighteen per cent said the pack had provided them with comfort, 7 per cent said it had made them stop and think, and 17 per cent suggested it had focused them on what they needed to do. Those who wished they had not sent for a pack stated that they had learned nothing new.

If information meetings were not available, it would clearly be worth continuing to produce written information. The Vice-President of the UK College of Family Mediators⁵ described information meetings as ‘the problem child’ of the Family Law Act. Nevertheless, he suggested that the principle of ‘giving parties to divorce some quality, objective and factual information’ was ‘a good one’, and recommended that leaflets be sent out ‘to all Petitioners and Respondents at the time of issue or service of petition’. If the leaflets were to be a sole source of information provision, however, the main limitation would be the obvious dependency on a literate divorcing population. Leaflets are not an appropriate means for conveying information to the less literate sections of the community. A recently published report suggested that in Europe, only Poland and Ireland have poorer standards of adult literacy than the UK.⁶ It seems that 23 per cent of UK adults are at the lowest literacy level, as against 24 per cent of Irish and 44 per cent of Polish adults. Figures show that ‘one in six UK adults are unable to read well enough to cope with such simple tasks as reading a bus timetable or a menu’.⁷ The information leaflets require a much higher level of literacy, and in their present form would be much too difficult for such people. The complexity of the written material was a concern frequently expressed by the various professionals we consulted during our research. Moreover, the marketing of the special study relied heavily on newspaper coverage, which would be unlikely to reach people unable to read. One suspects, therefore, that our analysis of use of the postal pack could only address its impact on a comparatively literate section of the population.

It may also be questioned whether written information alone can achieve the objectives of the FLA in terms of saving marriages and encouraging use of mediation. Most people

⁵ Hodson, D., ‘The Family Law Act: where now?’, Annual Conference of the United Kingdom College of Family Mediators (1 July 1999).

⁶ ‘Literacy crusade aims to hit home’, *Guardian* (26 March 1999).

⁷ ‘Classes at work for adult illiterates’, *Guardian* (24 March 1999).

who received a postal pack seemed to be well down the path to divorce. It seems that the information contained in the leaflets did not contribute significantly to slowing down that process. Six months after having received the pack the majority of recipients were either involved in divorce proceedings or intending to be, and most had consulted a solicitor. Moreover, it does not seem that the information in the pack leads to the use of either counselling or mediation services. People who attend an information meeting are more likely than postal pack recipients to go on to either mediation or counselling. This may be because they are more inclined to discuss their problems with a third party than those who have received information by post, but it is also likely that they will have had the services explained to them, thus encouraging them to consider using them.

The conclusion arising from the postal pack experiment seems to be that it is a cheap and practical means of disseminating information, but that it has serious limitations. On the positive side, it contains information that could be provided to both parties involved in divorce proceedings, ensuring that both have the same opportunity to be informed. Although everyone could receive information provided this way, however, there is no guarantee as to how many would actually read it. Moreover, many people would be unable to do so. One might also ask whether information provided in paper format is somewhat old-fashioned – and wasteful of trees – given the existence of new means of conveying information via computer which we discussed in the previous chapter.

In the absence of other means of reinforcing messages – such as an information meeting – we have doubts as to how much impact the leaflets might have on those who read them. Although some people who received the pack suggested that the information had helped them feel more in control of events, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that reading the information significantly changes what people will do. Nevertheless, written information will enable some people to be more informed. For these people at least the leaflets will have been useful. How many people would be helped if information packs were to be provided for all divorcing couples it is not possible to predict, seeing that our study was based on evidence gleaned from active seekers of information, that is, people who specifically asked for a pack. It seems likely that such people will have been more inclined to read the leaflets provided than people who received them unsolicited.

It is likely that the information pack is most appropriate for people who have decided they are going to divorce but require general information about the divorce process. For those who received an information pack but who were still struggling to decide whether divorce was what they wanted, however, such a focus on the divorce process would be unhelpful. One might, for instance, ask whether it is appropriate to provide information about marriage saving at the same time as giving information that is designed to help people through the divorce process. Is there too much to take in? Is it better to provide additional information anyway, in case it needs to be referred to in the future? Although people intent on divorce occasionally change their minds, information about marriage support is likely to have most impact before the parties have decided to separate. On the other hand, people are likely to be more receptive to information about mediation after they have separated. This leads to the suggestion that the information pack might be more effective if the leaflets were made available in phases, rather than delivered in one batch to people who are at varying stages within the divorce process. Several divorce-associated professionals have expressed concerns about the overwhelming bulk of written information, and they may be right in suggesting it is too much for people to take in. We know enough about marriage support to state that it works best if people are able to access it early. Thus, efforts need to be concentrated on making the leaflets about saving

marriage and marriage support publicly available at all times (through public libraries, doctors' surgeries, promotional campaigns and so on) rather than relating their availability to actions that are required before one can gain access to divorce procedure.

There remains, of course, a dilemma concerning the optimum point at which to provide information about mediation. There might be less chance of confusing mediation with marriage counselling if it were provided at a time when people are ready to use it, perhaps when they first consult a solicitor. Mediation becomes appropriate at the point when parties separate, but there is no public action that registers when a separation occurs. One might provide information about mediation, and other issues related to divorce, at the time divorce is applied for. However, almost two-thirds of those who were involved in divorce proceedings at the time they received an information pack felt that the information was for them too late. By contrast, 70 per cent of those who received the information pack before starting divorce proceedings felt they were receiving it at the right time. In order to understand who was likely to feel that the information was too late, we conducted a logistic regression analysis. The results indicate that men, those who had already been to a solicitor and those with children aged 5–17 are the groups most likely to feel that the information has come too late.⁸ The relationship between gender and contact with solicitors is demonstrated in Table 10.11. It shows that men are more likely than women to feel that the information has been obtained too late, and that men and women who have consulted a solicitor are more likely than those with no solicitor contact to feel it is too late.

Table 10.11 Feelings about timing of information by gender and contact with solicitor

Timing of information	Males		Females	
	<i>consulted a solicitor prior to meeting</i> %	<i>had not consulted a solicitor</i> %	<i>consulted a solicitor prior to meeting</i> %	<i>had not consulted a solicitor</i> %
Too late	52.7	18.3	38.0	11.9
Too early	1.1	4.2	7.4	7.8
Right time	41.8	74.6	51.2	77.2
Unsure	4.4	2.8	3.3	3.2
Total (100%)	91	142	121	193

Chi-squared = (males) 33.18; $p < .001$; (females) 31.17; $p < .001$.

Receipt of an information pack will be just as important for the party who does not initiate divorce. Our study of the impact of information meetings on people involved in divorce proceedings suggests that those who initiate proceedings are likely to have gone to some lengths to obtain information before going ahead with a divorce application. At the point when they receive notice of the petition, however, the other party may have considerable ground to make up, and an information pack may well be particularly useful for them. Whenever information is made available, however, it needs to be presented in a clear, coherent way. Bundles of leaflets may not be the most helpful format, and certainly the leaflets used during the evaluation were often complex and overly detailed. They also

⁸ See Annexe 5, Table A5.21.

contained mixed messages about what services to use, and how to access those that were chosen. A simpler pack might provide one way forward in the absence of implementation of Part II.