The role of social workers in supporting and developing the work of foster carers

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The quality of relations between social workers and foster carers can virtually make or break a placement. Clive Sellick uses a wide range of social work literature to examine some of the conditions needed for these relations to succeed, both in the realm of practical organisation and in terms of individual qualities such as reliability, honesty, empathy and warmth.

'She was approachable, always attentive. She gave you the confidence that she knew what she was doing.'

The notion of people working together as fellow participants in a service has underpinned social work activity for much of its existence. Working relationships exist between clients and social workers, student social workers and practice teachers, social workers and managers, social workers and foster carers, and foster carers and parents. These relationships form the basis of how people negotiate, what they achieve and whether or not they are satisfied with the outcome. Research and practice wisdom which describe these various relationships come up with remarkably similar findings and comments about what sustains them and what can be achieved because of them. This article will discuss both the content and potential of these working relationships by referring to the wider social work literature. It will concentrate on what makes the particular relationship between foster carers and social workers both satisfactory and effective. It will do so by extracting what we know from the published accounts of research and practice about the qualities and competences which social workers need to exhibit in this vital area of their working lives. In order to do so it starts by looking at how social services and social work departments in both the statutory and voluntary sectors organise their social work personnel.

Service arrangements

Most local authorities separate the tasks and responsibilities of family placement from family support and child protection social work in two key ways. Firstly, different social workers with different job titles are employed to undertake each of these. This role division is virtually universal throughout Britain. Although it has many operational benefits it also has shortcomings which will be discussed later in this article. Family placement social workers have various titles ranging from the rather dated 'Fostering Officer' to the somewhat incomplete 'Homefinder', whose title includes recruitment and assessment tasks but implies that support and retention tasks are less important. In this article the term 'link social worker' is preferred to describe this role since it sums up the whole range of the work with foster carers, children and their relatives, and with the social workers of the children and their families. It is also a term which is used widely in practice (see, for example, Ramsay in the last edition of this journal describing foster care in Fife). In addition to the specialist tasks of recruiting, assessing, training and supporting foster carers, link social workers play a significant
role in coordinating services for foster carers by liaising and negotiating with their colleagues, managers and administrators. Children's social workers based in district, area, health care or other specialist teams are principally responsible for the design and implementation of care plans, for discharging other statutory duties and for working directly with children and their families, but they too have an important role to play with foster carers. This is particularly relevant in respect of short-term foster carers who regularly handle 'real life' situations with distressed children, demanding families, and pressing practicalities that require ready access to children's social workers' (Sellick, 1992, p 63).

Secondly, most local authorities house these two types of social workers in separate sections which are often geographically distant. Family Placement Units tend to be centralised although some departments out-post link workers in district teams. A recent study conducted by the National Foster Care Association on behalf of the Department of Health indicates that the separation of tasks and locations of link and family social workers is widespread in local authorities across England (Waterhouse, forthcoming). Volume 3 of the Children Act Regulations does not require the establishment of such a distinct service but acknowledges its value, especially for foster carers themselves (DoH, 1991, p 22). Although this arrangement is generally based on experience rather than research, some descriptive studies indicate that foster carers themselves find it helpful (DoH, 1995b). The major study by Rowe et al (1989) of more than 10,000 placements in six English local authorities over two years investigated the possible links between placement outcomes and the organisation of fostering services. Although no clear link was found, there was evidence that there were advantages from having separate link social workers able to form good working relationships with foster carers (Hundleby, 1989). This study also reported that separate family placement units or the posting of link social workers in district teams led to effectiveness in recruiting foster carers and a greater expertise in their assessment. Respondents in the study by Waterhouse (forthcoming) also report increased recruitment activity.

Independent non-profit making fostering agencies have no formal or statutory authority to employ staff to undertake the work of local authority children and family social workers. Their strength springs from the specialist and often pioneering nature of their family placement work. Both large-scale and long-established voluntary organisations such as Barnardos, and small-scale and relatively recent ones such as Pro-Teen, have recruited and developed a workforce of foster carers who report very positively about their working relationships with their agency staff (Sellick, 1992; DoH 1995a). Government proposals for the introduction of inadequately regulated fostering-for-profit agencies have been widely criticised by both local authority and independent agencies’ staff (see, for example, Rickford, 1995). However, if such agencies invest in high quality support services to their foster carers they are likely to command the respect of these carers in much the same way as those who foster for the independent agencies or who highly regard the work of their local authority link social workers.

Components of an effective working relationship

In recent years a number of evaluative studies of child care social work have included descriptive accounts of the activities of social
workers. Consumers of a social work service describe what they value from social workers. Clients and carers have by these descriptions allowed us to dissect the core features of an effective social work service delivered by social workers themselves. Two major categories have emerged which are summarised below by Howe (1987). He writes that in order to be effective social workers must succeed in two areas - personal relationships and the organisation of work:

They must create those personal conditions which establish a relationship of trust, caring and acceptance thereby increasing the client's amenability to therapeutic influence. It appears, therefore, that the quality of the relationship is important in social work practice. Social workers should be 'responsive'.

They must employ careful and explicit procedures. The purpose of the worker involvement must be understood by the worker and the client. Good practitioners make deliberate use of well articulated theories and methods which organise, order and direct practice in a way that is recognised by both worker and client.

Social workers should be 'systematic'. (Howe, 1987, p 5)

These two major components are expressed in different terms but include remarkably similar features elsewhere in the literature. For example, in a more recent publication in which he describes the processes of counselling and psychotherapy Howe (1993) refers both to the 'core conditions' of genuineness, empathy and warmth as well as the theoretical base and therapeutic techniques of the therapist. Elsewhere in a recently published reader on the theory and practice of foster care Triseliotis et al (1995) also divide effective social work practice into two areas: the personal qualities and the professional competences which social workers display.

Two influential child care studies, Fisher et al (1986) and Farmer and Parker (1991), contain clear consumer descriptions of social work practice which build on our knowledge of social work qualities and competences.

The study by Fisher et al had a great impact upon child care practice, especially with regard to the notion of parental responsibility and the working relations between parents and social workers. An in-depth sample of 55 cases gave rise to 331 individual interviews with parents, children, field and residential social workers. These spanned the study's three phases of admission, in-care and discharge. Social workers were praised by parents when they were:

* open and honest and 'put their cards on the table';
* consistently showed concern by staying in close touch with parents;
* exhibited a desire to involve parents in the decisions and activities of care;
* took parents seriously;
* acted purposefully and in a business-like manner, for example by using written agreements or by discussing various options with parents.
This applied even where they were at odds over what they each considered to be in the children's best interests.

Farmer and Parker (1991) studied case files in four local authorities in England covering over 300 children who were returned home while they were still subject to care orders. The authors used the phrase 'purposeful social work' to describe what seemed to be a key ingredient in successful rehabilitation cases. This meant that social workers had to be clear about their responsibilities; they needed to be persistent and they needed to be flexible, adding that

It was this clarity of purpose, plus the ability to use their authority, combined with steady, reliable visiting that seemed to mark out the most effective social work input. (Farmer, 1992, p 13)

A very helpful, recent addition to the body of child care research sheds further light on the positive components of another working relationship in child welfare - that of parents and foster carers. Bradley and Aldgate (1994) studied the use of short-term breaks for children in need. The experiences of the key participants were considered. Among them parents commented on the friendliness and supportiveness of the carers, their generosity and their non-judgmental approach which seemed to restore their self-esteem and confidence as parents (Bradley and Aldgate, 1994, p 27)

The relevance to social work practice with foster carers

By looking beyond the manner in which social workers and foster carers relate to one another we can then establish a list of descriptive terms from those who are both consumers and generally less powerful protagonists in a working relationship. In these cited examples parents talk about what makes for a good social worker and, elsewhere, a good foster carer. When we go on to focus on what carers say about social workers many of their descriptions echo those of parents. Triseliotis and his colleagues cite Freeman's prerequisite qualities for creating the conditions of a working relationship or partnership:

honesty, naturalness, reliability, keeping clients informed, understanding their feelings and the stress of parenthood, offering combined practical and moral support (Freeman, 1991, p 64)

They go on to suggest that if we substitute 'foster carers' for 'clients' and 'caring' for 'parenthood' these prerequisites are equally appropriate for social workers in their work with foster carers (Triseliotis et al, 1995, p 93).

Carer studies

The views of foster carers and adopters as consumers of a social work support service have been reported in many studies. Some of these are now quite dated and many are North American. Since these carers were saying what many contemporary British carers say today there is a sobering as well as a fascinating element about them. The findings will now be briefly summarised.

Kline and Overstreet (1972) refer to carers wanting 'knowledgeable assurance' from social workers rather than 'vague generalisations,
evasion and indirection'. Hampson and Tavormina (1980), in a study of foster mothers, reported that their most frequent complaints related to the case management, poor communication or availability, and constant turnover of social workers. In a report based on interviews with government officials and agency managers in Canada, the USA, Denmark and the former West Germany, Southon (1986) wrote that 'successful fostering really does require a good rapport with the social worker' (p 43). Others talk of the need for social workers to praise and reassure foster carers (Littner, 1978; Cautley, 1980).

More recently two British publications reached similar conclusions. The first was an account of the service provided to adopters and permanent foster carers of children with special needs in a Scottish local authority (O'Hara, 1986). The second was a study of the support of short-term foster carers in four local authorities and two independent fostering agencies in England (Sellick, 1992).

O'Hara (1986) lists an interest and commitment to the carer, availability, reliability, trustworthiness, warmth, an ability to listen and competence over official matters. Sellick (1992) cites:

... workers and managers who make themselves available on both a regular and emergency basis, especially outside of office hours, who consult and inform carers, who offer recognition to foster carers for their work and for the personal costs to their families by, for example, the provision of respite and specialist support and who combine a working relationship with a personal touch are valued. (p 91)

The words of the foster carer in the title of this paper are representative of carers from different statutory and independent fostering agencies when they describe the work of their link social workers (Sellick, 1992, p 60). For example, another carer in the same study said her link worker

was always really on the ball. If I wasn't happy with things that she [the child social worker] was doing, I'd have a word with her. She was straight in writing memos, speaking to her, trying to get things sorted out. Things like that which was a great help. It wasn't just me having to struggle. She was on our side, backing us up, making some of the running as well. (Sellick, 1992, p 61)

These foster carers, along with many others, identified a number of different qualities. For instance, foster carers regularly report that they value or seek social workers who are energetic, purposeful, reliable and flexible, in addition to being friendly on the one hand and knowledgeable on the other. Foster carers are in the thick of things without day-to-day colleagues, without the opportunity to off load on to them or a manager, and without service conditions like paid holidays and sickness benefits, so little wonder that the personal skills of social workers can matter so much to foster carers. Foster carers in the same way as clients, students and social workers value being understood, respected, listened to and having interest shown in them by the social worker, therapist, manager or whoever happens to be on the other side of the working relationship in which they are engaged. Once established, collaboration acts as a springboard to allow foster carers to get on with the job. However, it seems to be at this point that foster carers require more from social workers than social skills and sound personalities. Social worker competence is needed if the working relationship is to
survive.

Foster care studies continually refer to the difference between the support provided to foster carers within a working relationship by link social workers and the social worker responsible for the child in the foster placement. However, a study of 72 foster carers in one Scottish local authority reported recently in this journal (Ramsay, 1996), noted that over two-thirds of the foster carers were satisfied with the support of their foster child's social worker either all or most of the time. The report of the second in a series of governmental inspections of six local authority fostering services stated that foster carers valued the support of their link workers and, because they respected their abilities, willingly accepted constructive criticism and the need to be accountable for their work as carers. In contrast most had developed low expectations of the children's social workers who were often described as unresponsible, unavailable, unreliable and poor at administration (DoH, 1995b). These accounts also contrast sharply with those of foster carers in two independent fostering agencies recently studied by the Social Services Inspectorate (DoH, 1995a). In these agencies foster carers considered they were encouraged to contribute to shared decision-making as team members, gained professional status and recognition, received a professional fee, and worked with specialist fostering social workers who were available around the clock to support them and the placement. These workers function as link workers within the independent agencies. The children's social workers as local authority employees are therefore even more organisationally distant from the independent agencies’ staff and carers than they are from link workers in their own agencies.

The way forward

There are clearly many advantages for both local authority fostering agencies and foster carers in separating out responsibilities for family placement on the one hand and child and family social work on the other. Yet this virtually universal arrangement has, it seems, one major structural fault: the expressed dissatisfaction of foster carers with the service they receive from children's social workers. In contrast the overall satisfaction that foster carers experience from their working relationships with local authority link social workers and independent agency specialist and support social workers serves to expose this faultline even further.

Certain arrangements may reduce these differences. Placing link social workers in district or area teams (Hundleby, 1989), regular joint training sessions for foster carers and children's social workers (Triseliotis et al, 1995), and the participation of social workers in foster care social events (Sellick, 1992) are reported as assisting the development of collaborative working practices and mutual respect of foster carers and children's social workers. But real solutions depend upon major change which may be beyond the grasp of most local authorities at least in the short-term. Many children's social workers are inexperienced and some move quickly to less stressful jobs only to be replaced by other newly qualified social workers. The professional training of social work students does not adequately cover the contemporary realities of foster care and the demands upon the largely volunteer workforce of foster carers and their families. Group care practice placements, for example, are still more likely to be sited in residential or day care establishments for children than in foster family settings.
Further leads may come from our knowledge of the stresses of social work and foster care practice, and the vital contribution of supportive supervision in developing and retaining social workers and foster carers alike. The range of supervision arrangements beyond the formal hierarchical one traditionally practised, as described by Sellick (1992 in Appendix B), may be further adapted. This could include peer or small group supervision involving link and children's social workers and foster carers together.

There are very few published practice accounts of these sorts of arrangements, although clearly opportunities are there to be taken. However, possibilities are not endless in a system which separates the activities, professional development and workplaces of link and children's social workers. Even the most effective and respected social worker for the child and family cannot be 'there' for the foster carers in the same way as link workers. Children's social workers have divided loyalties, many are subject to the unpredictable demands of child abuse investigations and court appearances, and can spend much time arranging contact visits and departmental meetings. The different responsibilities of link social workers allow them to be more measured. There is no real excuse for unreliability, inefficiency, lack of openness or inconsistency in link or children's social workers but maybe all of us, including foster carers, should understand a little more that organisational constraints rather than individual failure are often responsible.

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