Surviving the system as a foster carer

The foster care system in Britain is under pressure, with local authorities finding it difficult to offer sufficient placement choice to looked after children, so the retention of existing foster carers is vital. Foster carers’ dissatisfaction with the attitude and support offered by social services has been linked to their premature departure from fostering. Flora Maclay, Maureen Bunce and David G Purves explore the quality of the relationship between foster carers and local authority social workers and how it develops. From interviews with foster carers, four principle themes emerged: foster carers often feel under-supported and undervalued; independent networking acts as a survival mechanism; foster carers become more assertive with social workers over time; and some carers are able to manage the system whereas others become dragged into draining conflict. A model tracing the evolution of the relationship that foster carers have with social workers, from entry into the service to departure, is proposed to explain the existing levels of conflict. Recommendations for change within the system are suggested.

Flora Maclay is a Counselling Psychologist
Maureen Bunce is Service Manager, Child and Adolescent Mental Health working within a partnership between a local authority and NHS Trust
David Purves is a Principal Lecturer in Counselling Psychology at London Metropolitan University

Key words: fostering, social services, social worker relationships, care of looked after children

Introduction
It is generally accepted that care in a family home is most appropriate and beneficial for children who are unable to stay with their biological families, with the result that the majority of looked after children are placed in foster care (Kirton et al, 2003). Foster carers provide children with opportunities to learn to live successfully in a family and in a community and hence develop social competence (Wells and D’Angelo, 1994). In addition to promoting the welfare of the child, foster care is cost effective compared with residential care (Audit Commission, 1985).

A child may be placed in foster care for various reasons, including abuse, neglect and uncontrolled behaviour, or at the request of parents (Kagan, 1998). However, the picture of children in care has changed over the last 25 years, with the population of looked after children presenting more complex and severe emotional and behavioural difficulties, physical disabilities, learning disabilities and offending profiles (Triseliotis et al, 2000). As a result, providing adequate care for these children can be challenging for foster carers. In addition to such pressures, external pressures are inherent in foster care, including constant scrutiny by third parties such as social workers, agencies and biological parents, as well as uncertainty as to the child’s length of stay (Schwartz, 1994).

Given these challenges, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is ongoing concern about maintaining the supply of families willing to foster. A current shortage of suitable foster carers makes it difficult to place certain groups of children, such as older children, siblings, those from minority ethnic groups, disabled children and those presenting behavioural problems (Bebbington and Miles, 1990; Triseliotis et al, 2000; Waterhouse and Brocklesby, 2001; Social Services Inspectorate, 2002). As a result there are unacceptable restrictions on placement choice (House of Commons Health Committee, 1998).

Retention as well as recruitment of foster carers has long been a cause for concern. There is some evidence to suggest that foster carer attrition rates represent a significant waste of resources (Nixon, 1997). For example, Jones (1975) found that 40 per cent of carers ceased to foster within their first year and Soothill and Derbyshire (1982) reported an annual drop-out rate of about 25 per cent in a cohort of foster carers. However, more recent findings based on broader samples suggest that around seven or eight per cent of foster carers leave the service each year and most local authorities make annual net gains in foster carer numbers (Waterhouse, 1997; Triseliotis et al, 2000). These findings indicate that although
retention may not be a major problem for the majority of authorities, as has been feared, there is little room for complacency. Demand for foster placements is high and there is significant variation in ability to meet it across regional authorities (Social Services Inspectorate, 2002), leading to what has been described as ‘a developing crisis’ in foster care (National Foster Care Association, 1997, p 31; House of Commons Health Committee, 1998).

Throughout the research literature concerning foster carer retention, the dissatisfaction of foster carers with the operation of fostering services is a recurrent theme. For example, a quarter of Scottish foster carers cited this as the most common primary reason for giving up. As well as precipitating departure from fostering, a negative perception of fostering services by foster carers has a detrimental impact on their ability to look after the children in their care, even if they continue to foster (Triseliotis et al, 2000).

Lack of support has been identified as a major factor influencing foster carer retention (Rowe et al, 1991; Fees et al, 1998; Sinclair et al, 2004). Encouragingly, more recent studies indicate that the efforts to improve support services for foster carers are starting to pay off with foster carers reporting higher levels of satisfaction (Triseliotis et al, 2000; Kirton et al, 2003; Sinclair et al, 2004). Yet there still seems to be room for improvement, both in terms of concrete support and increased levels of general appreciation and respect (Triseliotis et al, 2000). The importance that foster carers place on support is shown by the finding that only a minority of carers would favour higher payments at the expense of other forms of support (Kirton et al, 2003). There is a clear argument that providing adequate support to foster carers leads to long-term benefits through maximising foster carer retention, minimising agency costs and preventing the breakdown of placements (Sellick and Thoburn, 1996).

In the definition of support required by foster carers, Nixon (1997) emphasised that family, friends and other informal elements of support need to be coupled with agency, professional and other formal support structures. Indeed, it is recognised that foster carers rely on external supports to enable them to sustain fostering activities (Sinclair et al, 2004), with the result that the ability of foster carers to create their own networks has been linked to gains in the support they receive (Titterington, 1990). The importance of other foster carers as a primary source of support and consultation to those who are struggling is paramount (Seaberg and Harrigan, 1999). However, only 50 per cent of carers in England (Waterhouse, 1997) and 35 per cent in Scotland are regularly involved in supporting other carers (Triseliotis et al, 2000).

Despite foster carer reliance on sources of support external to fostering agencies, the relationship between foster carers and the fostering system in which they operate has a major impact on retention, both directly and by affecting how foster carers manage the various struggles and challenges they face (Rindfleisch et al, 1998; Triseliotis et al, 2000). Choice Protects (Department of Health, 2002), a government review of child placement services, identified the importance of communicative relationships between foster carers and social workers based on partnership. Ideally, a strong relationship between a foster carer and their supervising social worker may well have a positive impact on long-term retention. However, the relationship between supervising social workers and foster carers can also be a direct source of frustration and so precipitate departure from fostering (Rindfleisch et al, 1998).

Conflict with social services, in particular, seems to have a significant impact on retention (Wilson et al, 2000). As noted earlier, foster carers face many pressures in their work (Schwartz, 1994). They are employed by or report to a fostering agency and also have a duty of care to their foster child. Tension can build up when the needs of the child and the needs of the agency pull the foster carer in different directions (Wells and D’Angelo, 1994). As a result, disagreement between foster carers and social workers is probably inevitable and ‘not
necessarily a bad thing’ (Fisher et al., 2000, p 232). What has been described as concerning is the handling of such disagreements in ways which leave foster carers feeling let down and unsupported.

Despite the ideal that foster carers are valued as equal team members in the childcare system, many sources of evidence contradict this view. Few are involved in the decisions affecting the children in their care. Foster carers routinely complain that information about the children in their care is withheld, that they have little input in the assessing and matching of children to their families and that they are unrepresented on management and policy-making committees (Waterhouse, 1997; Triseliotis et al., 2000). Kirton and his colleagues (2003) conclude that the exclusion of foster carers from professional partnership remains widespread. However, in keeping with the developing concept that foster carers are equal stakeholders in the care system, recent research has been directed towards their experiences, opinions, needs and concerns (Fisher et al., 2000; Triseliotis et al., 2000; Sargent and O’Brien, 2004; Sinclair et al., 2004; Wilson et al., 2004; Sinclair, 2005).

As discussed, the literature broadly associates dissatisfaction with fostering services and changes in personal circumstances with the premature departure of foster carers from fostering. Recurrent themes of lack of support from fostering agencies, troubled relationships with social workers and the marginalisation of foster carers in the system echo across the findings of qualitative and quantitative research. Now that recent large-scale studies have provided a clearer and more reliable analysis of foster carer dissatisfaction and service delivery and the factors associated with it, it is time to seek a greater understanding of why it occurs. For example, there has been little focus on how and why foster carer attitudes towards key relationships change over time.

The aim of this study is to explore more fully the relationship between social workers and foster carers, with a view to understanding the evolution of the dynamics that operate between them. In order to focus the investigation on the views of foster carers themselves and provide deep insight into the quality and nature of foster carer/social worker relationships, a qualitative study with a small sample size was designed. It was hoped that, while a small sample would limit generalisation from any findings, it would allow a deeper analysis of themes in order to understand the ways foster carers and social workers might relate to each other and how any patterns of relationship might develop. Findings were subsequently related to the substantial amount of existing research into factors that affect foster carers, thus providing a tentative context for a model of the development of the foster carer/social worker relationship.

**Method**

Nine foster carers (seven women and one couple) who had fostered for at least one year and currently had children in their care were contacted via a therapeutic centre in an outer London borough providing support for foster children, foster carers and their families. All foster carers interviewed reported to the same social services fostering agency. Those who volunteered to participate were interviewed at their own homes. The participants represented a wide spread of experience (from two to 20 years fostering) and age (from early thirties to mid-fifties) with a range of children (from babies to teenagers) and types of fostering (emergency placements, short-term and long-term). The age range, spread of experience and ethnicity of the sample suggest that this sample is representative of the foster carer population (Triseliotis et al., 2000). Participants were assured of their right to confidentiality and explicitly told that the contents of their interview would not be available to social services.

The interviews were semi-structured and the researcher followed the natural flow of the participants’ conversation where possible. Interview questions were derived from the existing literature and designed to facilitate talk on the experience of being a foster carer, replicating a similar study by Weinstein (2001). As well as asking broad, unfocused questions about foster caring, the researcher specifically probed interviewees about...
their perceptions of social workers and their fostering agency and whether these had changed over time. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996) in which the researcher constantly moves between the verbal data in the transcript and emerging themes, modifying and confirming them as appropriate. This method of analysis was used to identify themes hypothesised from the literature and to develop new ones that were grounded in the data. The aim was not only to find themes that were broadly consistent across the nine participants but also to generate hypotheses about how these themes might be integrated to form a coherent picture of these foster carers’ relationship with this social services department. Precautions were taken to ensure maximum reliability and validity of the themes (Boyatzis, 1998).

Results
Foster carers presented a diverse picture of their relationship with social services, even in this small sample. Some reported high levels of support and close working relationships with social workers. Others seemed to be weighed down and preoccupied by their struggles with the system. Two foster families expressed their satisfaction with social services, two were angry to the point of considering leaving and the remaining four seemed to have mixed attitudes but appeared able to sustain their fostering role within the limitations of their relationship with social services and social workers. The themes arising from the interviews were grouped and interpreted to produce four principal findings pertinent to the relationship between foster carers and social services:

1. Foster carers often feel undersupported and undervalued.
2. Independent networking acts as a survival mechanism.
3. Foster carers become more assertive with social workers over time.
4. Some carers are able to manage the system whereas others become dragged into draining conflict.

Despite individual differences, it is proposed from the themes that emerged from the interviews with foster carers that their relationship with social services progresses through a number of phases between when they start fostering and when they cease. These phases are summarised in the diagram below.

Entry
Foster carers reported feeling completely underprepared and bereft of support when they first started fostering, despite their initial training. Many found the experience quite a shock and in retrospect felt that they had been naïve on entering the service. As one carer narrated:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years as a foster carer</th>
<th>Age of children fostered</th>
<th>Short-term/long-term</th>
<th>Age of own children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White UK</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Babies</td>
<td>ST</td>
<td>11,16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>M,F</td>
<td>White UK</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Babies</td>
<td>ST/LT</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White UK</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0–16</td>
<td>ST/LT</td>
<td>Left home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White UK</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0–16</td>
<td>ST/LT</td>
<td>14,18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White UK</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0–16</td>
<td>ST/LT</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White UK</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0–16</td>
<td>ST/LT</td>
<td>Left home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White UK</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0–8</td>
<td>ST</td>
<td>16,18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White UK</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0–16</td>
<td>ST/LT</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: F = female; M = male; ST = short-term; LT = long-term
I expected – it might not be the right word – a ‘normal’ little child coming in who wasn’t going to go off the walls and wasn’t going to smear poop all up the walls. I really didn’t expect any of that. And it was quite a shock and there have been times in the early years when I thought, ‘Oh no – I really can’t cope with it.’

Initially, new foster carers reported relying heavily on social services for support and guidance. For example, they had required regular telephone contact and face-to-face social worker input. They also tended to comply with any demands and suggestions made by social services as they tried to adjust to their new role. This resulted in low levels of conflict but a highly dependent relationship.

Survival
Social services could not support foster carers single-handedly even if their resources were unlimited. Foster carers need many types and sources of support, ranging from informal to formal, from professional to personal and social (Nixon, 1997). However, some foster carers reported feeling chronically undersupported by social workers where large caseloads and limited resources lead to fluctuation in the quality of support they provide (Triseliotis et al, 2000; Kirton et al, 2003).

As a result, foster carers described how quickly they developed networks to provide the high levels of support they require to look after children. These support networks combine input from social services representatives alongside personal, peer and other professional sources. Many talked about the role that their own families play in supporting foster children in their care, whether by playing a foster grandparent, aunt, uncle or sibling role or by supporting the carer themselves. Some also described how they regularly telephone other carers for help with their foster children, on both practical matters and for advice. One carer illustrated how she coped in these terms:

Yeah, so I’ve got my own sort of network of support really. Plus then you’ve got other carers who you can be quite free to talk to in general.

Foster carers reported operating professional support networks almost entirely independently of social services to compensate for perceived low support from overstretched supervising social workers. They made independent links with specific professionals such as doctors, teachers and favoured social workers. Participants also reported establishing their own network within social services, allowing them to bypass their link worker to make things run smoothly. For example, some carers talked of contacting the placements office directly to alert them to vacancies:

Actually often the placements and all that sorting out can be initiated by you.
In this way, carers described developing their own networks of professionals, other carers and their personal resources to supplement the support provided by social services (Titterington, 1990; Sinclair et al, 2004). On a number of occasions participants approached the interviewer for information and feedback providing live examples of their networking capabilities. For instance, a carer asked the interviewer about the therapeutic centre involved in the research, wondering if it might provide additional support for her foster child.

Foster carer networking raises the likelihood of foster carers staying in the service and failure to develop independent networks can result in their leaving the service early on (Exit 1) (Nixon, 1997; Titterington, 1990; Sinclair et al, 2004).

Social services already encourage foster carers to network through training and by trying to set up support groups. Although foster carers talked of these measures positively, they expressed a desire for these interventions to be made independent from social workers, an opinion confirmed elsewhere (Triseliotis et al, 2000).

Independence
As these foster carers built up their own experience and resources, they reported becoming increasingly independent of social services and less willing to engage with them. The foster carers moved from a position of weakness, predicated on lack of experience and knowledge, to a position of strength in their relationship with the system. There seemed to be a general desire to be recognised for their professionalism and expertise, as this carer explains:

And I expect them to treat me professionally. I do this as a job. All right it might be a job I enjoy. But this is my job. They're a social worker, that's their job. If I treat them as a social worker then they should treat me as a foster carer. And we're not treated as foster carers. We're just these people that look after these kids.

Many foster carers expressed their anger and frustration about being expected to act as professionals in this deeply challenging work while being constantly treated unprofessionally by social services. Examples of unprofessional treatment ranged from long waits for expenses or equipment, information about children being withheld, foster carer opinion being ignored, to lack of consideration about foster carers’ needs and families. This hypothesis is supported by findings that ‘the more qualified the carers, the more critical they were of the support they had received’ (Triseliotis et al, 2000, p 151).

Along similar lines, the majority of foster carers discussed feeling undervalued by the system. This perception was raised in a number of contexts, from feeling ‘taken for granted’ in practical arrangements to having their input ignored or the emotional pressure on them minimised. They discussed at length their struggles to be heard, considered and supported. The following comment summarises how exploited foster carers can feel, particularly since it was made by a carer who was extremely positive about social services in general:

I think a lot of carers just feel that they're just a train and the door opens and they throw a kid in and the door shuts and you go along a bit and the door opens and they take that one out till the next stop and then the door opens again. And you just get on with it because you're a carer and that's what you do. You don't have feelings and you don't have any say and you know you're used to it. You've been doing it for ten years, what's the matter with you?

Many foster carers expressed how they had changed their own approach to interacting with social workers and the agency as they had become more experienced. They described how they had grown more confident and assertive, more willing to challenge and less willing to comply with social workers and all the demands made upon them, as the following three quotations indicate:

Yeah it has changed. I have got to the stage where I don't take any crap anymore and it's only been two years. There's a very, very steep learning curve. Like I said, when I first started I didn't know that I could say no. You know they'd phone...
and say, ‘Contact’s tomorrow. This time, that time. Be there.’ ‘Okay then.’ Then I’d get off the phone and go. ‘Ooh they’re out of order.’ But now I’ve realised through my own way of learning that I can say no.

Has it changed? Well yes I suppose it has. Yeah it has changed in that I’m a bit more confident about where I am in the, not in the pecking order exactly, but they need me. I think when you first start you don’t realise how much they need us. I mean some of the confrontations when I have had patronising social workers . . . [Long description of how social worker arranged an unnecessary meeting with her without thinking of the importance of her time]

But you know I have changed in that respect, that I will stick up for myself more because I think I’ve realised that they’ll walk all over you if you let them.

I would say that I am certainly more confident to challenge bad practice. And now the Department have actually done that with my training.

It is clear that over time foster carers assess their own position in the foster care system and become increasingly protective of their own needs, confident of their expertise and more able to challenge social services. One participant said of her relationship with social services:

I’m being more assertive now and I’ve told them straight, ‘You’re not pushing me around anymore.’

Conflict
As foster carers become aware of their value, experience and expertise, a healthy, more equal working relationship between supervising social workers and foster carers can develop or, alternatively, conflict can be exacerbated. In a context where foster carers feel excluded, undervalued and undersupported, conflict seems inevitable whether it is over decisions concerning the foster children or about the foster carer’s place in the system. An embattled relationship between carers and social workers characterised by mutual recriminations and non-co-operation inevitably drains resources, leaving less time, attention and energy for the children in care, as this carer with 20 years’ experience illustrates in her description of conflict with her new supervising social worker:

And in the end he got me. I landed up off sick for three weeks. No one has ever got me like that in fostering. I mean I’ve had battles with loads of link workers [supervising social workers] but we’ve always sorted it out and I can’t with him.

As a result, she was seriously considering withdrawing from fostering.

When situations such as this arise, otherwise capable and content foster carers can become disillusioned with the system and leave (Exit 2). Yet, judging from the intensity of discontent expressed by some participants who were still active carers, it seems that high levels of conflict can be tolerated between a foster carer and the system before it precipitates their departure, possibly due to the personal motivation and commitment of foster carers to fostering.

In contrast, some carers seemed able to manage their relationship with social services to minimise conflict. They appeared able to hold the tension between acting independently and working with social services, putting forward their professional opinions yet accepting that social services have the final word. They asserted themselves to get their own and their foster children’s needs met without entering into draining conflict. They discussed managing their relationship with social services strategically, asserting their needs enough to protect themselves and their families, but at the same time meeting social services’ needs. This is a delicate balance to maintain, particularly against a backdrop of feeling undervalued.

Discussion
It is important to emphasise that not all foster carers feel completely undersupported and undervalued all the time. Many participants expressed their gratitude towards individual social workers and satisfaction with social services for the support and training they provide. It is
a question of degree, depending partly on the level of support they require and their own expectations. It seems that the ability to ‘manage’ relationships with social workers and social services may mediate where carers fall on the contentment/disillusion continuum, as suggested by previous findings that foster carer/supervising social worker relationships play a pivotal role in retention (Rindfleisch et al., 1998; Triseliotis et al., 2000; Sinclair et al., 2004). Therefore, it is tempting to ask why some foster carers seem to be able to manage their relationship with fostering agencies and social workers while others struggle. Like any personal relationship, the success of this working partnership will always vary across individuals, but the role of social workers and fostering agencies must also be considered when trying to understand how counterproductive relationship patterns develop.

Aside from personality factors that may determine how well foster carers and social workers work together, it seems important to ask whether there is any alternative developmental template that would in general promote a stronger and more positive pattern of relating between foster carers and social services. On building this model, it seemed possible that the independent phase could potentially serve foster children, foster carers and social services well if it were not dogged by conflict. The diagram below charts an alternative progression for foster carers within the fostering system.

When they start fostering, foster carers will always have little experience and hence be heavily reliant on others for support. In this revised model, social services would allocate more resources to supporting foster carers at this critical early phase. However, these resources would be used to encourage foster carers to form their own support networks so that they are likely to require less support from social services at a later stage. They could provide more help to learn from their own fostering experiences, perhaps through providing external consultation or supervision for foster carers to enable them to reflect on the impact of their work without feeling compromised within the agency (Barratt, 2002). It is also important to ensure that foster carers know that it is ‘normal’ to need help (Barratt, 2002, p.168).

A recent evaluation of a specialist therapeutic service for looked after children, which worked primarily with foster carers, showed that they both valued inclusion in such services and readily took advantage of what they were offered, with indirect benefits for the children in their care (Sargent and O’Brien, 2004). Therefore, foster carer independence could be developed with social services’

---

**Figure 2**
A model of support and co-operation mapping how a foster carer’s relationship with social services could develop over time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENTRY</th>
<th>SUPPORT</th>
<th>INDEPENDENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foster Carer</strong></td>
<td>Low experience</td>
<td>Learning from experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High dependence on social services</td>
<td>Learning from training</td>
<td>Feeling valued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Services</strong></td>
<td>Initial training for foster carer</td>
<td>Continued strong support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– networking encouraged</td>
<td>– training and supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Foster carer progression over time**

- Mutual respect
- Foster care
- Co-operation

- Open communication
- Ongoing
support rather than born of necessity due to lack of it. Thus, the survival phase is replaced with a support phase where fewer foster carers leave the service within the first year and less bad feeling is generated between carers and the system.

As foster carers grow more independent, they could act largely autonomously, self-supported by big networks of professionals and other experienced foster carers. In this way they could construct a fostering environment in tune with their own family culture. In this independent role as an experienced foster carer, they could be more valued by social services, particularly in terms of their understanding of the children in their care. By attending more to foster carer opinions and views, social services not only potentially gain an additional perspective on the child but also help foster carers feel valued and respected, boosting their motivation to continue.

The positive effects of a fostering programme structured on a model similar to this have been seen in practice and reported in a previous issue of Adoption & Fostering (Unrau et al., 2004). A new foster care programme was set up in the US where the fostering agency allowed greater discretion among line-level workers to meet the unique service needs of foster families, promoting greater team-oriented communication and more foster family involvement than in the conventional model of foster care. The aim was to incorporate foster carers in an effort to improve outcomes for children and recognise their additional input by paying them for extra services and assisting other carers in crises. It was found that the new model was more successful at maintaining caseworker stability and, to a smaller degree, placement stability than conventional foster care service delivery. The authors hypothesised that the increase in caseworker stability might reflect their new perception of foster carers as an additional support rather than a drain on their resources. Unfortunately, they did not investigate the effect on foster carers.

Thus, the evolution of a foster carer within the system could be represented by a progression to independence in harmony rather than in conflict with social services. For this to succeed there needs to be general recognition that the roles of social workers and foster carers are different but equally important in the care of vulnerable children (Kirton et al., 2003). The result would hopefully minimise draining and unnecessary conflict, improve retention and increase focus on the children for whom the system was established.

There are obvious limitations to the generalisations that can be made from this study, not least because its small sample is drawn from current foster carers within a single local authority fostering agency, so there is no comparison with the views of foster carers who have withdrawn from fostering or those supported by voluntary sector or private agencies. Indeed, this last point is especially important in view of the growing proportion of foster placements provided by independent agencies. It will be interesting to see whether they are more successful than social services at recruiting and retaining carers, and whether these achievements improve outcomes for children.

The proposed model of how the foster carer/social services relationship develops is an initial attempt to move beyond the description of this relationship to an exploration of it. Such a model is tentative and needs to feed into the recent tranche of research on foster care (Sinclair et al., 2004; Wilson, 2004; Sinclair, 2005; Sinclair et al., 2005). In particular, this study has highlighted the need to explore whether and how the relationships between foster carers and their foster children affect the foster carer/social worker relationship, and vice versa.

References


National Foster Care Association, *Foster Care in Crisis: A call to professionalise the forgotten service*, London: NFCA, 1997


Soothill K and Derbyshire M, ‘Retention of foster parents’, *Adoption & Fostering* 6:2, pp 38–43, 1982


© Flora Maclay, Maureen Bunce and David G Purves 2006