Still the poor relations? Perspectives on valuing and listening to foster carers

There has long been debate regarding the treatment and status of foster carers, but this has gained added significance in the context of moves towards professionalisation and recognition of carers as part of the children’s workforce. While research studies have often touched upon the extent to which foster carers feel valued, appreciated or members of a team, less attention has been given to the perspectives of social workers and managers. Drawing on quantitative survey data and qualitative material from focus groups and interviews, Derek Kirton, Jennifer Beecham and Kate Ogilvie explore from the different perspectives of supervising social workers, service managers and foster carers, the extent to which the latter are valued, listened to or regarded as ‘colleagues’ by social work professionals and agencies. Key findings include that carers’ sense of being valued may be linked to factors such as age, experience, health and number of placements provided. Discussion of the status of foster carers revealed not only wide variation in practice but also a complex set of sentiments and significant divisions among social work professionals on the question of whether carers should be regarded as ‘colleagues’.

Introduction
Debate on the status of foster carers has been a perennial feature of child care policy and practice for many years (Department of Health and Social Security, 1976; Berridge, 1997). More specifically, the perceived low status and poor treatment of many carers have been viewed as damaging to their motivation and retention as well as wasteful of their knowledge and experience. In this article, we consider some of the key issues and underlying themes in this debate and report relevant findings from a recent research study.

Concern about the status of foster carers emerged as part of a wider set of changes during the 1960s and 1970s (Parker, 1966; George, 1970). These included attempting to improve the retention of carers and transforming their role from a ‘pseudo-adoptive’ one to an ‘inclusive’ one, where they worked together with the child’s birth family and social workers (Thorpe, 1974; Holman, 1975, 1988; Thoburn, 1993). In this context, treating fostering as more akin to a ‘job’ than an extension of family life could be seen both as a means of securing commitment and avoiding ‘possessiveness’ on the part of carers (Parker, 1978). An important element in this shift was that carers should be regarded as ‘colleagues’ providing a service rather than ‘clients’ with a ‘need’ to foster children (Prosser, 1978).

The quest for improved status was bolstered by the formation of foster carer organisations (the Foster Parents Association, forerunner of today’s Fostering Network, was established in 1962) and a climate of challenge to deference and professional authority (Bolger et al., 1981). As Reeves states, foster carers increasingly refused ‘to be treated simply as a depository for children’ (1980 p 125).

Moves towards professionalisation in fostering also emphasised the status of carers, whether through payment for their work or recognising their contribution to working with and planning for children. These features were important both in the pioneering specialist schemes of the 1970s (Hazel, 1981; Shaw and Hipgrave, 1983) and subsequently in the emergence of independent fostering providers (IFPs) during the 1990s (Sellick, 2002). They have also been increasingly influential in ‘mainstream’ fostering and the perceived need for a skilled, committed ‘workforce’ to deliver services for looked after children (National Foster Care Association, 1993; Hutchinson et al., 2003).

During this period, research has regularly noted the salience to foster carers of feeling valued by social workers and ‘validated’ by their agencies (Brown and Calder, 2000; Fisher et al., 2000; Redding
Yet, despite these developments, studies have frequently found a felt lack of status, involvement and partnership among many carers (Bebbington and Miles, 1990; Waterhouse, 1992; Strover, 1996). However, while several studies have provided useful findings in this area, there remain certain gaps that can usefully be addressed. First, studies have concentrated, especially in recent times, overwhelmingly on foster carers’ perspectives, with limited coverage of the views of social workers or managers (Triseliotis, Borland and Hill, 2000). Second, the reporting of views has rarely taken into account the heterogeneity of carers in terms of biographical or fostering career variables. Third, there has been very little research involving comparison between local authority foster care and that provided in the independent sector. It is in this context that our findings are reported.

The study
The findings reported here derive from a broader study of the relationship between remuneration and performance in foster care (Kirton, Beecham and Ogilvie, 2003). The overarching aim of the study was to map the relationship between payments to foster carers (and deployment of other resources) and the performance of fostering agencies. Areas covered included attitudes to payment, perceptions and provision of support, participation in training, and relationships between foster carers, social workers and their employing agencies. The last mentioned focused particularly on the questions discussed here, namely the extent to which carers felt valued by social workers and listened to by their fostering agencies.

The study was carried out in 21 agencies in England, 16 local authorities (LAs) and five IFPs. The former were chosen to reflect different combinations of payment levels (using unit cost data) and performance (based on performance indicators for looked after children placed in foster care and placement stability measures). On this basis, local authorities were classified into four groups, as follows:

1. high performance/high expenditure;
2. high performance/low expenditure;
3. low performance/high expenditure;
4. low performance/low expenditure.

Data collection included a postal questionnaire to non-relative foster carer households, with a 60 per cent response rate yielding 1,181 returns, and in each agency, semi-structured interviews with service managers (SMs) (n = 21), and focus group discussions with foster carers (n = 139) and supervising social workers (SSWs) (n = 124) respectively.

Feeling valued and listened to: a statistical overview
Our initial data reporting comes from responses to the following two questions on the foster carers’ questionnaire: ‘Do you feel valued as a colleague by social workers?’ and ‘Do you think your local authority or agency listens and responds to the concerns of foster carers?’ The headline responses to these two questions are presented in Table 1.

The figures reported in Table 1 mask wide variation between agencies. In LAs,
‘yes’ responses to feeling valued ranged from 15 to 59 per cent, and those for listening and responding from six to 37 per cent. These were not, however, found to be linked to the study’s performance and expenditure categories, suggesting that at an aggregate level at least, feeling valued and listened to are not necessarily reflected in areas such as placement stability. IFP responses were markedly more positive than those from LAs. Seventy per cent of the study’s 170 IFP carers stated that they felt valued as colleagues and 61 per cent that they felt their agencies listened and responded to carers’ concerns. The latter figure is particularly striking, suggesting that IFPs are seen as significantly more responsive than LA services, a subject to which we will return.

We were also interested to know whether carers’ responses on feeling valued and listened to were associated with any biographical or fostering career variables. Some of the most striking findings related to age and experience. On the one hand, feeling valued was found to rise markedly with age (p = .005), while falling with greater experience (p <.001) (the latter being found among LA but not IFP carers). Thus, for any given level of experience, younger carers tended to feel significantly less valued. For example, among carers with between two and ten years’ experience, only 29 per cent of those aged under 35 reported feeling valued, compared with 51 per cent of over 45s. Similar associations were found between age and experience and feelings of being listened to. It is not clear how far these differences reflect treatment or attitudes on the part of social workers or factors linked to the life course, careers and expectations of foster carers, but this may be a useful avenue for future research.

Feeling valued and listened to were also found to be associated with carers’ health ratings using the EuroQol EQ-5D (www.euroqol.org/web/). For example, a highly significant negative association was found between moderate anxiety or depression and feeling valued as a colleague (p < .001). Responses to the visual analogue scale (on which respondents indicate their current state of health on a scale of 0–100) showed strong positive associations, with both feeling valued (p = .01) and listened to (<.001) respectively. The number of placements offered by carers was found to be negatively associated with feelings of being listened to. While 34 per cent of carers offering one placement responded positively to the question, this fell to 27 and 21 per cent for those offering two and three placements respectively (p = .01). Similarly, looking after children outside the carer’s approved age range was associated with feeling less valued (p = .03). These relationships are likely to reflect complex circumstances but lend some weight to the findings of Farmer et al (2004) regarding the strains placed on carers and a concomitant need for enhanced support.

Predictably, strong links were found between feeling valued and listened to and ratings of support, as these concepts clearly overlap to a significant degree (Tables 2a and 2b). However, they are by no means co-terminous, with significant minorities of respondents indicating that they did not feel valued or listened to despite rating their support as good or very good.

It should be noted that feeling valued and listened to were also strongly linked to ‘objective’ elements within support, such as frequency and duration of social work visits, receipt of care plans and so forth, suggesting that these are necessary, if not sufficient, factors (Fisher et al, 2000). Although feeling valued and listened to were not linked to attendance at foster carer support groups, there was a

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling valued and listened to</th>
<th>Do you feel valued as a colleague by social workers?</th>
<th>Does your LA or agency listen and respond to foster carers?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>545</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
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N = 1,165*  N = 1,169**

*16 responses missing
**12 responses missing
strong positive association with perceptions of the latter’s usefulness (p < .001 in both instances).

The relationships between attitudes and orientations towards remuneration and feeling valued and listened to proved complex. Tables 3a and 3b show the significant positive association between satisfaction with remuneration and both variables. While there are likely to be

influences in both directions, this strongly suggests that adequate remuneration is an important component in feeling valued.

Surprisingly perhaps, there was a modest negative association among LA carers between receiving a fee and feeling valued (p = .04). Similarly, and again only within LAs, those demonstrating strong ‘professional’ orientations towards foster care (as judged by responses to statements – see Kirton, Beecham and Ogilvie, 2006 for details) were also more likely to say they did not feel valued or listened to. It may be that in LAs, but not seemingly in IFPs, there are greater tensions between more professionally oriented carers and their agencies.

In the following sections, we report findings from focus group discussions held with foster carers and SSWs and interviews with service managers, with a semi-structured schedule allowing qualitative exploration of the perspectives held by these key actors. We start by looking at the views expressed by foster carers on whether they felt valued as colleagues.

Are foster carers valued as colleagues?

Themes and perspectives

Caution is, of course, necessary when interpreting data from focus groups, given their variable dynamics (Bloor et al., 2001). However, the messages conveyed by foster carers were broadly in line with those from the questionnaire, both collectively and within individual agencies. In most groups views were mixed, but in five of the 21 groups (four LAs and one IFP) the tone of discussion could be interpreted as negative, while in four others (one LA and three IFPs) the overall tone was clearly positive. IFP carers were often particularly emphatic about being valued: ‘absolutely’; ‘without a doubt’.

Feelings of being valued as a colleague rested heavily on relationships with SSWs, which were generally viewed positively and, mirroring other research findings, markedly more so, on balance, than relationships with children’s social workers (CSWs) (Sellick, 1996; Fisher et al., 2000):

\[\chi^2 = 355.15 \text{ d.f. 4 } p < .001\]

Table 2a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would you rate the support you receive?</th>
<th>Do you feel valued as a colleague by social workers? (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Very) good</td>
<td>Yes 17 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>No 38 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Very) poor</td>
<td>Sometimes 45 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would you rate the support you receive?</th>
<th>Does your LA or agency listen and respond to foster carers? (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Very) good</td>
<td>Yes 20 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>No 34 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Very) poor</td>
<td>Sometimes 41 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[\chi^2 = 299.34 \text{ d.f. 4 } p < .001\]

Table 3a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction with total payment received?</th>
<th>Do you feel valued as a colleague by social workers? (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Very) good</td>
<td>Yes 37 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>No 42 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Very) poor</td>
<td>Sometimes 36 48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction with total payment received?</th>
<th>Does your LA or agency listen and respond to foster carers? (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Very) good</td>
<td>Yes 49 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>No 51 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Very) poor</td>
<td>Sometimes 57 28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[\chi^2 = 41.76 \text{ d.f. 4 } p < .001\]

\[\chi^2 = 84.00 \text{ d.f. 4 } p < .001\]
[CSWs], it's like you are just a foster carer. You're not classed as a professional or anything like that.

Encouragingly, among those who perceived change in relationships between foster carers and social workers, the direction was positive:

Going back a number of years, I feel that they looked down on you and you couldn't have that . . . not banter, but you couldn't say what you felt you wanted to say in case they were going to jump on you. Now I think you can.

In providing the opportunity to air concerns and grievances, qualitative exploration of topics may sometimes exaggerate their extent (Fisher et al, 2000). However, it is important to examine more closely the perceived shortcomings which, while far from pervasive, were too widespread to be dismissed simply as poor (individual) practice. Some of the difficulties have been well documented in research and will only be noted briefly here. These include partial exclusion, along with birth parents, from reviews and lack of consultation about availability for, or timing of, planning meetings. Many foster carers also spoke of contradictory practices in respect of delegated powers, whereby they might be expected to liaise with therapists or schools in relation to exclusions but were unable to agree a sleepover for their foster child at a friend's house (cf Aldgate et al, 1993). It was also a common perception among carers that they were often given inadequate information regarding children prior to placement or that problems relating to experiences or behaviour were glossed over (Vernon and Fruin, 1986; Pithouse and Parry, 1997; Morgan, 2005).

Collectively, such practices and sentiments generated a widespread sense among carers of subordination and exclusionary practices, with several references to 'them and us', or as one carer put it, 'underlings aren't we?' In exploring the reasons for this, employment status served both directly and indirectly as an important line of demarcation, as indicated by an IFP foster carer:

Well, we are not staff. That's been made clear to us on numerous occasions. It's still very much, 'We work in this office, so therefore we are part of this team. You don't work in this office, so therefore you're not part of this team.'

There is insufficient space here to enter the complex world of professionalism and what constitutes ‘professional’ in the field of social work and social care (Jordan, 1984; Hugman, 1991). Yet it was clear that such discourses were frequently used to draw and maintain boundaries:

What's hurtful to me is the attitude of people. I've actually had it said to me, 'You are just a foster carer. I am a professional.' I think that's insulting. I feel as much of a professional as anyone.

Several discussions referred to divisions between carers and professionals at training courses or presentations and how carers experienced this as denigrating their contribution to services. Some interviewees, especially in IFPs, were keen to challenge what they regarded as stereotypical images of foster carers, although in doing so, tended implicitly to endorse the idea that professional status came from other sources:

Some professionals view foster carers as not educationally . . . able to get another job so that was why they choose to care. But a lot of carers have got professional qualifications – nurses, teachers, degrees – so that is not the case. It's their choice.

From the standpoint of foster carers, however, tensions were sharper regarding knowledge of the child and consequent claims for legitimate input into planning processes (Reeves, 1980; Bullock, 1990):

Social workers seem to think they know the child better than anybody. The fact that they spend an hour maybe every six weeks with them, and you spend 24 hours a day, every day, with them, they don't take into account what you say.

This applied equally to the 'say' in decision-making powers given to others, such as
teachers or health care professionals, with perhaps limited knowledge of the child. Carers’ claims for greater status and ‘say’ could also be advanced by contrasting their resilience and practical ability with that of social workers:

You have to have a lot of self-respect and self-esteem and know you’re doing a blooming good job and one that they couldn’t do because they couldn’t stick it for 24 hours a day.

I think the problem with social workers is it’s all theory. Very little hands on.

Given our study’s focus on remuneration, we were interested in exploring perceptions of its relationship with feeling valued. Opinion was divided, but in contrast to the questionnaire finding of a negative association between receipt of a fee and feeling valued as a colleague, testimony from focus groups tended to acknowledge a positive link:

I personally have found that more social workers treat me with a little bit more – respect’s not the right word, but as if what I’ve got to say is actually more important than it used to be.

Payment is very important to me because there are two sides to being paid. One side is to be recognised, but the other side is not to feel abused.

However, some foster carers expressed concern about what they saw as unequal exchange, either in terms of low remuneration or increased demands:

We’re free professional people. We’re not paid professional money.

If they paid you a wage they would expect more, not less, of you.

It should also be noted that the delivery of fostering payments is also frequently taken as a measure of ‘valuing’, with delay and inefficiency conveying a sense of low status (Warren, 1999).

While our study was focused primarily on more formal aspects of relationships, including remuneration, several group discussions also included discourses of ‘friendship’ with social workers as indicative of being valued: ‘She’s like one of the family.’ Historically, the quest for friendship was often linked to voluntarism, ‘exclusive’ fostering and neutralisation of the social worker’s supervisory role (Adamson, 1973), although friendship and hierarchy among work colleagues are not mutually exclusive. The trappings of voluntarism and paternalistic expressions of valuing were perhaps more apparent in references to (lack of) gestures of appreciation:

I got flowers and chocolates when our last child moved on.

In all the time I’ve been working with children – 19 years – I’ve had one letter from social services to say, ‘You did a really good job. Thank you very much.’ I’ve kept it. It’s in a little box.

Valuing foster carers: the perspectives of supervising social workers and service managers

In many respects, SSWs and SMs confirmed the picture painted by foster carers, both in broad terms and on certain specific issues. However, there were mixed views expressed on the appropriateness of treating carers as ‘colleagues’. Among those who aspired to such treatment, different views were expressed within and between agencies as to how far the valuing of foster carers had been embedded. Workers in IFPs tended to be more confident in this respect, while juxtaposing this with the high expectations placed upon carers:

We try and treat them as equals and professionals and set certain standards that, if they want to come and work for us, they’re very clear about before they come.¹

In local authorities there was often recognition of falling short in terms of valuing

¹ Quotations are from SSWs unless indicated otherwise.
carers, with SMs tending to be more candid about this:

_I think a lot of people would say that’s what they believed, but I don’t think their practice would echo that._

Practices mentioned by foster carers, notably relating to partial attendance at, or consultation about, meetings were acknowledged by SSWs as occurring, albeit only in a minority of cases. Such difficulties were often laid at the door of CSWs, although it was noted that they had their own pressures:

_We receive a considerable number of complaints and concerns expressed by foster carers about how children’s social workers view and speak to them. A huge attitudinal problem. There’s a whole culture built up over years which needs to be changed._ (SM)

This lack of respect was sometimes taken to reflect the lower status of fostering services, by comparison with the ‘blue light’ work of child protection teams or as part of a wider lack of status in social work. Examples of ‘clientisation’ were acknowledged, with carers in one LA being given a ‘client number’ and their records kept in the same format. Lack of employment status was also highlighted, partly as a way of explaining problems of inclusion in planning processes but also a lack of ultimate responsibility and agency sanctions:

_I think the difference is, they can still say no to a placement, and they can even say . . . ‘I’m not dealing with this anymore. You take him this afternoon.’_

Crucially, however, SSWs were sharply divided on the question of whether they regarded foster carers as colleagues. There were numerous expressions of admiration of carers’ skills in working with children and, as one SM put it, some workers who wish to ‘canonise’ foster carers:

_I’m sure if you asked many of the staff here, ‘Could you foster children?’ they would say it’s the last thing they would ever want to do or could do. We just admire them. We don’t know how many of them do what they do._

However, few SSWs endorsed carers as colleagues without difficulty and many were openly opposed. The heterogeneity of carers was highlighted, especially in terms of their level of understanding or ability to ‘see the bigger picture’:

_We have a big range don’t we? Some I think we could imagine, ‘Yes, they are colleagues. They are as insightful as we are. And others are like birth parents – in fact I’ve met some much more insightful birth parents._

_Some of them I see more like punters._

A recurrent theme was how the supervisory responsibilities of SSWs, notably in respect of abuse allegations or complaints, placed a barrier in the way of full recognition of foster carers as colleagues, with frequent references to the need for ‘professional distance’ and the pitfalls of ‘friendship’:

_I mean I do regard carers as colleagues, and they’re far superior to me in many ways in terms of their skills and knowledge, but we’re not equals because in the last analysis, if there’s an allegation or investigations, we have to go in there and deal with it._

Yet closer scrutiny of SSWs’ discussions revealed a deeper pattern of division, based on a mixture of institutional boundaries, employment status and, in a minority of cases, the enduring legacy of clientisation. One SSW, after admitting she found it very difficult to explain what was different about relationships with foster carers, stated that:

_Apart from anything else, you’re often friends with your colleagues and you share things that you wouldn’t share with foster carers. It’s a working relationship, where you’re not going to build up friendships with foster carers as such._
However, she subsequently acknowledged that supervisory requirements were not incompatible with colleague relationships:

I still feel that my team manager is my colleague, even though she has power over my professional practice.

On the question of whether paid foster care makes, or would make a difference, SSWs and SMs expressed a similar range of views to that of foster carers. Although there were references to it bestowing greater ‘recognition’, employment was more often cited as the key factor. Like some foster carers, participants also pointed to deeper status problems, drawing parallels with historic inequalities between residential and field social workers (cf Frost, Mills and Stein, 1999):

The status of residential workers has picked up, but it’s still not equal. They can still sit in meetings, saying, ‘this is the wrong plan. We know these children inside out and backwards, and still be completely ignored.

The listening agency? Foster carers’ perspectives

Table 1 showed that foster carers were, on balance, less positive about the listening qualities and responsiveness of agencies than they were about social workers valuing them as colleagues. This may, in part, reflect the perceived ‘remoteness’ of large bureaucracies, a point supported by the generally more favourable views expressed by IFP carers. However, the wide variation among LAs and the absence of any association between responses and organisational size suggest that ‘bureaucracy’ provides only a partial explanation.

Feelings of being ‘listened to’ are likely to reflect both the handling of particular individual or collective issues and broader contexts of (un)happiness with the way in which the agency is managed. Overall, views expressed by foster carers within focus groups were fairly evenly divided between the complimentary and the critical. The more positive views generally found in IFPs appeared to reflect a combination of flatter management structures, accessibility and informality:

The therapists and teachers come to the lunches and most of the branch managers do as well. Everybody mucks in and it’s a really nice sort of way. You can just have a chat. That’s important, that communication.

I personally asked for some help, over tax and things, and [Director] came out to my house and sat down with me.

Although there is no necessary link, these features seemed to provide a context for feelings of dialogue, respect, treatment as an equal and, in turn, shared sense of purpose:

People can say things that even if they don’t agree and people don’t like, you’re still allowed to say it. You’ve got valued opinions.

It is clearly more difficult to replicate these features in LAs, given their scale and structures. However, it was apparent that the LA template could generate widely divergent relationships with foster carers. In a minority of cases, there were recognised channels of communication, notably meetings with senior managers, which gave rise to feelings of dialogue and recognition. A more common perception, however, was that senior managers were neither knowledgeable regarding, nor particularly sympathetic to, the concerns of foster carers (cf Triseliotis, Borland and Hill, 2000):

I think it’s because they’re not close enough to what’s actually happening. Sometimes you almost feel, with some of the comments that come back, do they actually have any idea of what goes on in this house?

Depending on the wider organisational culture, ostensibly positive initiatives could be viewed cynically. This included consultation exercises that often appeared to yield no results nor even feedback to participants, or as one carer wearily put it,
‘We do questionnaires.’ Wider contexts were also relevant to how remuneration was perceived. IFP foster carers tended to be most glowing about this link, while emphasising their wider pattern of support and recognition:

We got a big pay rise last year and it just felt like they were thinking about us.

However, in the absence of a broader supportive climate, payments could easily be construed as ‘bribes’:

I thought that was a bit of an arm up my back, kind of ‘Oh, don’t you dare go to a private agency.’

The question of ‘appreciation’, noted earlier, was also raised in the agency context, with positive allusions to expressions of thanks and recognition through long-service award ceremonies.

The listening agency? Social workers and managers’ views

Again with some exceptions, SSWs and SMs endorsed the views expressed by foster carers on their agencies’ responsiveness. Within IFPs, this included confirming the picture of open communication and an available and approachable management. However, such patterns were not universal among the study’s IFPs, with the senior management of one being depicted as ‘slow’ and another in even less complimentary terms:

I think we listen to what they say. I don’t think we do anything about them. We’re very good at talking and doing nothing. (SM)

In many LAs, there was acknowledgement of carers’ relatively marginal position, although several SMs were keen to emphasise recent and/or projected improvements. Several had tried to improve communication and participation for carers, with at least five having recently established new forums. One SM emphasised the growing trend of carers’ involvement in interview panels and planning meetings:

If you’d come five years ago, I don’t think we’d have been listening in the same way that we do now . . . We’ve got greater opportunities for carers to meet with a range of people: members, director – all the way down the system. There’s a huge involvement.

In almost half of LAs, there were no direct links to senior managers, and SSWs expressed concern that foster carers’ views were often ‘diluted’ on their way up the hierarchy. Similarly, there were reported instances of largely one-way communication, of managers who ‘see it as their role to speak to the foster carers, rather than to sit and listen to them’. In a minority of cases, there were perceptions of treatment that went beyond ‘indifference’ towards the punitive, with references to ‘unrealistic’ burdens being placed on carers and elements of ‘bullying’. One SM talked of a culture in which departmental anxieties were projected onto foster carers:

I can’t quite understand why we’re so punitive to foster carers. Because we are. And we expect so much of them in transforming children. And we’re very critical of them when they don’t meet our not necessarily clearly defined expectations of them.

While the ‘empowerment’ of foster carers enjoyed wide if not universal support, it was predictable that disturbing a status quo built on their relative marginalisation could give rise to conflict (Reeves, 1980). One SM described how the process of empowerment had ‘created a monster’, going on to talk of ‘big egos’ and ‘insatiable demands’ (cf Triseliotis, Borland and Hill, 2000). He was concerned that carer militancy was undermining the quest to improve the (financial) conditions of carers:

What I’ve tried to emphasise to them is that you have to be evolutionary here, and if you shout and bawl and insult elected members [councillors] it will be counterproductive.

Mirroring the perspectives of some foster carers, a minority of SSWs and SMs
emphasised the importance of more personal recognition and appreciation. One SSW described how she had had to ‘battle’ to have a letter sent from the Department to a retiring foster carer, noting that ‘there isn’t anything as a matter of course. They don’t seem to even get a bunch of flowers.’ Others endorsed the small but growing practice of long-service awards and ceremonies and argued the importance of marking departures and festivals, sometimes in its absence:

They can’t agree Christmas cards. They don’t even get a Christmas card from the department.

The study’s IFPs tended to be more attentive in this regard, in one case extending to marking birthdays and Christmas for foster carers’ own children.

Discussion
The importance of treating foster carers as professionals and partners within the children’s workforce has been re-affirmed in recent policy documents (Campbell, 2005; Department for Education and Skills, 2005, 2006). Although not the primary focus of our research, the findings reported here provide valuable insights into the relationships between carers, social workers and agencies, both local authority and independent.

Data from the foster carers’ questionnaire show that roughly one in six did not feel valued or listened to, while significant numbers used the qualified response of ‘sometimes’. Wide variation was found between agencies, suggesting that the latter’s policies and practices exert a significant influence over foster carers’ perceptions. IFP carers in the study were found to be markedly more positive than LA counterparts, although it should be remembered that our IFP sample was not necessarily representative of the sector as a whole. Nonetheless, some of these providers did seem to benefit from flatter management hierarchies and closer working relationships with carers. More generally, the study highlighted the importance of communication channels between foster carers and their agencies.

Analysis identified certain groups of carers who tended to feel less valued as colleagues and/or listened to by their agencies. Some of the factors relate to pressures such as those that may arise from poor health on the part of carers, offering a higher number of placements or operating outside terms of approval. We also found that younger carers tended to feel less valued and listened to, and among LA carers, that such feelings increased with greater experience. The reasons for these associations merit further research but also perhaps greater practice recognition in relation to support and career development for carers.

Foster carers’ satisfaction with payments was found to be linked to feeling valued and listened to, but a third of carers dissatisfied with their remuneration nonetheless expressed feelings of being valued as a colleague. Both the dissatisfactions of many fee-paid carers and testimony from focus groups and interviews showed the complex links between payment and sense of being valued. No aggregate link was found between carers feeling valued or listened to and the performance of LAs, although further research at the ‘micro’ level of carer households may produce different results.

The study’s qualitative data highlighted manifestations of the low status accorded to some carers – lack of consultation, participation in decision-making and even forms of ‘clientisation’ – although our evidence does not allow us to gauge their prevalence or their historical trends. Where participants referred to change over time, they generally did so positively. With some exceptions (see below), there was a high level of concordance between the views expressed by foster carers, SSWs and SMs.

The tensions surrounding foster care’s halting progress towards professionalisation were particularly evident in discussions of carers as ‘colleagues’ of social workers. While many participants in the study endorsed this status, there was also considerable opposition among SSWs and, to a lesser extent, SMs. This was in part based on reluctance to accept ‘professional’ credentials or expertise on the part of carers and reflected the wider
tendency to accord lower status to ‘hands on’ care work, largely undertaken by women (Pascall, 1997). Arguments based on the need for supervisory distance appeared rather confused and suggested that employment status and the deeper legacy of clientisation might be more important factors underpinning opposition. Both directly and indirectly, participants’ testimony highlighted the need for further cultural change in these areas.

The partial nature of moves towards professional foster care was also apparent in discussions regarding appreciation of carers through long-service awards, gifts and the like. In situations where such practices are not applied to employees, this arguably represents a more paternalistic mode of recognition, fitting well with the altruistic view of foster care but somewhat at odds with the professional path. This, of course, highlights the possibility of different modes of valuing and that there are likely to be both gains and losses in any modal shift towards professionalisation.

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