Sixty-eight per cent of looked after children in the UK are in foster care. Children in foster care benefit from continuity. Sometimes, due to worker turnover and workloads, that continuity comes not from a social worker but from a foster carer. Thus, children in foster care can develop significant attachments to their carers, who are likely to have a valuable role to play in long-term planning for a child. A strengths approach to fostering social work places value on the input of carers as experts on a child, but the social work research literature reveals limited information about the use of such an approach in supervising foster carers. This article by Tim Odell builds on recent writing and suggests that the strengths perspective could be of value in working with foster carers, just as it has been in other settings. A case study examines the process of moving on for one child and how social workers and carers worked together to take a creative approach for a child with a history of multiple placements. This case study illustrates elements of a strengths-based approach. Suggestions for further application of such a model with foster carers are made, and areas for further practice research identified.

Introduction
Sixty-eight per cent of looked after children in England (National Statistics, 2005) are accommodated in foster care. Despite policy strategies to increase the role of permanent placements, for example the Adoption Act 2002 with provision for Special Guardianship, many children still spend long periods in foster care settings. The months and sometimes years spent in a foster placement can create a bond between carers and young people that becomes an important part of a child’s life; foster carers are present at first steps, first days at school and numerous other milestones.

Even though they play an important role in the lives of looked after children and young people, the expertise of foster carers is a resource that is too often overlooked by social workers. The Social Care Institute for Excellence reports that lack of continuity of social work support (ie frequent change in social workers) is a major contributing factor to placement instability (Wilson et al, 2004). Furthermore, any social worker practising in a London local authority knows that social worker turnover is a constant issue. Therefore, ways in which foster carers can be more fully incorporated into work with looked after children should be explored. Encouragingly, there are indications that the attempt to elevate foster carers from their ‘marginal position in the social care workforce’ is gaining interest (Ogilvie, Kirton and Beecham, 2006, p 7).

Several recent articles examine the support, training and guidance given to foster carers. Ogilvie and colleagues (2006) discuss the resources devoted to training and supporting foster carers. They note that foster carers who feel more supported by and connected to their supervising agency tend to participate in more training, thus gaining more skills. Similarly, Warman, Pallett and Scott (2006) suggest that foster carers benefit from the group support of other foster carers and that the process of training may be as important as the content, if not more so. In addition to support from other foster carers, carers need to feel that they are valued members of a professional team working with looked after children (Wilson and Evetts, 2006) and perceptions of how their role is valued can affect foster carer retention (Maclay, Bunce and Purves, 2006). These articles seem to reflect a desire to find ways in which foster carers can be better incorporated to meet the increasingly complex needs of looked after children.

This article suggests an approach to working with foster carers that expands the ideas suggested by the above writings, drawing on a theoretical
A strengths-based approach: theoretical background

A strengths-based approach, such as the one advocated by Denis Saleeby (1997), is compatible with the notion of valuing the role and contributions of foster carers. It encourages social workers to focus on the adaptive, resilient characteristics of clients and to resist the role of ‘expert’. In fact, a strengths approach views the client (or in this case the carer) as the expert.

The strengths approach originated through work with severely and persistently mentally ill people in the US in the 1980s, as an alternative to a problem-focused ‘medical model’ of social work practice where practitioners are seen as experts who know best the needs of their clients (Saleeby, 1997). The strengths-based approach has been widely applied in other areas of out-of-home care, for example kinship care (Tilbury, 2007), family group conferencing (Connolly, 2006) and in related social work fields (Fast and Chapin, 2002; Sousa, Ribeiro and Rodrigues, 2006). The strengths perspective is allied to other emerging research and practice areas such as resilience theory (Green, 2002) and solution-focused therapy (de Shazer, 1982). Saleeby (1997) notes some key concepts in the strengths approach:

• **Empowerment** is the familiar term for helping people to discover ways they can take control of their lives.
• **Membership** refers to our need for belonging in order to combat alienation.
• **Resilience** speaks to the way that we can recover from stressful and troubling events.
• **Dialogue and collaboration** are the skills where we show empathy, caring and acknowledgement of others.
• **Suspension of disbelief** calls on practitioners to be wary of ‘professional’ scepticism and acknowledge that there may be more than one version of ‘the truth’ (Saleeby, 1997, pp 8–12).

A sample of strength-eliciting questions reflects the concepts of strengths-based work and gives a flavour of how practice might evolve from them (Saleeby, 2002):

• How have you been able to rise to the challenges put before you?
• Which of the difficulties have given you special strength, insight or skill?
• Who are the special people on whom you can depend?
• What is it that these people give you that is exceptional?
• When things were going well in life, what was different?

Most of the research regarding a strengths approach in the field of fostering has been aimed at work with young people and client families, which is of course a crucial practice issue and one that social workers must continue to develop in order to work effectively with families. However, to encourage foster carers to work with young people in a strengths-based fashion, social workers must do the same with foster carers, and, indeed, social care organisations need to provide supervision and leadership within a strengths-based framework. Bricker-Jenkins (1997) speaks of the need for organisations to
themselves function in a strengths-based way:

*Often we are thwarted because the inherent values and assumptions of a given practice model are not sustained and supported by the organisation’s culture, structure, and process. To implement and sustain a strengths-based approach requires that agency values and practices are also formed around supporting and enhancing the assets of workers on a daily basis. A call to strengths-oriented practice simply will not be heard in an agency that implicitly focuses on the deficits of clients and its staff in supervisory, management, and personnel practices.* (p 136)

In a review of fostering research in the UK, there appears to be limited information on a strengths-based approach to supervising and supporting foster carers. Anecdotal experience indicates that some social workers will incorporate it into their work when working with service users, but that foster carers are in a category of their own, a kind of no-man’s land between client and professional. Yet, they both need support and are themselves trained, experienced carers. The word ‘colleagues’ (as opposed to clients) for a social worker’s relationship with foster carers has been discussed by other authors (Kirton, Beecham and Ogilvie, 2007). They found wide variations in how foster carers are perceived by social workers and service managers. Many social workers still do not agree with the idea of foster carers as colleagues.

The following case study of Ronny illustrates the use of a strengths approach with foster carers, drawing on their knowledge of and relationship with a young person to help him move on to adoption. It is an example of an effective, thoughtful and flexible way in which a social work team in one London local authority slowed down, resisted time pressure and finally got out of the way to let the carers, adopters and young person do their jobs.

**Case study: Ronny and his families**

By way of full disclosure, the team of professionals involved in this case did not consciously set out with a strengths-based framework in mind. In fact, as is noted below, some of the workings of the team were initially problem focused. However, the team eventually worked in such a way that a basic model of strengths-based practice began to emerge. These examples will be noted in italics in the text.

**The F family**

The F family are experienced foster carers. They are East African in origin and speak English as a second language. Mr and Mrs F, together with their three teenage children, have accommodated looked after children in London for over five years. However, they had not seen anything like Ronny (now aged three). When he first arrived at their home at 18 months, he had tantrums, head-banging, self-injurious tantrums that worried them and the social services department. But who could blame him? After three previous placements, including a recent failed adoption, he wanted to make sure that this family could handle what he had to dish out. His sense of abandonment and lack of secure attachments seemed finally to be taking its toll on his young ego.

Out of necessity, the family developed strategies to keep Ronny safe during his tantrums. They made sure that the area around him was clear so that he remained as safe as possible. They comforted him afterwards. As it became clear that the Fs were not going to reject him but rather accept him with their strong sense of family, Ronny’s behaviour stabilised and the outbursts decreased, even though he remained quite strong willed. Through his extreme behaviours, Ronny expressed, in the

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1 To protect the privacy of the families discussed in this article, all identifying information has been changed.
only way he knew how, his anxiety and dissatisfaction with not having a consistent and lasting attachment figure (Shemmings, 2006). The family instinctively focused on Ronny’s positive qualities, such as his lively and engaging personality, and could see his tantrums in perspective as one part of a whole person.

During this time, the F family received support from their local Family Placement Unit at the social services department, including social workers and a psychologist. These services reinforced the family’s efforts, but they remained the front-line workers.

As the Fs continued to live and work with Ronny, they developed a great fondness for him and he became part of their family. I was the supervising social worker assigned to the family when the previous worker left the borough. When I visited for the first time, I saw first-hand how charming and personable Ronny could be. I heard how the F family had persevered with him and I could see how he had thrived with their positive support. It was now time to look at moving Ronny on to adoption.

The file indicated that Mrs F, in particular, had difficulty with the moving on of previous children in her care, suggesting that she had become ‘too attached’ to a specific child and had difficulty letting him go. When asked about this in relation to preparing Ronny for moving on, she had an interesting explanation. Her limited grasp of English sometimes led to communication difficulties between us, but this time her message was clear:

Yes, we became attached to the child, we loved him. Maybe we are not supposed to, but we can’t help it. When a child who has no contact with his family, a young baby, lives with you, you love them. If they call you mum, you can’t stop them.

Mrs F described the day two years ago when a child moved and how a social worker had pulled the baby from her arms and said something along the lines of ‘It’s time to go.’ This was what upset her. Mrs F appeared comfortable with the emotional intensity of saying goodbye to a loved child. She was apparently more prepared and comfortable with the situation than the social worker who took the child from her. Sometimes even trained social workers are not prepared for the emotional intensity of such an event, especially if they are not experienced in fostering work. As social workers, we are constantly under pressure to ‘get on with it’. Often, it is advisable to recognise this pressure and pay attention to the process, feelings and emotions.

**Family found: approval and introductions**

The A family was approved by the local adoption panel in early June. Ronny had been with the Fs for 18 months. The adoptive match with the new family seemed a good one, comprising experienced parents of similar ethnicity and cultural background with an active household. Due to his number of previous moves, the team which came together to plan for Ronny’s future was anxious to ‘get this one right’.

To complicate matters, Ronny’s foster carers, Mr and Mrs F, had an upcoming two-month trip for a family reunion in their home country in East Africa. The planning of the introductions became crucial to try and prevent a regression in Ronny’s behaviour which might jeopardise the adoption. Additionally, there was now a time pressure due to the foster carers’ impending trip home in only five weeks. They would be out of the country for a crucial time, just after Ronny’s move.

As you can imagine, the anxiety of the team kicked in and a frenzy of planning began. Then something unusual happened. The psychologist attached to the Family Placement Unit asked why we couldn’t wait until the Fs returned for the move to happen. I was surprised at the relief this simple suggestion provided and how it relieved the pressure.

I shared this suggestion with the
adoption workers. At first, it was dismissed out of hand. The adopters would not want to wait that long for ‘their’ child. But then, as we were able to discuss the idea in terms of the child’s interest and best possible outcomes, a process of thoughtfulness, compassion and clarity set in.

In the end, the team decided to go ahead with the compressed five-week time frame because lengthening the process by three months did not appear viable. However, slowing the process down was invaluable and contributed to creativity and flexibility within the shorter period. The discussion empowered the team to realise that options existed; we were not locked into a particular pattern. We discovered how to use the situation to our advantage. This discussion, where all involved were willing to discuss, consider, reflect and respect the opinions of the other team members, is a key example of the team working in a strengths-based way using dialogue and collaboration.

Several ways that the team decided to proceed demonstrate this newfound flexibility. First, the adoptive parents and foster carers would meet without Ronny so that they could discuss their hopes and concerns about the moving on process. The adopters could freely ask questions about Ronny’s behaviours and how the foster carers had worked with him to bring out his positive qualities and decrease the tantrums. This is further evidence of a strengths approach, as the carers had the opportunity to share their knowledge of Ronny, to be acknowledged as experts.

In addition, the time frame of the introductions was lengthened to 14 days from the usual ten, taking into account the strong attachment between Ronny and the F family and the need for a more gradual letting go. This also allowed for a short gap of about ten days between Ronny’s move to his adoptive parents and the F family going on their trip. The family would then visit Ronny at the placement shortly after he moved, approximately one week. This would allow him to see that they still existed in his life as consistent attachment figures. They would phone him from abroad while they were away to reinforce this idea. The adopters were supportive of ongoing contact with the F family, which was crucial in this case. The As could see the bond that existed between Ronny and his foster family. Thankfully they were not threatened by it.

The role of emotion
At the first post-approval planning session, Mrs F became quite tearful as the introduction plan became more and more specific and the moving day was identified. The concerns noted from the previous moving on were again raised. Most of the team suspected that Mrs F herself was sad about Ronny moving on and therefore was having difficulty preparing him. The team was concerned that Mrs F’s feelings of sadness would get in the way of her preparation work with Ronny and that he would again revert to his violent tantrums.

To everyone’s relief, the introductions started very well. The A family, with their pets, activities and parenting experience, seemed an excellent fit with Ronny’s active and outgoing personality. Their ability to work co-operatively with the Fs created a net of support and positive feelings around Ronny. Fortunately, the two families lived within a half hour of each other so the transport back and forth was not too exhausting. As the introductions moved on, there were no tantrums or outbursts by Ronny as feared. However, Mrs F said that she wasn’t sure that he really understood what was happening.

This remark raised questions in the team. This was certainly a case of ‘denial’ by Mrs F. If she were preparing him properly, surely he would understand. Perhaps there was a language barrier between her and Ronny.

At a meeting during the halfway point of the introductions, Mrs F was questioned again about how she was preparing Ronny to move on. Her idea that he didn’t understand the process was challenged. She had received a
letter from one of the team saying that she needed to express her emotions ‘appropriately’. Her frustration was apparent:

*I talk to him. Now he does not say ‘no’ as he did at first. Now he says ‘why?’* 
*Why, indeed? a deep question from a three-year-old boy.*

She became tearful and said that she felt as though the team was telling her it was wrong to be sad about Ronny moving on. This was another important moment and again caused the team to pause.

Several of the team members responded positively, acknowledging that her emotions were appropriate, and indeed necessary, for Ronny to know that she would miss him. Furthermore, given his age, he probably did not understand what was happening. Perhaps it was the cumulative anxiety of the team that was being expressed in the form of questioning Mrs F’s ability to understand and prepare Ronny. After further discussion, the team was forced to acknowledge that we did not have any better suggestions about how to tell Ronny what was happening and the tone shifted from one of scepticism to one of support and empathy. This was a situation where emotion needed to be expressed. Could any one of us really do any better? Here the team suspended disbelief and empowered Mrs F to prepare Ronny in the way that only she could, with her own emotional content.

**Moving and follow-up**

The day of Ronny’s move to his new adoptive home was a continuation of the process so far, successful and with cooperation between the two families. Ronny was happy to go with the As, as he had come to enjoy his time there and was already calling Mr A ‘dad’. Ronny’s social worker was the only professional present (by agreement with the team) and stayed in the background for support, if needed. The day went smoothly.

On a follow-up visit a few days after Ronny’s move, I debriefed with Mr and Mrs F and their nominated support person about the process. They wanted to clarify something. When Mrs F said that Ronny didn’t understand what was happening, she didn’t mean that he didn’t understand anything. He clearly was aware that something important was taking place. Mrs F meant that he didn’t understand that the move was permanent. This turned out to be true as Ronny was still asking when he was coming home several weeks after the move. He was confused, but not desperate. He was settling in with the A family and he was not having the type of tantrums witnessed by his previous carers. It had been a successful moving on.

Mr F was concerned that sometimes ‘professionals’ make a judgement based on a short visit, while the foster carers’ opinions are disregarded. ‘We become the psychologist for the child,’ he said:

*We are the ones who are with him 24/7. We developed the ways to handle his tantrums and his strong personality. We passed this on to the adopters. Otherwise they wouldn’t know him.*

He seemed to be indicating the foster family’s need for recognition with his comments. I decided to acknowledge the work that the F family had done with a formal letter thanking them for their help in this complex case. I copied the letter to the manager of the Family Placement Unit.

Let’s be clear. The F family will continue to need support when they move children on, as do most foster carers. What can we expect when a family is asked, as foster carers, to love and care for a child as if he or she were their own and then to say goodbye? As social workers, we must be prepared for the strong emotions that come with this situation. We should not try to shield carers or children from these emotions, for they are markers of the importance and depth of the relationship (Jewett, 1994).

I once had a social work professor who worked with people at the end of
their lives. Her advice was, ‘You don’t want to break down sobbing, but there’s no harm in shedding a few tears. It shows you’re human.’ We must also do our best to prepare carers (and social workers) through training prior to and communication during the moving-on process. I have come to think that, while we call on foster carers to take children into their homes, a significant piece of the work is letting go.

Discussion

As noted in the course of the case example, the elements of strengths-based work were evident in this moving on process. Through open discussion, the foster carers (as well as the adopters) were listened to and their opinions valued. Their emotions were validated and recognised as a natural and healthy part of what was happening. The carers were acknowledged as important team members, all contributing to the positive result of a permanent family for a child with multiple placements.

Preparing children for moving on is one of the defining tasks of foster carers. I have helped to facilitate training and support groups for foster carers, and the moving-on process constantly comes up as an area in which they would they would like additional training. Quinton and O’Brien (2000) report:

*Foster carers may have an important role in the preparation of a child and their attitude to releasing the child can be fundamental. Training and supervising social workers and foster carers who are undertaking direct work with children is an important function of councils.* (p 10)

Therefore, foster carers need to understand theoretical areas such as attachment. Often they do, as the F family has demonstrated. Social workers can empower foster carers to use and integrate their practice knowledge, often by simply acknowledging their evident skills.

As noted above, some recent work (Wilson and Evetts, 2006; Kirton, Beecham and Ogilvie, 2007) discusses the importance of support and development programmes for foster carers. This research indicates that it is not the content of the training which seems to be most important to carers, but rather the quality of support (eg consistent contact with supervising social workers, carers feeling listened to, group support in trainings) that matters. These results reinforce the value of strengths-based skills such as *empowerment, membership and dialogue and collaboration* in their communications with foster carers. To take the area of training beyond being a supportive process, consultation with foster carers on areas of content is necessary.

There are also reminders of how social workers and other professionals need to communicate with one another (*dialogue and collaboration*). Even though the decision was made to go ahead with Ronny’s move before the F family’s trip, the discussion itself was invaluable for the overall process. Simply having the conversation reminded the team to assess constantly the situation using practice knowledge and experience, and to not be afraid to be creative.

So often in social work, a profession that is based on talking and communication, we forget to talk to each other. In public social services, workers have pressure to meet deadlines and complete forms, and I have been in meetings where the discussion is more about the forms than anyone present in the room. Conversely, I have gone into other meetings feeling quite pessimistic. However, through using the clinical skills that underpin social work, listening and effective communication, a solution seems to appear, almost as if by magic. A strengths-based approach suggests that social workers possess no special knowledge that can ‘magically’ give insight to others. What we can do as social workers is encourage conversation when others think there is no more talking to be had and to encourage the search for solutions when others think that there may be nothing else left.
to find. In this way, we can empower everyone’s innate, and sometimes untapped, personal resources.

Finally, the importance of a debriefing meeting with foster carers soon after the move should be noted. In this case, debriefing provided an opportunity for the carers to express their view of the introductions process, reinforcing their importance in the moving on process and acknowledging them as part of the team. The discussion provided valuable insight into their thought processes and clarified issues, such as the meaning of Ronny ‘not understanding’ the fact that he was moving to an adoptive placement. This debriefing conversation now serves to inform future work with these carers.

The conversation we had after Ronny’s move clarified the foster carers’ beliefs and abilities around moving children on and counteracted the ‘myth’ that had been established about them (as happens to many families involved in social services departments) that they had ‘difficulty letting go’. In fact, it is their difficulties in letting go that make them such good foster carers. Furthermore, they can and do ‘let go’, and perform one of the most important functions that we ask of carers in a case like Ronny’s. They give a child who loves them permission to love another family.

In accordance with the idea of not having unfinished business and acknowledging the strengths of colleagues, I would like to say a final word about the letter that was written to Mrs F during the introductions process, expressing concern about how she was preparing Ronny. In some ways, readers may see ‘the letter’ as an example of a more problem-focused style of working. This may be true, but if that letter had not been written, the team may not have ever had the crucial conversation with Mrs F that ended up supporting her and her expression of emotion.

**Limitations**

The fact that the carers’ first language was not English may have contributed to the scepticism of the social work team. Discussions about the level of emotion and expression of emotion during the introductions process may have contained shades of meaning that were misinterpreted on both sides. One limitation of the strengths approach is that it does not directly address the issue of cross-cultural communication. However, rather than doubt the abilities of foster carers who speak English as a second (or third or fourth) language, perhaps the issue can be seen in context as a communication problem rather than a deficit in practice. In local authorities with diverse populations, ways to communicate with a diverse population of foster carers will have to be improved.

Rapp (1997) notes that the strengths approach may be seen as naïve. He was discussing work with addicted clients but his views may also apply to foster carers, as they are adults with their own views and opinions which they feel they must protect in the face of questions posed by social services regarding their parenting style.

Due to the traditional tendency of social services to focus on problems and deficits, foster carers may be unused to identifying their strengths or times when they have helped young people. They may be even more unused to the idea of helping young people find their own strengths. Thus, they too may find this approach naïve.

Other professionals may also be unaccustomed to identifying strengths and may believe that the focus on strengths permits too much risk to children in foster care. Indeed, social workers must continue to use their training, experience and insight to follow up hunches or suspicions. Consistent support and training also serve a monitoring role, as is the case with social workers and their managers. Foster carers must be made aware of potential risks to the safety of young people, such as parental abduction or challenging behaviours. Yet we must also use our professional intuition to allow foster carers the freedom to manage placements and gain satisfac-
tion from making decisions on their own. We must trust them.

At the same time, we must not ignore situations that are clearly risky or when foster carers make serious errors in judgement. One way to help foster carers understand a social work perspective on risks might be to incorporate more training on legislation (eg *Every Child Matters*, Children Act 2004) into foster carer training. Understanding the legal perspective may allow foster carers to perceive questions about their practice as a legal rather than a personal issue.

The feedback of young people and colleagues is a useful guide for making assessments and judgements. We cannot count on ourselves, the adults, to catch every instance of risk. Mechanisms for young people to give feedback about placements, especially after they have been gone for a time and no longer risk their personal stability if they make a complaint, are valuable. This could be an area for future longitudinal research.

**Conclusion**

Foster carers are in a difficult position. On one hand they are expected to welcome and love a child as their own, yet they often do not feel the same authority to engage with foster children as they do with their birth children. They are the front-line workers, sometimes the most consistent person in a child’s life, yet, frequently, decisions by foster carers are questioned and scrutinised by social workers. This mixed message can cause frustration and a sense of helplessness in dealing with vulnerable and challenging children.

A practice model whereby foster carers’ strengths and skills are not only acknowledged but also assumed could be a way to support carers better, improve relationships between carers and the agencies they work for, and create more job satisfaction, thus improving retention for local authorities. In turn, this preserves a resource in the form of current carers and creates opportunities for the development of other resources, addressing the seemingly constant need in public social services to do more with less.

The difference between traditional approaches to social work and strengths-based practice might be seen as the difference between the red-topped tabloids and the papers that take a more considered approach to the news. The tabloids strike a certain nerve and we are sometimes attracted to their headlines. Perhaps there is some element of comfort in knowing that the hardships of others, luridly displayed, are not our own. We should not make the same mistake in social work practice. We must acknowledge the complexity and resilience of people and of life, and thus encourage more of the same.

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