Lesbian and gay fostering and adoption
Out of the closet into the mainstream?

Recent public debates have discussed lesbians and gay men caring for children as a novel phenomenon, but such arrangements are not new. Helen Cosis Brown and Christine Cocker track debates concerning lesbian and gay families and examine the relationship between policy and practice that is evidence based and ideologically driven. They outline the complexities of adoption and fostering practice within its political and social context and argue that the paramountcy of the child's welfare is the lynchpin to understanding the issues involved with the placement of children with lesbian and gay carers. The emphasis, in examining the detail of practice, is on recruitment, assessment, matching and support.

Introduction
The changing nature of the ‘family’ in the UK over the last quarter of a century has had a profound effect on social work with children and young people. In particular, it has had a considerable impact on fostering and adoption practice in relation to those deemed suitable to care for separated children. This article explores the changes surrounding the acceptability of lesbian and gay adoption and fostering from the early 1980s to the present day. It draws on the literature and documents in the public domain, as well as on the authors’ practice experience. In setting out to explore this often controversial topic, we are mindful that social work practice is located in a social, political and historical context and that an understanding of this is crucial because knowledge about the past enables us to interpret the present and plan for the future. We shall look at the 1979–97 Conservative Government’s preoccupation with the social and political position of lesbians and gay men. This is demonstrated in the debates surrounding various pieces of legislation and the law reviews relating to the care of children and the right of lesbians and gay men to parent (Embryology and Fertilisation Act 1990; Adoption Law Review; Family Placement Guidance 1991; Local Government Act 1988).

We track the debates and changes to the legislative and policy framework which have enabled lesbians and gay men to become visible foster carers and adopters. In national policy terms, a number of recent legal changes – the Equality Act 2006, the Civil Partnership Act 2004 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 – have transformed the current context for social work practice in this area. We look at the contradictions relating to these developments and consider how and why discourses surrounding the public debates have remained so consistent over the last 25 years. We also examine the research findings concerning outcomes for children growing up in lesbian and gay households and how these have influenced policy and practice.

The article’s main focus is on ‘best’ social work practice in fostering and adoption that is necessary to enable children’s needs to be effectively met. In debating this, we are keen to move away from the ‘rights’ perspective that has dominated much of the debate regarding lesbians and gay men parenting, to one that emphasises the paramountcy principle in relation to children’s welfare, as stated in section 1 of the Children Act 1989. We will consider the following areas of practice: recruitment, assessment, placing children and matching, support to carers and safer care.

There can be little doubt that social work practice with regard to lesbian and gay carers has changed and developed over the last quarter of a century. This trend is evidenced, for example, by the acceptance of such people as carers by organisations like the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), BAAF’s publication about this subject.
(Mallon and Betts, 2005) demonstrates its wider social ‘acceptability’. We shall argue that in these respects, lesbians and gay men are finally ‘out of the closet’. However, at the same time BAAF has allowed ‘sexuality’ as an aspect of ‘diversity’ to vanish from the Form F used by agencies as the proforma for the assessment of prospective applicants (BAAF, 2005). Moreover, as demonstrated by the discourses surrounding the passing of various pieces of permissive legislation, the inclusion of lesbians and gay men in the mainstream remains tentative and contradictory.

Legislative and policy debates

Conservative Government years 1979–1997

A small number of articles have recounted the legislative history of the acceptance of lesbians and gay men as parents, whether through adoption, foster care or as birth parents (Skeats and Jabri, 1988; Brown, 1998a; Hicks, 2005a; Manthorpe and Price, 2005). Although there is anecdotal evidence that lesbians and gay men have always cared for children, the growth of feminism and the politicisation of lesbians and gay men in the UK from the 1950s onwards meant that through the 1960s and 1970s gay issues became more salient and gay people more confident in asserting their ‘right’ to be carers, both for adults and children. This developing confidence occurred against a backdrop of public opinion and social welfare institutions being hostile to the idea of children being in contact with lesbians and gay men because of perceived dangers of sexual abuse by gay men, conversion to homosexuality and the possibility of ‘abnormal’ social and emotional development.

An example of public sector opinion on this matter in the 1980s was manifested in the sacking of Susan Shell and Judith Williams, who worked successfully with young people but were dismissed when their sexuality became known to their employers. The Tribunal investigating Susan Shell’s dismissal upheld her employer’s actions on the grounds that her lesbianism made her unsuitable to work with adolescent girls. The local authority is recorded as having said:

*It is the responsibility of social services departments to encourage the socio-sexual norms of marriage for the young people in their care, and it was not prepared to debate the philosophy of homosexuality.* (Davis, 1993, p 60)

A similar situation applied to Judith Williams. Her employer, noting her lesbianism, described her as ‘temperamentally unsuitable’ and said that the agency required its employees to be, ‘mature, stable adults who identify with the conventional adult model normally accepted by society’ (Davis, 1993, p 61).

These two cases demonstrated the importance of lesbians and gay men within social work and social care having employment rights and protection. Brown (1998a) provides an analysis of the relationship between trade union activities in this area, from the mid-1970s through to the 1980s, and the influence of this upon Labour-controlled local authorities, as well as the Labour Party generally. The effect of national and local trade union activities on Labour-controlled social services committees, which enacted local policy and procedures, is complex and is documented elsewhere (Cooper, 1994). This dynamic occurred within the wider social context of the organisation and mobilisation of lesbians and gay men as a social force and was happening against a backdrop of the Conservative Party, from 1979, using the debates related to the passing of specific pieces of legislation to try and limit the rights of lesbians and gay men to parent. At this time, the Government was sufficiently concerned about this situation to challenge the progress made in some local authorities. For example, in 1984, the Conservative council of Rugby deleted ‘sexual orientation’ from their equal opportunities policy (Sanderson, 1995, p 154).
A number of authors have considered the debates surrounding the 1979–97 Conservative Government’s preoccupation with lesbian and gay men’s right to parent and care for children (Brown, 1998a,b; Hicks, 2005a; Manthorpe and Price, 2005): ‘Each time these debates have arisen they have highlighted the degree of homophobia that permeates our society’ (Brown, 1998a, p 29). These issues arose at each stage of the legislative and social policy processes in, for example, section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, the Embryology and Fertilisation Act 1990, the Family Placement Guidance and Regulations of the Children Act 1989 (Department of Health, 1991) and the White Paper, Adoption: The future (Department of Health, 1993). A summary of the Government’s view can be seen in the Adoption Law Review discussion paper no. 3, which read as follows:

_The question of adoption by lesbians or male homosexuals, whether living with a partner or not, is controversial. There is one view that such applicants should not be excluded from consideration if they can satisfy an agency that they can provide a home in which a child’s interests would be safeguarded and promoted. Others take the view that placement with a lesbian or male homosexual could never be in a child’s interests and could never provide a suitable environment for the care and nurture of a child._ (Department of Health, 1991)

Despite old arguments being repeated in the legislative processes, the major child care lobbies successfully argued that gay and lesbian applicants should not be excluded from consideration, thus showing that:

... consultation and lobbying processes still do act as a force to keep in check extreme ideologies that particular governments might favour. However, the end product has often been less than anybody hoped for. (Brown, 1998a, p 29)

Hicks (2005a) emphasises the significance of 1988 in the history of lesbian and gay foster care and adoption. It was the year that Skeates and Jabri published their report on fostering and adoption by lesbians and gay men. In addition, although section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act discriminated against lesbian and gay families, it did acknowledge their existence, albeit as ‘pretend families’. This acted as a catalyst for lesbians and gay men to become more visible and vocal as prospective and actual parents and carers. The national lesbian and gay foster and adoptive parents network (LAGFAPN) was also established and the first conference for lesbian and gay carers organised (Hicks, 2005a).

The publication of the Children Act 1989 was heralded as a landmark piece of legislation that placed children at the centre of decision-making and offered the opportunity to emphasise the responsibilities of adults towards meeting children’s needs, so questioning their automatic rights and entitlements towards children. However, while acknowledging that no adult has an automatic right to parent looked after children, the Act and its related guidance gave the Conservative Government the opportunity to limit lesbians and gay men’s opportunities to parent. It used the family placement guidance of the Children Act 1989 (Department of Health, 1991) as a vehicle to try and restrict lesbian and gay men’s role in caring for separated children as part of their ‘demonisation’ of homosexuality. This was unsuccessful and the guidance eventually included the following statements: ‘the needs and concerns of gay young men and women must also be recognised and approached sympathetically’ (1991, p 97) and ‘gay young men and women may require very sympathetic carers to enable them to accept their sexuality and to develop their own self-esteem’ (1991, p 98). One of the ironies of this period was the unintended outcome whereby an unsympathetic government ended up producing the first piece of secondary legislation
(Family Placement Guidance) where lesbians and gay men were afforded protection.

Another unintended consequence of the Government’s negative focus on lesbians and gay men more generally, but also related to the rise of HIV and AIDS within the gay community and the public response to it, was that it served as a catalyst for the mobilisation of lesbians and gay men within the UK. As a result, the lesbian and gay community emerged as a confident group, more able to influence the social and political agendas via lobbying groups such as Stonewall.

**Labour Government years 1997 onwards**

Since 1997, the Labour Government has introduced a hitherto unprecedented amount of supportive and protective legislation and repealed discriminatory laws affecting lesbians and gay men. Examples are: the Equality Act 2006, the Civil Partnership Act 2004, the Adoption and Children Act 2002, the repeal of section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 (2003) and bringing the age of consent in line with heterosexuals (2001). The most pertinent piece of legislation in relation to social work practice is the Adoption and Children Act 2002 which, for the first time, allowed lesbian and gay couples to adopt, placing them on the same footing as heterosexual married couples. This also fundamentally changed the privileging of heterosexual unions and their resulting families, so removing the notion of ‘pretend families’ from social policy discourse. In Scotland the situation is currently somewhat contradictory, with the Fostering of Children (Scotland) Regulations 1996 stating that same-sex couples cannot foster whereas the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 states that lesbian and gay couples, whether or not they are civil partners, can adopt. However, this anomaly is currently being considered through the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations: Consultation on Draft Regulations (Scottish Government, 2007).

Although the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 have created deep-seated changes in the area of carers’ sexuality, the debates surrounding their passages were littered with discussions depressingly similar to those articulated around the earlier pieces of legislation described. This would suggest that lesbians and gay men are moving into the mainstream. However, an analysis of parliamentary debates shows that homosexuality is still seen by some as pathological. Even supporters of progressive changes were lukewarm because of their belief that homosexuality is a marginal identity. According to Hicks’s analysis of the parliamentary debates in the House of Lords surrounding the Adoption and Children Bill:

> Lord Alli’s speech is significant because he is openly gay, yet he demonstrates some classic conformity devices. He argues for the maintenance of a relationship hierarchy in which married heterosexuals remains the ‘gold standard’, which has the effect of suggesting that lesbian and gay adopters should be a last resort. (2005b, p 296)

At the beginning of 2007 these arguments resurfaced in public discussions concerning the enactment of the Equality Act 2006, as it pertained to the provision of goods and services to lesbians and gay men. For an adoption and fostering agency, this legislation means that lesbians and gay men cannot be discounted from assessment purely on the basis of their sexuality. The Roman Catholic Archbishop supported the Catholic Children’s Society’s wish to be exempted from complying with the legal requirements to assess and approve suitable lesbians and gay adopters and to place children with such people. He believed that to do so would be acting against Roman Catholic religious belief and the conscience of its adherents. This argument for religious organisations to be exempt from complicity with
legislative requirements on the basis of faith also received support from the Archbishop of Canterbury. The articulation of homophobia through religion is very powerful and has been a constant theme in debates about lesbian and gay priests, civil partnerships and the care of children.

Wilton (2000) comments that social policy and the resulting provision of welfare are inevitably political as they reflect tensions and contradictions in the wider society. She also argues that despite the progressive changes occurring within the UK, two themes remain:

First, both an understanding of the degree to which sexuality is a factor in socio-political exclusion, and an acceptance that discrimination is still widely present in public service provision . . . (p 149)

And secondly, ‘that discrimination remains real, and has potentially serious consequences for anyone who happens to be lesbian or gay’ (p 150). This is particularly pertinent to the experiences of lesbian and gay adopters and foster carers (Hicks and McDermott, 1999). They have obviously been affected by the changing political and social context surrounding homosexuality, mostly for the better. Nevertheless, despite the welcome legal changes, the realisation of lived equality is unlikely to be achieved for some time to come. For example, ‘gay bashing’, pejorative stereotypes and disrespectful jibes are still common in the UK.

**Children growing up in lesbian and gay families: research evidence**

A number of research studies undertaken since the 1970s have compared the development of children growing up in same-sex households to those in heterosexual ones. The early research emerged from lesbian custody cases from the 1960s onwards, first in the USA and then in the UK. A publication written in early 1986 recounts the following:

Divorce law regards lesbianism in itself as unreasonable behaviour and the burden shifts to the lesbian, particularly in custody disputes, to prove otherwise. Many lesbian mothers still lose custody of their children solely on the basis of their sexuality, regardless of their parenting abilities and material circumstances. Even if the children wish to stay with their mother and she has looked after them almost exclusively since they were born, the judgement still often goes against her. (Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group, 1986, p 1)

The first significant piece of research looking at the outcomes for children of lesbian mothers in the UK was undertaken at the Maudsley Hospital in London (Golombok et al, 1983). This initial study was comparative, considering the social, psychological, educational and sexual development of children growing up in lesbian households and those brought up by a single heterosexual mother. There were methodological concerns about the study and these are worth noting; for example, all the children studied had experienced parental separation and this might have had an impact on the findings. Nevertheless, the research showed no significant differences between the two groups of children, results that replicated earlier work undertaken in the USA.

Since that time, research studies in the UK have proliferated and there have been a number of systematic reviews carried out in relation to outcomes for children growing up in lesbian households (Tasker and Golombok, 1991, 1997; Tasker, 1999; Patterson, 2005). This body of research has included longitudinal studies that considered child development, as well as longer-term outcomes, family relationships, mental health, peer relationships and psychosexual development (Tasker and Golombok, 1997). What appears to be significant in terms of child development outcomes is the quality of the relationship between young person/child and his or her parent: ‘It is what happens within families, not the way
families are composed, that seems to matter most’ (Golombok, 2000, p 101). The implication of this is that the sexuality of parents is not the main or indeed a particularly significant variable determining outcomes for children; the strongest influence is the quality of relationships between children and their primary carers.

When applying what is known about lesbian and gay parenting to fostering and adoption, the existing research evidence is helpful. However, significant gaps remain, including limited knowledge about outcomes for children in relation to gay fathers, although a few studies do explore this (Patterson, 2004; Barrett and Tasker, 2001, 2002; Tasker, 2005). There are also currently no studies tracking outcomes for children who are placed with lesbian and gay adopters and foster carers, although Hicks and McDermott (1999) provide 17 case study accounts of the experiences of the adults involved. Despite these deficiencies, it seems reasonable to conclude that the sexual orientation of birth parents is not a factor dictating adverse outcomes for children (Tasker and Golombok, 1991, 1997; Tasker, 1999; Golombok, 2000; Patterson, 2005). There may, of course, be differences in outcomes for looked after children as opposed to those for birth children, due to factors such as their experiences prior to separation. While this might also be the case for heterosexual adoptive and foster families, the important point is that the interface between the private family and the public service arena may dictate very different experiences for lesbian and gay families from that of their heterosexual counterparts, as Wilton (2000) has noted in respect of wider health and social care provision.

**Fostering and adoption: social work practice**

‘The truth is that research is about generalisations but practice is about individuals’ (Jackson and Thomas, 1999, p 5). Capable practice thus requires critical and reflective application of research findings. Brown’s (1991) article was the first UK publication to consider social work with lesbian and gay fostering and adoptive carers and it took another 14 years before a practice guide emerged from BAAF (Mallon and Betts, 2005). This demonstrates the dearth of publications on these matters available to social workers.

As a consequence of this scarcity, practice can become over-simplified. One such risk is that social workers, in their quest to be non-discriminatory, over-identify the positive aspects of lesbian and gay applicants. This positive stereotyping was explored in the Tyra Henry enquiry, where the complex life experience of Tyra Henry’s black grandmother, including her history of loss, was overlaid with a positive stereotyping of black women (London Borough of Lambeth, 1987), confirming that all stereotyping, whether positive or negative, negates people’s humanity and does little to help vulnerable children.

With the current shortage of foster carers and adopters, children’s services departments are under pressure to increase the numbers of families able to care for children. The Department of Health has funded recruitment campaigns (National Foster Care Association [now Fostering Network], 2000) including the 2000 recruitment campaign for foster carers which acknowledged the role of lesbian and gay people as prospective applicants. But it is important that the same high expectations of carers should prevail for all applicants, irrespective of their sexuality or whether or not they come from either a historically or currently oppressed group. The focus of the assessment process should always be on the applicants’ potential to meet the needs of the child. The authors remain in agreement with the comment made in the Family Placement Guidance that ‘fostering decisions must centre exclusively on the interests of the child’ (Department of Health, 1991, p 25). No one has a right to parent, only to approach an agency in order to be considered for an assessment.
A focus on practice
There are several publications that identify key components and requirements within assessment processes of prospective carers (BAAF, 1998). However, only a small number in the UK relate to the assessment of lesbians and gay men (Brown, 1991; Mallon and Betts, 2005). In this article it is not our intention to replicate these but to comment critically on some aspects of practice.

Recruitment
Initially, it is clear that the sexuality of applicants should have little bearing on the outcome of recruitment and assessment. However, this is not to say that an applicant’s sexuality is unimportant but rather that there are other aspects of an individual which are equally or more significant. Unfortunately, sexuality can become the lens through which the entire process is conducted, with such phrases as ‘Who is going to do the assessment on the gay couple?’ being commonplace in allocation meetings, whereas reducing a heterosexual couple’s identity purely to their sexual orientation would be unheard of. But it is equally the case that, occasionally, this lens can also be part of the applicant’s view of the world, in that they might have little or no contact with the wider community. In such cases they may not be appropriate as carers, as foster carers and adopters must encourage a child’s integration into the wider community and ensure their safety within it.

In terms of recruitment, it is good practice to use the terms ‘sexual orientation’ or ‘lesbians and gay men’ in recruitment literature as this conveys a message of inclusivity. However, where local authorities advertise specifically within the lesbian and gay press, they need to have robust procedures and systems in place to deal effectively with enquiries from lesbians and gay men. What we know from recruitment generally is that if people have a good experience of an agency, they will tell their friends and this will generate further enquiries from prospective carers (Triseliotis et al, 2000; Fostering Network, 2006). This applies equally to the lesbian and gay community, with some agencies achieving good reputations in this respect.

Assessment
Elements of good social work practice also apply in the assessment of lesbian and gay applicants. This is inevitably a dynamic process and needs to reflect the positive aspects of what Smale et al (1993) describe as an ‘exchange model’. It should be an arena for the development of people’s potential and enable applicants to learn through the process. Moreover, while the quality of the information collected is of paramount importance, it is the analysis of this information by the applicant and the social worker that is the kernel of sound assessment. This analysis must then be framed against the knowledge purveyed in the literature about what contributes to good placement outcomes (Sinclair, 2005).

Brown (1991) argued that in addition to the thorough assessment used for all potential carers, five additional points were relevant when assessing lesbian and gay applicants.

1. The individual’s experience of their homosexuality (their own and their families’ response historically)
It is essential to have an understanding of applicants’ histories, including their experience of ‘coming out’ as lesbians or gay men. This is necessary so that both parties consider any of its implications regarding the applicants’ ability to care for looked after children. For instance, if they have had a severed relationship with their birth families as a result of ‘coming out’, what might the implications of this be on how they will be able to facilitate contact between a child placed with them and that child’s birth family. It is important not to assume that this will be problematic for a potential carer but to work with them about how they might experience any problems and how they might project
feelings about their families onto those of the child whom they are looking after.

2. How confident they feel in relation to their sexuality and how comfortable they are as lesbians and gay men
If they are to care for looked after children successfully, carers need to have a secure sense of themselves because children have a powerful ability to identify areas of vulnerability in their carers, and to play on them. In relation to sexuality, potential carers need to feel sufficiently secure as lesbians and gay men as part of their overall sense of themselves as emotionally robust and resilient adults.

3. How homophobia and heterosexism has impinged on their lives and how they feel they dealt with this and what coping devices they use
It is important to explore applicants’ experience of heterosexism and homophobia in terms of how they have responded to these in their lives. This is important because as carers they will have to manage any difficulties they encounter with confidence and in such a way that promotes the interests of the children for whom they care.

4. Their present relationships – sexual, emotional, supportive, family, etc – and how they negotiate homophobia within close relationships (eg with siblings)
Assessors can be reluctant to talk with lesbian and gay applicants about the intimate details of their relationships because of shyness, a perceived lack of knowledge about lesbian and gay men’s lives or a fear of being seen as homophobic by the applicants. However, such enquiry is critical.

5. Transition to parenthood – making links with the local community regarding child care resources and contact arrangements with birth family members of fostered/adopted children
The task of caring for looked after children transports carers into the public domain. Some lesbians and gay men may be used to occupying an exclusively lesbian and gay environment. Applicants have to show enough flexibility to move beyond what feels comfortable and into new situations, dictated by the child’s needs.

In addition, the assessment should explore with the prospective carer how they would support a child who experienced prejudice because of the sexual orientation of their carer. There are real issues about lesbians and gay men being confident enough to manage the integration of vulnerable children into their community, given the potential homophobia therein. This has to be an explicit part of the assessment.

One area of assessment that paradoxically is not often commented upon in the literature or in practice is the importance of applicants’ attitudes to sex and sexual relationships. The paradox is that to ignore this aspect of the human experience stands in stark contrast to the prurient fascination often focused upon lesbian and gay sex. The issue is that sex is a powerful form of communication and pleasure within adult relationships and the meaning of both of these for the applicants needs to be made explicit. This is an important area for children being placed in the home because:

- Children will grow to understand sex in terms of their own relationships through what they observe in families.
- Children who bring particular histories that affect their own behaviour and feelings require carers who have a level of insight to understand the impact this might have on themselves and the dynamics within the family. The placement of any child into a family
will change the rhythms of family experience of everyday life, including expression of sexual feelings and affection by adults. If the adults are secure in their sexual relationships, they will be able to adjust and adapt to these new constraints in a comfortable enough way without their relationship being undermined.

- Some relationships are sexually inactive – and the meaning of this needs to be explored with both the individuals concerned. This is not necessarily a contraindication for suitability for fostering or adoption.

- Assessors need to be able to predict the longevity of the couple’s relationship. Clearly, this is not always possible, but it is helpful to explore people’s sexual partner histories and patterns that might emerge, as well as assessing the history and quality of the current relationship.

Reticence in exploring the quality of lesbian or gay couples’ relationships appears to be common (Hicks and McDermott, 1999). However, this is relevant to everyone and is significant because it helps ‘... carers’ potential for facilitating the comfortable (enough) development of each individual child’s complete self...’ and this means:

... good enough sense of themselves, good enough relationships with others, and good enough relationships with the outside world – society. Gender, sex and sexuality are integral parts of all three aspects. (Brown, 1992, p 30)

When assessing single people, sexuality is often ignored in terms of potential future relationships for that individual. This has implications for the position of the child in the family, as he or she might have to form a relationship with a new person and share their primary carer. This might also mean that the child is faced with the reality that their carer is lesbian or gay for the first time, a fact that might not have been obvious to them when their carer was single.

**Placing children and matching**

Sellick and colleagues reviewed the research on what makes effective placements and concluded that, ‘matching’ is one of the most important variables (Sellick et al, 2004). Within this process, we have argued that it is necessary to move beyond the sexuality and gender of carers and examine their skills, abilities and capacity in order to match these with the needs of the children requiring placements. Yet, for lesbian and gay carers prejudices from other players in the matching process might arise at every stage. Children and families social workers, birth families, permanency panel members and previous foster carers can all object to such placements, expressing fears that are often founded on beliefs that children cannot develop ‘normally’ in lesbian and gay households. One way of countering these objections is to ensure that the assessment identifies a family’s strengths and attributes rather than stereotyping them according to assumptions based on their sexuality.

But despite the best efforts of professionals, the placement of children with lesbian and gay carers is still fraught with difficulty. The birth families of looked after children can sometimes object to their child being placed with lesbian and gay carers and there have been some very highly publicised cases (Weale, 1993), although it is noticeable that these have diminished in recent years. Social workers can also fall back on familiar arguments to prevent a child for whom they have responsibility being placed with a lesbian or gay carer. But the reality is that often no other placement is available, especially if the child has complex needs. This, ironically, is a return to practice of 15 years ago whereby lesbian and gay carers, if approved, were most likely to have children with complex needs placed with them (Skeats and Jabri, 1988; Hicks and McDermott, 1999). However, it seems now to be less of an issue in some local authorities, with all kinds of carers being matched with children who have many different
needs and from a range of ages. This is an area that requires more research in order to learn about placement patterns and trends.

**Support to carers**

When the support needs of lesbian and gay carers are considered, it is found that they do not differ from those of other carers. The importance of an open and trusting relationship with the supervising social worker applies to them as much as anyone else. But problems can arise with regard to external helping agencies and earlier comments concerning the private family and public service arenas are again pertinent. For example, when difficulties occur in the family and external support is sought, the external agency will almost certainly make an assumption of heterosexuality, unless otherwise informed. Once corrected, sexual orientation can then become the filter through which everything is considered and interpreted, and is generalised so that people’s uniqueness, humanity and experience become lost. A parallel risk is the danger of the families seeking help taking on the role of educator to the helper, in terms of cultural norms. By the use of this term, we are not suggesting that there is a lesbian or gay ‘culture’ as such, which can be described and learned, but that rather the capable practitioner does not make assumptions and always seeks clarification.

Supporting adopters and foster carers includes helping to address issues in relation to safer care. This involves helping them think through the day-to-day detail of their lives in terms of how this might affect the care they are able to give to a child or how a child might understand a particular activity or family routine. The responsibility of caring for a looked after child will involve carers in detailed consideration of their own household and lifestyle and how these might both affect and be interpreted by the child and her or his friends and family. Although many of the issues around safer care can be dealt with in a general capacity, there are some that might need to be discussed specifically with lesbians and gay men.

**The future for lesbian and gay fostering and adoption: margins or mainstream?**

Over the last 40 years social work practice with lesbians and gay men has fundamentally changed. UK society has moved from criminalisation and pathologisation of homosexuality in the 1960s to, by 2008, having protective legislation in place to safeguard the rights of lesbians and gay men. This social transformation has necessitated change in social work practice. Although this is visible at a surface level within many social work organisations in terms of specific inclusion policies and recruitment practices, the degree of depth at which these changes are embedded within organisations is still to be determined, as there are still concerns voiced in practice (Cocker and Dugmore, 2006).

This ambiguity remains highly significant for fostering and adoption. Until recently the private domestic homes of lesbians and gay men have been the only environment where they could express themselves and pursue their lives in an open manner, free from public prejudicial scrutiny. Lesbian and gay men who have put themselves forward as carers and adopters have had to marry the public and the private, in terms of their homes and their private lives becoming subject to scrutiny by public agencies. As well as the public agencies adapting recruitment and assessment processes to admit lesbians and gay men, lesbians and gay men have had to engage with parenting, making them visible within the mainstream when accessing public services associated with parenting. However, visibility should not be interpreted as acceptance by the mainstream.

Thus, lesbians and gay men who are approved as prospective carers continue to face dilemmas. Their approving agency has assessed them as having the abilities needed to care for vulnerable
children but they encounter conflicts through being expected to care for children in a society that is still deeply ambivalent about their competence and suitability.

It seems, therefore, that the current inclusion of lesbians and gay men in mainstream children’s services remains both tentative and contradictory. The authors are optimistic about the effect of recent protective legislation and its ability to sustain the trends over the past 40 years. But the experiences of related struggles for equality, such as women’s emancipation and race equality, would suggest that the journey ‘out of the closet’ has only really just begun.

References

BAAF, Preparing for Permanence: Key issues in assessment – points to address during the assessment process, London: BAAF, 1998

BAAF, Form F, London: BAAF, 2005


Brown HC, ‘Gender, sex and sexuality in the assessment of prospective carers’, Adoption & Fostering 16:2, pp 30–4, 1992


Cooper D, Sexing the City: Lesbian and gay politics and the activist state, London: Rivers Oram, 1994


Department of Health (DH), Adoption: The future, London: DH, 1993


Hicks S, ‘Queer genealogies: tales of conformity and rebellion amongst lesbian and gay foster carers and adopters’, Qualitative Social Work 4:3, pp 293–308, 2005b

Hicks S and McDermott J (eds), Lesbian and Gay Fostering and Adoption: Extraordinary yet ordinary, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999

Jackson S and Thomas N, On the Move Again, Barkingside: Barnardo’s, 1999


National Foster Carer Association (NFCA), on behalf of the Department of Health, Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) and the Local Government Association (LGA), On Target: The monthly bulletin of the national campaign for foster carers, Issue 4, London: NFCA, 2000


Sellick C, Thoburn J and Philpot T, What Works in Adoption and Foster Care?, Barkingside: Barnardo’s, 2004


Skeats J and Jabri J (eds), Fostering and Adoption by Lesbians and Gay Men, London: Strategy Unit, 1988


Triseliotis J, Borland M and Hill M, Delivering Foster Care, London: BAAF, 2000


Wilton T, Sexualities in Health and Social Care, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000

© Helen Cosis Brown and Christine Cocker 2008