Supporting Roles: Identifying Support for Foster Carers

Tim Martin, Research Officer, West Sussex County Council Social and Caring Services

Abstract

Support for foster carers is generally agreed to be an important factor in the delivery of quality services, yet, in this context, its definition is often vague and ambiguous. This paper begins to explore the issue of support from the perspective of foster carers themselves. It aims to outline some of the key issues surrounding support as well as providing pointers on how this can be improved for foster carers, thus enabling the needs of fostered children to be met more effectively. How recruitment and retention, information, payments and training are linked with support is considered. This paper is based on the findings of a study of 224 foster carers undertaken in West Sussex.

Keywords: Fostering, foster carers, recruitment, training, children's services, support needs

Introduction

A total of 41,100 children were in foster care on March 31st 2003, accounting for more than two-thirds of all children looked after in England (DfES, 2004). Between 1993 and 2003 there was a 31 per cent rise in the number of children in foster care, whilst the total number of children looked after rose by a more modest 19 per cent over the same period, illustrating how foster care has become the principal form of placement for children in public care. With an increasing number of children being placed in this type of care, issues surrounding the recruitment and retention of foster carers have become critical for local authorities. In spite of the reported shortages of foster carers (Department of Health, 2000; Fostering Network, 2002), placement choice and matching remain central to national standards and policy. The demands of these standards and policy have raised the expectations of what foster carers can deliver. It is crucial, therefore, that appropriate training and support are available to assist foster carers in fulfilling these requirements and meeting the needs of the children placed with them.

Children with high levels of need are likely to need high levels of support; the structures surrounding and underpinning children in public care must provide this. Whilst foster carers are part of the support mechanism for fostered children, carers themselves need to be supported to enable them to provide appropriate and effective care for these children. The consequence of high levels of support and training is that of making foster carers feel respected and valued. The skills and confidence this bestows upon them impacts on the quality of foster care that they are able to deliver.

Support for Foster Carers: The Issues

A number of research studies over recent years have noted the importance of support in the recruitment and retention of foster carers. This is illustrated by the dissatisfaction with support described by carers who have ceased to foster. Triseliotis et al (2000), for example, found that 32 per cent of carers who had ceased fostering rated support as either good or very good, compared with 72 per cent of those who were still fostering. Another study, undertaken by Sinclair et al (2000), reported that foster carers who were well supported, trained and remunerated were less likely to leave fostering. Yet, at best, the level and quality of support provided to foster carers is thought to be variable (Sinclair et al, 2000; Triseliotis et al, 1999). Where dissatisfaction with support for foster carers is found it has tended to be more focused on the child's social worker than the family placement social worker (Triseliotis et al, 2000; Sellick, 1999; Ramsay, 1999). Dissatisfaction with the child's social worker has also been found to be associated with poorer placement outcomes (Farmer et al, 2001). The perception of insufficient support may also be linked to foster carers reporting difficulties with the children placed with them (Triselotis et al, 2000).

The amount of contact foster carers have with social workers is thought to be decisive in how carers rate the support they get. Indeed, inaccessibility of social workers and infrequent visits have been cited as areas of dissatisfaction with support (Triseliotis et al, 1999; 2000). Contact with social workers was one of the key factors that Sinclair et al (2000) singled out as crucial in supporting carers. Another study demonstrated that placements which disrupted were typified by a lack of social work visits (Scottish Office, 1991, cited in Berridge, 1997).

For some of those who report inadequate support, transferring to the independent sector may seem an enticing option.

Who Does It Better?

The Social Services Inspectorate's report *Fostering for the Future* notes that support is a key issue that councils need to address (Maddocks, 2002). The report drew attention to the 'stark contrast' found between how councils and independent agencies fared in the support that they offered (p.26). It gave the example of an independent agency whose staff supported four foster carers each, contrasting with one council in which workers supported up to 30 carers each. Other research has revealed how foster carers working for the independent sector tend to rate the support they receive more highly than those working for local authorities (Kirton et al, 2003).

Foster carers and those considering fostering may be 'shopping around' to find the 'best deal' in terms of what packages of support and remuneration independent agencies or authorities can offer (Hayes, 2003). For this reason independent agencies may have an increased interest in ensuring that their foster carers are adequately supported and remunerated for their work, perhaps being more sensitive to the commercial aspects of the labour market. One national study of 55 independent agencies, for example, found that around a third of foster carers had transferred directly from local authorities (Sellick and Connolly, 2001). All of the agencies in the study provided 24 hour support to their foster carers. Better pay and support were considered important in attracting people into fostering.

In contrast it is probable that some local authorities are still relying on the traditional view of foster care as a largely altruistic pursuit. It seems that few carers begin fostering purely for financial reasons, yet a good number will consider leaving through lack of support (Martin, 2002).

What Support do Foster Carers Want?

As Triseliotis et al (2000) point out, support comprises a 'range of crucial components', rather than a singular or simplistic concept. Reviewing other foster care research reveals common themes that help define both what support is and what support foster carers want. Common factors include foster carers' desire to be part of the team, being respected and valued for both the work they do and their views. Alongside this, foster carers want social work support that is dependable and reliable, available and accessible, efficient and responsive whilst being flexible. In addition, they want practical advice and support with things such as money, the children themselves and respite care. They also want to know that support is available when needed should difficulties arise (Triseliotis et al, 2000; Sinclair et al, 2000; Sellick, 1999).

The Research

The findings presented here are based on a questionnaire sent to all local authority foster carers in West Sussex. The study was undertaken by the research officer for children and families in West Sussex's social and caring services department.

Although evaluating foster care support was not the primary aim of the research, it became clear from the findings that this was an issue that was high on foster carers' agenda, and consequently should be high on the agenda of the authority. The questionnaire itself was developed after reviewing previous research in the area and incorporated the expectations of national standards. It was also informed by the issues identified during a series of focus/consultation groups. These groups included members of the fostering service, foster carers and young people who had been in foster care.

The issues that this method highlighted were incorporated into the questionnaire in the form of a series of closed and open-ended questions. Scales and statements were also used. Questions were grouped into the main themes of training, information, support, payments, approval and 'general'. A final section was included to collect demographic data on foster carers.

After publicising the research in a foster care bulletin and by letter, the questionnaire was mailed out to all local authority foster carers in West Sussex. In order to increase the response rate, a second mailing of the questionnaire was

undertaken after which there was a telephone follow up of a one in five sample of carers who had not responded.

Once questionnaires were returned they were entered into the statistical data programme SPSS and analysed.

Findings

A total of 224 questionnaires were returned out of 462 that were sent out, equating to a response rate of 48 per cent. The foster carers who responded reported a wide range of fostering experience, from between a few months to 36 years. On average carers had been caring for children for nine years. The number of children that carers had been caring for since they began fostering ranged from one to 408. On average, carers had looked after 20 children.

Support and Retention of Foster Carers

Whilst being able to attract a supply of new foster carers is important for local authorities, it is equally important to know why foster carers cease fostering if it is not for reasons of natural attrition, such as retirement or moving house. To examine the underlying causes behind problems with the retention of foster carers, individual authorities should monitor carers who leave by analysing exit interviews to determine localised issues in this respect. It is also prudent to examine what makes foster carers consider this course of action before it actually happens.

Although considering leaving fostering is not the same as actually leaving, it is a useful indicator of intention in the context of a survey of existing carers, especially when associated with other variables. In this study four in ten carers had considered leaving fostering. A statistically significant association existed between having a placement breakdown and considering leaving fostering with 56 per cent of those who had a placement breakdown considering this compared with 34 per cent of those who had not. Whilst important in itself, it is more striking still in the context that nearly half (49%) of all carers reported having had a placement breakdown. This reflects Sinclair et al's (2000) research which cited

placement breakdown as one circumstance likely to precipitate carers ceasing to foster.

Our research also found that there was a significant association between foster carers considering leaving fostering and how support, provided by both social services generally and family placement social workers, was regarded. Just over three-quarters (76%) of carers who rated general social services support as poor had considered leaving fostering compared with 37 per cent of those who rated this support as good. For support provided by family placement social workers, 69 per cent of those who rated this as poor had considered leaving compared with 40 per cent of those who rated this support as good.

It might therefore be expected that carers who have actually experienced a placement breakdown would rate support lowly, however, this is not the case. In fact carers who have had a placement breakdown described slightly higher levels of satisfaction with support compared with those who did not report having a breakdown. This may indicate that support was made available when needed, averting the possibility of the carer ceasing to foster, as evidenced by the fact they were still fostering at the time of the research.

When carers were asked what would be the single issue most likely to stop them fostering, lack of support was the most frequent response. This was closely followed by carers' health. If the assumption is that a certain level of health is required to continue fostering, local authorities have a duty to ensure that stress and burnout do not become issues. This could be aided by respite and child care. The third determining factor in the consideration to leave fostering was a lack of placements.

Carers were then asked an open-ended question to find out what would be the most important factor in ensuring they continued fostering. Easily the most important was support with 46 per cent stating this. Other important factors in ensuring carers continued fostering were: respite/child care (15%); to have placements (8%); to be listened to/valued (8%).

Not having children in placements is clearly an

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undesirable situation for foster carers as demonstrated in their responses to the previous two questions. This presents a dilemma for social services departments as, to enable placement choice, there must be a level of placement availability, and thus an assumption of empty placements.

Sources of Support

When considering where foster carers might look for support, a good indication is to identify the source they rate most highly. This emerged as the support received from family placement social workers with 78 per cent of carers rating this form of support as either good or very good compared with 58 per cent for general social services support (see Table 1). The rating of support obtained from support groups was lower with 48 per cent rating this as either good or very good. In fact only 16 per cent of carers said they used support groups on a regular basis. Although this figure is relatively low, and may reflect the availability of such groups, those that do use them generally find them to be valuable. Six out of ten carers who used them reported these groups as being either useful or very useful.

Table 1
How carers rate the support they get

Support from	Very good %	Good %	Adequate %	Poor %	Very poor %
Social services generally	20	38	28	11	2
Family place-ment social worker	52	26	16	5	1
Support group	17	31	40	8	4

Two thirds of carers reported feeling either very valued or fairly valued as a colleague by social workers. As noted earlier, being valued and respected is part of a range of components that make up a supportive relationship between foster carers and social workers. How supported foster carers feel is closely associated with how valued they feel, as demonstrated in Table 2: the more likely foster carers are to rate support highly the more likely they are to feel valued.

Table 2
How carers rate the support they get by how valued they feel

Support rated as good or very good from	Valued %	Not valued %
Social services generally	75	25
Your family placement social worker*	71	29
Support group*	71	29

* p < 0.01

There was also a highly significant association between how valued carers felt and whether or not they had considered leaving fostering: a high proportion of those who had not considered leaving fostering felt valued (75%) compared with a lower proportion of those who had considered this (53%). To feel that your work is appreciated is an essential element in job satisfaction. Being valued not only makes carers feel appreciated, it also confers worth and importance to the work that they undertake. This may help promote job satisfaction and thus retention.

Both the UK National Standards for Foster Care (1999) and the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (2002) underline the importance of support for foster carers by incorporating this within their expectations. For example, standard 14.5 of the UK National Standards for Foster Care states that foster carers should be seen or telephoned at least once a month whilst a child is in the placement. Clearly this ongoing engagement with carers is desirable, not least to pick up concerns at an early stage. In our study the more contact, both by visits and telephone, that family placement social workers had with foster carers the more supported and valued they felt. Table 3 demonstrates this association for telephone contact and feeling valued. While there are good reasons why social workers should make visits to placements in person, nevertheless, for the purposes of ongoing support, simple telephone contact can be a very effective and efficient tool.

Table 3
How often carers are telephoned by their FPSWs by how valued carers feel

How often phoned	Once a week %	Once every 2 weeks %	Once every 3 weeks %	Once every 4 weeks %
Valued	79	71	61	57
Not valued	21	29	39	43
Total	100	100	100	100

It must be noted though, that too frequent contact may be linked to carers ceasing to foster with a 'slightly greater' chance of this occurring in cases where carers were telephoned once a week or more (see Fisher et al, 2000). This was thought to be due to the family placement social worker lacking confidence or the foster carer's uncertainty. Another reason may be that difficulties in the placement meant that more frequent contact was necessary.

Feeling valued is also closely associated with foster carers having their views taken into account. A total of 81 per cent of carers who always had their views taken into account reported feeling valued. All carers who felt that their views were not taken into account felt they were not valued.

Information and Support

Generally, the more information that is supplied to foster carers to assist in caring for the children placed with them the more valued and supported they report feeling. In addition, timing is a crucial factor in the distribution of information, not only in ensuring carers feel supported, but also in assisting carers to meet the needs of the children placed with them.

The UK National Standards for Foster Care state that the information listed in Table 4 should be supplied to foster carers to assist them in caring for the children they have placed with them. The information that carers reported being supplied with was mixed: they were most likely to have been supplied with copies of placement agreements and least to have been supplied with supervision reports.

Table 4
Information supplied to carers about the child

Information	Yes %	No %	Some %	Standard
Copies of needs assessments	54	33	13	2.5
Copies of placement agreements	83	9	8	3.5
Copies of supervision reports	33	54	12	14.7
Copies of care plans	72	17	11	3.2
Details of contacts listed in the child's care plan	63	24	12	9.9
full information on child and family	48	19	33	7.10
Advice/information about the child's background	53	14	33	14.9
Description of the health needs of each child	68	14	18	10.11
Procedures governing health care consent for the child	55	27	19	10.11
Guidelines on health and safety responsibilities	54	28	17	6.7
Safe caring guidelines	60	26	14	7.2
Educational history of the child	49	23	27	14.9

Note: The last column in the table shows the standard and the sub-division of that standard to which each refers.
Discrepancies in percentages are due to rounding.

The more likely carers are to receive any of the information in Table 4, the more highly they rate social services support. This association is valid for each individual item presented in the table with no exceptions. For example, 70 per cent of those who reported receiving details of contacts listed in the child's care plan rated social services support as either good or very good compared with 36 per cent of those who did not receive this information. Of those who received full information on the child and family, 69 per cent rated social services support as either good or very good compared with 34 per cent of those who did not have this information.

A similar picture of association emerges between how carers rate the support that they get from family placement social workers and whether or not they had received the information listed in

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Table 4. Although this picture is similar, the associations are not as prominent as with social services support generally. This may indicate that the information carers obtain from family placement social workers is more comprehensive and appropriate than that which they receive, or expect to receive, from the child's social worker or social services generally. Furthermore, carers tend to rate the support they get from their family placement social worker more highly than that from social services generally (see Table 1).

As noted earlier, feeling supported and being valued are closely linked. It is therefore not surprising that the likelihood of carers receiving the items of information listed in Table 4 is positively associated with how valued carers report feeling. As with general social services support and family placement social worker support, this appears throughout all the items of information listed. For example, 82 per cent of those who received copies of needs assessments said they felt either valued or very valued compared with 44 per cent of those who did not receive this information.

Information and Meeting Children's Needs

In terms of meeting the needs of children, there is some evidence to suggest that having sufficient information can help achieve this. Of the list presented in Table 4, supplying needs assessments and information on the educational history of the child are the most important.

However, in our study, nearly a third of foster carers said they did not receive full information on the child before the placement was made. This impacts on carers' feeling of support and their ability to meet the needs of the children placed with them. Timing is therefore important. Carers were more likely to report being able to meet the needs of the children placed with them if they received adequate information before a placement was made. Additionally, carers were more positive about social work support when they were supplied with information prior to placement. For example, 81 per cent of the carers who received information on the child before the placement was made rated social services support as good compared with 31 per cent of those who did not.

Whilst having sufficient and timely information certainly plays a part in meeting the needs of children, for foster carers the most important factor in helping them meet needs remains support from social services. When asked this question directly, carers highlighted support as being the most important factor in meeting children's needs; the second most important was training, followed by receiving expenses payments.

Payment, Training and Support

Foster carers who rated general social services support highly were also more likely to be satisfied with the total payments they received for fostering. Three-quarters (75%) of those who considered that support was good were either satisfied or very satisfied with the total payments they received compared with 52 per cent of those who thought support was poor. A similar picture emerges when foster carers were asked their views on whether or not their allowances adequately covered the expenses related to fostering. Those who rated support most highly were more likely to agree that allowances covered their costs with 61 per cent saying this compared with 48 per cent of those who thought support was poor. If carers value the support they receive, it is unlikely that they would be prepared to 'trade it off' against better payments as Kirton et al's (2003) research suggests.

In our research, the association between support and training was also prominent. Nine out of ten carers (90%) who thought support was good were satisfied with training contrasting with 65 per cent of those who rated support as poor. The interpretation of this may be that both payments and training are in themselves supportive elements in the overall fostering package. It could also be the case that carers who feel well supported tend to rate other elements more highly generally.

What Support Would Foster Carers Find Most Useful?

Foster carers may need different forms of support at different times when dealing with different situations. Consequently there is not only a need for focused and practical advice and support, there is also a need to know that support is available if and when it needs to be called upon.

Foster carers were given a list of items of support and were asked to pick the single item they would find most useful, or to add their own suggestion under an 'other' category. This resulted in the following:

- weekend and evening social work support (39%)
- telephone helpline (29%)
- support of other carers (27%)
- other self-defined forms of support (5%)

The self-defined category included: having message facilities, regular respite, access to training, more direct contact with social services, and family placement social workers always being on call.

Foster carers are most likely to need support during the evening and weekend because it is the time when children are around. It is often not appropriate for carers to contact emergency duty lines as they are too generic; foster carers usually want specific advice. The need for weekend and evening support has also been commented on by others (see Davis, 1999). One of the best ways of delivering this may be through a telephone helpline.

It is interesting to note the 27 per cent who reported wanting the support of other carers. Support groups are usually run by foster carers themselves, and, as noted earlier, are not well attended, perhaps reflecting their lack of availability. Even with limited financial commitment and application, this is a resource that could better exploited.

As a supplement to the previous question on what support foster carers would find most useful, foster carers were asked an open-ended question to find out how social services support could be improved for both the carers themselves and their families. This generated a long and varied list of answers, many of which overlapped in their content. The five most frequently mentioned themes were:

- being more accessible (12%)
- listening to what carers say (10%)
- more frequent contact with social workers (9%)
- respite/child care (8%)
- support generally (6%)

This self-defined list reiterates the importance of communications with foster carers. In addition to accessibility and contact, taking carers' views into account was highlighted. This not only enhances planning and decision making, it is also associated with carers feeling valued.

Conclusions

This research is not comprehensive in its answer to the question of foster care support. It does, however, reflect and complement the findings of others whilst providing new evidence to inform the debate, and assist the development of support strategies, particularly around the timing and distribution of information for foster carers.

This research has demonstrated the need for:

- regular social work contact with foster carers and placements;
- accessibility of social workers;
- carers' views being listened to;
- prompt distribution of comprehensive, yet appropriate, information;
- evening and weekend social work support and out of hours support.

Retaining foster carers is imperative, not only because of shortages in numbers and maintaining placement choice, but also because of the time and resource implications incurred during the recruitment and approval process. This research found that a lack of support was the single factor most likely to stop carers fostering. And when asked what the most important factor was in ensuring carers continued, they reported, not surprisingly, support.

Foster carers who have experienced placement breakdowns are more likely than others to consider leaving. It is crucial that carers are supported during this difficult time, especially as those who rate support lowly more readily consider leaving fostering.

The other side of the coin is recruitment. Carers who are well supported may experience a high level of 'job satisfaction' which, in turn, is a good advertisement to attract potential carers into fostering.

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As with our research, other studies have found that foster carers who expressed dissatisfaction with social work support also highlighted a failure to provide sufficient background information on the child and family (Triseliotis et al, 2000). Others have found that supplying carers with inadequate background information on children increased the likelihood of placement disruption (Farmer et al, 2001). Our research identified the significance of providing information early in both meeting children's needs and supporting foster carers. Issues around information imply that carers should be more closely involved in the planning and decision making process to ensure that they have a good knowledge of the children, their circumstances and their needs to help achieve better matching. Additionally, our research found that if carers' views were taken into account, there was a higher probability that they reported feeling valued.

The Social Services Inspectorate's report *Delivering Quality Children's Services* recommended that councils should ask a variety of questions aimed at reviewing their services. These include whether there is sufficient support for foster carers, and what support carers themselves want (Cooper, 2002). Therefore, local authorities, whilst taking on board messages from research in this area, should work closely with their own foster carers in developing and implementing support strategies. Consultation with carers will identify issues distinct not only to the local authority, but within its boundaries. Our research, for instance, found that foster carers administered by different area offices had differing support priorities.

It is reasonable to assume that foster carers who receive good levels of training and payments would feel that these were key elements in an overall framework of support. Indeed, a higher level of satisfaction with social services support was found to be associated with higher levels of satisfaction with both training and payments. Although this can be interpreted as part of a more generalised satisfaction with fostering, it equally implies that a general satisfaction with fostering adds to the perception of feeling supported. Therefore, next to the practical sources and methods of support mentioned here, it is also important to have an ethos that promotes a feeling of being supported.

Within the wider context, and in conjunction with the practical aspects of support already outlined here, a package of adequate and appropriate training and payments can go some way to providing this.

This paper has helped define what support is, what carers want in practical terms, and how this can be achieved. Even so, there is also a side to support that is not wholly definable, one which is perhaps distinguished by a more holistic approach to the way in which foster carers are embraced and involved in the child care process. Regardless of the extent to which foster carers use support, the knowledge that it is available when needed allows a more self-assured approach to daily fostering tasks.

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Notes on Contributor:

Tim Martin is a research Officer with West Sussex County Council Social Services and Caring Services

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