Part-time Fostering: recruiting and supporting carers for short-break schemes

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Abstract

Although most local authorities provide or commission home-based short-break services to support families with a disabled child, such schemes have been much slower to develop as a form of support for families where children are in need for reasons other than disability. This paper draws on a study of barriers to the development of 'support care' schemes in England, focusing in particular on the motivation and experiences of those who undertake this part-time fostering work and the skills and support they require. Since childminders can now be registered to provide overnight care, and some already provide daytime care for children placed with them by social workers, the potential for childminders to expand their service into short-break care is also considered. The paper concludes that although local authorities have sometimes been reluctant to develop short-break schemes because they fear diverting potential carers from mainstream fostering, in practice such fears are not well-founded. Support care schemes can offer a way for those who might be interested in fostering to 'dip a toe' in the water, as well as helping to retain existing foster carers who might otherwise leave the service. This kind of service also fits well with the current policy emphasis on early intervention to support children and families who are experiencing difficulties, and on promoting flexibility in the social care workforce.

Key words: foster care, respite care, short break, recruitment and retention, support

Introduction

In recent years, fostering has moved from being a 'neglected service' to receiving considerable attention from both researchers and policy makers (Sellick and Howell, 2004). This is partly in response to the difficulties that many local authorities have been experiencing in recruiting and retaining sufficient foster carers (ADSS, 1997; Warren, 1997; Maddox, 2002). In the most recent survey by the Fostering Network, these difficulties are reported to have reached 'critical levels', with more than 8,000 additional carers required nationally to enable local authorities to offer children a choice of placement (Fostering Network, 2004).

Fostering can take a variety of forms, including long-term, task-focused, respite, short-term and care by relatives (Sinclair et al., 2004a). This diversity is increasing: a review of innovative fostering practice in local authorities found examples of specialist fostering schemes such as time-limited placements for young people with particularly complex and challenging needs, and placements for young offenders as an alternative to secure accommodation (Sellick and Howell, 2003). One form of fostering that has received relatively little attention, however, is short-break care. This offers short-term placements (typically a weekend every fortnight or month, or a regular overnight stay each week) to families in need of support. Most of the available information concerns short breaks provided for families with a disabled child, commonly known as 'family link' or 'shared care' schemes (Robinson, 1996; Prewett, 1999; Tarleton, 2003). Less is known about short-break schemes for children who are in need for reasons other than disability, although one evaluation of four such schemes in the mid 1990s concluded that this kind

of support was much appreciated by parents and helped them to feel more in control of their lives (Aldgate and Bradley, 1999). The government's *Choice Protects* review of fostering and placement services, which was launched in 2002 to improve and extend the range of options that local authorities can offer to support children outside of their families, refers to this kind of service for parents and children in need as 'support foster care'. It combines regular short breaks for children with support for parents, who remain the main carer of their child (Department of Health, 2002). In this paper, we use this term interchangeably with 'part-time foster care', 'support care' and 'short-break care'.

Support foster care has the potential to be used in a variety of situations, for example to provide support to children, young people and their families at times of crisis; to support families affected by HIV/Aids (Fostering Network, 1997); to provide a part-time base for young people who have run away from home, care leavers and young offenders; or to support children cared for by relatives by offering regular breaks. One of the first support care schemes in England, set up in the mid 1990s, identified key characteristics as the emphasis on accommodation being a form of family support, and a strong focus on working in partnership with parents (Howard, 2000).

A similar service to support parents through short-break care has been available in Sweden for many years, where it is known as the 'contact family' service (Andersson, 2003). It is the most frequently used statutory service within the child welfare system, used by around one percent of children and young people under the age of 18. Carers are volunteers recruited and supervised by social services, although families can suggest the name of someone known to them such as a friend or neighbour. The carers are 'ordinary

people without special training' (Andersson, 2003: 291), and they undertake a range of tasks such as helping schoolchildren with homework, sharing leisure activities, supporting parents and providing regular breaks where the child stays with them overnight, or every second or third weekend. The arrangement often continues for a number of years. Contact family carers receive expenses rather than payment and are entitled to support and supervision from social workers, although in practice this tends to happen only when the placement is reviewed twice a year.

In the UK, this kind of support service for families is not widespread. There are perhaps a dozen specialist schemes, and some local authorities use mainstream (full-time) foster carers in this way on an occasional or *ad hoc* basis (Greenfields and Statham, 2004). All such schemes require carers to be registered as foster carers (unlike in Sweden), and children cared for in this way are legally regarded as accommodated under a series of short-term placements. There have been suggestions that the amount of paperwork and 'red tape' involved in such placements may be deterring local authorities from developing this form of support (Heyes, 2004). It is also possible that local authorities may be having difficulties in recruiting carers for such part-time fostering work, in line with more general difficulties with recruitment and retention in the fostering service. As part of the *Choice Protects* review, the Thomas Coram Research Unit at London University's Institute of Education was asked to carry out a survey of support foster care schemes, with the aim of finding out more about the nature and extent of this form of provision. In particular, the study aimed to look at the barriers (legal and otherwise) that might be preventing local authorities from developing support care schemes and how they could be overcome. The researchers were also asked to consider the potential for

childminders, some of whom already offer daytime places to 'children in need' paid for by social services (Statham et al., 2001), to offer overnight and short-break care. In 2001, national standards for childcare were issued by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES 2001). They included for the first time an appendix setting out the additional criteria to be met if a childminder wished to care for a child overnight, for a continuous period of not more than 27 days (if care continues for longer than this, the guidance notes that the childminder should be regarded as a foster child and must notify the social services department). This provides the potential for childminders to extend their normal day time service by also caring for children in need overnight or at weekends, in the same way as part-time foster carers do.

This paper presents selected findings from the study of support care schemes, focusing on the motivation and experiences of those who undertake part-time fostering, the skills required for the work, and the implications for local authorities who wish to develop such provision.

The study

The research design involved a number of methods and stages. In April 2003, a screening questionnaire was sent to all 150 councils with social services responsibilities in England, which aimed to establish whether a support foster care scheme existed or was planned, and asked about barriers and difficulties that had been experienced or would be anticipated in setting one up. The form was sent with the weekly electronic bulletin to chief executives from the Association of Directors of Social Services. After a reminder

several weeks later, replies were received from 46 councils (a response rate of 31 per cent).

From this screening survey and other sources, including information provided by the Fostering Network and the coordinator of one of the longest running support care schemes, fourteen councils were selected covering a range of local authority types and geographical areas. Six had an established support care scheme, two were in the process of setting one up, and the remaining six authorities had reported in the screening survey that they did not have a support care scheme. Information was collected from detailed telephone interviews with coordinators of the schemes, senior managers in family placement or fostering team, and a legal adviser in six authorities. The interviews explored the difficulties experienced in setting up and/or keeping support foster care schemes going, the reasons why local authorities without schemes did not have them, and what had or would prove helpful in overcoming barriers to developing this service. Managers' views were sought about the factors that facilitate or hinder the use of short term breaks as a family support service, and the local authority's practice in applying Looking After Children (LAC) procedures to this form of care.

Three of the longer-established schemes were then visited to obtain more detailed information, and a group of six or seven foster carers in each took part in a group interview which explored their experiences of offering this kind of care and how and why they had come to do the work. Finally, the study explored the potential for childminders to provide a short-break service in a number of ways. The coordinators of six community childminding schemes (providing places for children in need) who had participated in an

earlier TCRU study of sponsored day care in 1997/8 were re-contacted by telephone. They were asked about the impact of changes in the regulation of childminding and home childcare, and whether they thought community childminding schemes had the potential and interest expand into support care work. A short questionnaire was also included in a newsletter sent by the National Childminding Association to coordinators of childminding networks across England in July 2003 (31 responses were received from 26 networks). This asked about the number of childminders registered to provide overnight care, whether any offered short breaks for children in need, if this was a service the network would want to develop, and whether there were particular difficulties that would need to be overcome before childminders could offer such a service.

Barriers to establishing short-break fostering schemes

Turning first to the results from the screening survey of local authorities, nearly a third (16 out of 46) did not mention any specific barriers to developing a support foster care scheme (Table 1). Three of these authorities already had a project and a further nine were considering developing one. Of the 30 local authorities that described one or more barriers, by far the most frequently mentioned (by almost two thirds) was the priority placed on recruiting carers for the mainstream fostering service, and a fear that a support foster care scheme might create competition for an increasingly scarce resource. As we show below, this was not in fact upheld by the experience of existing projects, but there was a perception among survey respondents that the most urgent task was to recruit and retain full-time foster carers. The difficulties that most authorities were experiencing in this area appeared to be discouraging them from using carers in a more flexible way, or diverting resources into recruiting specifically for short-break care.

[Insert Table 1 around here]

A second perceived barrier was lack of resources, including funding for the additional support and training that would be needed by carers who were also supporting parents. A related resource issue was the anticipated impact on workloads for fostering team staff and management; and the difficulty of exploring new ideas and setting up new initiatives given current staffing pressures. Uncertainty about where a support foster care scheme would fit into the range of services offered by the council was raised by several respondents, who felt it would sit more happily in a family support than a fostering context. One noted that '*it seems a different task from mainstream fostering'*. Another was concerned about potential overlap with the job of family support workers. Other perceived barriers included anticipated difficulty in attracting carers with the necessary skills (for example to work with parents), uncertainty about appropriate payment levels for part-time carers, and the potential for misuse of the scheme either by social workers who it was feared would find it difficult to accept time-limited placements, or by parents who might refuse to have children back home (Table 1).

'A friendly ear': the skills needed for support care work

Some of the skills and approaches needed for short-break foster care are those that research has found to underpin successful full-time placements, such as the ability to provide an emotionally warm and safe environment and to handle difficult behaviour in a way that does not make the child feel insecure or unloved (Sinclair et al., 2004b). But there are a number of features of short-break care that make the task different from that of

mainstream foster care. One coordinator described it as '*substituting for a missing grandparent or auntie or friend, not substituting for a parent…it's a different kind of role, about making parents feel empowered and not that somebody else is taking over'*. Scheme coordinators sought to recruit individuals who could understand and empathise with families and be aware of the practical and emotional problems that parents faced:

> My view is that people who have struggled with quite a lot of difficulties in their lives actually make better carers than people who sail through with few problems, because they understand a lot (scheme coordinator)

Those carers who also had experience of mainstream fostering described the difference as follows:

> As a support carer you're actually helping both the parents and the children at the same time. As a foster carer you're looking after the children on behalf of the parents (male part-time foster carer).

Scheme coordinators described the carers' role in relation to parents as informing them about and helping them to access local services, such as parent and toddler groups and community activities; offering emotional support and 'befriending'. Attending school meetings or hospital appointments with a parent was viewed as outside of the carers' remit, but telephone or face-to-face advice on parenting issues, or simply acting as a 'listening ear' was seen as an appropriate role. The carers themselves reported providing a significant level of emotional support for parents. Most had found ways of keeping

boundaries and discouraging parents from depending upon them too much, but several noted that difficulties could occur if parents began to telephone them on a daily basis or late at night for support and advice. In such situations, the backing of the scheme coordinator was crucial in helping them to resolve the issues. Despite the tensions inherent in balancing a professional caring role with that of being a 'befriender' to a parent, carers spoke with genuine warmth of some parents who had thanked them for their support and assistance at times of crisis, or who had simply felt more able to cope with a parenting issue after seeking the carer's advice.

Routes into short-break care

Despite the fears expressed by respondents to the local authority survey, finding people prepared to offer short-break fostering had *not* proved a barrier to developing schemes. Nor did it appear to have led to competition with mainstream fostering for a limited pool of carers. The main reason for this was that recruitment for support care targeted different groups who would usually not have been in a position to foster full-time, such as individuals in full-time employment who wanted to foster but had felt they could not do so because they worked. In one authority, in-house recruitment had led to several child and family social workers offering support care at evenings or weekends. In another, the young adult children of existing full-time foster carers had proved a fruitful source of recruits for support care work, especially as this scheme had a particular focus on engaging with young people in sport and leisure activities. Among the carers participating in the focus groups, some had felt they would be too old for mainstream fostering, or wanted to set aside time to spend with grandchildren:

> Being our age (58), we thought it would be better for us than full-time fostering. And we enjoy it, we do enjoy it, it's good (couple, part-time foster carers).

Rather than deflecting potential carers from mainstream fostering, it appeared that support care could offer a route into full-time fostering when the carer's circumstances changed. Several participants in the focus groups described how they had considered full-time fostering, but decided it would be too difficult for their own children until they were older:

> I went in to do mainstream at first, but I'm a single parent and as the assessment process went on we realized it wouldn't really be fair to my son. I've got a 12 year-old son and it turned out that he didn't really want to share his Mum with somebody all the time (female part-time foster carer).

Part-time fostering schemes enabled people to '*dip a toe in the water'* and engage in some caring work, even if they did not currently have adequate accommodation or enough emotional space in the family for fostering full-time. As one scheme coordinator explained, '*I think it encourages the service [as a whole] really, as if we hadn't been able to take them on a part-time basis, these people would have been turned away'*.

Support foster care could also prevent mainstream foster carers from leaving the service entirely. In five local authorities running schemes, former foster carers who had decided to retire (through age, health related problems or general disillusionment) had moved into part-time fostering, indicating that individuals with well developed skills, who would

otherwise be lost to the service, may be retained by offering them a different (and perhaps more varied) role.

> I were just fed up really [after a number of difficult emergency placements] but I still wanted to do it. If I hadn't known about this [support care scheme] I'd have just left. I would have finished with the fostering altogether (female part-time foster carer).

In this study, we asked both coordinators of support care schemes and managers in local authorities without such schemes, about the kind of people whom they thought would have skills suited to this form of fostering. Childminders were frequently mentioned, and the potential for childminders to undertake such work is explored further below. Nurses (in an area which had experienced several hospital closures), child care, residential home, teaching and social work staff were also noted as potential carers who might be willing to combine employment with caring.

The local authority managers interviewed were also keen to draw in new carers from among the general public, rather than simply targeting professionals or those with prior experience of caring work. Specialist recruitment campaigns, and sending information on support care to individuals who enquired about mainstream fostering but who were not considered suitable for such a role (for example on health, age, or employment grounds), were also noted as potential ways of overcoming barriers to recruitment. Finally, 'word of mouth' recruitment was mentioned by a number of interviewees. This has been shown in other research to be one of the most successful ways of attracting new carers (SCIE,

2004). The effectiveness of word of mouth was illustrated in one local authority in the study where, since the first same-sex couple became support carers, an increasing number of enquiries had been received from within the gay community, allowing access to a wider pool of potential carers.

Satisfaction and support

Research consistently shows that foster carers are generally highly committed to their work, despite the low pay, and are motivated by a desire to improve the lives of damaged or vulnerable children (Rhodes et al., 2001; Triseliotis et al., 2000; Sinclair et al., 2004b). This was certainly true of the part-time foster carers in this study. They described the satisfaction they obtained from providing children with stability and access to a 'normal life' They also referred to the improvement they felt they made to parents' lives and the positive effects of short-breaks on family life as a whole. Carers were proud of the service they provided:

> I think it's really rewarding. It really is. I get a lot out of it personally. Just to think you're you know improving their life and giving them a bit of care they wouldn't get at home (female part-time foster carer)..

However, while carers were very committed to the service they provided, the conditions under which they worked were for many a source of dissatisfaction. They thought that the role of their own families in the provision of care was under-rated and forgotten, and that more recognition was needed of the sacrifices made and support given by children growing up with parents who are foster carers. Low pay was a particular issue, as has

been reported in many other studies (e.g. Waterhouse, 1997; Warren, 1997). Most support carers were located within the lowest level of the fostering pay range, which was a source of resentment given the level of support offered to parents and the complex needs of some children in placement. Few schemes offered any financial help with the cost of the activities and outings which carers felt it was important to provide. One made the point that part-time placements were very different to full-time foster care:

> The big difference is that the time that you have children in support care is much shorter than the 24 hours a day that you have them in foster care, but it's much more intense. You have to devote yourself entirely to the children for the time you've got them, whereas in a foster care situation they just become part of the family (male part-time foster carer).

Some short-break services for disabled children have attempted to address recruitment problems by introducing extra payments for some carers. Research has shown that this can improve stability of placement, increase the level of commitment by carers and result in a more experienced pool of carers (Heslop et al., 2003).

The level of support offered to foster carers can be as important as the level of financial reward in encouraging them to enter and continue in the work (Maddox, 2002; SCIE, 2004). The carers who participated in the focus groups had mixed feelings about their relationship with their local authority and the extent to which they felt the service they provided was valued by those outside the scheme. Some felt that they were unable to access adequate information on children before accepting a placement. Attending training

sessions or support groups was often difficult as many carers were at work during the day. Part-time carers reported being excluded from initiatives that benefited children placed with full-time foster carers, such as the provision of a home computer. Incidents like these resulted in them feeling sidelined and forgotten in comparison with mainstream carers. While acknowledging that some social work staff were effective and thorough, others were perceived to be dismissive of part-time carers, unaware of the limitations of the service, or simply disinterested in the child and carer. Another common concern was the increasingly challenging needs of the children placed with them, in particular children with autistic spectrum disorders and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder).

On the other hand, carers in all three focus groups repeatedly stressed how much they valued the support of their scheme coordinator and support workers. Having someone whom they could contact if there were any problems was valued highly, as was the coordinator's role as an advocate and buffer in their dealings with the wider social services department. Although support carers often went on to express dissatisfaction with the way part-time foster carers were treated, they stressed that this was a result of wider social services policies and relationships with particular social workers, rather than difficulties with the support care scheme itself.

Childminders as a source of short-break care

Under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities are encouraged to support families who are experiencing difficulties by providing daycare, for instance with a registered childminder. This can be organised on an informal basis, or through a community childminding scheme where a 'pool' of childminders are especially recruited

for such work. Most local authorities have developed childminding networks, organizations that bring together groups of childminders for training and support, and these may include community childminding schemes (Owen, 2003). Such childminders have the potential to offer a source of recruits for part-time fostering.

However, we found little evidence that this was the case. None of the six community childminding schemes involved in the earlier research (Statham et al., 2001) were actively developing a short-break or overnight care service. This was mostly because scheme coordinators thought the majority of childminders would be unwilling to work evenings or weekends, due to the impact on their own family lives. In most schemes, coordinators were aware of one or two childminders who did provide overnight care for children placed by social services, but on an occasional and informal basis rather than being specifically registered to do so. In the majority of these situations, the child was already being cared for by the childminder during the daytime, and staying overnight with the same carer provided continuity in circumstances such as the mother going into hospital, or a grandparent carer needing a break. Some of these childminders were foster carers, or had been so in the past, but this was not a requirement for providing overnight care.

A similar picture emerged from the survey of childminding network coordinators. Again, a major obstacle was thought to be the reluctance of most childminders to offer overnight or weekend care because of their own family commitments. Of the 26 networks responding to the survey, 10 had no childminders registered to provide overnight care, 14 had either one or two, and only two had more than four overnight carers. A small number

of childminders are nevertheless likely to be interested in this kind of support care work, possibly those with older children rather than a young family at home. Several network coordinators expressed an interest in developing their service to offer such care, whilst also pointing out barriers such as inconsistent and over-rigorous regulatory requirements for overnight care, and lack of clarity over the relationship between an extended community childminding service and short-break foster care services for children in need. There appeared to be inconsistencies in the regulations that allowed childminders to provide overnight care without being registered as foster carers, and the expectation that children provided with short breaks under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 should be counted as 'looked after' and hence cared for by foster carers.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the role of part-time foster carers who provide short breaks to support children living with their own families. The findings have a number of implications for recruitment and retention within fostering services. First, they reinforce the need for local authorities to broaden the net to recruit a much wider section of the population who might not be in a position to consider traditional full-time fostering, including younger people, older people and those in full-time employment. Short-break foster care can provide an introduction to care work and thus a potential source of future recruits to full-time foster care, as well as helping to retain within the fostering service carers who would otherwise have left. There was no evidence in this study to suggest that support care diverted people from a career in mainstream fostering. Part-time foster carers were drawn from a pool of people who would in most cases not have been

available for full-time fostering, or who would not wish to take on full-time fostering at this point in their lives, such as grandparents and the young adult children of foster carers. Some childminders may also be able and willing to provide short breaks in addition to daytime care, especially those whose own children are older or who have left home. Specialist childminders who already care for children placed with them under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 are most likely to have the relevant skills and expertise.

Second, this study reinforces the findings of other research (e.g. Triseliotis et al., 2000; Sinclair et al., 2000a; Kirton et al., 2003) in highlighting the importance of offering a good support package to retain carers and create job satisfaction for them. The provision of similar support to that recommended for mainstream foster carers (such as carers' group meetings, access to equipment, 24 hour 'on-call' support and regular supervision) should be no more costly than when provided for full-time foster carers, and would help to ensure that part-time carers feel valued and enabled in their work. Such support could be offered by dedicated workers attached to schemes, or possibly by embedding the support carers into the fostering service so that each fostering team member has some support carers on their workload, as happened in one authority in this study. When coordinators were running schemes single-handed, it was generally difficult for them to provide the support and supervision that carers needed. The good relationships which scheme coordinators had been able to establish with their support carers were repeatedly mentioned as a crucial factor in the success of the service, and it is important that they are able to allocate sufficient time to this.

Finally, the study indicated the importance of strong senior management backing for support care schemes if they are to survive and thrive in a climate where preventive services were often reported to be the first to bear the brunt of spending restrictions. Where schemes had been developed on a piecemeal basis, staff and carers were hampered by a lack of security, low staffing levels, the need to bid for funds on an annual basis and an inability to plan and develop the service in a coherent manner. Government grants through the *Choice Protects* initiative have encouraged a number of authorities to develop support care schemes, but this kind of family support service is vulnerable unless incorporated into mainstream budgets (either family support or fostering). In Sweden, the 'contact family' service is a well-established part of the child welfare system and can provide ongoing, low-level support; but in the UK services are often not provided until a family's difficulties have become more severe. An integrated strategy, in which support care has a clear role within the range of council services for children, would help to ensure that preventive services like this do not lose out when decisions are being made about resource allocation. Such a strategy would also need to take a coordinated view of how services offered by different agencies to support families fit together, for example the relationship between the care offered to children in need by community childminders and by short-break foster carers.

(4972 words)

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Table 1: Barriers to establishing a support care scheme (survey)

Barrier	Number of councils mentioning
Shortage of carers/priority to mainstream fostering	19
Resources and funding	10
Staff workloads	8
Skills needed	5
Appropriate location for service	4
Payment issues	3
Potential misuse of scheme	3
No specific barriers mentioned	15
Number of councils responding to the survey = 46	