
Sharing the care: the qualities sought of social workers by foster carers

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ABSTRACT

Given that foster carers are a scarce resource it is essential that every effort is made to retain their services. This paper considers the role played by social workers in this endeavour. The results reported here form part of larger study, involving seven local authorities, concerned with the wider issues of supporting foster placements. The paper describes the qualities sought of social workers by foster carers and discusses the relationship between these qualities and the likelihood that carers will continue fostering. It was found that carers are highly satisfied with the job of fostering, are committed to it and view social workers as a vital source of support. Promoting good relationships between social workers and foster carers is therefore an important element in any strategy that aims to retain good foster carers.

INTRODUCTION

There has generally been a significant shortage of foster carers and it has often not been possible to place children in the type of environment that was being sought (Berridge 1997). Such conclusions attract widespread agreement. There is, it is true, evidence that the problems of supply and matching are particularly severe for certain groups of foster children such as older children and adolescents (Triseliotis *et al.* 1995; Waterhouse 1997) or children from ethnic minorities (Thoburn 1990; Caesar *et al.* 1994) and in certain areas – those where the need is greatest (Bebbington & Miles 1990) or which pay low rates (Waterhouse 1997). As a result, few if any authorities would claim that they are over-endowed with foster carers. So there is research concern both with *supply* of carers and, although rather less prominently, with their *retention* (Berridge 1997). This paper is concerned with the role which social workers play in retention.

Evidence already exists about the likely influence of social work on foster carer satisfaction and – a related but not identical issue – their willingness to continue to foster. Two studies (Cummins 1994; Fees *et al.*

1998) identified a perceived lack of support from social workers as a major source of foster carer dissatisfaction. A study in Hampshire (Gorin with Hayden 1997) found that almost half the carers who responded had thought of giving up fostering and of these over half commented that their dissatisfaction was bound up with the social services department or with individual social workers. Triseliotis *et al.* (1998) report similar findings from their large-scale study in Scotland. The single most common reason given by carers for ceasing to foster was dissatisfaction with the service provided for them.

The aim of this paper is to use a large-scale study of foster carers and foster placements in order to build on this earlier literature. Its particular objectives are to:

- compare foster carer views of social workers in this study with those found elsewhere in the literature;
- build on this literature by developing and testing a measure of foster carer attitudes to social workers;
- identify some factors which influence these attitudes;
- assess the relationship between these attitudes and whether carers continue or cease fostering.

In this way we hope both to confirm or refine existing knowledge, but also to add to it. In particular the development of a measure of carer attitudes should make it easier to monitor these attitudes. It should also be possible to see whether trained social workers will be more favourably viewed than others, and to gain a quantitative handle on their relative impact on turnover (as opposed, for example, to the influence that fostering allowances might have on this).

THE STUDY

The research was funded by the Department of Health and carried out in seven local authorities selected to provide social and organizational diversity, and to be reasonably accessible to the research team. Two are London boroughs (one inner, one outer), two are urban unitary authorities, one is a metropolitan borough with a rural hinterland, and the remaining two are large and diverse shire counties. Three of the authorities have sizable ethnic minority populations, a fact which is reflected in the ethnic composition of their foster carers. All seven authorities operated a system whereby the foster families had their own social worker (variously identified as family placement worker, family support worker or link worker – we shall use the term ‘family placement worker’ throughout the rest of the paper) and also had contact with the child’s social worker.

The study was undertaken over a period of 30 months and used a variety of sources of data. This paper draws on the following two sources:

- 1 *General Questionnaire*: In June/July 1997 a General Questionnaire was sent to every foster carer registered in the seven participating authorities, regardless of whether they were fostering a child at that time. This asked the carers about the support they received, their satisfaction with it, their experience of fostering and their attitudes towards it. The survey produced 944 usable questionnaires – an overall response rate of 62%. All registered carers were followed up approximately 17–18 months later to see if they were continuing to foster. Carers were counted as ceasing to foster if either (a) they were no longer registered or (b) they were not fostering and were not expected to do so in the future by their family placement worker.
- 2 *Specific Questionnaire*: Carers were asked in the General Questionnaire if they were willing to complete further questionnaires on a specific child, and 80% of those responding agreed to do so. This second survey generated 487 usable questionnaires (82% of those sent the Specific Questionnaire).

Response rates for the General Questionnaire were significantly lower from the London boroughs, from carers from ethnic minorities and from carers who were not actively fostering. In other ways the samples seem highly representative of foster care in general. The social characteristics of the foster carers have an almost identical distribution to that described by Bebbington & Miles (1990), while the age and sex distribution of the children in both samples are exactly what national statistics would lead one to expect.

While there was no evidence within the study that the variables we discuss below were related to whether or not the carer came from London or from an ethnic minority, those who were not actively fostering had significantly less favourable attitudes to field social workers but not family placement workers. As a result, our paper may give a slightly more favourable picture of attitudes to social workers than would be found in a truly random sample of foster carers. However, other information on non-responders from their social workers does not suggest to us that this is in any way a major source of bias.

CARERS’ VIEWS ON SOCIAL WORKERS IN THIS AND OTHER STUDIES

The literature (see below) identifies three main sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with social workers. Key factors seem to be the physical and emotional availability of the social worker, teamwork and respect, and help both of a practical nature and with the individual child. As will be seen, there is overlap between these categories and some of the quotations given below could be placed in more than one. Nevertheless, the categories seem sufficiently robust for our purposes here. For each of these areas we give the relevant literature and the degree to which they corresponded to the themes extracted from the qualitative comments in our questionnaires.

The latter were taken from a subsample of one in nine respondents to the General Questionnaire ($n = 105$) and one in five questionnaires about a specific placement ($n = 97$). In both questionnaires we asked a number of open-ended questions about their perceptions of social workers and about the support they received.

Physical and emotional availability

Gilligan (1996) found that a significant minority of his Irish foster carer respondents agreed with the

statement that 'once you get a child you're on your own and have to get on with it'. Against this background it is not surprising that Rees & Wallace (1982) reported that foster carers valued social workers who visited them when needed and were sympathetic to the needs and feelings of family members, while Rindfleisch *et al.* (1998) found that a number of foster carers ceased fostering because in their view social workers did not reach out to them.

In contrast to reaching out, some social workers are seen as inaccessible. The United States General Accounting Office (1989) found in a large-scale survey that inaccessible agency workers were a key source of dissatisfaction. Triseliotis *et al.* (1998) report similar conclusions from Scotland. In their study respondents who ceased fostering complained that social workers failed to visit them often enough and left them to cope on their own. Such social workers did not respond to telephone calls, were unresponsive to messages, and generally seemed to be somewhere else when needed.

The themes emerging from our research were very similar to those identified above. A central concern is that the social worker is there if needed, with a third of the respondents in the General Questionnaire mentioning this as helpful. At best this involves the worker in being approachable, available and responsive, and in having time for the placement. For example:

'I know I only have to make a telephone call to get the support needed.'

'Any problem and she'll come at any time.'

'My link worker is great. She is there for me when I need her. But I feel we could have more visits from the social worker for the children and return telephone calls.'

A lack of support in this respect was variously attributed to a lack of time owing to absence or workload or a lack of a sense of commitment to the case. For example:

'Seems to be on leave so often that requests for assistance have to wait for well over a week from initial contact.'

'Does not visit. She never talks to us or tells us any problem the child has had or may have.'

'I sometimes feel as though he clock watches when he visits which can be unnerving.'

Another aspect of support is reliability:

'She always does what she says, I know where I stand with her.'

'Doesn't keep promises.'

Over and above being generally available and encouraging, carers seem to want social workers

who will be there for them when the going gets tough. They refer to placements which break down, foster children who present them with challenging behaviour on a daily basis, resentful and/or abusive parents and/or actual allegations of abuse against the carers themselves. For example:

'We received very good support from the child's social worker and link workers to come to terms with the difficult ending of a long-term placement.'

'Our family felt very betrayed by Social Services' apparent lack of support when allegations were made. When they proved unfounded our social worker was very supportive. I will never get over the feeling of betrayal and after so many years of working together there was not one hint from anyone that they felt it was a mistake or unfounded.'

Teamwork and respect

The second key aspect of the foster care/social worker relationship is that of respect and recognition. Rees & Wallace (1982) concluded in their review of the admittedly sparse literature at the time on the views of foster carers that 'they do not want to feel that they are just a departmental "resource"' (p. 58). Pasztor & Wynne (1995) go further in recommending that foster carers should be involved as team members in permanency planning and in developing care plans. In similar vein, Thoburn (1994) emphasizes the importance of caregivers being full partners in the process of helping the young person. Triseliotis *et al.* (1998) found that carers were put off by social workers who were unappreciative of their efforts and/or did not allow them a say in what happened to the child. At least some of the disillusioned carers appear to have been looking for recognition as members of a working team or partnership which had not materialized.

An important part of this teamwork is the provision of appropriate information. Carers want to be properly briefed about the child before he or she arrives (Rees & Wallace 1982; Triseliotis *et al.* 1998). As suggested above, a sense of teamwork may also be particularly missed in the aftermath of an allegation by a foster child against a member of the foster family. Nixon (1997), for example, cites one carer who comments 'We were guilty until proven innocent' and suggests that social workers were often seen as part of the investigating team while the carer was left to make use of what informal support might be available elsewhere.

The foster carers' responses in our research also reflected these concerns, emphasizing the importance

of being treated with respect, having their views listened to, and being given the appropriate information. Their comments suggest an ongoing concern on the part of foster carers that they should be treated as partners in a professional relationship, rather than workers with inferior training and status. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction is related to what the social worker may have done or failed to do to empower the foster carer, by being listened to, kept informed and taken seriously:

'He is very helpful. Supervises the contact and always keeps me informed on what's going on.'

'Has an extremely relaxed manner, totally unthreatening, even when challenging. Listens. Acknowledges difficulties.'

On the other hand, foster carers can feel that they have been denied information and have not been appropriately consulted, or have been excluded or patronized:

'I was surprised to read on the minutes at the child's review that he was being considered to be moved to another placement near his grandma. The child was very settled with us.'

'Sometimes you feel as if you are at the bottom of the pile. Everyone's views (child's/parents/social workers) seem to come first and you have no say.'

'My general feeling is that foster parents are often unimportant and their views are often ignored. Foster carers' views should be listened to about each placement's needs. After all they are with the child on a 24 hour period.'

Help both of a practical nature and with the individual child

The literature suggests that carers want efficient, practical help – financial where appropriate but also in kind. Thus Rindfleisch *et al.* (1998) found that withdrawal from fostering was associated with a perception of the social service agency as slow and indecisive in dealing with financial matters. Others have noted the importance of paid holidays and sickness benefits (Sellick 1999) and relief breaks for carers (Fees *et al.* 1998).

In keeping with this evidence, carers in our study stressed the need for social workers to be effective in addressing problems identified by the carers. They want social workers who will deal with problems promptly whether they are serious or routine. So for example on the positive side:

'Financial support is always punctual, holiday allowances, etc.'

'Helped to make our life a lot easier by making dad

understand we are doing our best for the child and not for the parent.'

But critically:

'I feel the money side is the most depressing part of fostering. It is a struggle getting social workers to fill in the necessary forms in order to get payments when they should be paid.'

'Contact transport is haphazard – E has been let down. Arrangements are not always stuck to and changes not passed on to ourselves.'

Another aspect of supportive social worker behaviour is seen as the work they do with the child's family and the relevant professional networks. This work involves liaison, negotiation and sometimes mediation. For example:

'Sorting out school and other things with me.'

'She will also sort out any problems with parents, hospital, health visitor, etc.'

The literature highlights the increasing number of children placed for foster care with very challenging emotional and behavioural problems (Stone & Stone 1983; Fees *et al.* 1998). Such difficulties are considered by Triseliotis *et al.* (1998) as intrinsic reasons for ceasing to foster. Foster carers have not always expected such problems (Fees *et al.* 1998) and there is a need for them to receive help in understanding and responding to difficult and distressing feelings and behaviours (Gilligan 1996). The United States General Accounting Office survey (1989) identified a lack of support in dealing with the foster child's challenging behaviour as a key component in decisions to withdraw from caring, together with insufficient prior training in how to address such difficulties.

Unsurprisingly carers in our study also appreciated support for their handling of the child, and were dissatisfied when their concerns were not taken seriously. So, for example, on the positive side:

'Always discusses visiting arrangements with me.'

'Supports my handling of the child's behaviour.'

And on the negative side:

'Plays down bad behaviour and tries to justify why he may be misbehaving.'

'He thinks no matter how bad the problem he can solve it by talking and trying to smooth things over without actually taking any positive action.'

Carers also commented on ways in which the social workers worked with the foster children, appreciating workers who could befriend, listen to, and understand them and enable them to make sense of their lives. Such work could be indirectly supportive to the foster carers themselves.

'If needed would talk to the foster child about any problems and explain what is happening to his life.'

'She knows J and understands him and his past, etc.'

'Makes time to see L when she has problems. Comes to all the meetings we have at college to do with L's progress with school work.'

Lack of this careful attention to the child clearly left this foster carer with a sense of not having been helped appropriately:

'If she listens to the child she does not seem to take any notice. The child was very upset last year about a short-term child we had who was racist and the social worker more or less said we had to put up with it.'

Another aspect of the social workers' involvement with the child highlights the need for the careful balancing of this focus on the child with a recognition of the foster carer's role and responsibility as carer:

'She often speaks to the child and does not include us in any part of the information.'

'Never communicates the child's feeling after having interviews with her. (A little feedback would be good).'

'Does not investigate complaints properly, will just take the child's word without hearing all the evidence.'

MEASURING FOSTER CARERS' ATTITUDES TO SOCIAL WORKERS

Qualitative approaches of the kind used above can identify the kinds of issue which are important to foster carers. They are less appropriate for questions about how many foster carers feel this way and how many another. Indeed by implication they may give a more negative impression than is justified for negative comments often strike home. In practice a fair assessment of the qualitative material was that most foster carers approved of their social workers, whether the social worker for the child or the family placement worker. Over half (53%) of the open-ended comments on the children's social workers were entirely favourable, just under a third (29%) were mixed, one in nine (11%) were entirely negative, and the remainder (7%) were non-committal.

As others have found (Triseliotis *et al.* 1998), family placement workers were seen even more favourably. The General Questionnaire invited foster carers to rate the importance of various sources of support. Just over half (55%) gave the maximum rating to their family placement worker while 33% did so for the child's social worker. Out of other possible sources of support only family (64%) gained as many high ratings as the family placement worker.

To provide such quantitative assessments we constructed a measure of attitudes to social workers using a number of closed questions. The scale incorporates items selected on the grounds that they would tap dimensions which research on other user groups, notably elderly people and families, had suggested were important and which mirror closely the themes from our qualitative data outlined in the quotes above. Table 1 sets out the distribution of answers to questions about the family placement worker in the General Questionnaire.

The measure at the bottom of the table (α) measures reliability or internal consistency – the degree to which answers to the different questions go together and so may be seen as measuring the same thing. An α of 1 reflects perfect reliability whereas one of 0 suggests that all the items are measuring variables which are independent of each other. The items in Table 1 go together to a high degree and the scale has an extremely high measure of internal consistency.

The picture of the child's social worker was less favourable but still highly positive, a result also found by Ramsay (1996). In their case we asked a similar set of questions reflecting their role with the child as well as the foster carer. Table 2 sets out their replies.

We used the mean rating for the various items to form two 'support' scores, one for the family placement worker and one for the children's social worker.

Despite minor changes of wording it is apparent from Tables 1 and 2 that on all comparable questions family placement workers are more favourably seen than the child's social worker. We computed a score based on the comparable questions and examined how often the foster carer gave a better rating to the family placement worker than to the child's social worker (or the average of scores given to the children's social workers where there were more than one). For statistical reasons the analysis used the relative ranking of a score rather than the absolute value. In 52 cases the foster carers gave the children's social worker the same score, in 102 cases a better one and in 223 cases a worse one (Wilcoxon test, $z = 8.54$, $P < 0.0001$). In both groups social workers who visited more frequently tended to be more popular, but other variables (e.g. training, the social workers' sense of being under pressure and the frequency with which they received supervision) were not related to the scores.

ARE ATTITUDES TO SOCIAL WORKERS RELATED TO CEASING TO FOSTER?

Almost all those responding to the General Questionnaire said that they had a family placement

Table 1 Foster carers' views of family placement workers

The family placement worker:	<i>n</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
		(%)			
Visits often enough	885	35	52	10	3
Listens carefully	886	49	45	5	1
Does what they say they will do	880	46	45	7	2
Responds promptly when asked	884	47	42	9	2
Appreciates our work	874	56	39	3	1
Offers good advice	877	47	44	8	1
Sorts out practical problems	880	42	48	9	1
Keeps in touch with us enough	887	43	43	12	2
Alpha = 0.93					

Source: General Questionnaire to foster carers at Stage 1.

Note: The percentages may not add up to 100 across the rows due to rounding.

Table 2 Foster carers' views of the child's social worker

The child's social worker:	<i>n</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
		(%)			
Visits often enough	472	23	50	20	7
Listens carefully	477	28	54	15	4
Does what s/he promises to do	472	25	57	13	5
Comes promptly when asked	466	23	57	16	3
Offers good advice	472	20	60	17	3
Understands our foster child	473	22	51	23	4
Helps us handle difficult behaviour	437	18	46	30	6
Agrees with us about the way to handle child	467	23	60	14	4
Alpha = 0.93					

Source: Specific Questionnaire to foster carers at Stage 2.

Note: The percentages may not add up to 100 across the rows due to rounding.

worker. The minority who did not were less likely to continue fostering, 32% ceasing to do so as opposed to 20% of the remainder ($\chi^2 = 3.11$, d.f. = 1, $P = 0.0776$).

In keeping with these findings, those who stopped fostering gave their family placement workers a significantly lower average support score than did those who continued ($F = 5.135$, d.f. = 1.807, $P = 0.0237$). This difference is significant but the difference is not large. To put matters in a more usual way, 17% of those who gave their family placement worker an above-average support score left over the period considered, as against 23% of those with low ones. If repeated over time this difference could amount to sizable numbers of foster carers but it is not dramatic.

This evidence does not necessarily imply that good relationships cause – as opposed to accompany – continuance. In a non-experimental study such as this final proof of causality is not possible. We did,

however, test the relationship between attitudes and continuance after taking into account a wide range of other variables which we found associated with continuance. These analyses did not shake our conclusion that there is an association. The close association between telephone contact with the family placement worker and continuing (see Table 3) supported this view.

As can be seen from Table 3, there was quite a strong association between frequency of telephone contact and the likelihood of continuing. By and large the more frequent the contact the lower was the chance that the carer would leave. However, very frequent contact ('once a week or more') was associated with a slightly greater chance of leaving, perhaps because it indicated uncertainty on the part of the carer or a lack of confidence by the family placement worker.

The strong association between frequency of telephone contact and the likelihood of continuing

Frequency of contact	<i>n</i>	Intending to	
		continue fostering	cease fostering
		————— (%) —————	
Once a week or more	166	79	21
Once every two weeks	204	86	14
Once a month	237	83	17
Less often	178	70	30
Never	11	54	46
Total	796	80	20

Table 3 Frequency of telephone contact and continuance

Source: General Questionnaire to foster carers at Stage 1 (excludes those with no family placement worker).

$\chi^2 = 21.49$; d.f. = 4; $P = 0.0003$.

Mantel-Haenszel test for trend, $\chi^2 = 7.81$; d.f. = 1; $P = 0.0052$.

to foster could of course reflect either the quality of the support offered by the family placement worker or something about the attitude to fostering by the carers themselves. (For example, committed, confident carers might ring up more frequently.) At the least, it seems to be an index of the relationship between the carers and the family placement workers. It also raises the question for practice of whether telephone contact might, in selected cases, be sufficient to maintain a good relationship without the necessity of frequent visits, a point which we return to in our concluding section.

In two ways, however, the results were not as expected. First, there was no evidence that placements where the children's social worker was seen positively were more likely to be with carers who continued. This is not in keeping with evidence from Triseliotis *et al.* (1998) or with what comments in our questionnaires would have led us to expect. Second, the differences in views of family placement workers between those who stayed and those who did not was not as large as findings from Triseliotis *et al.* (1998) would lead us to expect.

A possible explanation for this anomaly has to do with the fact that future disruptions (i.e. disruptions which occurred after completion of the Specific Questionnaire but before the final questionnaire, from which numbers of carers ceasing to foster are drawn) were strongly associated with whether a carer stopped fostering. In placements where a carer experienced a disruption over the period of follow-up, 25% of carers left. The comparable proportion for placements where a carer did not experience one was 4%. Negative attitudes to social workers did not predict future disruptions. The disruptions may, however, have negatively influenced foster carers' attitudes towards social workers. If so, cross-sec-

tional studies (e.g. Triseliotis *et al.* 1998) will typically find sharper differences between foster carers who stay and those who leave in their attitudes towards social workers than prospective studies such as ours.

CONCLUSION

This paper has described the qualities which foster carers seek from social workers. In general, the foster carers in our sample had views consistent with those identified in the literature. In their eyes good social workers:

- show an interest in how carers are managing;
- are easy to contact and responsive when contacted;
- do what they say they are going to do;
- are prepared to listen and offer encouragement;
- take account of the family's needs and circumstances;
- keep them informed and included in planning;
- ensure that payments, complaints, etc. are processed as soon as possible;
- attend to the child's interests and needs, and involve foster carers in this where appropriate.

To meet these criteria social workers will no doubt need to have the qualities described by Sellick (1999). He suggests that foster carers seek social workers who are '... energetic, reliable and flexible, in addition to being friendly on the one hand and knowledgeable on the other' (pp. 245–246).

Over and above these qualities, social workers need to be able to handle the kinds of difficult experience which our findings, and those of other studies, suggest are a common, although not a routine, part of foster caring (see Wilson *et al.* 2000). In relation, then, to such difficulties, social workers should demonstrate the following abilities:

- to treat disrupted placements seriously and with care, that is, to acknowledge and engage with the feelings of the child and of the carers;
- to take seriously and engage with carers who are struggling to manage challenging foster children – or their parents and extended family;
- to resist the tendency towards ‘splitting’ when allegations are made – that is, not to treat the ‘accused’ as if he or she were automatically guilty;
- to get the relevant parties together and face the issue squarely with all those involved.

Our paper also explored the hypothesis that supportive relationships increase the likelihood that carers continue to foster. Our findings suggest that good relationships with family placement workers do influence decisions to continue fostering (although further data, not considered in this paper, suggest other intrinsic and personal factors, for example life-stage considerations, which may be less amenable to modification from outside). Our data also suggest that support at times of crisis – particularly disruptions – may be particularly important and that these events crystallize attitudes to social workers.

One implication is that the qualities foster carers seek should be emphasized in training, and reiterated from time to time in further training and in supervision. It is not that anyone is likely to believe that, for example, unreliable visiting or inefficient handling of practical concerns are desirable: these characteristics reflect widely held social work values. The difficulty may lie in ensuring that they are not neglected as a result of other pressures. To address this, they might be emphasized through brief postal questionnaires given periodically to foster carers and including questions such as those used above. We found no evidence that departments as a whole differed in the way questions were answered, but we did find significant differences between the suboffices of one department. Repeating such questions, say once every two years, should not greatly burden foster carers and might concentrate the mind.

Second, the study emphasized the relationship between frequency of visits and perceptions of social workers. Good relationships, it seems, depend on at least minimal levels of contact. An increase in visits might reduce the time available for other core activities, such as supervision. Perhaps one implication is to experiment with telephone contact. The estimated frequency of telephone contacts was associated with good opinions of family placement workers. Such contacts cannot achieve certain purposes – for example, that of seeing children on their

own. Telephone contact, however, if carefully and systematically used, could reassure the foster carer as to the availability and interest of the social worker, alert the latter to problems before they became crises and save time on both sides. As noted above the ability to intervene effectively at times of crisis may be particularly important.

Third, it is probably inevitable that foster carers will sometimes disagree with social workers or feel dissatisfied with them. For the foster carer to be in conflict with the social worker, for example over contact with the birth family, plans for rehabilitation and so on, is not necessarily a bad thing, or an indication that the social worker, or for that matter the foster carer, is performing less than adequately. What does seem to need addressing in training and supervision is the handling of disagreements. The numbers of foster carers, particularly in the General Questionnaire, who reported feelings of being let down and unsupported by social workers in the handling of allegations against them, or in the aftermath of a placement breakdown, is a cause for concern. In this respect, there sometimes seems to be a failure to capitalize on the potential advantages of having two social workers involved, one of whom would specifically support the foster carer.

Overall, we were struck by the evidence from our study that foster carers are highly satisfied with caring, and committed to it. Ensuring that their relationships with social workers, whom many see as a vital source of support, are as effective as they can be is one important way of helping to maintain this commitment.

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