

“KEEP ON GOING – WHAT KEEPS FOSTER CARERS MOTIVATED?”

A small scale practitioner research project
to find out what foster carers find
motivating and supportive in their work
with foster children.

Christine Spurk
November 2013

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“Of course motivation is not permanent. But then, neither is bathing; but it is something you should do on a regular basis.”

(Zig Ziglar, American author, salesman and motivational speaker)

Abstract

Most children accommodated by the Local Authority live with foster carers. According to Edinburgh's Carer's Handbook, there were 878 children and young people accommodated full time in Edinburgh at the end of August 2010. Of those, 478 were placed in foster care. As foster carers are our largest resource to have a positive impact on the lives of our fostered children, it is crucial to know how to best support our carers and how to keep them motivated. This paper aims to investigate what factors foster carers within the City of Edinburgh Council find motivating and supportive in their work with their fostered children. It thereby can help to improve or adjust the support we give to our carers and might be a tool for the Council to improve its service.

Foster carers' views of factors that keep them motivated and support they perceive as helpful were examined using a questionnaire (open-ended questions, paper-and-pencil administration). From their answers, the following principle themes emerged: some factors motivating carers were intrinsic, such as their own resilience, beliefs, faith, humour or being satisfied by seeing positive changes made to a child's life. Other factors were external, tangible factors such as social work support, carer support groups, support by CAHMS or school. Support from family and friends was also found immensely supportive and important to stay motivated to foster, as over three-quarter of all respondents stated.

Generally social work support was highly valued, 92% of all respondents rated their satisfaction (on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being very satisfied and 5 being not satisfied) with the support they currently receive by their supervising social worker as 1 or 2. But it seems that this satisfaction is rather on an individual basis than seen as a Council service as most factors mentioned as being de-motivating had to do with service provision, such as the length of processes, not feeling that services are child centred but rather paperwork driven or feeling that they have not been involved in decision making.

Most prominently, all carers felt that it were child related factors which have kept them motivated over the years since they started fostering, such as seeing a child's progress, making a positive change, experiencing positive outcomes, just to mention a few.

The findings from this small scale research point out what we already do well, especially when it comes to the support foster carers receive from social workers. It also highlights that most carer motivation is intrinsic and child related. But it also suggests that there are areas for improvement, especially when it comes to time related, administrative and managerial aspects, such as long time scales and carer involvement when making decisions, effective and respectful communication or timely payments.

Good support certainly improves foster carers' satisfaction. With the current need to recruit and retain new carers in mind, our foster carers perceptions / views of what they find supportive and motivating are important to consider, especially in regards to carer retention.

INTRODUCTION

I have been working as a qualified social pedagogue/social worker for over 14 years and in different areas of social work (within and outside the UK), but only recently started to work in Family Based Care, through the 'Head, Heart and Hands' project, working with foster carers for the first time in my career. Getting to know a lot of foster carers it has emerged that they all have different approaches to their work. Some carers have been working in fostering for many years and with very challenging children but they still seem very motivated and state that they love their work with foster children. Others seem more affected by the difficulties entailed in fostering and seem exhausted and discouraged.

I was wondering what the factors are that keep carers going, even if they experience difficult times with their foster children and what we as supervising social workers can contribute to those motivating factors. Discussing this with colleagues brought out different ideas. Some colleagues would say that motivation is influenced by the difficulties a foster child presents. Others think motivation can change over time, depending on the personal circumstances. Others view it that influences from the outside, such as payment, support by social workers etc. might have an impact on ongoing motivation, while others think motivation is mainly influenced by intrinsic factors, for instance personal values and attitudes.

I therefore aim with this small scale practitioner research project to examine what factors foster carers within the City of Edinburgh Council find motivating and supportive in their work with their fostered children.

The particular objective was to look into what general factors, such as support and influences within the family and wider family support network as well as external / agency support, keep our Edinburgh foster carers motivated. And with this question in mind to explore how The City of Edinburgh's Family Based Care team can improve the support they provide to their foster carers in order to keep them motivated or revive their motivation.

Structure

This introduction is followed by some information about the project, including an overview of its timeline. The literature review that comes after looks into current literature relating to the aims and objectives of this small study in order to explore existing theories. After the literature review the methods used in this project will be explored, including ethical aspects. Thereafter will be an investigation into the findings of my research, followed by the conclusions. References can be found at the end of the document, followed by appendices.

THE PROJECT

This practitioner research project is part of an ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) funded Knowledge Exchange Programme between Social Work subject area in the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh, the City of Edinburgh Council and East Lothian Council. The aim of the project was to encourage culture change and practice development in children and families social work following a number of reviews of social work practice mostly recently that of the Munro Review of child protection in England.

The aim was to work with the City of Edinburgh and East Lothian Councils to build and support a culture of learning within children's social work services in order to maximise effective intervention with children and their families. It has been doing this through working on a Knowledge Exchange Project led by Social Work at the University. The project has had three main strands:

- * Working with social work managers to support them to act as change agents to foster a learning culture, bring about changes in practice and in organisational culture
- * Facilitating critical reflection groups with practitioners to build confidence in understanding and articulating effective practice in children and families social work
- * Supporting small scale practitioner research projects around particular themes and practices that are consistent with what is known to be effective practice

Project Timeline

1. Research planning and project management: end of April until beginning of June 2013
2. Deadline research proposal: 4th June 2013
3. Undertaking research and reflect on it: from start of June to August 2013
4. Analyse the gathered data around end of August and present initial findings beginning of September.
5. Write up findings in September and October 2013, submit draft report to mentor until 18/10/2013
6. Create a poster and submit draft until 25/10/2013
7. Share findings: Knowledge Sharing event on 13th November 2013; present final report
8. Dissemination of findings with foster carers, colleagues and management from November 2013 onwards.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Through studying existing literature I tried to explore what other studies tell us about foster carers' views in relation to motivation and support so I could relate existing ideas with the findings of my small-scale research. The literature used for this report is mostly UK based, but there were also some articles from professional journals in Australia, Canada and the USA.

Motivation

A definition:

“Internal and external factors that stimulate desire and energy in people to be continually interested and committed to a job, role or subject, or to make an effort to attain a goal.

Motivation results from the interaction of both conscious and unconscious factors such as the (1) intensity of desire or need, (2) incentive or reward value of the goal, and (3) expectations of the individual and of his or her peers. These factors are the reasons one has for behaving a certain way. An example is a student that spends extra time studying for a test because he or she wants a better grade in the class.

(from: www.businessdictionary.com)

Conscious and unconscious motivations to foster

There are many books about foster children and how social workers and foster carers can support the children they care for best (Sinclair 2005; Fahlberg 1994). But at this point we want to focus on the carers themselves. There is good knowledge about what motivates people to choose to become foster carers, and many similarities can be found:

Conscious factors expressed by foster carers in many studies regarding the attraction of fostering had to do with seeing children progress and having a sense of achievement. In an American study in California, most reasons for wanting to foster mentioned by the prospective carers were child focussed, e.g. being able to make a difference or giving a child the chance to experience a positive family experience. But there were also aspects of effects of fostering on the carer, such as personal fulfilment or “adding meaning to life” (Tyebjee, 2003: 701). In a Canadian study it is mentioned that participants “consistently reported that their motivation to become or remain a foster parent was based solely on their love of children and the personal satisfaction they felt by being a foster parent” (Daniel, 2011: 910). Results of another Canadian study showed that “the most frequent motivations for being foster parents were intrinsic, altruistic motivators” (MacGregor et al., 2006: 351). The same kind of reasons, which attracted carers to fostering can be found amongst foster carers in the UK. Sinclair (2005) claims in “Fostering Now”, when looking at recruitment, that altruism is the main reason for fostering. A recent study by the Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre (McDermid, 2012) explored the motivation of carers in the current literature and found that intrinsic reasons, such as wanting to help, fondness for children or the feeling of being able to offer the child something, were cited in much of the literature. Triseliotis, Borland and Hill also asked carers about the attraction to fostering. Amongst the many answers they received, those were the three most common ones from female and male carers: “having something to offer”, “fondness for/liking of children” and “awareness of need” (2000: 61).

Other motivational factors may be more unconscious motives such as the identification with deprived / disadvantaged children as a result of own past experiences, as Dando and Minty (1987) suggest. There seem to be different opinions regarding the weighting / emphasis of

this aspect, as Triseliotis et al. (2000) state that only a small group of carers stated this argument as their reason to foster, while Dando and Minty suggest that this is one of the key motivators.

Intrinsic factors that influence the motivation to continue to foster

As Delfabbro et al. state in an article about motivational factors in Australia, outcomes of placements are often not mainly influenced by available resources to foster carers but are most likely more influenced by the “general stability and inter-personal characteristics” (2002: 31) of the placement. This suggests that it is intangible motivational factors and attitudes of carers which we as services should focus on, especially when recruiting but also in regards of retaining carers.

The above mentioned Australian study found that the most common motives to foster were altruistic, intangible motivations, such as the interest in a child’s wellbeing. Butler and Charles (1999) confirm this in their British study. Intangible rewards, such as role satisfaction and the impact they could make on a child’s life played a major role for carers in their decision whether to continue to foster. They even state that tangible rewards alone, no matter how good or how much, were not sufficient enough to keep carers on a long-term basis (Butler and Charles, 1999: 56).

Tangible rewards and external support factors are explored when looking at remuneration and support and retention. So what are those intangible motivators?

Butler and Charles (1999) recognized in their small scale research project three factors when looking at carers hopes for intangible rewards: carers wished for an interaction of love and emotional attachment between themselves and the young people they cared for. Then they were hoping that the young people would value what they do for them, that they would show some thankfulness. And finally, carers wanted the young people to become part of the family, expected the young people to fit in.

Looking at the various backgrounds our looked after and accommodated children and young people come from and drawing on findings from attachment theory (e. g. Howe, 1995) we know that those expectations are often not be able to be fulfilled by our young people. Young people in our care often had not the quality and character of relationships throughout the formative years of their development they would have needed to allow them to develop age appropriate levels of social competence. This requires foster carers, social workers and other people working with looked after and accommodated children to have an increased tolerance, patience and empathy towards the young people’s situations. Otherwise, above mentioned expectations towards the children and young people we care for are destined to be disappointed. Consequential, expectations of intangible rewards need to be addressed by supervision social workers in order to support their carers. What other personal, intangible rewards to carers support them in their decision to continue to foster? What intrinsic factors support their motivation?

Supporting factors that strengthen carer retention, such as adequate payments, appropriate agency support and other aspects which may prevent carers to leave the system, will be explored later. But on an intangible level, having a say in decisions regarding the child and feeling valued in their job role, are important aspects for carers to stay motivated to continue

to foster. As will be later explored, several studies in Australia, the UK as well as Canada emphasize the importance of the relationship between foster carers and those who support them (Delfabbro, 2002; Fisher et al., 2000; MacGregor et al., 2006). The quality of support seems to have a significant influence on carers' ongoing motivation, their decision whether to continue to foster and therefore our service's carer retention.

Daniel (2011) confirms that intrinsic factors are more common reasons for carers to stay motivated in fostering. She states that her participants consistently reported that "their motivation to become and remain a foster parent was based solely on their love of children and the personal satisfaction they felt by being foster parent" (Daniel, 2011: 910). But she also acknowledges that motivation can be influenced by both, intrinsic factors as well as extrinsic factors which lead to tangible rewards. It is therefore difficult to keep both separated. But it seemed to me appropriate in this paper to cover extrinsic, more tangible factors in the following chapters (remuneration, tangible support and retention) and to concentrate on intrinsic factors at this point. In practice, though, intrinsic rewards, job satisfaction and tangible support (which lead to motivation and therefore to carer retention) are close combined and often difficult to separate. Particular attention should be paid to intrinsic factors perceived as rewards for fostering by carers as they support carers through challenging times in fostering.

Intrinsic motivators mentioned by Daniel (2011) are mostly altruistic, such as the sense of being able to give something back to society, having awareness about the need for foster carers, the desire to help or love for children. On the whole, American (Tyejee, 2003) and Canadian studies (Daniel, 2011; MacGregor et al., 2006; Rodger et al., 2006) found also intrinsic, altruistic motives prevalent for carers to be motivators to foster. They mostly mention aspects such as an awareness of the distress of children in society / wanting to save them from further harm, wanting to make a difference in a child's life and, to a lesser extent, a need for personal fulfilment. Along the same lines are the findings of another American study by Buehler (2003: 66) who identified as the most prominent rewards associated with fostering that carers felt they make a difference in a child's life and that they could see the child grow and develop. Daniel (2011) and MacGregor et al. (2006) also emphasize the need for social workers to strengthen intrinsic factors by providing more interpersonal support through treating carers as a part of the team, respect and include their views and reinforce their abilities. Also Rodger et al. reinforce the importance of teamwork and the quality of communication between carers and the service and professionals. The perception of carers in regards to those factors play a key role in their job satisfaction and motivation.

Those findings from other countries concur with Triseliotis' et al. (2000: 101) study of Scottish foster carers. The main benefits and attractions of fostering were "seeing children progress" (28%), "sense of achievement" (25%) and "job satisfaction" (20%). The same study also confirms – besides concrete, tangible aspect of support which we will deal with at a later point – the importance/ significance of intangible support. And again, aspects mentioned were: "being listened to, understood, appreciated, valued and involved" (Triseliotis et al., 2000: 177).

The importance of self-determination, feeling valued and having a say was in a completely other context, but despite that applicable and transferable, mentioned by Jimmy Reid in his Rectorial Address, where he spoke about the frustration of people if they feel excluded from

processes of decision making and feel that they not really have influence on decisions that affect their lives. His call for democracy rather than bureaucracy seems transferable to me when it comes to the situation of fostering. “To unleash the latent potential of our people requires that we give them responsibility” – Jimmy Reid’s words from 1972 are still relevant and are applicable not only for our carers, but also the young people we care for.

Remuneration as a motivation to foster

When it comes to payments, it seems worth noting that from the literature, most carers did not become foster carers for the money. But it also becomes apparent that they could often not afford to do the job without being paid. Money does not appear to be the main factor for the decision to foster, but seems necessary for most. (Sinclair, 2005) A study / survey by Sinclair et al. showed that some carers could not continue to foster without the fee (Sinclair et al., 2004: 27-28). 62% of all carers taking part in their survey strongly agreed or agreed to the statement “Without the fees from fostering we would not continue fostering”.

Using findings from a Scottish survey with foster carers in Fife, Ramsay (1996, in Hill (ed.)) confirms the importance of remuneration: Almost two-thirds of the respondents stated that the fostering fee had become an essential part of their household budget and 59% of carers said “they would not be able to continue fostering if only maintenance rates were paid and the professional fee were withdrawn” (1999: 71).

Sinclair et al. (2004) report the substantial irritation of foster carers through not being appropriately informed about their entitlements or caused by financial affairs not being dealt with quickly and efficient. Generally, Sinclair et al. state that there are different opinions among carers when it comes to the importance of payments, but many carers feel that the intangible rewards of fostering are more important than the remuneration for the job.

Looking abroad, studies from Canada (MacGregor et al., 2006; Daniel 2011) reinforce UK findings that payments are not the main motivational factor for becoming or staying a foster carer, but also recognize the importance of adequate financial compensation. And an Australian study (Delfabbro et al., 2002: 31) confirm that many foster carers “require significant financial support to continue to provide their service”.

Seeing remuneration from a different angle, it is hard to say what influence the level of payments has on the quality of work provided by carers. Walker et al. (2002) described and evaluated the impact of the Community Alternative Placement Scheme (CAPS) which was an intensive specialist fostering scheme set up in Scotland in 1997 as an alternative to secure accommodation. In many ways the scheme was similar to specialist fostering schemes, but was exceptional in its extensive support arrangements, including training and high level of remuneration. It was, though, still cheaper than providing secure accommodation. But Walker et al. were not able to estimate whether or not the higher level of payments affected the quality of care provided (Walker et al., 2002).

Disregarding the impact of remuneration on carers’ motivation or quality of their work on a practical level, financial support remains an essential and necessary requirement for foster carers. Even though money does not seem to be the most important aspect in regards to the motivation to start / continue to foster, adequate and timely payments should be a matter of course out of respectfulness for carers and the job they do.

Or as Butler and Charles (1999: 50) highlight in regards to tangible rewards of fostering, this calls for “the need for efficient payment systems” if we don’t want to compromise the relationship with carers. They found evidence in different studies which relates leaving or retention of carers to the amount of fostering allowances, training and support. This is in agreement with findings which will be further explored in the next chapter, “Support and Retention”.

Support and Retention

There are many reasons for children to come into care, and most of them result into those children presenting with complex needs and difficulties. Many looked after and accommodated children display challenging behaviours due to emotional difficulties, some have been victims of serious abuse and neglect, some have physical or learning disabilities and some have been offenders (Triseliotis, 2000). So it does not come as a surprise that fostering is a challenging task and the recruitment and retention of carers has been a cause for concern for a long time (Maclay et al., 2006). There are ongoing efforts by councils (e.g. see The City of Edinburgh’s “Foster Me” campaign) to recruit new carers but also to maintain the existing work force.

Sinclair et al. (2004) found various reasons for foster carers deciding to leave, one example being because of the personal strain felt through fostering. Also, social circumstances such as old age or being a lone carer with not enough informal support can influence the decision to cease fostering. Relatives who foster often decide to cease when the young person leaves, as they were only committed to that specific individual child.

When we look at retention of carers, many studies focus on intrinsic rewards of fostering which keep carers motivated, as McDermid et al. (2012) summarize. But if we consider retention factors we can influence as a service, it becomes apparent that adequate support for foster carers, such as support by the supervising social worker, other professionals and also higher-than-average standards of training also relate to their continuity (Sinclair, 2004).

Maclay (2006: 30) states that “the dissatisfaction of foster carers with the operation of fostering services is a recurrent theme” throughout relevant literature. Triseliotis et al. (2000) investigated reason for giving up fostering. The answers by foster carers who ceased fostering were diverse, but the most frequently mentioned explanation was “dissatisfaction with the service”, stated by 26% of the respondents (Triseliotis et al., 2000: 190). And when asked about the worst aspects of fostering, “the operation of the fostering services (2000: 103) was seen as the worst aspect of fostering. Looking at all reasons for withdrawal mentioned by carers in the same study, “almost three-fifths were related to some aspect connected with the operation of the fostering service” (Triseliotis et al., 2000: 198).

Another study by Fisher et al. (2000) showed the influence of social workers’ support on foster carers’ satisfaction. Perceived lack of support from social workers is a major reason for carers’ dissatisfaction, while a good relationship with the social worker influences the decision to continue to foster. Another UK based study confirms that carers dissatisfaction focuses on different factors, one of them being poor or inadequate support from social workers (Ian Sinclair, Ian Gibbs and Kate Wilson, 2004).

A Canadian study comparing Canada, Britain and the USA in regards to job satisfaction, summarises that what foster carers were asking for were “qualities from management that most people expect in their workplaces”. (MacGregor et al., 2006: 364). Another Canadian study identified external factors that foster carers find helpful, for example timely respite or getting relevant and practical training. Also, open communication and rapport between carer and social worker were found crucial for the role satisfaction of foster carers (Daniel, 2010).

This all leads to the conclusion that in order to retain our carers, at least with regards to the factors we can have an impact on, we need to provide them with the best possible support. Support factors found in various studies, that contribute to the retention of foster carers were support from family, other carers and other professionals, adequate financial resources and training (Sinclair et al., 2004). But another important factor highlighted by carers of both studies was the importance of interpersonal support, having an open, honest and reliable relationship with supporting social workers, feeling listened to and recognized for the work they do (Sinclair et al., 2004; MacGregor et al., 2006).

Fisher et al. (2000) confirm the importance of the relationship between carers and their supporting social workers. In their study they found that carers seek from social workers availability, reliability, an interest in their views and how they are managing and inclusion into decision making. Sinclair (2005: 107) also reports that “all the studies that consider formal support in any detail provide a similar picture”. Again, what carers asked for was “respect; efficiency; reliable, warm support from social workers” as well as fair payments, respite when needed, information regards entitlements, appropriate training and responsive support even outside business hours.

Similar findings were made by Strover (in Hill (ed.), 1999) when she asked foster carers how they wanted to be treated by social workers. The answers she got included: Being reliable (keeping appointments, be on time, keep in regular contact), showing respect towards the work and knowledge of carers (trust their competence, share information), give practical help, including entitlements such as the timely payment of allowances.

The above findings are confirmed in a more recent study by McDermid et al. (2012). On behalf of The Fostering Network they compared studies by Swain (2007) and Tearse (2010) (in McDermid et al., 2012) which showed that adequate remuneration to carers has been identified as essential for them in order to be able to do the job. Other recommendation for carer retention by McDermid (2012: 45) included “sufficient and specialist professional support” and the payment of retainers and support after the breakdown of a placement.

It becomes obvious that similar supporting factors, which can be influenced by the council in regards to retaining foster carers, are reoccurring throughout many studies. Consequential, following recommendations out of this literature review can be made regarding the retention and support of carers:

- Interpersonal and professional support by social workers, who are available and reliable
- Adequate payments, including retainers when placements break down
- Sufficient, ideally above average levels of training
- Providing a platform for foster carers to meet in order to encourage mutual support / to create a support network and allow new carers to learn from experienced carers

Even though there is a lot of pressure for councils to place children with foster carers, to recruit new carers and to maintain and enhance their number of carers, they won't do themselves a favour and also do not help their children "if they burn out new, or even experienced, foster parents" (MacGregor et al., 2006: 365).

The existing evidence of factors that are supportive to foster carers and therefore assist in the retention of carers, should make every council / fostering agency thoughtful and reflective towards the service provided to their foster carers, if the existing number of foster carers is to be sustained or even extended. And after all, in my personal opinion, the above suggestions are nothing else than a reminder of what good social work practice should look like.

METHODS

The research project was carried out within the City of Edinburgh Council. It attempted to gather data from foster carers from all parts of Family Based Care (FBC): Recruitment, Mainstream Fostering, Fostering for children with disabilities, Specialist Fostering and Permanence and Adoption.

There are a range of practical reasons for having chosen the method of using a questionnaire for my research: Due to the shortness and limited time frame of the project I realized that this would not allow a more in-depth or ongoing study. I decided to gain a snapshot from as many foster carers as possible and therefore using questionnaires was found most suitable. Another reason for choosing this method was the foster carers' availability. A questionnaire would allow them to fill it in whenever they have time and would not require them to arrange childcare, transport or the like. Using questionnaires is also quite effective to gather information in a short period of time, is easy to administer and is relatively cost effective.

It was intended to gather information from a large group of people in order to find common ideas amongst our Edinburgh foster carers. As this survey is mainly an attitude survey it was important for me that using a questionnaire is a quite anonymous method of gaining data and therefore hopefully reduced the influence of the opinions, personality or role of the researcher. As the questionnaire could be completed in privacy and returned anonymously (via a pre-paid envelope provided to the participant), I expected the information gathered to be quite authentic.

The questionnaire was pre-piloted with some colleagues (research project colleagues as well as team members of the FBC) and then piloted with some foster carers in order to make sure I had found / used the right terms and language.

The aim was to distribute about 40 questionnaires to a random selection of foster carers from all different parts of Family Based Care, from different personal backgrounds, different cultural backgrounds and different ages.

Beforehand, team leaders of all teams were asked to provide names of participants and to inform them via their link worker about the research project. Also, the research project was mentioned in the SFT newsletter to inform foster carers.

The 15 questions in the questionnaire were structured via mostly open-ended questions in order to allow the participants to submit some qualitative responses regarding the topics of motivation and support. There were also a few demographic questions (4) and one close-ended question where the foster carers were asked to scale their satisfaction with the social work support they receive in between 1 and 5 (1 being very satisfied and 5 being not satisfied).

Besides some statistical / quantitative information (years of fostering, which kind of FBC they are part of, which kind of care they provide, number and age of fostered children currently placed, if fostering single or with a partner), the following questions were asked in the questionnaire:

- If you think back to when you started fostering, what was your motivation to become a foster carer?
- What has kept you motivated since you have started?
- What “outside” support or factors keep you motivated? Examples may include support from outside your household, from external agencies, social workers etc.
- To keep you motivated, are there any other types of support which would help?
- How satisfied are you with the support you currently receive by your supervising social worker? Please circle appropriate number (1 = very satisfied, 5 = not satisfied)
- Is there anything that your social worker could do to support you better?
- What internal factors / resources keep you motivated? Examples could be personal values and attitudes, ideas, thoughts, your resilience etc.
- What external factors in your work as a foster carer are de-motivating?
- What internal / personal factors are de-motivating?
- What do you like most about your job?

A sample questionnaire can be found in the appendix.

All answers were summarised into one document and common themes were highlighted. After refining the initial coding scheme, following categories were elaborated: Initial motivations to foster, continuous motivation to foster, external supportive factors with a deeper look on social work support, internal motivational factors and discouragements, divided into internal and external.

Some questions seem to overlap each other, which was intended in order to countercheck and confirm statements. This also allowed me to look at a topic from different angles.

The findings of the research / in this report will be shared with the participants and Edinburgh’s foster carers and supervising social workers at team meetings, carer groups and training events.

Ethical Review

The participants who received a research questionnaire were all adults over 18 years of age. They were all approved foster carers with the City of Edinburgh Council. The researcher is a supervising social worker and some (but only about 3 or 4) of research participants are supervised by the researcher. None of the participants was in a dependent relationship with the researcher. Due to the nature of the research project it was not very likely that the research would induce any psychological stress or discomfort to the participants or affect them negatively in any way. The research topic did not involve very sensitive topics and did not involve any intrusive procedures. It was not deemed likely that the research project would lead to the disclosure of any information that would require the researcher to breach confidentiality.

The purpose of the research was fully revealed to the participants via an information sheet which was handed out together with the questionnaire (see appendix). This letter informed the participants about the purpose of the study and why they had been chosen. The information sheet advised the participating carers that it is completely at their own discretion if they participate / fill in the questionnaire or not. It also told the participants with whom the findings would be shared and what would happen with the data gathered. The participants were also advised that they will receive feedback about the findings of the study during carer groups or similar events. They were provided with the contact details of the researcher and encouraged to get into contact with the researcher, should they have any questions or wish to know more about the study.

The research project did not involve any psychological or physical risk to the researcher and/or supportive people (e.g. social workers who hand over the questionnaire to their foster carers). The questionnaire did not ask the participants to disclose their identity. They were able to send the questionnaire back anonymously via a pre-paid envelope provided.

The questionnaire was only distributed after the research project had been approved by the Head of Operations for the department and with the agreement and support of FBC management.

Outcome

I wanted to gain the views, wishes and feelings of our foster carers and find out if the service we provide meets their needs. I was hoping to gain ideas for improvements to the service we provide to our foster carers and to be able to adjust my work to the findings of the research.

I will share the findings with colleagues within FBC and recruitment as well as management, as they might benefit from knowing about our foster carers' views and the findings of the research. The findings will hopefully influence my work approach positively and can also provide guidance to inform the recruitment and training of foster carers, and of course the support provided to carers by their social workers. The research findings will also feed into our Service's participation strategy.

Limitations

As this is a small scale and time limited practitioner research project, the literature review as well as the research had to be limited in order to suit time constraints. It therefore does not aim to give a comprehensive and deep insight into all of Edinburgh's foster carers' views, but rather to give a snapshot of opinions from a variety of carers in the current situation and subsequently indications for possible areas for improvement.

MAIN FINDINGS

The findings are illustrated in two ways: original quotes will give an authentic insight into the questioned carers' views. Also, the percentage of the answers coded according to the elaborated categories are shown in a table.

The participants

Foster carers that answered the questionnaire are all registered with The City of Edinburgh Council. All carer's are part of the Children and Families Department, Support to Children and Young People's Family Based Care Service. Within Family Based Care, Foster Carer's are divided into different teams: The recruitment team not only recruits, prepares and assesses prospective foster carers, but also keeps newly approved carers up to 15 months in their team, in order to provide them with further training and intensive support before they are transferred into one of the other teams. The Foster Care Team manages the mainstream foster carers. Some of the mainstream carers have children on a short-term basis, other carers may have children on a long-term fostering basis. The Disability Team manages carers who provide care to children with disabilities on various levels, physically and/or mentally. This care can range from only a few days a week up to permanent care. The Specialist Fostering Team supports foster carers who care for some of the most complex young people, who often have experienced numerous placements breakdowns and who, due to their life story, present with quite challenging behaviours and various difficulties. The Permanence and Adoption Team work, amongst other tasks, with foster carers who have agreed to care for a child on a permanent basis.

In the end, 51 Questionnaires were sent out (some of them were delivered face-to-face, most of them via postal delivery). The respondents' anonymity was protected by the option to send the questionnaire back anonymously via a pre-paid envelope enclosed to the questionnaire. Thirteen questionnaires were completed and sent back, which represents a response rate of slightly more than 25%. This was a much lower response rate than anticipated.

Due to the low response rate it is possible that the outcome of this small survey shows mainly the opinions of a highly motivated part of foster carers, namely those who took the time and effort to complete and return the questionnaire.

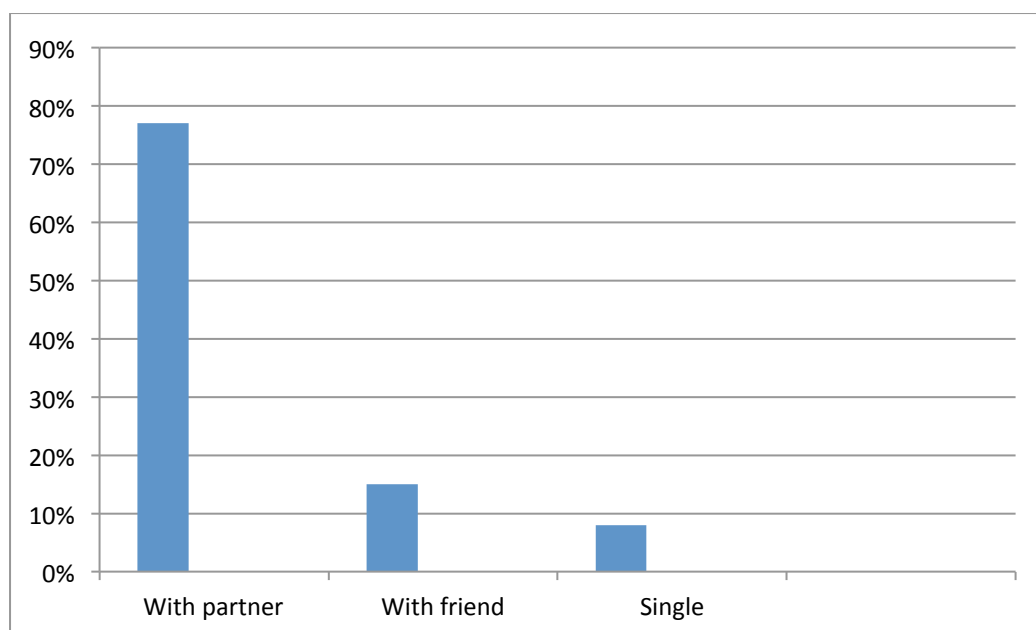
This report therefore does not claim to represent the views of all foster carers with the Council. It rather gives a snapshot of the opinions, wishes and feelings of some foster carers in Edinburgh at the current time.

Out of those 13 participants who responded, no carer from the recruitment team took part in the study, seven carers from the mainstream team answered the questionnaire, one foster carer each from the disability team and the Permanence and Adoption team responded and six carers from the Specialist Fostering Team sent the questionnaire back. One carer placed himself/herself in three categories: mainstream, disability and permanence. As the questionnaire was done anonymously, it could not be explored which main team that person is allocated to.

Team	Quantity	Percentage
Recruitment	none	0%
Foster Care Team (mainstream fostering)	7	53.84%
Disability Team	1	7.69%
Specialist Fostering Team	6	46.15%
Permanence and Adoption	1	7.69%

Twelve of the 13 carers provide full time care to their fostered children, 4 of those 12 also offer emergency placements and two offer also additionally respite care. One of the participants is a respite foster carer only.

The number of children the carers care for ranges from one child up to four children (six carers care for one child, two care for two children, two care for three children and three care for four children; all together, the 13 participants of the survey care for 28 children). Age groups are from babies (four months up to 17 years). Most foster carers (10 = 77%) stated that they foster with a partner / spouse. Two carers mentioned that they foster jointly with a friend and one carer is a single carer. These figures compare with other studies, e.g. Triseliotis et al. (2000) where they found that 79% of carers were couples/married. The two carers who mentioned that they foster with a friend might be an exception, though, as this criteria could not be found in other studies.



Even though only a small number of carers replied the quality of replies was high, the researcher got the impression that those who replied did so with a lot of effort and thoughtfulness.

Reasons for fostering / initial motivations to foster

As an introductory question I asked carers to think back to when they started fostering and asked them to explain what motivated them to become a foster carer. Most carers had more than one reason, but there were a lot of similarities and a lot of answers closely relate to each other.

About half of the respondents answered along the lines of “wanting to make a difference”, for example: “to make a difference to vulnerable children’s lives”, “to affect change in a child’s life” or “to help children to have a better life”.

Closely aligned with this were the answers around wanting to provide a safe, secure home environment in order to offer children a secure start into life.

Eleven of the 13 participants gave one of those answers (see table below).

Almost a quarter of the participants found that they wanted to foster as they have the required skills and knowledge. Their answers included: “to use my knowledge and skills in this area” and “I was aware that I had a ‘gift’ for caring for children and wanted to use this”.

The wish to parent was another finding. One participant wished for a larger family but wasn’t able to have this, others mentioned that they did not have own children but felt that they were missing something and had the wish to parent.

Two participants came into fostering due to own past experiences, one due to having been in care as a young person, the other because of growing up around fostered children as the mother was fostering.

One answer stated that he or she wanted “to make my own life more fulfilling” and while another one mentioned the awareness of the “need for homes for vulnerable children” and wanting “to give something back”.

As multiple answers were possible, the percentages in the below table do not add up to 100% but show how many of all respondents gave an answer according to the respective category.

Motivation to foster	Quantity / numbers	Percentage
To make a difference	6	46%
To provide a safe, secure home environment for children	5	38%
To use own knowledge and skills	3	23%
Childlessness / wanting to parent / wanting larger family	3	23%
Due to own past experiences	2	15%
Personal fulfilment	1	8%
To give something back	1	8%

Those findings conform to the insight gained through literature cited which found that most carers wanted to foster because of intrinsic, altruistic motivators. Also all other reasons mentioned by our carers could be found in literature, with similar weightings.

I will now look deeper into the factors that keep carers motivated. What are the reasons for continuing to foster? Are they more intrinsic / internal motivational factors or are external factors playing the main role? Due to the nature of the research I focussed on support factors, when looking at external parameters and the role of the supporting (supervising) social worker. I will also have a look at internal and external demotivating influences.

And finally a look at our carers’ job satisfaction: What do foster carers like most about their job?

My hypothesis was that most carers have intrinsic reasons not only for starting to foster, but also for continuing to do so. If this is true, it becomes important to ask how the Council can support / maintain and / or strengthen intrinsic factors. But I also do think that external support factors are immensely important to foster carers and can decide whether or not someone continues to foster. Looking at job satisfaction, contentment with the received support and demotivating factors may give the service ideas for improvement.

My hypothesis was already mostly confirmed by the literature research. There, I also already found some answers regarding good carer support and retention. Would our Edinburgh carers give answers along the same lines?

Some of the questions I had were: Is what brought them into fostering also what kept them doing the job? Is motivation purely intrinsic or are there external and tangible factors we can

positively influence? How rate our carers the support they receive, what would they change if they could and how important are external supporting factors?

Where are overlaps, where are coinciding answers when looking at motivational factors and support elements? And how do the results of my small scale research with Edinburgh foster carers relate to the findings in literature?

So let's have a look at the answer our foster carers gave:

Continuous motivation to foster

Reason for continuous motivation to foster	Questionnaire number	Numbers in total
Seeing progress / contributing to a child progressing	1, 3, developmental milestones being reached 4, watching children grow and develop 5, Observing their growth, development, increase in confidence and attachment 8 Seeing child blossom...10 Seeing glimpses of hope and progression 11	7
Seeing positive changes we can make	2 Desire to 'affect' change in their life, 6 Seeing the difference and the YP grow to being excited about life and the future, 7 Experience positive outcomes for families 8 Knowing we could make a difference 9 Improving the lives and prospect of the children 12 13	7 (= 54%)
Keep going for the child's sake	1, Commitment to the needs of the children in my care 6 Wanting to help 12	3
Desire to help as many YP as possible	2,	
Positive feedback from fostered children and others	2, 3 Hearing the impact we have made at LAAC reviews and from their parents, 7	3
Happiness of child	4	
Helping children to fulfil their potential	5	
Tangible support	Training, 7 Having a supportive, realistic and insightful link social worker 8; Education 12	3

The factors that influenced people to become foster carers and also most reasons for staying motivated to foster are child centred.

All foster carers are, some of them with additional motivational factors, motivated by altruistic motives. The two main themes which emerged were categorized under “seeing their children progress” and “seeing positive changes”. All carers had a statement in either both or one of those categories. Answers given were amongst others: “watching the children / young people experience new opportunities and the changes we can make”, “the reward of seeing children making progress in a variety of situations”, “seeing the difference and the young people grow to being excited about life and the future” or “seeing our foster child blossom into a fine young man that is all the motivation that we need”. Further altruistic motives were the desire “to help as many children as possible”, the happiness of the child or helping children to fulfil their potential.

So our carers responded along the lines of the findings in literature, that the main factors which keep carers motivated in the long-term are intangible and relate to the impact they could make on a child’s life.

One carer differentiated between good and bad times: “During easier times it is seeing the progress the children make and feeling that we are helping with that. During more challenging times it is often feeling that we have to keep going for the child’s sake and it will get easier in time when the child begins to feel more secure”.

Another motivational factor was external and only partly depending on the child: getting positive feedback from fostered children, their parents, other professionals or at LAAC reviews. Being valued and hoping for thankfulness was also discussed in the literature review. In our findings those aspects never stood alone but always came in combination with child-centred and altruistic aspects.

A few (3) carers stated that tangible support, such as training, education and social work support kept them motivated. It is assumable that “education” was meant as support by school / by the child’s educational system.

External supportive factors that help carers to stay motivated

Support factor	Questionnaire number	Total number
Social worker	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13	10 (77%)
Family and friends	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 13	9 (69%)
Other foster carers / support groups	1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13	8 (62%)
School / education	5, 7, 11, 12	4 (31%)
CAHMS / Edinburgh Connect	3, 5, 12	3 (23%)
Medical staff	7, 11	2 (15%)
The Fostering Network	11	1 (8%)
Training	13	1
Colleagues at work	6	1
Previous placements	2	1

Looking at continuous motivation, carers were asked what had kept them motivated since they have started. All of them mentioned altruistic, intrinsic factors and only a few added tangible supportive factors such as training or social work support.

But when asked to look at “outside” support or factors which keep them motivated, those tangible supports come to the fore and there is a quite uniform picture. Three main supportive areas were identified: social work support, support from family and friends and support from other carers, including support groups.

Ten out of 13 carers found support from their social worker very supportive. Some carers included the children’s social workers into this: “There is always support available from social workers and practice team workers”. “Our social worker is really motivational she has real confidence in us!” is another statement that shows the importance of social work support.

Family and friends were the second mostly mentioned support group. Having supportive family and friends was mentioned by nine out of 13 foster carers, and for those who mentioned it usually the first point of their answer.

The importance of being able to meet up with other foster carers became clear, too. Out of the 13 carers who answered the questionnaire, eight stated that they find the support they receive from other foster carers very important. One carer said: “We have made friends with other foster carers and it is good to meet up and bounce ideas / experiences of each other”. Other carers stated regarding external support factors that keep motivated: “Drawing on other carers experiences of problems they have had and see how they resolve problems” or “I have found other foster carers fascinating and their lived experience has kept me interested”.

Other, less mentioned supportive factors from “outside” were: school / education (four out of 13), Mental Health Service (three), Medical staff (two, by a Specialist Carer and a Disability Carer) as well as The Fostering Network, Training groups, colleagues at work and previous placement (one each).

I also asked carers to identify possible other types of support which would help. One person said there is no other support which would help. Two carers didn’t really find that there is more support from outside needed, as they saw motivation coming solely from within: “Others can’t really motivate you – you have to do for yourself”, the other one stating: “None, as motivation is an inner source within yourself”.

But four other main elements – tangible and intangible - appeared regarding other types of support which would help:

1. Respite: regular, flexible and consistent respite was found essential by 3 carers, even though one carer stated that he found respite difficult to manage as the children dislike going to respite.
2. Acknowledgement and recognition: three foster carers gave answers along those lines. One was stating it would help to get acknowledgement and recognition from social workers and other professionals for the work they do. Another one said: “Hearing about the differences we make now and again”. While another carer

claimed: “Foster carers being treated as equals to social workers and being respected as professional workers”.

3. Money: “financial payments made on time”, “more money”. More financial support would be found beneficial by three other carers.
4. Additional support: child related additional support was requested by three carers: “more support services/provision with children who have additional support needs. E.g. group activities for children to attend, especially during summer holidays”. Similar to this, another carer asked for more foster carer / children’s days out. Also, own children should not be neglected, as this statement shows: “A support service which can help us to understand and appreciate the strain that fostering can put on your relationship. Also for birth children there have certainly been issues that have proved challenging to explain and provide the appropriate support for”.

The above statements already give quite clear suggestions how the council could improve its service or how social workers and the department could support carers additionally. Some of those things surely are in place, but there might be possibilities for improvement.

Interestingly, this was the first time in the questionnaire where carers mentioned remuneration. When looking at all the motivational questions as well as the first question regarding external supportive factors, money was not mentioned once. Only when asked about what “additional” support would help, 3 carers mentioned money, not as a sole item, but together with other support ideas. This goes in line with findings throughout literature which suggest that remuneration is not the main reason for fostering, but for many carers is a necessary, essential requirement.

Carers in this research also confirmed the importance of recognition and acknowledgement mentioned in the literature review.

Social Work Support

Carers were asked to indicate how satisfied they are with the support they currently receive by their supervising social worker. This snapshot gave a very positive feedback: From 1 (very satisfied) to 5 (not satisfied), six carers circled 1 and another six carers circled 2. So all together, 12 out of 13 foster carers are either very satisfied or at least satisfied with the support they receive. Only one carer circled the 4 and suggested the social worker could provide better support by “thinking creatively to solve problems”. Nine out of 13 carers (69%) stated that there is nothing their social worker could do to support them better. One of those carers said: “If we have a problem usually 9 times out of 10 they are at the end of the phone and we can discuss any issues that have arisen”. While another one said: “No, she is great always there when we need her, always checking we are ok”. One explained that what is great about the working relationship with the social worker is, that it is “very open and honest too”.

Others, even though apparently being happy with the service they receive had additional suggestions for support, such as more practical support at times or “Advocate on our behalf. Act as an intermediate between ourselves and senior management. Support at meetings”. Another one felt that the social worker should “support us more rather than the children as they have their own worker”.

As discussed in the literature review, several studies showed the importance of the relationship between foster carers and those who support them. Literature shows that carers want a social worker who is reliable, respectful and who provides not only professional but also interpersonal support. This definitely seems to be an area where we are doing well, and the carers responses are a compliment to their supervising social workers.

Internal motivational factors

Being aware of the importance of the use of self in fostering, I wanted foster carers look again at what keeps them motivated and this time to reflect on internal factors.

Some of the findings overlap with previous answers. Repeated factors, which were also mentioned when carers looked in general at what kept them motivated to foster had to do with personal values and beliefs, such as “knowing our intervention makes a difference to those we look after” or the desire to help others and “wanting to do as well as well as I can for each child”. Over half of the respondents made statements that could be categorized under personal values. Own beliefs and values were sometimes also coinciding with resilience and therefore counted in both categories. Two examples are: “We were both brought up by parents who had high morals and values in life and this was instilled into ourselves”; “I feel that resilience and experiences from my own childhood keep me motivated”.

Four out of 13 carers made comments that fall into the category of resilience, e.g. “Resilience – working through the ‘bad times’. Knowing that there is light at the end of the tunnel”.

Having a sense of humour as a key to internal motivation was stated by three carers. And two foster carers found that their faith supports them or even asked them to do the job. One carer previously stated that he/she knows that “I had a gift for caring for children”, so when asked to look at internal factors, “Faith – knowing this is what I’m being asked to do” was found as an intrinsic motivation.

Some carers stated external support as factors that keep them internal motivated and stated, as before, factors such as working with a friend, supporting each other. Two carers who previously stated that motivation comes from within, stated that in one case “how to converse with each other” is motivating and the other found reading and training a inner source of motivation and therefore assumedly didn’t mention those when looking at external support.

One carer left the answer blank.

So in summary, personal values and beliefs, together with resilience were found as the most important internal motivating factors. Most carers gave elaborate answers which could be counted in different categories. All respondents who had resilience in their answers, also gave details about their personal values and beliefs.

Internal motivational factors	Answers / which questionnaires	Total number of respondents
Personal values	Believing in making a difference (2) Wanting to do as well as I can do for the child (3) Believing that young people can make positive choices for themselves if they get the right support (6) Own beliefs – equality and remembering differences we made (7) Own beliefs – the right intervention can make a change, desire to help others (8) Having high morals and values, such as respect (11) Feeling like you are doing the best for the child, seeing changes (13)	7
Resilience	Working through “bad times”, knowing that there is light at the end of the tunnel (2) Own abilities, e.g. ability to stay positive even when things go wrong (6) Experience and resilience from own childhood (8) “we were brought up by parents who had high morals and values in life and this was instilled into ourselves” (11)	4
Humour	Having a sense of humour (3) To love and laugh are also very important (11) Funny stories. Having a sense of humour (12)	3
Faith	1, 5	2
External factors mentioned which support internal motivation	Working with a friend, keep each other going (3) First placement, being continuously motivated and excited (4) Enjoy reading and online learning, find this motivating (7) Enthusiasm of family and children (8) “How to converse with each other” (10)	5
No answer / left blank	9	1

Discouragements

In this part of the findings we look at answers given by carers when it comes to internal and external factors which they find demotivating. Looking at the answers given by carers it becomes clear that it was found difficult to keep internal and external demotivating factors separated. I personally find that most answers given, even under the category of internal / personal factors, are actually extrinsic factors. So while we look at them separately, as they were given in the questionnaire, we still have to give consideration to the answers in both categories when looking at possible starting points for improvement of support.

Internal / personal demotivating factors	Answers / number of questionnaire	Numbers in total
<p>Strains of fostering</p> <p>Green = child related Blue = Time related</p>	<p>Exhaustion and difficulty having a life outside fostering (1)</p> <p>Destruction of family home, having to put up with behaviour we wouldn't tolerate from our own children and impact on our own immediate family (2)</p> <p>Not enough hours in the day (3)</p> <p>Isolation, losing sight of friends and family; feeling you are not getting anywhere (6)</p> <p>Not enough time (7)</p> <p>Lack of sleep, not enough time for one self and for each child. Personal disappointment when things don't go well (8)</p> <p>Setbacks, when you thought things are developing (13)</p>	<p>7 of which 3 are child related and 5 are time related (time limitations)</p>
<p>To be left high and dry by the council (not feeling valued, feel left alone, unsupported)</p>	<p>Feeling unsupported (2)</p> <p>More pay would be appreciated (4)</p> <p>Lack of understanding when requiring respite / break (7)</p> <p>Not always being considered as an equal part of the wider team. (9)</p> <p>Rules stipulated on the care of children, difficulties to organise some time off (11)</p> <p>Being impatient how slow everything is (12)</p>	<p>6 (2 and 7 had also mentioned strains of fostering)</p>
<p>Left blank / no answer</p>	<p>5, 10</p>	<p>2</p>

External demotivating factors	Answers / number of questionnaire	Numbers in total
<p>Discontentedness with service / council</p> <p>Organisation / time / management related</p> <p>Value / acknowledgment related</p>	<p>Long time scales and lack of concrete plans for children (1)</p> <p>Feeling disrespected by social workers, senior or other professionals, lack of acknowledgement; not being used to full potential (2)</p> <p>Lack of communication from child's sw, too extensive paperwork (3)</p> <p>Lengthy recruitment process, staff illness, changes within social work sector (4)</p> <p>A lot of rules, regulations and amount of meetings, reviews etc. (5)</p> <p>Amount of ppl involved with YP, but actually not being directly involved; decisions being made without discussion with carer (6)</p> <p>Decision making without listening to carers and children; not being seen as part of team or as professional (7)</p> <p>Financial constraints, lack of drive by children's sw (8)</p> <p>The legal system (9)</p> <p>Children post 18 not receiving adequate support any more (10)</p> <p>Length of processes legally, decision making by ppl who don't even know the child (11)</p> <p>Poor organisational skills; not being considered as professionals; workers only available 9-4pm (12)</p>	<p>12 (92% of all 13 questionnaires; 100% of all answers)</p>
<p>Other difficulties</p>	<p>Stigma which can surround looked after children (5)</p> <p>Destructive parental involvement (12)</p>	
<p>Left blank / no answer</p>	<p>13</p>	<p>1</p>

So when looking at carers demotivation or dissatisfaction, there is an overwhelming response rate that relates to the service they receive by the Council. This coincides with findings throughout literature, that carers' dissatisfaction with the way services operate is a recurrent topic.

Looking at internal / personal factors that carers find demotivating, 2 did not give an answer, 6 made statements regarding not feeling valued or supported by the council and 7 gave reasons for demotivation concerning the strains of fostering. Two of those 7 additionally are part of the ones not being happy with the council service. I will have a look at service related dissatisfaction when discussing the findings of external demotivating factors. It still might be depending on the approach / point of view, if strains of fostering are seen as intrinsic or external factors, but as the main focus should be what we can learn from the answers given, the focus is not on the classification internal / external but rather on the substance of the answers' content.

Strains of fostering

Seven out of thirteen (54 %) respondents reported about the strains that come with fostering. Interestingly, only three of them included child related issues:

“Putting up with behaviours from foster children that we would not tolerate from our own children” “Feeling you are not getting anywhere”

“Setbacks, when young person has a setback / bad behaviour just as you feel you are developing”

The most mentioned strains all had to do with time. Foster carers reported about their exhaustion and the “difficulty having a life outside fostering”. They found that they were “losing sight of friends and family in favour of the child’s needs” which caused some of the carers to feel isolated. Similar statements were along the lines of “Not enough hours in the day!”, some carers telling about the lack of sleep and the difficulty to prioritise some time for themselves.

Discontented with service

Already when looking at internal demotivating factors, almost half of all respondent (six out of 13) made statements relating to feeling left high and dry by the Council.

Some of them just generally stated that they felt unsupported, others went more into detail and reported a “lack of understanding when requiring respite/break” or felt that they were not considered as part of the wider team.

When asked about the external factors in their work as a foster carer they find demotivating, only one left the answer blank. All others, a 100% of all carers who answered the question, had service related answers which showed what they found unhelpful, hindering and demotivating in their work as foster carers.

For one carer the discontent was mainly due to not feeling valued and feeling unsupported by social workers, seniors and other professionals “who think they know best, but are

actually wielding power through position". Two more carers, had amongst other critique similar responses regarding not feeling acknowledged and valued. Both complained about not being seen as professionals or equals "but just 'the carers'".

All other answers were more related to how things were managed, the working style of social workers and the way the Council operates. The main issues mentioned can be divided into time related issues, communication related issues and managerial aspects. But often they are closely connected with each other, as following statement shows: "Long timescales and the lack of concrete plans for the children can be difficult". When considering time related complaints, those could be found in different areas. Some newly qualified carers stated that "the recruitment process was very lengthy and we had a bit of difficulty with staff illnesses and changes within the social work sector which was quite frustrating". Luckily their commitment towards fostering was stronger which motivated them to still complete the process. Another carer finds that "the length of processes legally can be de-motivating" and finds that often decisions are based on paperwork rather than the knowledge what is in the best interest of the child. This is especially the case "when you have professionals making decisions on the child's lives when they don't even know the child and only reading about them on paper".

This could be avoided with effective communication with all involved into the child's life. But if people feel that they are "not being considered as professionals in our care of children", they might find it hard to making their voice heard.

Lack of communication and case as well as time management by social workers and foster carers alike, lie close together. One carer reports that the "lack of communication by the child's social worker" is difficult as this influences the organisation of family contact for the child. Decisions being made "without listening to others including carers and children" entail that carers and young people often find it hard to accept decisions, as they feel they haven't been part of discussions, even though they are the ones mostly affected by them / it is about their life.

The above mentioned aspects of feeling valued in their job role and having a say in decisions regarding the child were factors which also repeatedly occurred in literature, which found that those factors influenced carers in their decision whether to continue to foster or not. Even though none of our carers referred to thoughts of ceasing to foster, it becomes apparent how crucial the quality of support and the relationship we have with our carer is.

Other demotivating factors mentioned had to do with the amount of paperwork involved, the legal system, the rules and regulations regarding fostering, the limited time social workers are available (9am to 5pm) and financial constraints. One carer explained how paperwork and regulations (e.g. disclosures, medicals) can make things difficult to organise, although "these children are to be cared for as part of your family and to enjoy a 'normal' as can be upbringing". The example continues with describing how difficult it can be to organize a babysitter, which through the system as a carer does not at all resemble how you could do it to for your own child.

Only two, additionally mentioned strains, had nothing to do with the service: One being "the stigma which can surround looked after children" and the other being sometimes "destructive parental involvement".

What do you like most about your job?

Finally, I just generally asked what foster carers like most about their job. As expected, this question did not bring many new insights but rather confirmed already gathered data.

What I like most		
Altruistic / intrinsic aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seeing children grow and develop (1, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 13) - Making a difference (2, 3, 7, 8, 13) - Enjoying the time with children (8, 9, 10, 12) 	12
Challenges and variety	2, 3, 6, 11	4
Fun	3, 8, 12	3
Collaboration with others	4, 8	2

“Seeing a big smile on a child’s face”

As anticipated and not surprisingly, almost all foster carers mentioned intrinsic, altruistic things about what they like most about fostering. As previously mentioned by them, they enjoyed seeing children grow and develop, loved to see to enable trust, positive attachments, “seeing children becoming more settled and confident”. Foster carers valued to be able to make a difference. One carer reports enthusiastically about “the real joy experienced when a child is able to put trust in you and attach to you and your family”. Another reports how satisfying it is to see “changes in the young person for the better” and “seeing them fulfil their full potential”.

“The fun we have”

Together with the joy giving care to a child some carers also emphasized the fun it brings themselves. They enjoy the good times with the children and one appreciates “the luxury of going to places of interest with the children (fun/educational).

“The support and solidarity we get from others”

Another two carers pointed out how much they enjoy working with the social workers, the children’s families and how they like sharing their experiences with other foster carers.

“Working with a variety of children makes is interesting and challenging”

Interestingly, four carers mentioned the challenges amongst the things they like most about their job. They report about the “sense of accomplishment” when dealing with the day to day challenges that arise. And how exciting and “ever changing” it is to have a young person at your home. One carer especially liked that the complexity of issues a carer has to deal with involves “constantly learning and finding more out about yourself”.

CONCLUSIONS

As previously mentioned, the City of Edinburgh Council aims to increase its numbers of foster carers but presumably also wants to maintain its existing work force of carers. Even though this small scale practitioner research project can only give a small insight into our foster carers' views, it still shows – in accordance with findings in literature – which factors carers find motivating or demotivating and which support they value and wish for.

While we might not be able to influence intrinsic factors, and carers' personal beliefs and values, we can definitely influence carers' motivation and satisfaction by providing adequate external support. The findings of this research coincide with many findings in literature. Comparing both, findings of this research and findings from literature, following recommendation can be consequential made in regards to carer motivation, support and retention:

- Interpersonal and professional support by social workers (supervising social workers and Practice Team social workers), who are available, reliable, realistic and insightful
- Positive feedback and acknowledgement from social workers and from the service
- Good, efficient, clear and honest communication and team work between foster carers, social workers and the Council
- Inclusion of carers in decision making
- Adequate and timely payments, including retainers when placements break down
- Sufficient levels of training
- Providing a platform for foster carers to meet in order to encourage mutual support / to create a support network and allow new carers to learn from experienced carers (this does already happen, but current take-up by carers is very fluctuating – so maybe structure and content need to be revised?)
- Child-centeredness above all. All professionals involved working as equal members of the team around the child, having the child's best interests in mind.
- Additional support where needed (CAHMS counselling, medical support, finances, respite)
- Diminution of bureaucracy where possible (avoidance of intersecting paperwork and meetings, shortening and simplification of processes where possible) in order to allow foster carers to care for fostered children as "normally" as possible.

Some of the above mentioned items are already in process, but I believe that – with some honest self-reflection - there is always room for improvement.

As much as we expect our carers to not give a "standard" care but to give each child individual support according to individual needs, to be flexible and supportive in each possible way, we should also as a service aim to give the same kind of "care" in providing our service to our foster carers – flexible and individual. On an organisational level I would say that what we expect from others, we should try to role model ourselves – through all hierarchies of the service.

The work we ask for from foster carers can be exhausting and often asks for extraordinary tasks and support for the child. Foster care is definitely more than a “normal” job. So we should give this acknowledgement and try to support our carers as best as possible.

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Appendices

- Covering / Information letter
- Questionnaire (blank)
- Reminder letter
- Poster

Research Project

“Keep on going – what keeps foster carers motivated?”

A small scale practitioner research project to find out what foster carers find motivating and supportive in their work with foster children.

Dear foster carer

I am undertaking a research project and would like to ask you for your support. I won't take up your time very long, and the study only involves filling in a questionnaire anonymously.

Purpose of the study:

The research is about finding out what keeps carers motivated and what factors support the carers in their work. Hopefully your answers will also help Family Based Care and individual social workers to improve the support they provide to you.

Why you have been chosen:

The survey will take place within The City of Edinburgh's Family Based Care Team and questionnaires will be distributed to foster carer's working within the (mainstream) Foster Care Team, Specialist Fostering Team, Disability Fostering, Recruitment and Permanence & Adoption.

Do you have to take part?

No, it is up to you whether you participate. But your support would be much appreciated! ☺

What do you have to do if you take part:

To take part please complete the attached questionnaire. There are 15 questions to fill in and there are no right or wrong answers!

The questionnaires can be submitted anonymously via the pre-paid envelope provided.

What happens with the information provided?

I will gather the information provided by you, summarize the information and produce a project report. The report will be shared with foster carers at carer groups, with supervising social workers and managers within Family Based Care as well as with research professionals at the Edinburgh University.

The information you give will be treated confidential and it will not be possible to identify a single participant in the project report.

If you have any question, or if you require more detailed information, please don't hesitate to contact me (details below)! Thank you very much for your time and effort.

With kind regards

Christine Spurk

Social Pedagogue, Specialist Fostering Team

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Research Project

“Keep on going – what keeps foster carers motivated?”

A small scale practitioner research project to find out what foster carers find motivating and supportive in their work with foster children.

Dear participant

Thank you very much for taking part in this study. The questionnaire will take about 20 minutes to fill in. Please answer the following 15 questions about motivation and support. There is no right or wrong in answering the questions and you can give as many examples as you like. If you find that the questionnaire doesn't give you enough space, please feel free to write on the back or use another sheet of paper.

A little guidance to start with

A Definition of “Motivation” is....

Internal and external factors that stimulate desire and energy in people to be continually interested and committed to a job, role or subject, or to make an effort to attain a goal.

Motivation results from the interaction of both conscious and unconscious factors such as the (1) intensity of desire or need, (2) incentive or reward value of the goal, and (3) expectations of the individual and of his or her peers. These factors are the reasons one has for behaving a certain way. An example is a student that spends extra time studying for a test because he or she wants a better grade in the class.

QUESTIONS

MOTIVATION

- 1.) If you think back to when you started fostering, what was your motivation to become a foster carer?

2.) How many years have you been a foster carer?

3.) What has kept you motivated since you have started?

SUPPORT

4.) What “outside” support or factors keep you motivated?

Examples may include support from outside your household, from external agencies, social workers etc.

5.) To keep you motivated, are there any other types of support which would help?

6.) How satisfied are you with the support you currently receive by your supervising social worker?

Please circle the appropriate number:

Very satisfied 1 2 3 4 5 Not satisfied

7.) Is there anything that your social worker could do to support you better?

8.) What internal factors / resources keep you motivated?

Examples could be personal values and attitudes, ideas, thoughts, your resilience etc.

9.) What external factors in your work as a foster carer are de-motivating?

10.) What internal / personal factors are de-motivating?

STATISTICS

11.) Which part of Family Based Care are you part of? Please circle.

Recruitment Team
fostering)

Foster Care Team (mainstream

Disability Team

Specialist Fostering Team

Permanence and Adoption

12.) Please tick. There are multiple answers possible.
Are you providing...

Full time care

Respite care

Emergency care.....?

13.) How many foster children are currently placed with you? And what is their age?

14.) Are you a single carer or do you foster with a partner?

A last question....

15.) What do you like most about your job?

Please put the questionnaire in the pre-paid envelope provided and return within the next 2 weeks.

Thank you very much! ☺

Research Project

“Keep on going – what keeps foster carers motivated?”

A small scale practitioner research project to find out what foster carers find motivating and supportive in their work with foster children.

Dear foster carer

I wanted to take the chance to thank you for your support by participating in my research project. I have already received some questionnaires back, and it was great to see so much commitment and also the honest feedback.

In case you haven't sent the questionnaire back yet, I would very much appreciate if you could still do it. As more foster carers participate, as more meaningful the outcome will be. If you need another copy, just let me know and I will send it out to you.

I hope to receive all questionnaires soon, in order to be able to then start analysing the gathered data and write up my findings. The final project report will be done by end of October.

The report will be shared with foster carers at carer groups, with supervising social workers and managers within Family Based Care as well as with research professionals at the Edinburgh University.

The information you give will be treated confidential and it will not be possible to identify a single participant in the project report.

Please do not hesitate to get into contact with me (details below) should you have any questions. Again, thank you very much for your time and effort.

With kind regards

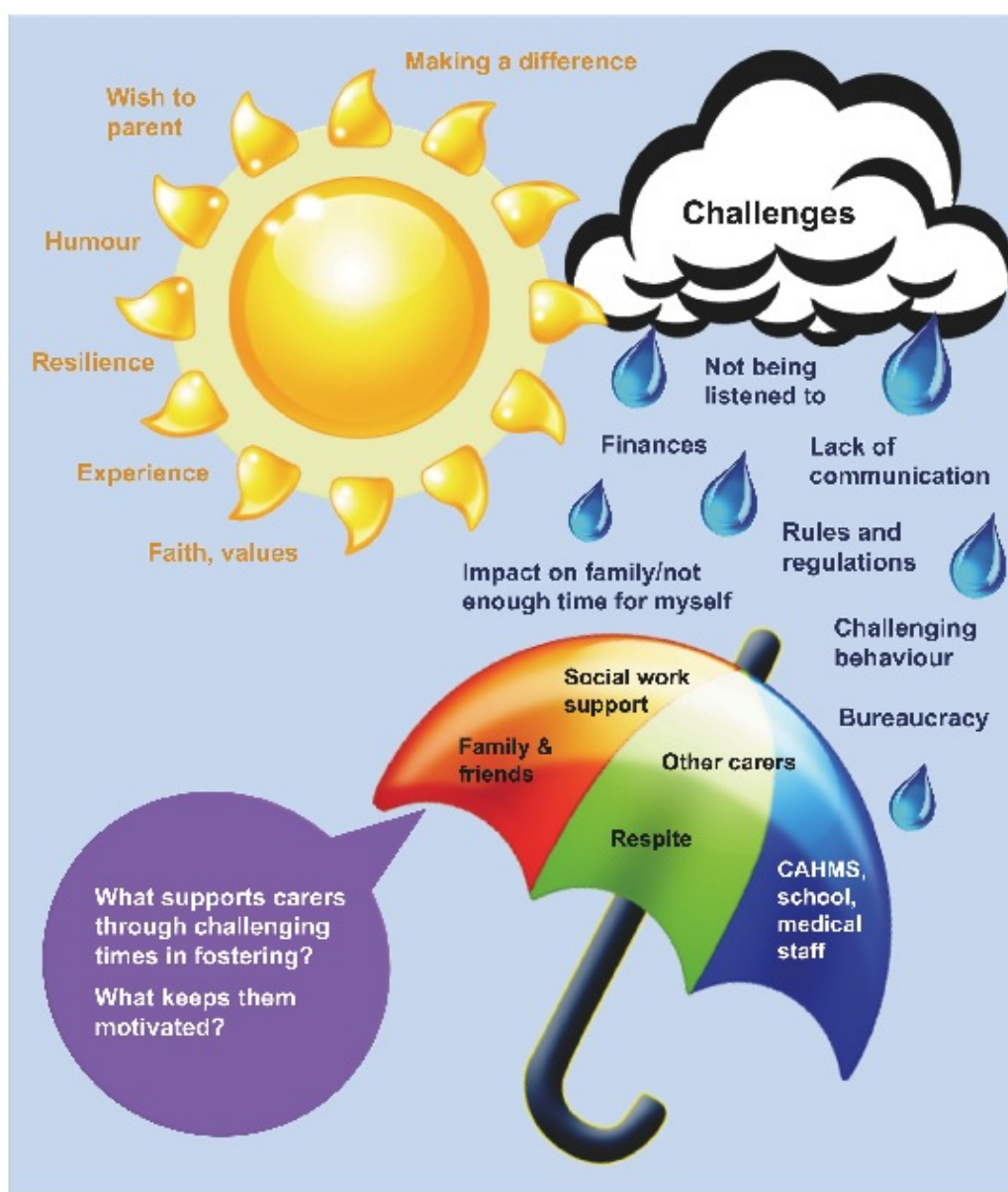
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Carer support and motivation

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