

Experiences of former foster carers



Institute of Child Protection Studies



RESEARCH REPORT

EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER CARERS

You need to match the caseworker with the foster parent. They must get on. The benefit will be that they can put their trust in the foster carer.....

You need to treat them like fellow caseworkers, which essentially they are.

.....(Quote from former foster carer)

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Project Team

Lorraine Thomson

Morag McArthur

Megan Layton-Thompson

Lyndall Evans

Institute of Child Protection Studies
Australian Catholic University
PO Box 256 DICKSON ACT 2602
icps@acu.edu.au

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ACRONYMS

ABS—Australian Bureau of Statistics

ACT—Australian Capital Territory

CaPACT—Caring and Parenting ACT Inc. Organisation in the ACT set up to support the needs of birth parents with children in out of home care

Child—in this report when we say ‘child’ we mean child or young person up to the age of 18 years

CYFAACT—Child, Youth and Family Agencies of the ACT – peak body for out of home care agencies funded by OCYFS

DHCS—The ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services, within which the Office of Children Youth and Family Support is an administrative unit

DOCS—Department of Community Services in NSW - responsible for care and protection services in NSW

Foster care—out of home care where there is a ‘general authorised caregiver who is reimbursed by the state/ territory for the care of the child and supported by an approved agency’ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2007, p.85)

FCA of the ACT Inc.—Foster Care Association of the Australian Capital Territory Incorporated—the organisation which supports foster carers in the ACT

GPA—General Parenting Authority—the authority or license conferred on foster carers by the Chief Executive of the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Service as a ‘suitable entity’ to care for children under Section 47 of the *Children and Young People Act 1999* (ACT)

ICPS—Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University

NSW—New South Wales

OCYFS—Office of Children Youth and Family Support which provides care and protection services to children and young people in the ACT

Relative or kinship care—where out of home care is provided by ‘family members other than parents or a person well known to the child and/or family (based on a pre-existing relationship) who are reimbursed by the state/territory for the care of the child’ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2007, p.85)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

At the same time as the number of children needing out of home care has increased, the number of people available to provide foster care for children, particularly non-relative foster care, is declining. In Australia, this has been attributed to a number of factors including the ageing of the population and the increased participation of women, the traditional carers, in the workforce (McHugh et al., 2004).

Within this context, the Foster Care Association of the ACT Inc (FCA of the ACT) commissioned the Institute of Child Protection Studies to carry out a small research project which aims to better understand the reasons why ACT foster carers cease foster caring during the period January 2004 and April 2007.

In this research project we highlight how the foster carers experienced and made sense of the way in which their foster caring finished. By understanding these experiences potentially the systems that care for children can make changes that better support foster carers and ultimately ensure better outcomes for children.

Themes from literature

In Section 2 of the report we briefly outline the main themes of the literature on the reasons foster carers cease fostering. There is also a literature review available separately. The literature suggests that whilst normal life events or particular factors related to fostering may affect people's decisions, often there is a combination of factors involved. Research varies in its findings on the weight attached to normal life events. Amongst the factors related to the fostering experience itself, the level of support experienced from the foster care professionals, from other foster carers and from other professionals may be significant in people's decisions to cease. Frustration at bureaucratic requirements, lack of clarity about role delineations amongst workers, financial considerations,

lack of a voice in decision making about children, and impacts on foster carers' own families all emerge as reasons that some carers leave foster caring.

Foster Care in Australia and ACT

In 2001 the Australian Foster Care Association estimated the number of foster families in Australia to be 8340 (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001). However there is currently no systematic data collection on foster carers and therefore no authoritative figure on current numbers of foster carers nor on the numbers of people leaving foster caring nationally.

At 30 June 2007 there were 367 foster carers registered with the ACT Office of Children Youth and Family Support (OCYFS). From the number of questionnaires sent out by the OCYFS for this study we know that 90 carers were officially removed from the list of authorised carers between January 2004 and the end of April 2007.

We do not have a profile of a typical carer in ACT. However anecdotal information provided by some foster care agencies indicates an increasing diversity of foster caring families in ACT. Where headed by a couple, both parents are increasingly likely to work. Single carers and same sex couples form part of the foster caring community.

In the ACT child protection is administered under the *Children and Young People Act 1999* (the Act). The Chief Executive of the Department of Disability Housing and Community Services (DHCS) is responsible for registering people as suitable entities to be foster carers and they receive a General Parenting Authority (GPA). This is an authority to care for children under the Act.

The OCYFS, an administrative unit of DHCS, is responsible for child protection in the ACT. The Chief Executive of DHCS has parental responsibility for children who are designated under the legislation to be in need of care and protection for

temporary, short term or long term periods. Some of these children enter foster care. The OCYFS is responsible for the case management of the children in out of home care.

In addition to approval of foster carers, the OCYFS purchases the services of a number of non government foster care agencies to provide foster parents for children and young people whom the OCYFS considers to be in need of foster care. The OCYFS also runs the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) Foster Care Unit, which recruits, trains and supports foster carers to provide foster care to Indigenous children and young people.

Methodology for the current study

The focus of this research project and of the report is on the lived experience of carers' who have left foster care. It aims to illuminate the way in which former carers understand the termination of their foster caring. When possible and appropriate we compare the findings of this study to previous research findings which provides a broader context for the experience of the participants. Because the research involved human participants, we sought and were given approval to conduct the research by Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

The research design included both quantitative and qualitative methods. The methods included: a questionnaire sent to 90 former foster carers, utilizing both open and closed questions; semi structured interviews with 12 former foster carers; and interviews with representatives from stakeholder organizations—government and non government organizations involved in foster care in ACT. An SPSS analysis was conducted of the questionnaire's closed questions. We undertook a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts with former carers and of the text of the answers to the open ended questions in the questionnaire. The themes emerging from the interviews with stakeholder organizations are utilized in the discussion of findings and the themes themselves are summarized in Appendix E.

We convened a small reference group comprising workers from some key stakeholder organizations which met on three occasions.

One major limitation of this research was the low response rate (18.8%) to the questionnaire. This limits the extent to which the results of the questionnaire can be generalised to the remainder of the former foster care population. A comparison profile of former foster carers is not available.

Profile of former carers from questionnaire responses

The questionnaire respondents were equally likely to be couple carers as single carers, more likely to be female than male, and likely to be aged between 26 and 49. Due to the small respondent numbers, the value of comparison to other larger sources of data is limited, however NSW findings on current carers through ABS Census data found that 70% of foster carers were aged between 35 and 54 (Siminski, Chalmers, & McHugh, 2005). The carers in our sample were most likely to have provided fostering for 3–5 years and to have provided a combination of care, with crisis and emergency care being the most common after respite. The questionnaire did not collect data on employment or income.

Reasons foster carers ceased fostering

A key finding of this research is the multi factorial nature of the reasons people leave fostering. This is in keeping with the international research. Another finding is that for some former carers the line between voluntary and involuntary departure from fostering is not always clear. Most participants in this research reported leaving on a voluntary basis, but a small number indicated a lack of clarity about this.

Life changes, as found in previous research, feature as reasons (although often not the sole reason) that 9 questionnaire respondents (59%) decided to leave caring in the ACT. Some of these life events included pregnancy, travel, study, leaving the

state and caring for an elderly relative. However, from the evidence, moving interstate is not always a singular or uncomplicated reason for ceasing to foster.

The effect of fostering on the foster carers' own families was a reason for ceasing in 8 of the 17 (47%) questionnaire responses and in 4 of the 12 interview responses. This too has been found as a key factor in other research conducted both in Australia and overseas. There may also be other factors involved, for example, family exhaustion from foster caring.

Whilst there were many examples given of the helpful work undertaken by the professional workers in foster care and the FCA of the ACT (see Section 5.3.4 of the report), difficulties in the relationships with the foster care agency or the statutory authority featured in 8 (47%) of the questionnaire responses to the question on reasons for ceasing fostering and in 5 of the interviews.

Former carers identified some specific issues: lack of information about children prior to or after placement; disagreement with decisions to return children to birth parents; lack of respite; lack of useful information to deal with behavioural issues; lack of recognition of foster parents' knowledge and capacities; undermining of foster parents' management of children; lack of communication from the foster care agency worker; slow payment of reimbursements.

The challenging behaviour of children and managing relationships with birth parents, whilst part of the reasons for leaving for some people, featured more highly as challenges in fostering than reasons for leaving in this particular group.

Some questionnaire respondents (4) mentioned 'exhaustion', 'strain' and 'disillusionment' as direct reasons for leaving caring. The interviews revealed similar emotional impacts as fundamental to many of the foster carers' experiences. Experiences of attachment and loss, uncertainty and burnout were part of this emotional landscape.

Whilst not given as a specific reason for leaving, lack of clarity about the circumstances and procedures around finishing foster caring was a feature of some of the interviews. In this research, this was particularly apparent when leaving foster caring was involuntary.

Positive aspects, challenging aspects and improvements

The research also covered the positive and challenging aspects of fostering for these former carers and their suggestions for improvement. All former carers were able to identify benefits to themselves or to their families from the fostering experiences. Key amongst these was the satisfaction of seeing progress in their foster child or children.

Aspects of the foster care system which foster carers identified as working well usually related to cooperative, respectful working relationships between workers and foster carers, based on equality. Among the questionnaire participants, 9 identified foster care agency support as a positive aspect of the system.

Challenges included managing children, bureaucratic processes, managing relationships with birth parents, not being considered equal partners in caring for the children, coping with uncertainty about children's future care plans. In terms of improvements, some people wanted more contact with the agency, others to be left alone to do the job. Other improvements suggested included portability of qualifications for foster carers so they could move from state to state and not have to retrain, greater recognition of the role of foster carers and better pay and conditions for foster carers.

Discussion of findings

This research adds to the growing body of knowledge which demonstrates that all groups in the foster care system (foster carers, birth parents, foster care agency workers, statutory workers and foster children) experience considerable stress

(Colton, Roberts, & Williams, 2006; Leeson, 2007; Thomson, 2007; Thomson & Thorpe, 2003). Finding and nurturing the human resources for each of the groups in the system is challenging.

What is particularly striking about this study is that the foster carers' reasons for leaving are largely reflected in the views expressed in the stakeholder interviews (see Appendix E for more detail). This implies there is significant shared understanding of the issues across the foster care sector in ACT. The qualitative findings are also consistent with the findings of previous much larger overseas studies and the Australian research.

In most of the situations explored in this research there was an interplay of factors affecting the carers' decisions to leave. This confirms the model of decision making suggested by Sinclair et al (2004) where a carers' sense of strain due to the impacts of fostering interacts with the level of support received and the particular fostering situation they are involved in. Many carers expressed strong emotional feelings about their caring experience, even though it may have been some time in the past.

Some of these feelings described earlier include the sense of being used, abused and/or burnt out. For some carers there is the added experience of fear and trauma (for example, having a knife held to them by a foster child). For others there may be the effects of suffering vicariously from the knowledge of the trauma experienced by the children they have cared for.

In the context of paid human service workers these experiences are clear indications to management that workers may be in need of care, support, debriefing, ongoing professional supervision and access to an Employee Assistance Provider. However, the participants in our research who were affected by these experiences indicated that as foster carers they did not have access to such services which provide debriefing and support.

Similarly, the data indicate intense experiences of loss and grief in many of the foster carers. Foster families face loss and grief on a continual basis, with the ebb and flow of vulnerable children and young people in and out of their lives. In the few situations where allegations of abuse are experienced, carers may grieve not only the loss of the child but also a sense of themselves as competent carers/parents. It can also be that they lose their circle of support (for example other foster carers). UK research (Hicks & Nixon, 1991) has identified additional losses such as losses of marriage, occupation and income flowing from allegations of abuse.

Losing the care of a foster child may be conceptualised as a form of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2004). There is a lack of clarity about whether the lost person is still part of the family, and what has happened to the person (Boss, 2004). This ambiguity of boundaries is present in fostering families. Ambiguous loss is hard to resolve, because there is not a death to mourn.

This research adds to the existing literature about the ambiguous nature of the fostering role and the difficulties this ambiguity raises. On the one hand foster carers are regarded as essential to the care of the child, on the other hand they are not regarded as professional staff. On the one hand they need to parent a child, and on the other hand, they are not the parent, and can make only minor decisions about the care of the child.

Foster carers have a deep commitment to make a difference for children. It appears that one of the factors involved in leaving might relate to a deep sense that what is right and what needs to be done to make a difference in a child's life is actually not happening. For some carers there may be a clash between their worldviews and those of the professional caring culture with which they enter a relationship when they enter fostering.

Implications

This research was undertaken at a time of potential for change within the out of home care sector in the ACT, particularly given the review of out of home care services in ACT being conducted by the OCYFS.

Promoting the parenting partnership—the collaborative care team

Foster care in the ACT involves numbers of people in a parenting partnership: the OCYFS; the foster care agency; the foster carer; and the birth parent, together with the child or young person. Our sample of former foster carers identified several situations of conflict in the parenting partnership—the corporate parent—in which they were involved, and where they felt they had no rights. Despite inherent power imbalances it is possible for the people concerned to strive for decision making processes based on respectful relationships where everyone's voices can be heard, and where each person's rights are acknowledged and respected.

Conflict management processes are of critical importance. In the field of relationship counselling considerable expertise has developed around mediating conflicts in parenting relationships taking a child inclusive or a child focused approach (McIntosh, Long, & Moloney, 2004). Family Group Conferencing is increasingly used in child protection. It may be possible to use some of this knowledge to develop a hierarchy of conflict resolution processes in foster care situations which are accessible and transparent. Such processes may need to allow for the introduction of facilitator or mediator who is external to the parenting partnership. They may involve the development of clearly documented understandings of the rights of all groups involved in foster care. At all times child centred practice (Winkworth & McArthur, 2005) is critical, involving the participation of children and young people in decision making.

This research confirms other findings in this area (Lovatt, 2005) that different carers have different needs for support—an individualised approach to carer support is needed requiring different models of support. Some people in our

sample were very satisfied with the supportive relationships with foster care agency workers and others were not.

Processes around finishing fostering

This research indicates that clear procedures about finishing as a foster carer which are fully communicated to the carers are vital. It is important that procedures are reinforced and supported at the time of leaving the foster care role, and that they include exit discussions with the foster care agencies and/or the OCYFS. These can provide opportunities for foster carers to give and receive feedback about the fostering experience, and to develop a shared understanding about whether or not the foster caring is finished or whether they are on leave, and what that means for the status of the GPA. Where there are allegations, foster carers need to have access to review mechanisms and need to be informed of their rights to information and to legal support and representation.

Recompense for fostering

Although some former foster carers expressed concern about being paid (they wanted fostering to be purely voluntary), a few former carers and several stakeholders considered improvements are required in this area, particularly in relation to reimbursement for contingency items. This diversity of foster carers' views is in keeping with previous research (McHugh, 2007; Triseliotis, Borland, & Hill, 2000). Changes suggested in this research would aim to avoid the sometimes lengthy, uncertainty provoking and conflict generating applications for and processing of contingency payments experienced by some former carers.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the research

Out-of-home care is defined as overnight care provided to children by someone other than their parents where the state or territory makes a financial payment to that carer (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2007). In the western world, the number of children in out-of-home care is rising (MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). In Australia in 2005–06 there were 25,454 children in out of home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2007). These numbers have increased each year since 1996 when there were 13,979 children in out-of-home care. This represents an increase of 82% (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2007).

A large percentage of these children are cared for in family-based care: foster care or relative foster care (kinship care) (Delfabbro, Osborn, & Barber, 2005). At the same time as the number of children needing care has increased, the number of people available to provide foster care for children, particularly non-relative foster care is declining. In Australia, this has been attributed to a number of factors including the ageing of the population and the increased participation of women, the traditional carers, in the workforce (McHugh et al., 2004).

This situation is described as a ‘crisis’ in foster care in both international and Australian literature (Briggs & Broadhurst, 2005). When the shortage of foster carers began to emerge in the 1970s, research was directed at recruitment of foster carers. However, the need to better understand the support needs of current foster carers so that they would remain in their foster caring role began to receive some attention:

The view that higher recruitment is the answer may be incorrect. It may be more fruitful to examine critically the assessment, preparation and support given to foster parents after recruitment. (Jones, 1975, cited in Rindfleisch, Bean, & Denby, 1998, p. 22)

Research in this area has looked at the experiences and problems of current carers, and how they may be supported to continue (see for example, MacGregor et al., 2006). There has been limited consideration of the factors which affect foster carers' decisions to leave.

In December 2006 the Foster Care Association of the ACT Inc commissioned the Institute of Child Protection Studies to carry out a small research project which aims to better understand the reasons why ACT foster carers cease foster caring.

1.2. Aims of the research

The broad research question was:

- What are the factors leading to foster carers' in the ACT discontinuing their foster caring roles?

The research also aimed to:

- Compare the expectations of foster caring held by former foster carers with their experiences of being foster carers;
- Identify the factors which foster carers consider led to their discontinuing foster care; and
- Identify what would need to change for them to return to the foster caring role.

The prime focus of the research project was to better understand former foster carers' experiences of leaving foster care. This report highlights how the foster carers experienced and made sense of the way in which their foster caring finished. By understanding these experiences, the systems that care for children can make changes that better support foster carers. This will be better for foster carers and ultimately ensure better outcomes for children.

We did not specifically include former kinship carers in this research project, though they may have been included in the sample surveyed or interviewed if they

were also foster carers. Relative or kinship care is a form of out-of-home care which is increasingly used in Australia and other English speaking countries to provide care for children and young people whose parents are not able to care for them (Dunne & Kettler, 2006). Whilst kinship carers may have some similarities of experience and indeed may have been included in the broader foster carer sample in some studies (Sinclair, Gibbs, & Wilson, 2004; Triseliotis, Borland, & Hill, 2000), there is some evidence that kinship foster carers experience some aspects of placements differently and conceptualise some aspects of their roles and relationships with the children, parents and agencies differently from non kinship foster carers (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). Further research is needed to more fully understand these needs to achieve better outcomes for children (Dunne & Kettler, 2006; Paxman, 2006). This was beyond the scope of this project.

This small research project attempts to hear the voices of the foster carers who have left foster caring. There is no doubt the perspectives of some groups can be marginalised in large complex systems. In the case of foster care, Unrau (2007) has argued that knowledge development about placement moves has privileged the perspectives of policy makers and researchers, rather than that of birth parents, foster children and foster carers. This research aims to highlight what former foster carers saw as the reasons that they ceased fostering. The research also aims to take into account the perspectives of some key stakeholder organisations on factors affecting foster carers ceasing to foster.

1.3 Structure of the report

The next section of the report overviews the literature on the reasons people leave fostering. Part 3 describes how foster care is organised in ACT. Next we outline the methodology for the study. In Part 5, the results of the questionnaire and the semi structured interviews are described and we then discuss the findings in relation to the literature. Finally we consider possible implications of the research for policy, practice and further research.

2. THE LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

This overview of the literature is highly focused on research into why foster carers cease fostering, rather than on the broader literature about retention of foster carers. The overview relies heavily on two empirical studies from the United Kingdom (Sinclair et al., 2004; Triseliotis et al., 2000), two from the United States of America (Rhodes et al., 2001; Rindfleisch et al., 1998), one study from Australia (McHugh et al., 2004) and the results of two Australian surveys discussed in reports for government (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001; Department of Human Services, 2003). A larger review is available separately.

A number of research designs were used in the existing research. These include: cross sectional samples of foster carers who have ceased fostering (Department of Human Services, 2003; Triseliotis et al., 2000); comparisons between foster carers who have ceased fostering and those who continue to foster (Rindfleisch et al., 1998); prospective studies which follow up on whether or not foster carers continued (Sinclair et al., 2004); and asking current foster carers why they think foster carers cease fostering (McHugh et al., 2004).

Each of these designs has limitations. For example, as Rhodes et al. (2001) point out, foster carers' perceptions of what are the important factors in their reasons for leaving may develop over time. In the two Australian surveys of former foster carers reported in larger reports of foster caring, the statistical and methodological approaches utilised do not appear to have been peer reviewed (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001; Department of Human Services, 2003). A large gap in the literature from the Australian context, is the dearth of research on Indigenous foster carers and why they may cease foster caring. This gap is part of a broader shortfall, in understanding the needs of Indigenous carers, who currently are particularly involved in kinship care (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007; Richardson, Bromfield, & Higgins, 2005). Another gap is the invisibility of foster fathers and

the birth children of foster carers in current foster care research (Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panozzo, & Richardson, 2005). This latter gap is being addressed both overseas and in Australia (Clare, Clare, & Peaty, 2006; Hojer, 2007).

One of the limits to drawing strong conclusions from the existing evidence is that research has been carried out in a variety of legislative and policy contexts and in different countries. This limitation often applies in social research where it is impossible to control for all variables. In this subject area the categories of foster caring and the manner in which relationships with statutory and foster care organisations are organised vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and from time to time, making comparisons difficult.

2.2 Length of fostering

The evidence on when foster carers leave in relation to length of fostering is not entirely consistent, and may well be context-specific (Triseliotis et al., 2000). There is some evidence from the USA that in the 1990s 64% of foster families left after less than one year in the role (Casey Family Programs, 2002).

A Queensland study undertaken by the Foster Parents Association of Qld (FPAQ) (reported in Australian Foster Care Association, 2001) found that 28% of the carers left after less than one year, with 55% being carers for less than 5 years. The Victorian study found that 37% of former carers had left foster caring within the first two years of being a foster carer (Department of Human Services, 2003). However, there is also evidence that experienced foster carers are leaving foster care in Victoria, with those leaving in 2001-2002 having an average of about 4 years experience compared with 1.6 years experience in 1997-1998 (Department of Human Services, 2003).

There is some evidence to suggest that foster carers who leave may consider returning. In Rindfleisch's (1998) USA sample, 20% of discontinued foster families reported that they intended to return. In the Victorian sample of former foster parents, 62% said they would consider returning if changes were made which

included more support from the department and the relevant agency (Department of Human Services, 2003).

2.3. The role of normal life events

Various studies from the USA and UK undertaken during twenty years from 1975 to 1998 have suggested a range of between 20 percent and 65 percent of foster parents leave fostering due to family changes such as moving, death of a spouse and pregnancy (see Rhodes et al., 2001).

A Victorian questionnaire of 87 past foster carers found that 53% had stopped fostering due to a change in family or personal situation, such as a new baby or changed work commitments. They also found that 38% had left due to one or several experiences they perceived as negative experiences in foster care (Department of Human Services, 2003).

2.4 Factors related to the fostering experience

2.4.1 Support from professionals

A Scottish study by Triseliotis et al. (2000) found that a majority of carers who ceased fostering did so due to a combination of factors. The most common reason given was their dissatisfaction with the support provided. This included a history of unavailability of social work support and the lack of responsiveness from foster care services for help during a recent crisis. Sinclair et al's (2004) English study supports this finding. Rindfleisch et al. (1998) found that where foster carers perceived that social workers did not 'reach out' to them (p.15), there was a greater chance of their leaving foster care.

The available Australian research supports this. A Victorian survey of former foster carers indicated that 'unreasonable demands by the system, frustrations arising from dealing with the department' and 'inadequate support' were important reasons in their decision to leave (Department of Human Services, 2003, p. 90).

The FPAQ survey of former foster carers also shows the pivotal nature of lack of support as a factor in leaving (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001).

There is evidence that informal support and support from other foster parents is important in continuing as a foster carer (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001; Rhodes et al., 2001; Rindfleisch et al., 1998). Informal support from family and friends and religious communities may also be important to foster carers, particularly single parents, if they are to continue (Colton, Roberts, & Williams, 2006; Sinclair et al., 2004).

Other important forms of support cited in the literature for foster carers are respite or day care services (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001; Butcher, 2004; McHugh et al., 2004; Rhodes et al., 2001) and support from other professionals such as doctors (Sinclair et al., 2004).

2.4.2 Agency behaviour, red tape and role delineation

Foster parents may perceive agency behaviour as indicating a lack of commitment to the well being of a child, their prime motivation for becoming a foster carer and this may prompt some foster carers to question their decision to become a carer (Triseliotis et al., 2000). Negative perceptions of bureaucratic requirements or 'red tape' emerged as a significant factor in one USA study (Rindfleisch et al., 1998). This predicted the likelihood of foster carers' leaving. It also indicated that this red tape can be experienced during attempts to obtain individual allowances or attention to special needs of the children in their care.

The same study (Rindfleisch et al., 1998) identified that foster carers having to deal with several workers at the same time was a factor in leaving foster care. They considered that this pointed to the importance of clear role definitions particularly given the likelihood of high staff turnover in the child welfare field. This fits with other findings highlighting the need for clarity about who the carer's first contact

should be, and how that role interacts with other professionals involved in the foster care situation (Triseliotis et al., 2000).

2.4.3 Financial considerations

Many writers acknowledge the contentious nature of the issue of financial support for carers and its relationship to whether the role is seen as a professional occupation, or as voluntary caring (Colton et al., 2006; Kirton, Beecham, & Ogilvie, 2006; McHugh, 2002, 2007; Sinclair et al., 2004).

It is clear from the literature that financial motivation is not the prime reason for foster carers deciding to foster. The key motivations have been found to be altruistic in nature, a desire to make a positive difference to a child's life (Colton et al., 2006; Delfabbro, Taplin, & Bentham, 2002; MacGregor et al., 2006; Triseliotis et al., 2000). On the evidence it appears that there are no significant differences in motivation between those who cease fostering and those who continue (Rindfleisch et al., 1998).

Foster caring involves a variety of costs to carers and financial payments to carers can vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, including within Australia (McHugh, 2002, 2007). Financial considerations do play a part in some carers' decisions to continue or to cease fostering. Although Sinclair and colleagues (2004) found no difference in the attitudes of continuing and former carers' views on the adequacy of payments for foster care, carers who left fostering had a lower income from fostering than those who continued, even when the number of children and associated allowances were factored in.

2.4.4 Children's complex needs

Both in Australia and overseas, the increase in the number of foster placements of children and young people with high and complex needs has been noted as a

contemporary feature of foster care (Department of Human Services, 2003; Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; McHugh, 2007; Triseliotis et al., 2000).

The difficult behaviour of some foster children has been identified in the literature as one of the reasons foster carers cease fostering (Triseliotis et al., 2000). Many choose to end a particular placement which is very difficult (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003) or they may cease fostering altogether (Rhodes et al., 2001).

2.4.5 Lack of voice in decision making

There is evidence that one factor in foster parents' decisions to leave is not having their opinions considered in decision making about the children in their care (Rhodes et al., 2001). The Victorian survey identified that 'not having a voice in decisions' was a significant factor in past carers' decisions to leave fostering (Department of Human Services, 2003, p. 90). Role ambiguity (on the one hand being critically important to the well-being of the foster child and on the other hand not having any role in decision-making) has been identified as a source of dissatisfaction with being a foster carer (Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000).

2.4.6 Impact on own families

The experience of foster caring exerting a negative impact on foster carers' own families is a further factor in foster carers' decisions to leave foster caring. In the Scottish and the English longitudinal study, carers were more likely to discontinue if they perceived that fostering had a negative effect on their family (Sinclair et al., 2004; Triseliotis et al., 2000). McHugh's work in Australia supports this finding (McHugh et al., 2004). Of past carers in the Victorian Government's study (Department of Human Services, 2003), 26% indicated that the effect of foster caring on their own families was a reason for leaving foster care. This was also the case with 33% of the Queensland former foster carers (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001).

2.4.7 Allegations of abuse

A number of people who foster face allegations of abuse (Briggs & Broadhurst, 2005; Wilson et al., 2000), and this is a further reason some foster carers leave fostering (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001; Rindfleisch et al., 1998). The Queensland survey found that 11% of the former foster carers left following an allegation of abuse (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001).

A related factor is the level of support received. Some qualitative research has found that foster carers may experience isolation, lack of support and information and an assumption of guilt following an allegation of abuse (Carbino, 1991; Fisher, Gibbs, Sinclair, & Wilson, 2000; Hicks & Nixon, 1991; Wilson et al., 2000).

2.4.8 Interaction of factors

In an attempt to draw together the various factors in why foster parents leave and why they stay, Sinclair et al (2004) draw some broad conclusions which link the concept of the 'strains' of fostering with that of 'views of fostering'. 'Views of fostering' could be interpreted as levels of satisfaction with fostering. These broad conclusions emphasise the interplay of individual circumstances, including the supports available, and fostering circumstances.

They suggest:

The strains that arise from fostering reflect the difficult events that occur and the amount of support—particularly informal support—provided.

Views of fostering reflect these strains and the support—particularly from family and social workers—that is available.

Views of fostering, family circumstances, and the degree to which a carer received a 'professional package' involving training, support from other carers and enhanced finance, all influence whether or not a carer thinks of leaving, with different weights probably being given to those factors, depending on the carer's situation.

Whether a carer leaves, partly depends on these views, partly on fostering circumstances (eg numbers fostered) and crucially on whether a placement breaks down and no other child is fostered at the time. (Sinclair et al., 2004)

3. CONTEXT OF FOSTER CARE IN ACT

3.1 Foster families—the national picture

In 2001 the Australian Foster Care Association estimated the number of foster families in Australia to be 8340 (Australian Foster Care Association, 2001). However as there is currently no systematic data collection there is no authoritative figure (Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2005). We do not have a clear picture on the numbers of people leaving foster caring nationally. However, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is considering the possibility of national data collection in this area (Cynthia Kim, 5/9/07, personal communication).

A Victorian study carried out by the Department of Human Services (Department of Human Services, 2003) provides some detailed numbers from that state. This shows that in 2001–2003, there were about 5500 carers providing out of home care, including both kinship and non kinship care. This was an increase from 1997–1998, but the increase was due to an increase in kinship and permanent carers, whereas the number of foster carers decreased in that time. The study that found from 1998–1999 to 2001–2002 there was an overall 7% reduction in the number of foster carers.

In terms of the social and demographic characteristics of foster carers, McHugh et al. (2004) found that there is considerable variety in the profile of foster carers in NSW. However a ‘typical’ foster carer is female, 48 years old, born in Australia, is not working outside the home, has been a foster carer for five years or less and has completed Year 10. They found that about two fifths of female foster carers were in paid employment and that families at the high or low end of income distribution were ‘least likely to foster’ (McHugh et al., 2004, p. iv).

3.2 What we know about foster carers in ACT

According to information by the OCYFS, at 30 June 2007 there were 367 foster carers registered with OCYFS with General Parenting Authorities. These include couple carers who are now registered individually. We are unable to compare this number with previous years, as previously, couple carers were registered jointly. From the number of questionnaires sent out by the OCYFS for this study we know that 90 carers were officially removed from the list of authorised carers between January 2004 and the end of April 2007. We do not know how many of these would have been couples.

We do not have a profile of a typical carer in ACT. However anecdotal evidence and some information provided by some foster agencies indicate an increasing diversity of foster caring families in the ACT. Where headed by a couple, both parents are increasingly likely to work. Single carers and single sex couples form part of the foster caring community. The demographic profile of ACT varies from that of the rest of Australia on a number of variables relevant to the pool of people available for fostering, including higher rates of workforce participation of women and high population mobility (ABS, 2007; Chief Minister's Department, 2004).

3.3. The organisation of foster care in ACT

Every jurisdiction in Australia organises its child protection system differently, and this difference also applies to the organisation and procedures involved in foster care (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005).

In the ACT child protection is administered under *Children and Young People Act 1999* (hereafter the Act). The Chief Executive of the Department of Disability Housing and Community Services (DHCS) is responsible for registering people as suitable entities to be foster carers and they receive a General Parenting Authority (GPA). This is an authority or license to care for children under Section 47 of the Act.

This is distinct from kinship carers who receive a Specific Parenting Authority (SPA) for a specific child.

The Office of Children, Youth and Family Support (OCYFS), an administrative unit of the DHCS, is responsible for child protection in the ACT. The Chief Executive of the DHCS has parental responsibility for children who are designated under the legislation to be in need of care and protection for temporary, short term or long term periods. Some of these children enter foster care. The OCYFS is responsible for the case management of the children in out of home care. At 30 June 2006, there were 388 ACT children in out of home care and of these 197 were in foster care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2007).

In addition to licensing/registering foster carers, the OCYFS purchases the services of non government foster care agencies to provide foster families to children and young people whom the OCYFS consider to be in need of care. These agencies are Marymead Child and Family Centre, Barnardos, Life Without Barriers and Galilee. These agencies recruit, train and support foster carers, and support the foster care placements. The OCYFS also runs, within their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) Unit, the ATSI Foster Care Unit, which recruits, trains and supports foster carers to provide foster care to Indigenous children and young people.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Principles

The ICPS supports a collaborative approach to research and practice. In designing this research collaboratively with the Foster Care Association of the ACT Inc, we were mindful of the many groups involved in foster care in the ACT. The perspectives of some of these groups were sought through the formation of a reference group to provide advice on the research. The views of key stakeholders were solicited as part of the research design.

The ICPS attempts to include wherever possible the voices of children and young people in its research. The focus of this research was the perspective of former foster carers, who would often not have the opportunity to be heard in relation to foster caring. We were not able to specifically include children and young people in this research. We are grateful that CREATE ACT, which represents young people in out-of-home care, participated in the interviews which we conducted with organisational representatives.

4.2 Description

The research design included both quantitative and qualitative methods. Because the research involved human participants, we sought and were given approval to conduct the research by the Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee. This is required by the University and ensures a high level of ethical responsibility in the research process. The information letters and consent forms which form part of the ethics application process can be found at Appendix A.

4.2.1 Literature review

The research design included a brief, focused review of existing literature to provide background and assist in the development of the project. This literature review is available separately.

4.2.2 Survey of former foster carers—Quantitative method

A questionnaire was developed, piloted and sent to 90 former foster carers who were no longer on the list of carers with a General Parenting Authority (GPA). Responses were anonymous. In developing the questionnaire we looked at previous tools, (including that developed by the Foster Care Association (NSW) Inc.) and at a major UK study (Triseliotis et al., 2000) to identify key questions that might enable comparison between this research and previous research.

The questionnaire was mailed out in April 2007 by the Office of Children Youth and Family Support (OCYFS) to 74 former foster carers. The OCYFS are responsible for registering foster carers and for maintaining the list of registered carers. We included all foster carers who had been withdrawn from the OCYFS list of carers with a GPA between January 2004 and December 2006. At our request the OCYFS also sent out a reminder to those former carers a month afterwards.

Due to a low response rate we extended the time frame to include carers who had left the list between January 2007 and end April 2007 (16 people). This occurred at the end of May 2007. Four carers who had changed address since leaving fostering (and who knew about the research project) contacted us and we sent them questionnaires directly. It is likely they were part of the group of eight questionnaires returned unopened to the OCYFS.

From the overall mail out of 90 (assuming the additional four questionnaires were part of the eight returned unopened), we received 17 completed questionnaires. This was a response rate of 18.8%. This return rate affects the extent to which we can generalise from the questionnaire results.

In the questionnaire package we included information about the research and two envelopes addressed to the Institute of Child Protection Studies. One envelope was for the return of the anonymous questionnaire, the other was for the foster carer to indicate if they would like to participate in semi structured interviews as part of the research. The questionnaire included a sheet for participants to complete and return separately to the Australian Catholic University in a self addressed envelope if they wished to be interviewed. This process ensured anonymity to those who completed the questionnaire.

The questionnaire comprised both open and closed questions (see Appendix B). The closed questions have been analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and we describe the results in part 5 of this report. The answers to

the open questions form, together with the results of the interviews, the data for qualitative analysis.

4.2.3 Semi structured interviews—Qualitative methods

We interviewed 12 former foster carers. Phone interviews were conducted if the respondents were interstate (5) and face to face if in Canberra or surrounding area (7). If the former carers agreed, we recorded the interviews to aid accurate data transcription. The interviews lasted for one to two and a half hours with most taking approximately one hour. The interview proforma can be found at Appendix C.

We also interviewed non-government and government organisations involved in the foster care system to elicit their views on the reasons people cease to be foster carers. Appendix D contains the interview proforma for the interviews with the representatives of those organisations involved in foster care in ACT. As the organisations would be identified, we sent the notes of the interviews to the representatives for them to make any alterations they wished. The organisations were: the ATSI Foster Care Unit, OCYFS, Galilee, Marymead Child and Family Centre, the Foster Care Association of the ACT Inc.(FCAACT), Barnardos, CREATE and Life Without Barriers. Caring and Parenting ACT (CaPACT) provided a written response.

We have utilised the main themes from the stakeholder interviews during discussion of the findings of the research (in Part 6) and in the final section (Part 7) which canvasses some implications of the project's findings. We have placed the summary of the stakeholder themes in Appendix E. This is in keeping with a key aim of this research which is to hear directly from the foster carers about their reasons for ceasing fostering.

4.2.4. Qualitative data analysis – interviews with former foster carers

We undertook a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and the text of the answers to the open ended questions in the questionnaire. The taped interviews were partially transcribed and each participant's interview was analysed against the questions asked.

The second step was to carry out a content analysis of the data. This involved the identification of important examples, themes, and patterns in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We also used a comparative method with the use of the previous research concepts and propositions which sensitized the analysis. By a close examination of the data, particularly the interview transcripts, common themes emerged (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Darlington and Scott, 2002; Minichiello et al, 2000). Previous research when available and appropriate were also used to support the conclusions reached (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

In the report, we provide quotes from the interviews with former foster carers and answers to the open ended questions in order to illustrate the themes identified. We have endeavored to remove or alter potentially identifying information unless explicitly discussed with the participant.

4.2.5. Reference group

As discussed above we convened a small research reference group comprising workers from some key stakeholder organisations. These were Children, Youth and Family ACT (CYFAACT), the Office of Children Youth and Family Support, 2 non government foster care agencies (Barnardos and Marymead Child and Family Centre) and the Foster Care Association of the ACT Inc (represented by Life Without Barriers). The reference group met on three occasions, and provided advice in between meetings on effective questions for the semi structured interviews with former foster carers, and on the draft of this report.

4.3. Limitations

One major limitation of this research is the low response rate to the questionnaire¹. This limits the extent to which the results of the questionnaire can be generalised to the remainder of the former foster care population. Instead we can describe the characteristics of this group and the reasons that they consider their foster care career ceased. It is likely that some of the people interviewed also completed the questionnaire. We have no way of knowing exactly how many that might be and have taken this into account in analysing the results. In relation to the low response rate to the questionnaire, it may be that people who have simply ‘moved on’ in their lives and who have no particular suggestions for improvements may not be motivated to complete the questionnaire, nor to volunteer for interview. Our sample may be skewed towards those with strong views. A profile of former foster carers, with whom this sample could be compared, is not available.

A further consideration is that this research design does not allow us to make claims about what factor or factors cause foster carers to cease being foster carers. In order to make such connections we would need a large prospective study with control groups where the experimental group is subject to a particular event or intervention. Even where such studies have been undertaken it seems likely, as the literature review shows, that a person’s leaving foster care follows the occurrence of a number of interacting factors, rather than being caused by any one factor (Department of Human Services, 2003; Rhodes et al., 2001; Sinclair et al., 2004; Triseliotis et al., 2000).

The focus of this research project and report is on the lived experience of carers’ leaving foster care. It aims to illuminate the way in which former carers understand the termination of their foster caring. When possible and appropriate the findings of this study are compared to previous research findings and this provides a broader context for the experience of the participants. Hearing from this group

¹ Because GPAs are now issued individually it may be that some households received 2 sets of correspondence. We do not know whether 1 or both members of the couple responded nor whether they hold the same views about why fostering ceased.

adds to the body of knowledge of those diverse groups and individuals involved in foster care in the ACT.

5. FINDINGS OF THIS RESEARCH

5.1 Demographic data from the questionnaire participants

A total of 17 completed questionnaires were received. Demographic information was collected, as was information about the factors that influenced the cessation of foster caring. This section provides a profile of the questionnaire participants.

5.1.1 Gender, couple single status, age, location

Sixteen of the participants were female, and half (8) of these were part of a couple caring arrangement. One person had moved from couple caring to single caring during foster care. There was 1 single male. Where the data was provided for couple partners, 6 partners were male.

Over a third (35.3%, 6 participants) of former foster carers fell into the 26–39 age group, and the same percentage were in the 40–49 age category. Interestingly, 23.5% (4 participants) of carers surveyed were 60 years or over.

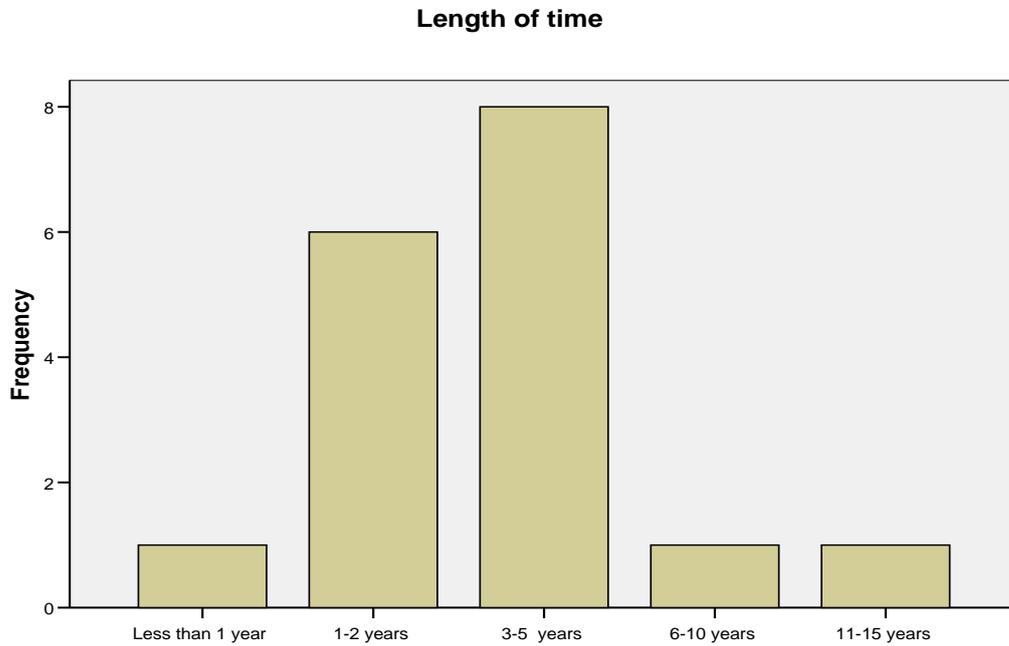
Six out of the 17 participants said that they lived in NSW, whilst there was a spread of carers throughout the regions of the ACT (3 Belconnen, 2 Gungahlin, 1 Woden, 1 Inner North, 2 Tuggeranong), with the exception of the Inner South which had no carers. There were 2 participants in ‘other’ which would mean other states.

None of the participants identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 1 out of seventeen came from a Non-English speaking background.

5.1.2. Caring profile of questionnaire participants

Almost half of the participants reported that they had been carers for 3–5 years. 35.3% (6 participants) had been carers for 1–2 years and there were no participants who fostered for more than 15 years.

Figure 1: Length of time in fostering



41.2% (7 participants) had none of their own children living at home while they were fostering and 52.9% (9 participants) of carers reported that they had 1 or 2 of their own children at home during all or some of the time they were fostering.

With regards to the age of children in care, almost half were between 6 and 15 years old: very few carers looked after children older than 15; 23% (4 participants) cared for all age groups; and no foster carers indicated that they had looked after newborns or babies only².

² The questionnaire was designed with tick boxes and text, participants were able to tick more than one box in each question. Therefore, as the data was compiled, there were more than 17 responses to some questions and the total responses total more than 100%.

As seen below, many participants indicated that they provided more than one type of care.

Table 1: Types of Care

	Types of care	
	Number	%
Crisis or emergency	10	59
Short term	5	29
Medium	5	29
Long term	4	24
Respite	14	82
Kinship	1	6
Other	1	6

Fourteen foster carers in this sample carried out respite care with the next largest category being crisis or emergency care (59%). Not surprisingly considering the focus of the research only 1 foster carer identified as a kinship carer. The ‘other’ identified related to special needs care.

The majority of people fostered 5–10 children; however the range was 1 to 48 children.

5.1.3 Summary of profile

Our questionnaire respondents were equally likely to be couple carers as single carers, more likely to be female than male, and likely to be aged between 26 and 49. Due to our small numbers, the value of comparison to other larger sources of data is limited, however NSW findings on current carers through ABS Census data found that 70% of foster carers were aged between 35 and 54 (Siminski, Chalmers, & McHugh, 2005). The carers in our sample were most likely to have provided fostering for 3–5 years and to have provided a combination of care, with crisis and emergency care being the most common after respite. We did not collect data on employment or income.

5.2. Ceasing foster care

5.2.1 Introduction

In this section we discuss the themes that emerged from the answers to open ended questions in the questionnaire and the more in depth responses gained during the semi structured interviews. Firstly we consider the answers to the main question of the research: the reasons carers ceased fostering. This question was an open question in the questionnaire to enable a fuller expression of respondents' experience, rather than a tick the box option. As the interviews were semi structured, not every question was asked in the same way in every interview, as the interviews focused on facilitating the responses from the former carers in a responsive manner.

We follow these results by outlining the carers' experiences of the caring role: their expectations and preparation when starting out; the challenges and the positive aspects of caring; what might have made a difference to their decision to leave.

Finally we provide the former carers' insights into what changes would benefit the foster care system.

Given the small numbers involved, and the likely cross over with the surveyed group, we do not provide a detailed profile of the interview group. In brief, most (not all) interviews were with one person, usually a woman, even where there was a couple carer involved. There was an even spread of single and couple carers.

We have endeavoured to present our findings in such a way as to be as faithful as possible to the experiences of the foster carers who shared them with us, without compromising our commitment that we would not identify them in the report.

5.2.2 Interacting factors in foster carers' ceasing fostering

A key finding of this research is the multi factorial nature of the reasons people leave fostering. This is in keeping with the international research already discussed

(Sinclair et al., 2004). In both the questionnaires and interviews more than one reason was usually given for leaving. Of the 17 questionnaire participants, 4 gave a single reason for leaving fostering in ACT. In the interview sample this was the case with 3 foster families (one of which involved an involuntary leaving). The remainder cited a combination of reasons. Normal life events may interact with other factors which are related to the fostering experience. On a number of occasions during the research, we read or heard of foster carers' responses that a particular event was 'the straw that broke the camel's back' or similar.

In this description and analysis of findings, we attempt to demonstrate some of the complexity of the interaction of factors. The following quote from a questionnaire response illustrates this interaction:

Our last child had severe psychological problems causing many behavioural ones. As a result we were advised to have frequent respite but eventually they [the agency] ran out of respite carers due to [the child's] behaviour. The frequent changing of staff just increased the strain as well as no one there seemed to have enough experience to help or advise us.

5.2.3 Voluntary and involuntary departure from foster caring

One finding of the research is that the line between voluntary and involuntary departure from fostering is not always easy to draw for the foster carers involved. In the questionnaire responses, 13 out of 17 considered their departure to be voluntary.

One identified that the departure was involuntary. At the time that foster caring finished she had thought that it was a voluntary departure, but found out through seeking information through official channels that it was involuntary.

The other 3 people considered that the departure was 'other' than either voluntary or involuntary. Of these, one felt forced to leave fostering because they were moving interstate and their fostering qualifications were not recognised in the

other state. One person considered that a serious and traumatic conflict with an agency meant that she could no longer work with that agency and did not receive responses from other agencies. A further carer turned down placements due to personal reasons, and did not receive a letter indicating that the GPA was removed.

Interestingly of the 13 former foster carers who had left voluntarily, three completed Question 7.1 designed to ask involuntary leavers how they had found out their GPA has been withdrawn. It is possible that our questionnaire question was not clear. However, the letter from the OCYFS confirming that they were no longer authorised foster carers seemed to be a source of confusion for some of the voluntary departers. One described receiving:

Letter saying GPA had been removed. I felt like a criminal.

Another said:

When I received the letter –rather impersonal one – I felt both relieved and annoyed. A “thank you” might have helped stay as a foster carer if received after starting caring and also after placement breakdown.

5.2.3. Changes in personal circumstances

Life changes, as found in previous research feature as reasons (although often not the sole reason) for 9 questionnaire respondents (59%) to decide to leave caring in ACT. Some of these life events included pregnancy, travel, study, leaving the state and caring for an elderly relative.

In the following questionnaire response, the interaction of factors is clearly demonstrated:

The two main reasons we ceased fostering were 1) opposition from own family members and difficulty in caring with an elderly relative and 2) specifically, an extremely incompetent, arrogant case worker who single-handedly destroyed all the success we had been having in dealing with a very

difficult long-term foster child by informing [the child] that [the child] didn't have to do anything [the child] didn't want to!

In both the interview sample, and the questionnaire sample, 2 foster families moved interstate and this was the trigger for them to cease fostering in ACT. We acknowledge that these may be the same people. However, we cannot assume that moving interstate is a singular or uncomplicated reason for ceasing to foster.

One foster parent who had provided a wide range of fostering (long term, respite and emergency) over a ten year period, described accepting a job interstate as partly a strategy to cope with burn out:

I can't turn away anyone in need of a home. I'd be thinking, Let me just enjoy this child and then I'd get a phone call, 'can you take this child for just 2 days'..... I would say yes, when maybe I shouldn't have.

5.2.4 Impact on own family

The effect of fostering on the foster carers' own families featured as a reason for ceasing in 8 of the 17 (47%) questionnaire responses and in 4 of the 12 interview responses. This too has been found as a key factor in other research conducted both here and overseas (Department of Human Services, 2003; Sinclair et al., 2004). It constitutes the second most often cited reason in the questionnaire. In 2 of the questionnaire responses this was given as a single reason, with no other stated complicating factors. Carers came to a point where they considered that their children's well being was being compromised from the emotional and physical work involved in foster caring. In itself this is probably an indicator of the demands of a foster caring role.

Other former carers were clear that there were other factors involved. One questionnaire respondent indicated that the impact on the family's own children was one important reason but that additional reasons were that the family was exhausted from foster caring with little respite and that fostering stresses were

affecting the foster parents' own relationship. Another respite carer was concerned that her son was becoming withdrawn after being hit and abused. The reason for leaving was:

A combination of factors: we were worried about our son; we were disillusioned. The disillusionment was I am not actually helping someone who lacks attention..... he had everything, so there's the disillusionment.

One of the former foster carers interviewed talked about the impact on her teenage daughter of providing respite care:

I decided to leave, because my daughter, a teenager, was getting upset. She felt she couldn't bring friends around and a few of her things went missing.

Because of the emphasis on confidentiality of information, carers may be reluctant to share information with their family. This former carer considered that had she been able to do that, or had there been someone outside the family available to talk with her daughter, this may have assisted.

Another former carer felt that the age of the foster child affected her daughter:

One of the problems was that it changed the situation in our family- our own daughter was not the eldest any more.....After two years I was exhausted. I was worried about the effect on our eldest daughter. I asked them to find somewhere else.

In two families parents thought that their own children may not look favourably on fostering in the future. One family considers that the emotional impact of the fostering experience on their children is such that these children will never foster themselves when they are grown up:

They are horrified at what has happened.

5.2.5. Relationship with the fostering agency or the statutory authority

There were many examples given of the good work undertaken by the professional workers in foster care. Some of these are discussed in a later section (5.3.4). Some foster carers interviewed provided considerable praise for these workers.

However, difficulties in the relationships with the foster care agency or the statutory authority featured in 8 (47%) of the questionnaire responses to the question on reasons for ceasing fostering. This may have been because they experienced lack of support from the agency (4 questionnaire respondents) or had disagreements with the agency or statutory body involved concerning decisions about children (4 questionnaire respondents). Sometimes carers were involved in interstate situations (fostering children from both ACT and NSW, so were involved with both OCYFS and DOCS).

In 5 of the interviewed families conflicts with the agency or statutory authority emerged as direct reasons the carers considered they left fostering (this does not include 2 involuntary departures, where conflicts had occurred).

Sometimes it was hard to distinguish whether the difficulties expressed related to the relationship with the foster care agency or OCYFS, because sometimes carers were unhappy about decisions made about the children's lives by other people and were not necessarily attributing this to one or other organisation. On the other hand, there was some frustration expressed that every decision concerning the child had to go through the foster care agency:

We couldn't speak to God ourselves, we had to do it through the agency.

Former carers identified some specific issues: lack of information about children prior to or after placement; disagreement with decisions to return children to birth parents; lack of respite; lack of useful information to deal with behavioural issues; lack of recognition of foster parents' knowledge and capacities; undermining of

foster parents' management of children; lack of communication from the foster care agency worker; and slow payments or reimbursements. One questionnaire respondent said:

Lack of support from [foster care agency], always late payment. Case workers young and inexperienced. Too many changes for the child. I am still available for DOCS and would [provide foster care] long term for another agency. Case workers did not relay concerns to the relevant case manager at OCYFS. Lack of communication.

5.2.6 Managing children

Two questionnaire respondents cited the difficult behaviour of children as a factor in their leaving fostering. As has generally been the case, this challenging behaviour interacted with other matters identified by former carers such as lack of respite or other forms of support. For the people whom we interviewed, difficult behaviour was one of the challenges of foster caring, rather than a perceived reason for leaving. However conclusion of a difficult placement may have provided the trigger for leaving (see later section 5.2.9).

5.2.7 Managing relationships with birth parents

A small number (2) of questionnaire respondents mentioned managing relationships with birth parents as one of several reasons for leaving foster care. Like managing children, relationships with birth parents featured in a number of the interviews as challenging aspect of fostering, but not as a dominant for leaving.

5.2.8 Emotional impact of caring

Some questionnaire respondents (4) mentioned 'exhaustion', 'strain', 'disillusionment' as direct reasons for leaving caring. The interviews revealed similar emotional impacts as fundamental to many of the foster carers' experiences. Whilst they were not always stated by the carer as an explicit reason for leaving (in some cases they were) these emotional experiences constituted powerful undercurrents in the lead up to the decision to leave.

A number of foster carers interviewed considered that they were being ‘used’, and abused by the foster care system. Others talked of the profound distress they felt at what they had learnt about the children’s experiences prior to the children coming to them, particularly those related to violence, abuse and drug use.

In addition most carers interviewed had formed attachments to children and had experienced deep feelings of loss and sadness when the children moved on. This occurred particularly where the children moved suddenly, and the carers were not in agreement with the decision. However it was also the case when carers for other reasons needed to hand over the care to someone else. These former carers expressed sadness that they did not know how these children were faring after they left—some were told they were not allowed to know. Carers found it hard to make sense of this ‘confidentiality’ procedure when they had cared for the children over a period of time.

I would like to see follow-up with kids—they are part of your life, but they won’t tell you anything after they leave.

Another carer who had been exhausted from years of dealing with very difficult behaviour, without respite and could no longer manage:

In the end it got too much, we gave [the child] back to the department..... I was in tears when they said it wasn’t our fault. We had dedicated our lives to looking after and loving these kids we had. For all of a sudden for it to be stopped because we couldn’t handle these kids that we had was awful. It was a terrible day for us.

Some former carers interviewed spoke of their hearts being ‘broken’ by the experiences around the separation from children they cared for, and put a lot of work and effort into. They had grown attached to the children. Two interviewees said they were required to encourage the children’s attachment to them as they had been of a very young age when they came into care.

One former carer described some of the emotional impact:

It is an incredibly extreme experience—you cry tears that you never thought you would cry, but you also share elation at moments when a child who has not set foot in a school gets up at assembly to sing, you know it is pretty special. It is hard to describe the lack of rights you have as a human being, as a foster carer, and the reason I tell the stories is to give a glimpse of what is so you can understand that when all of a sudden you are cut off, how confusing it is.

Another family described trying to find out what was going to happen to the children who were removed suddenly from their care after many months. They were distressed at not being able to find out whether the children would be returned or anything about how the children were faring:

We didn't know [what was happening] for more than a week and we knew nothing and it was gut wrenching. We were phoning—what's happening, what's happening? We don't know. We wanted to know what was happening as soon as possible.

This emotional impact appeared in some circumstances to have ramifications on the rest of the foster family, including extended family. The elements which contribute to this emotional impact are further illuminated in a later section when we describe the experiences, positive and challenging, which formed part of the fostering experiences of these former carers (see section 5.3).

5.2.9 Trigger factors

Trigger factors for leaving were not explicitly sought in the questionnaire. In the interview sample, it did appear that there were trigger factors for people's leaving foster care in the ACT in nine out of the twelve situations. Five of these related to difficult placements, including three where children were removed from the care of the carers and two where the carers relinquished care with great sadness. The other four related to life events (illness, moving, change of family composition).

5.2.10 What might have made a difference to the decision to leave?

In the questionnaire group, 13 people answered the closed question about what might have changed their minds about leaving. Six of these indicated that nothing would have changed their minds. Three said ‘more training’, 1 said ‘more respite’, 2 said ‘more support from the foster care agency’ and 1 said that they might have changed their mind if they felt that the child in (respite) care was actually needy.

Of the interview group, the responses indicated that 4 may have continued fostering, or resumed fostering after a break if they had been followed up. In that case they could have talked about their current fostering needs in relation to their personal circumstances. Some indicated that the provision of specific services for a particular child (for example respite, counselling) may have made a difference to their decision to leave. Others needed greater clarity about the decision making process concerning the care of the children they were looking after.

5.2.11 Confusion/ambiguity about the processes around ceasing foster caring

Whilst not given as a specific reason for leaving, lack of clarity about the circumstances and procedures around finishing foster caring was a feature of some of the interviews.

In this research this was particularly apparent when leaving foster was involuntary. Earlier in this report we identified the blurred boundary which can exist between voluntary and involuntary departures in the experience of former carers. One interviewed foster family had allegations of child abuse made against them and were told that these had been substantiated. They found this hard to understand when the fostered child had ‘changed for the better’. They were uncertain about the implications of the finding that the allegations had been substantiated. They did not know what this meant for their future lives:

I don't know if we would be able to foster again. It feels unfinished. We would like to know what is in the files about us. We would like to know how the [child is] doing,.... They employed us, why aren't they helping us? We are in limbo.

Two former carers were not sure how the decision was made that their caring role had ceased. One experienced couple carer explained that they would have considered taking on a much less challenging child than the last child they had, but they were never asked:

I would dearly have loved contact from the agency or the department. We often talked about wouldn't it be nice if someone rang and said how are you going and would you consider taking someone. We would dearly have loved a 'normal' foster kid without all the dramas.

One of the former carers interviewed remains unclear about whether or not he has finished as a foster carer. He has received no indication that his association with the agency has terminated, but he was on the list of former carers to whom the questionnaire was sent. This former carer had very positive experiences of caring over a two year period and felt confident in and appreciative of the support provided by the foster care agency. Due to a change in family circumstances and a family tragedy his family did not feel that they could manage to live with a foster son, but that a female foster child would be suitable. When the foster care agency offered further placements of boys, he could not accept, and eventually did not receive calls from the agency. He felt unable to broach the subject about whether or not, as a lone father, it would be possible for him to foster girls. He was unaware of any policies, but thought he might be badly viewed for asking.

A final related example is of a foster carer who needed medical treatment. The arrangement as she understood it was that she would reconsider fostering after she became well. She did not recontact the agency, due to a number of negative experiences during fostering, and she did not hear from the agency about whether or not she wished to continue.

5.3. The experiences of fostering which preceded the point of leaving

We noted in the preceding section on reasons for leaving that a group of former carers described being exhausted or burnt out or experiencing strain as one of the reasons for ceasing to foster. In this section we look at the experiences of fostering described in answers to questions in the questionnaire and interviews about expectations of fostering, training and the positive and negative aspects of fostering. This will give a further flavour of the emotional experience of caring.

5.3.1 Expectations

Uniformly, the foster carers entered fostering because they wanted to make a difference to the well being of children and young people—they felt they had something to offer. In the questionnaire group 7 considered that their expectations matched their experience, 7 thought it partly did so and 3 thought that it did not. Reasons given for the expectations not matching the reality or partly matching reality were dominated by those which related to a sense that the authorities (both foster care agency and statutory) either did not have the capacity or skills to assist the carers or were not working with the foster carers to better assist the children:

All the good parts were very satisfying. I felt let down that I kept finding out about the child's previous behaviour and possible medical problems after each crisis occurred.

Interestingly, of the 17 questionnaire respondents, 10 had moved on to other voluntary or community work (3 of these were paid workers), and 1 was intending to move into voluntary or community work.

5.3.2. Preparation and training

Of the questionnaire group 76.5% of carers (13) attended their initial training before commencing foster caring and only 1 reported never attending any initial training. The numbers of participants who attended ongoing training whilst fostering were significantly different, with 41.2% (7 participants) never attending

ongoing training. Training was mostly provided by foster care agencies (10 people) by a support group (1) and by another provider (1). Five people did not answer this question. The most common reason provided for not attending training was that the time or place was inconvenient. This was noted in the interviews as a difficult issue for single parent carers who also worked full time. Of the 16 participants who had attended training, 1 did not find the training helpful at all, 3 found it not helpful enough, 2 found it helpful enough, 7 found it moderately helpful, and 3 found it highly helpful.

For the group interviewed, experiences were variable. Some people said that they had very little or no initial training, others found the training 'really good', and still others felt that there was a lot of useful information missing from the training. Some of these experiences would reflect different periods in which these carers began training, and others would reflect different experiences of training in the same or similar period of time.

Both the questionnaire group and those in the interview group reported that the most helpful aspects for them were the information on how to manage children's behaviour and contact with other foster carers.

One person who found the training helpful said:

The training was adequate and useful. There was information about child protection, information about dealing with troubled teens and a discussion on support from the agency. They reassured you that if you had any problems whatsoever you could ring.

Most people who went to training reported talking with other foster carers as particularly valuable:

You could talk about your experiences of fostering with a similar group of people.

Almost universally the suggestions for improvements in training included more strategies or more specific strategies for managing difficult situations with children

A lot of the training offered is not hands on, real. It's all very well to sit in a room with a social worker watching over you, but it's not the same as seeing and getting a practical demonstration and people saying: that's how I dealt with it.

Another former carer:

You need information on real life situations for example, what do you do when a child spits in your face? What do you do when they run away?.....When the child is punching holes in the gyprock it is no use thinking about how the brain works.

Other areas which carers would like to have seen covered included ways of relating to birth parents:

There possibly could have been more about dealing with birth parents. They touched on it so briefly that it didn't help—it depended so much on the individuals.

Some former carers felt that it was important that information about roles and responsibilities, how the foster care system works and the bureaucratic requirements is provided up front:

I think they were telling you about the warm fuzzy feelings you were going to get. They didn't tell you about the bureaucracy you were going to deal with or the lack of communication.....They didn't explain to us originally that there were so many things that you were not allowed to do. You are hidebound by regulations that I wasn't aware of until I ran foul of them.

5.3.3 Benefits of being a foster carer

Every former carer in the questionnaire and interview groups identified benefits of foster caring for themselves and their families. Many of these benefits related to

the satisfaction of providing a child with a safe home and opportunity for development:

There were the rewards of providing a young person with a safe place to live. It is rewarding to know that you have made a difference and have changed something.

And:

You felt you were giving them a chance of a normal life when they didn't necessarily have a normal life. Some of them were never put first, at least here you spent the weekend doing things with them and they were made to feel important.

Many carers indicated that they experienced immense satisfaction at the progress their foster children made. More than one carer spoke of the thrill of teaching a child to sit at the dinner table, to set a table, to use a knife and fork for eating and to go to a restaurant:

Lots of good things—progress made with the children.....Taking the kids to a restaurant after they all learnt to eat and sit properly. Satisfaction of teaching them to hold a knife and fork, and how to behave. I cried at the restaurant because it was such an achievement. We had a kid with ADD and to see him well behaved was awesome.

Another carer:

These kids were scary and frightening and violent. To see these particularly dangerous children settle at school and to see them do well academically and socially. A lot of people were just blown away by it, caseworkers the agencies and the office—very satisfying.

Another carer

I love the fact that families who are struggling have some way of getting help for their kids and that we as a community can help kids who are struggling. I love the idea of foster care. I loved the Agency we went through. They were beautiful and very supportive. The training was excellent. We loved having little kids in the house with us. That was a real blessing to us.

Some carers spoke of the benefits for their own children of providing a home or respite for others with fewer advantages in life:

For the boys, they saw another part of life. No matter what happens to you, you have to get on with life. I am not into wrapping my kids in cotton wool

Carers who felt traumatised by their fostering experience also identified satisfactions which they gained from their role:

After shocking experiences have clouded my vision, the photos of the children I [have] cared for remind me of the care I provided which gave them a safe haven from trauma.

Another family who had experienced trauma associated with fostering, gained satisfaction from children's participation in household routines as well as their progress at school:

Towards the end of their time with us they were coming home from school with stars.....the school noticed and wanted to know what we were doing because they were actually blending in.

5.3.4 Aspects of the foster care system which worked well

For the former carers aspects of the foster care system which worked well usually related to cooperative working relationships between people. Among the questionnaire participants, 9 identified foster care agency support as a positive aspect of the system.

Support from the agency. Constant communication and access to help when needed.

One questionnaire respondent identified the support from Foster Care Association as the aspect of the foster care system which worked well. An interviewee expressed that the information provided by other foster carers, which was facilitated by the foster care agency, was particularly useful:

The best info was not from the social workers it was from the foster carers- networks. The practical experiences of dealing with weird behaviours, the system and children from troubled backgrounds. I met the carers through [the foster care agency] and the FCA.

Three people were not able to identify an aspect of the foster care system which worked well.

In the interview group, time and time again carers indicated that the system worked well when they had a good relationship with the worker, when they felt the worker treated them as an equal. Some people experienced workers they found helpful and some that they did not:

But a lot depends on the worker. One worker where things worked well would see me out and about and stop and have a chat—it was like having a friend you could talk to.

A similar quote from another foster parent:

When we had a good caseworker, it worked well. She was a nice person, we could talk, we had lunch together. It was not them and us. They [caseworkers] need to have a personal relationship with the foster parents.

In the interviews, receiving information about a child was given as an example of the system working well:

[The foster care agency] gave a you a dossier on the child which includes info about the child, their background, their Medicare number etc and that kind of stuff was really good.

Another example was of a situation where the placement was sufficiently financial resourced and supported, where all services worked together to support the children in the placement and where the caseworker's basic approach was to identify what had to be done to support the placement and to work to make those things happen:

There is no magic solution—you have to have a team of people working really well. You need a supportive counsellor, supportive teachers' aide..... it is a unique thing when you have all the services working together and this caseworker played a big part as well. She was able to look outside the square.

Two different former carers from the interview group spoke of excellent cooperative relationships they had with the relevant schools, so that they were working together with the school to achieve a consistent approach to caring for the children.

Another former carer outlined experiences where the system worked well:

When there was excellent support you were provided with enough back ground information, you were made aware of the issues of that young person, you were provided with a lot of background information. There were a number of meetings set up with the young person prior to their going into your care. These 2 or 3 meetings were beneficial.....There were subsequent meetings with the caseworker, the young person and the young person's mother. It constantly allowed you to see the scope of the problem and there was the opportunity for debriefing.

Two former carers in the interview group reported receiving support from the FCA of the ACT in dealing with difficult situations.

5.3.5 Challenges

Like the reasons for ceasing fostering, the challenges experienced by both the questionnaire group and the interview group interacted. Clearly there is a cross over between the 'challenges of fostering' and the reasons for leaving. There is also some diversity: what is experienced by some may not be a challenge for others.

Managing children

Of the 17 questionnaire participants, 11 identified managing the children as one of the challenging aspects of fostering. In the interviews, former carers provided many instances of behaviours which were very difficult to manage. There were differences within the interview group of the extent to which foster care agencies

were able to assist in this, with some feeling that help was readily available, and others that the support or information provided was not of assistance, and still others that there was little support:

The workers were sympathetic and supportive, but would not have solutions.

Sometimes changeovers in staff were reported to affect the capacity of workers to provide advice in the management of the child or young person:

In the time [foster child] was with us, [the child] must have had about 6 different caseworkers at the foster care agency and 4 different caseworkers at the department. That's too many.....staff changes in the agency and the department were so great that no-one knew the history, no-one built up an understanding of the complexities.

Some carers described physically threatening and frightening behaviour (including serious damage to property, and danger to other people) by children who themselves had been abused and threatened before being taken into care.

Red tape/bureaucratic requirements

One of the red tape issues identified was the process of reimbursement for expenses:

There were months of [specialists] visits and then we had to take on the fight of the [specialists] screaming for their money which the department hadn't paid. The department promised to pay before treatment was commenced. We were threatened for no more treatment for (foster child) because the department wouldn't pay. The foster carer is in the middle—every way you turn you come up against all the red tape.

The experience of struggling to obtain reimbursements for counselling/ psychiatry services for children featured in the interview sample:

Traumatised children can need as much extra care as children with physical disabilities. I would prefer to have a child with a heart condition, grommets, glasses where you get decent reimbursement, than a child pretending to be a lost puppy eating dog food and trying to get the services that child needs.

Not being considered as equal partners in caring

One of the prevailing themes in the interview group was the sense of being an unequal partner in caring for the children. This manifested itself in different situations with carers feeling that their views and knowledge of the children were not respected by the decision makers, where they reported passing on information about the well being of children and it not being acted on, where the wishes of the birth parents took precedence over what the carers thought. This is the flip side of earlier instances where former carers felt they were treated as equals by caseworkers:

As a foster carer you were not always given credence for what you knew or did, because you didn't have a degree.

Some carers in the interview group found the parenting advice or requirements of the agency did not fit with their own beliefs about raising children, or about what was desirable for the particular children in their care. Two of the interviewed carers felt their child management strategies were undermined by the child management techniques of the foster care agency workers. For example, where the foster agency worker picked the foster children up from school if they had misbehaved at school and took them for a treat to a fast food outlet. The foster carers felt that this undermined what they were trying to teach the children about taking responsibility for their behaviour. Another reported that her foster child was told the child didn't have to do what the foster parent said and the foster carer found this undermined her:

I was told in front of the foster child: that's the rule, you can't make [the young person] do anything [that young person] doesn't want to do. The foster care worker said here's my number anytime you want to you phone me. Every time [the young person] had to do something [the young person] phoned the worker who would come and take [the young person] away to respite.

Frustration at lack of information about children

In the interviews, many parents expressed frustration at the lack of information about children in their care. Not having the background on a child affected how prepared carers felt for managing and understanding a child's behaviour. Most carers were aware that the foster care agencies themselves may not have much information about children. However, former carers found the lack of information affected the extent to which they could meet the needs of the child, particularly but not only, in a crisis care situation:

They are supposed to give you documentation when they [the children] come which is supposed to list all these things. Sometimes I would get the form with the kid's name on it. I never had the form filled out. Sometimes it had a name [only]. Maybe the department is not giving the foster care agency information. It makes a difference to how you treat them and their health information. For example, food allergies, medication. Is there something that triggers the child's allergy?

This seemed to affect respite carers as well:

You weren't kept up to date—there was no reason given except confidentiality.....You were dealing with bad behaviour that you would never expect.

Coping with uncertainty

One challenge identified in the interviews which was less obvious in the questionnaire group, was the uncertainty, conflict and emotional turmoil which emerged where the foster carer experienced changed care plans for the children. There were a number of varying situations in which this occurred in families interviewed, where carers had to make practical and emotional adjustments to unanticipated fostering changes. This could be where a planned short stay with a crisis carer turned into a year long or two year long placement:

I offered to have [the child] for one term. I was assuming they were looking for another placement, but [the child] was still there after a year.

Conversely, there were situations where the carer understood that the placement would be long term and there was a change in the thinking of the department or foster care agency or there was a court decision and the placement was terminated. In these cases, carers were very concerned about the well being of the child and the effect of the uncertainty and changed plans on the child. They also experienced anxiety and sometimes loss and grief themselves as a result of these uncertain situations.

Similar to adjusting to lengths of placement different from what was anticipated, some people found it challenging to have children in age groups which they did not think suited their situation or for which they did not feel prepared:

Every time we got a phone call we accepted the child because they are desperate for foster carers. It just doesn't work, we couldn't discipline the kids and it would upset our kids.

Relationship with birth parents and family

Four former carers in the questionnaire group and 5 in the interview group indicated that dealing with the birth parents of children in their care presented challenges. Sometimes this related to a belief that the birth parents influenced the decisions about the child in a way which was unhelpful to the child. Sometimes it was related to the day to day contact with birth family which could occur in a variety of fostering scenarios, including shared care and respite:

You sometimes felt that you were dealing with a lot of resentment—they resented the child's attachment to you. In one case the mother withdrew from respite and I wondered if that had something to do with it.

5.4 Suggested improvements

5.4.1 Questionnaire responses

In the questionnaire, former carers were asked what might have changed their minds about returning to fostering. Of the 13 who responded to this question 6

said nothing would have changed their minds, whilst 3 indicated more training would have, 1 said more respite, 2 said more support from the foster care agency and 1 (a respite carer) that they needed to know that the children they were caring for were in need.

Former carers in the questionnaire were also asked whether they would return to fostering if suggested changes were made. Of the 16 who answered this question, 2 said no, 8 said yes and 6 said maybe. For 9 people the changes which would make a difference related to foster care including respite and agency support, and liaison between the foster agency and the government department, and for 5 the changes related to personal circumstances.

The interviews allowed the opportunity to expand on these ideas.

5.4.2 Nature of support

There were a number of dimensions and differences in this. Some people in the interview group wanted more contact with agencies:

More genuine support rather than burying the children and carers and then the only contact they have is when the carer is in strife.....More qualified staff to handle kids with disabilities and complex problems. Staff with skills and experience to actually be able to assist carers with the very difficult issues they face.

Some former carers wanted to be left alone to do what they knew they could do well. Some interviewed carers felt that if the agency workers selected and knew the carers well enough they would be able to trust them:

You need to match the caseworker with the foster parent. They must get on. The benefit will be that they can put their trust in the foster carer.....You need to treat them like fellow caseworkers, which essentially they are.

Another suggestion was giving positive feedback to carers:

Foster carers need to be encouraged. I got no positive feedback—only from the kids themselves. It doesn't cost people to say thank you.

5.4.3 Status, recognition and respect for foster carers

A number of interviewed former carers indicated that there should be more recognition and status for carers. There were varying suggestions in this area including that:

Carers' voices need to be heard. In NSW there is an administrative decisions tribunal which foster carers can go to if they query a decision made by a worker. Until foster carers have the same rights as caseworkers it is not a level playing field. Recognition of what foster carers do falls so short.

Several interviewed people identified a need for the development of a professional approach to the human resource management of carers. Some of those interviewed said they would be prepared to foster again if this more professional approach to fostering, were taken. This included suitable payment arrangements, paid recreation and sick leave and access to an Employee Assistance Plan (EAP). Interestingly, and in keeping with previous research about differing views on payments to foster carers (Sinclair et al., 2004) other former carers interviewed were concerned that more payment for carers could mean people could be attracted to caring for the wrong reasons.

5.4.4. Portability of carers' training and accredited status

Three people interviewed who had trained in the ACT and moved interstate believed that the retention of carers would be aided if qualifications could be more easily transported from one state to another. One was particularly annoyed that the training she had completed was not accepted in another state where she had moved to. She felt she had been led to believe it would be.

5.4.5 Training for caseworkers

Several interviewed people indicated that they thought the training of professional workers needed improving. They felt that the professional workers often did not have the specific knowledge to deal with the challenging situations involved in foster care, including the behaviour of children and the decision making about what is in the best interests of the child.

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1 The context of complexity in child protection and foster care

Across the western world foster care sits within child protection systems which can at times experience great turmoil (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2006). Complex relationships exist between the foster carer, the agency selecting and training the foster carer, the statutory child protection agency (which in some jurisdictions like Queensland may also select, train and support the carer) (Thomson, 2007), the Courts, the birth parent or extended family and the child or young person. This research adds to the body of knowledge which demonstrates that all elements in this system experience considerable stress (Colton et al., 2006; Leeson, 2007; Thomson, 2007; Thomson & Thorpe, 2003) and that finding and nurturing the human resources for each of the elements is challenging (Casey Family Programs, 2002; Richmond, McArthur, & Winkworth, 2005).

What is particularly striking about this study is that the foster carers' reasons for leaving are largely reflected in the understandings expressed in the stakeholder interviews and in the strategies for support which foster care agencies seek to implement (see Appendix E for more detail). This implies there is significant shared understanding of the issues. The qualitative findings are also consistent with the findings of previous much larger overseas studies and the Australian research (Department of Human Services, 2003; Rindfleisch et al., 1998; Sinclair et al., 2004). If there were any easily implemented solutions to the problems which have

been identified both in this project and in previous research (Fisher et al., 2000; Rindfleisch et al., 1998; Thomson, 2007), they would have been found before this.

6.2 The complexity and interaction of factors

In most of the situations explored in this research there was an interplay of factors affecting the carers' decisions to leave. This confirms the model of decision making suggested by Sinclair et al (2004) where a carers' sense of strain due to the impacts of fostering interacts with the level of support received and the particular fostering situation they are involved in. In the next section we discuss some of the results of the research in relation to strain and emotional impact and what was perceived as supportive by carers

6.3 The emotional impact of fostering

Many carers expressed strong emotional feelings about their caring experience, even though it may have been some time in the past. Some of these feelings described earlier include the sense of being used, abused and/or burnt out. These are feelings described by many workers at the front line of human suffering (Stanley & Goddard, 2002). For some carers there is the added experience of fear and trauma (for example, having a knife held to them by a foster child). For others there may be the effects of suffering vicariously from the knowledge of the trauma experienced by the children they have cared for.

In the context of paid human service workers these experiences are clear indications to management that workers are in need of care, support, debriefing and perhaps ongoing professional supervision (Morrison, 2007; Stevens & Higgins, 2002). They may also have access to an Employee Assistance Provider. However, the participants in our research who were affected by these experiences indicated that as foster carers they did not have access to such services which provide needed debriefing and support.

Similarly, the data indicate intense experiences of loss and grief in many of the foster carers. Examples were where children were restored to parents when the foster carer thought the placement would be long term, where an infant was removed suddenly when the foster carer thought the placement would be long term, when a crisis placement became a year long placement and then the foster carers could not find out how the child was doing after the child was moved elsewhere. Foster families face loss and grief on a continual basis, with the ebb and flow of vulnerable children and young people in and out of their lives (Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2001).

Particularly in the care of young children, the research participants indicated that foster carers are encouraged to develop bonds, to enable the infant to develop secure attachments. Literature indicates that the intensity of foster carer's loss and grief is increased by factors such as the young age of the child, a longer length of care time, situations where foster carer and foster child have overcome difficulties together, and where transitions have been abrupt, including as a result of abuse allegations (Edelstein et al., 2001).

In the latter situation carers are grieving not only the loss of the child but also a sense of themselves as competent carers/ parents. Indeed they lose their role as a foster carer. It can also be that they lose the circle of support (for example other foster carers) which they enjoyed whilst fostering. Even where carers initiate the changed environment for the child, profound feelings of loss can emerge. All these situations were experienced in our sample of former carers. Overseas research (Carbino, 1991; Hicks & Nixon, 1991) has identified additional losses such as losses of marriage, occupation and income flowing from allegations of abuse.

Losing the care of a foster child could be conceptualised as a form of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2004). The ambiguous loss literature refers to situations where a family member is missing, but their location is unknown and it has been applied to other situations including adoption (Boss, 2004). There is a lack of clarity about whether

the lost person is still part of the family, and what has happened to the person (Boss, 2004). This ambiguity of boundaries is present in fostering families. Ambiguous loss is hard to resolve, because there is not a death to mourn (Boss, 2004). Some of the former carers in our sample wanted to know how their former foster children were going, and found it difficult that they were not supposed to know, or that they could not get information about the children.

In the current environment where stable and settled arrangements are regarded as key to a child's well being, foster carers who offer temporary or crisis care will continue to suffer loss and grief. Where concurrent planning measures are in place, concurrent foster carers are likely to experience considerable grief, associated with this ambiguous role. These responses need to be recognised and help with dealing with these feelings offered.

Foster carers work with caring professionals from the foster care agency and the statutory authority who are also in roles which are vulnerable to stress, strain and burnout (Gibbs, 2001; Stevens & Higgins, 2002). There are huge issues about how this highly stressful sector can be resourced and organised adequately to sustain caring for children.

6.4. Role ambiguity

This research adds to the existing literature about the ambiguous nature of the fostering role. This ambiguity is related to many of the reasons given for leaving fostering, such as not having a say in decisions about the children, conflicts with the foster care agency and/or statutory authority and minimal monetary compensation for the work undertaken.

Role ambiguity is a recognised and difficult feature of foster caring (Colton et al., 2006; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003; Sinclair et al., 2004). On the one hand foster carers are regarded as essential to the care of the child, on the other hand they are not regarded as professional staff. On the one hand they need to parent a

child, and on the other hand, they are not the parent, and can make only minor decisions about the care of the child. On the one hand they are volunteers, on the other hand they have to complete specified training and to conform to both foster care agency and statutory agencies procedures.

This role ambiguity is difficult for carers who anticipate parenting a child in the same way as they would their own children and then find they are hampered in this by rules and regulations which would not apply to their own children.

6.5 Wanting to make a difference in a child's life

When we consider the intention of former carers to assist children or to make a difference in a child's life, it appears that one of the factors involved in leaving might relate to a strong sense that what is right and what needs to be done to make a difference in a child's life is actually not happening. This too has been identified in previous research (Triseliotis et al., 2000). All the carers interviewed and those in the questionnaire were able to identify positive aspects of fostering and these were usually related to seeing progress in a child while in their care. Two of the carers in the questionnaire sample ceased (respite) fostering partly because they did not feel that the children they cared for were in sufficient need. In the interview sample, some did not agree with some of the parenting advice/attitudes promoted by agency staff, and sometimes birth parents, and considered that this difference in approach was confusing for the child(ren), and hampered their work with the children. Others interviewed who chose to relinquish care of children under difficult circumstances were devastated by a sense that they could not help that child. On a wider level, there were disagreements with case directions and care plans which foster carers considered detrimental to the children. This research highlights that the diversity of views about what constitutes the best interests of the child is a fundamental issue for foster carers. As one former carer put it, there was a 'clash of worlds' with children whose life experiences were vastly different to hers. For some carers there appears to be a similar clash between their worldviews

and those of the professional caring culture with which they enter a relationship when they enter fostering.

6.6. Processes for finishing placements or fostering

A related matter is that the foster carers interviewed seemed unclear in a number of cases about the circumstances under which their fostering concluded. Some foster carers felt that had they been followed up by the foster care agency, and their circumstances appreciated by the fostering agency, they may still be fostering. Those subject to allegations were still experiencing the significant emotional impact of this, and still grieving the loss of the fostering role and the children who were removed from them. Some seemed uncertain about their rights to information, to review of decision, or the implications of the allegations for future fostering.

7. IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

7.1. For foster care in ACT

This research has occurred at a time of potential for change within the out of home care sector in the ACT, particularly given the review of out of home care services in ACT being conducted by the OCYFS. There is a draft document elsewhere mentioned which relates to the roles and responsibilities of the partners in foster care. There is also a new training package for foster carers which may go some way to filling the training gaps identified by participants. These include strategies for dealing with difficult behaviour and understanding organisational relationships in foster care. The implications noted below are written in the knowledge that some changes may flow from these activities.

Promoting the parenting partnership- the collaborative care team

Foster care in ACT involves numbers of people in a parenting partnership: the OCYFS; the foster care agency, the foster carer; the birth parent; and the child or young person. Children benefit from consistent parenting. Having clarity about the

roles and responsibilities for each person in the partnership is mentioned in the literature (Rindfleisch et al., 1998) as promoting better working relationships in foster care. The draft document relating to roles and responsibilities which is currently under development in the ACT may assist. The Looking After Children (LAC) system which is in place in ACT also provides a means of promoting collaborative care planning and information sharing about children (Yeatman & Penglase, 2004).

For the collaborative care team concept to work effectively research has identified the key elements that need to be in place. These include: all of the collaborative care team working together respectfully and flexibly; the recognition by all of the importance of collaboration for successful outcomes (in this case outcomes for children); and goals, objectives and the overall vision and purpose for the collaborative relationship are clearly understood and shared amongst partners. To ensure collaboration is an effective mode of practice mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating care and identifying the ongoing challenges are required (Centre for Research in Early Childhood, 2002; Frost, 2005; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992).

All parenting relationships need to manage conflict constructively in order that children do not suffer emotional harm from this conflict (Grych, 2005). The sample of former foster carers in this research identified several situations of conflict in the parenting partnership—the collaborative care team—in which they were involved, and where they felt they had no rights. Rindfleisch et al (1998) argue that it is important to work from the assumption that foster care agencies and foster carers only partially share goals and that ‘understanding retention should take the resulting conflict as a starting point’ (p. 22).

In situations where a child is in foster care, there is a power imbalance in the parenting partnership, where the Chief Executive has the dominant decision making power about children in conjunction with the Children’s Court, and the foster agencies have the ability to terminate a placement. Nevertheless the people

involved can strive for decision making processes based on respectful relationships where everyone (statutory agency, foster care agency, birth family, foster carers, child or young person) can have their voices heard, and where each person's rights are acknowledged and respected. In situations where children leave a placement in an unplanned way there may be merit in holding a meeting between case workers and foster carers to discuss the implications and what can be learnt for future caring.

The foster care agencies and the OCYFS in the stakeholder interviews indicated that that they were aware of the need to create respectful and supportive relationships with foster carers. The research indicates that for some foster carers in our sample, this was achieved. In these situations carers considered that foster care agency workers treated them as equals and as individuals. Other former carers experienced relationships as essentially unequal and disrespectful. Carers in our sample indicated that they needed support to be available outside of working hours, 7 days per week. This research confirms other findings in this area (Lovatt, 2005) that different carers have different needs for support, for example, some would like more contact with workers than others.

Relationship based practice is fundamental in human services generally and certainly so in foster care (Fisher et al., 2000; Ruch, 2005). Relationship based practice can acknowledge the differing support needs of foster carers requiring different models of support. Such practice can, within a supportive relationship, address the loss, grief, trauma and attachment experiences of foster carers, as well as those of foster children, birth parents and the implications of all of this for the fostering family as a whole. This is highly skilled work and does require a trained and supported workforce.

Conflict management processes are of critical importance. Some participants in this research have left fostering partly due to conflict with other people in the parenting partnership. It was a challenging aspect of fostering for others. In the field of

relationship counselling considerable expertise has developed around mediating conflicts in parenting relationships taking a child inclusive or a child focused approach (McIntosh, Long, & Moloney, 2004). Family Group Conferencing is increasingly used in child protection. It may be possible to use some of this knowledge to develop a hierarchy of conflict resolution processes in foster care situations which are accessible and transparent. Such processes may allow for the introduction of a facilitator or mediator who is external to the parenting partnership, in certain situations. They may involve the development of clearly documented understandings of the rights of all groups involved in foster care. At all times child centred practice (Winkworth & McArthur, 2005) is critical, involving the participation of children and young people in decision making.

Processes around finishing fostering

This research indicates that clear procedures for finishing as a foster carer need to be clearly communicated to foster carers. It is important that procedures are reinforced and supported at the time of leaving the foster carer role, and that they include exit discussions with the foster care agencies and/or the statutory agency. This would enable opportunities for foster cares to give and receive feedback about the fostering experience, and to develop a shared understanding about whether or not the foster caring is finished or whether they are on leave, and what that means for the status of the GPA. This will avoid situations where people feel they have made a voluntary choice to leave and then receive an official letter which makes them feel that they have been 'sacked'. It will also avoid situations where people feel in abeyance, not knowing if the agency still has them on the list or not. Such procedures may overlap with the conflict resolution processes indicated above if there are allegations. Where there are allegations, foster carers need to have access to review mechanisms and need to be told their rights to information and to legal support and representation.

Recompense for fostering

Although some former foster carers expressed concern about being paid (they wanted fostering to be purely voluntary), a few former carers and several stakeholders considered improvements are required in this area, particularly in relation to reimbursement for contingency items. This diversity of foster carers' views is in keeping with previous research (McHugh, 2007; Triseliotis et al., 2000). Research also indicates that whilst payment may not be a major reason for leaving care, it does play a part in the reasons that people decide to leave (Sinclair et al., 2004).

In Australia, Marilyn McHugh's detailed investigation has highlighted the direct and indirect costs of being a foster carer (McHugh, 2002, 2007). She argues that the possibility of a carer wage or salary needs to be considered in order to ensure care for children into the future (McHugh, 2007). Sinclair et al. (2004) suggest that a solution to the diversity of carers' views on payment and of their life situations may lie in developing a variety of models of foster care. These could address the variety of children's and foster carers' needs and would occupy different positions on the voluntary-professional foster care continuum. This is part of longer term planning and development in out of home care.

In the shorter term in the ACT, some former carers and stakeholders identified the need for revised procedures. Such changes would aim to avoid the sometimes lengthy, uncertainty provoking and conflict generating applications for and processing of contingency payments experienced by some former carers.

7.2. For future research

Considerable work has been undertaken on carers' needs and relationships between carers and social workers in Queensland (Thomson, 2007; Thorpe, 2004). This current study suggests that relevant areas of future research might include developing and piloting participatory decision making models in foster care; developing and piloting conflict resolution procedures between the parenting partners; and evaluating models of foster care which range from voluntary to

professional. A further relevant area of study could be to assess the demand for foster carers into the future in the ACT utilising current data collected by the organisations involved in foster care.

APPENDIX A ETHICS DOCUMENTS

Australian Catholic University Limited
ABN 15 050 192 660
Canberra Campus (Signadou)
223 Antill Street Watson
Australian Capital Territory 2602 Australia
PO Box 256 Dickson
Australian Capital Territory 2602 Australia
Telephone 62091225
Facsimile 62091216
www.acu.edu.au

INFORMATION LETTER TO FORMER FOSTER CARERS

TITLE OF PROJECT: EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER CARERS

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: DR. MORAG McARTHUR

Dear participant,

You are invited to participate in a research project. This letter is designed to provide you with some information to help you decide whether you want to contribute to this research. The purpose of this research is to provide a report to the Foster Care Association of ACT which documents the reasons that foster carers cease fostering in ACT. We are asking people who have been foster carers in ACT and who are no longer undertaking foster care about their experiences as foster carers and the reasons that they have ceased fostering. We would very much appreciate hearing your views about this.

The research is in two parts. The first is completion of the enclosed anonymous survey. For those who are interested, there is a second part which involves an interview with a researcher about your experience as a foster carer.

We expect that completion of the survey will take about twenty minutes. For those who volunteer to be interviewed, the interview will involve about one hour of your time at a time and place which is convenient to you. We intend to tape these interviews so that they can be transcribed and direct quotes can be used in the report. However, you are free to ask that the tape recorder be stopped at any time, and the researcher will take notes instead.

Through your participation, you will be providing valuable information about your experience and views of being a foster carer in ACT. The report to the Foster Care Association of ACT will contribute to developing policies and practices within ACT which may better support foster carers to do the very important work which they do. We may also write up the findings in an academic journal in a way which does not identify individuals.

Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason, including after the interview has begun.

The survey is anonymous. For those who agree to participate in the interviews, your identity will be known to the researchers only and will not be disclosed to anyone else.

Any questions regarding this research can be directed to the Principal Investigator

Dr. Morag McArthur
Director
Australian Catholic University
Institute of Child Protection Studies
223 Antill Street
Watson ACT 2602
02 6209 1225

The report about this research will be provided to the Foster Care Association of ACT. We will be able to provide you with a summary of our findings if you request this.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University.

In the event you have any complaint or concern about the way you have been treated during this study, or if you have any question that the Investigators have not been able to satisfy, you may write to the chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee, care of the nearest branch of the Research Services Unit:

Chair, HREC
C/o Research Services
Australian Catholic University
Strathfield Campus
Locked Bay 2002
STRATHFIELD NSW 2135
Tel: 029701 4093
Fax: 02 9701 4350

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. The participant will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree to complete the survey, instructions for the return of the survey are included with the survey. If you are interested in participating in the interview, please complete the space indicated on the last page of the survey and return that page in the separate pre addressed envelope. If you agree to participate in the interview, you should sign both copies of the consent form which the researcher will provide at the time she contacts you regarding the interviews, retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to the Investigator.

Yours sincerely

.....

Morag McArthur
Principal Investigator

CONSENT FORM FOR FORMER FOSTER CARERS

Copy for researcher

TITLE OF PROJECT: EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER CARERS

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: DR. MORAG McARTHUR

NAMES OF CO-INVESTIGATORS: LORRAINE THOMSON AND
MERRILYN WOODWARD

I.....have read (or had read to me) and understood the information provided in the Information Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this:

- interview which will be audiotaped (please tick relevant activity)
- interview which will not be taped

I realize that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I agree that research data collected for the purpose of the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT.....

SIGNATURE.....

DATE.....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR.....

DATE.....

CONSENT FORM FOR FORMER FOSTER CARERS

Copy for participant to keep

TITLE OF PROJECT: EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER CARERS

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: DR. MORAG McARTHUR

NAMES OF CO-INVESTIGATORS: LORRAINE THOMSON AND
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- interview which will be audiotaped (please tick relevant activity)
- interview which will not be taped

I realize that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I agree that research data collected for the purpose of the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT.....

SIGNATURE.....

DATE.....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR.....

DATE.....

3/10/2012

Australian Catholic University Limited
ABN 15 050 192 660
Canberra Campus (Signadou)
223 Antill Street Watson
Australian Capital Territory 2602 Australia
PO Box 256 Dickson
Australian Capital Territory 2602 Australia
Telephone 62091225
Facsimile 62091216
www.acu.edu.au

INFORMATION LETTER TO ORGANISATIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

TITLE OF PROJECT: EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER CARERS

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: DR. MORAG McARTHUR

Dear representative,

You are invited to participate in a research project. This letter is designed to provide you with some information to help you decide whether you want to contribute to this research. The purpose of this research is to provide a report to the Foster Care Association of ACT which documents the reasons that foster carers cease fostering in ACT. We are asking people who have been foster carers in ACT and who are no longer undertaking foster care about their experiences as foster carers and the reasons that they have ceased fostering. We would also like to hear from the organisations involved in out-of-home-care in ACT regarding their views on the reasons that foster carers cease fostering.

We will be conducting interviews with representatives of these organisations. You will be given the choice of talking with us over the telephone or face-to-face at a time or a place which is convenient to you.

Your involvement in this research will take about half an hour to an hour of your time.

Through your participation, you will be providing valuable information about your organisation's experiences of the reasons foster carers cease fostering. The report to the Foster Care Association of ACT will contribute to the evidence base for policies and practices within ACT which will most effectively support and recruit foster carers. We may also write up the findings in an academic journal.

You are free to decide not to participate in this research, without giving a reason. You can decide not to participate at any time, including after the interview has begun, and you do not need to give any reasons for your decision.

For the purposes of this report we need to talk with you as a representative of your organisation's views. We would like to identify you as the source of the interview and to use your organisation's name in the final report.

Any questions regarding this research can be directed to Principal Investigator:

Dr. Morag McArthur
Director
Australian Catholic University
Institute of Child Protection Studies
223 Antill Street
Watson ACT 2602
02 6209 1225

The report will be provided to the Foster Care Association of ACT. We will be able to provide you with a summary of our findings, if you request this.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University.

In the event you have any complaint or concern about the way you have been treated during this study, or if you have any question that the Investigators have not been able to satisfy, you may write to the chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee, care of the nearest branch of the Research Services Unit:

Chair, HREC
C/o Research Services
Australian Catholic University
Strathfield Campus
Locked Bay 2002
STRATHFIELD NSW 2135
Tel: 029701 4093
Fax: 02 9701 4350

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. The participant will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participate in this project, you should sign both copies of the consent form, retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to the Investigator.

Yours sincerely

.....
Morag McArthur
Principal Investigator

CONSENT FORM FOR ORGANISATIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

Copy for researcher

TITLE OF PROJECT: EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER CARERS

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: DR. MORAG McARTHUR

NAMES OF CO-INVESTIGATORS: LORRAINE THOMSON AND
MERRILYN WOODWARD

I.....have read (or had read to me) and understood the information provided in the Information Letter to Organisational Representatives. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this:

interview which will not be taped

I realize that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I agree that research data collected for the purpose of the study may be published in accordance with the Information Letter to Organisational Representatives.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT.....

SIGNATURE.....

DATE.....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR.....

DATE.....

CONSENT FORM FOR ORGANISATIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

Copy for participant to keep

TITLE OF PROJECT: EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER CARERS

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: DR. MORAG McARTHUR

NAMES OF CO-INVESTIGATORS: LORRAINE THOMSON AND
MERRILYN WOODWARD

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interview which will not be taped

I realize that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I agree that research data collected for the purpose of the study may be published in accordance with the Information Letter to Organisational Representatives.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT.....

SIGNATURE.....

DATE.....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR.....

DATE.....

APPENDIX B QUESTIONNAIRE PROFORMA



SURVEY OF FORMER FOSTER CARERS

This anonymous survey is being conducted for the Foster Care Association of the ACT Inc. by researchers at the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University.

Each year a number of foster carers stop fostering children and young people. At the same time as carers leave there is an increasing number of children and young people requiring foster care.

The aim of this research is to understand why carers leave, what might be done to support and encourage carers to stay and what might encourage and attract others in the community to become carers. The information we obtain will inform the Office of Children Youth and Family Support (OCYFS) and the Foster Care Agencies about what is needed to better direct resources to support existing carers and recruit new carers. Further information about the research is found in the enclosed information letters.

We appreciate your time in completing this survey. Please use the extra spaces provided or extra paper if you wish to expand on your answers.

We would be grateful if you return the completed survey in one of the two enclosed pre-addressed envelopes by 14 May 2007. No stamp is required. If you have questions please contact Lorraine Thomson (6209 1207) at the Institute of Child Protection Studies or email lorraine.thomson@acu.edu.au.

1. CARER PROFILE *(please tick one box if you were an individual carer, and provide additional ticks if you were a couple carer)*

1.1 What is your gender?

Male	<input type="checkbox"/>
Female	<input type="checkbox"/>

1.2 What is your age group?

18 – 25	<input type="checkbox"/>
26 - 39	<input type="checkbox"/>
40 – 49	<input type="checkbox"/>
50 - 59	<input type="checkbox"/>
60+	<input type="checkbox"/>

1.3 Where do you live?

Belconnen	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gunghalin	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inner North	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inner South	<input type="checkbox"/>
Woden	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tuggeranong	<input type="checkbox"/>
ACT rural	<input type="checkbox"/>
NSW	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

1.4 Are you an Aboriginal person or a Torres Strait Islander person?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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1.5 Are you from a Non-English speaking background?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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2. FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE

(please tick one box)

2.1 How long were you a foster carer?

Less than 1 year	<input type="checkbox"/>
1 – 2 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 – 5 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 – 10 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 – 15 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
16 – 20 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
20+ years	<input type="checkbox"/>

2.2 What type of carer were you?

Single carer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Couple carer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Changed from single to couple /couple to single	<input type="checkbox"/>

2.3 How many of your own children were at home while you were fostering? (please write number)

.....

2.4 What were the name(s) of the foster care agency/agencies you cared under?

.....

2.5 What was the main age group of the children you fostered?

Newborns/Babies	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 – 5 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 – 10 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 – 15 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
16+ years	<input type="checkbox"/>
All age groups	<input type="checkbox"/>

2.6 What were the types of care you provided?

Pre-adoption	<input type="checkbox"/>
Crisis or emergency	<input type="checkbox"/>
Short term (6 weeks to 6 months)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Medium to long term (6 months or more)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Long term	<input type="checkbox"/>
Respite	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kinship care — related to child	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

2.7 How many children have you fostered overall?

1-4	<input type="checkbox"/>
5-10	<input type="checkbox"/>
11-15	<input type="checkbox"/>
16-20	<input type="checkbox"/>
Over 20 (please estimate number and write below)	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

3. TRAINING (please tick one box)

3.1 When did you receive your initial foster care training?

Before commencing fostering	<input type="checkbox"/>
During 1 st year	<input type="checkbox"/>
Between 2 nd and 5 th year of fostering	<input type="checkbox"/>
After more than 5 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

3.2 While you were a carer, how frequently did you attend ongoing training?

Once a year	<input type="checkbox"/>
Twice a year	<input type="checkbox"/>
Four times a year	<input type="checkbox"/>
Once a month	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never (go to Q3.4)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

3.3 Training was mainly provided by:

Office of Children Youth and Family Support (OCYFS-formerly Family Services)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Foster Care Association of ACT	<input type="checkbox"/>
Foster Care Agency	<input type="checkbox"/>
CYFAACT (Child Youth and Families Agencies ACT)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support group	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (<i>please specify</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/>
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.....

3.4 If you have never attended training what were the main reasons?

No training available	<input type="checkbox"/>
No information about training	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not convenient	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did not need it	<input type="checkbox"/>
Training was not relevant to my needs	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (<i>please specify</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

3.5 How much did the training assist you as a foster carer?

Highly	<input type="checkbox"/>
Moderately	<input type="checkbox"/>
Enough	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not enough	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not at all	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

3.6 What aspects of the training did you find helpful?

.....

.....

3.7 How could the training have been improved?

.....

.....

4. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE THINGS ABOUT FOSTERING

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4.4 Was your overall experience of fostering what you expected it to be?
(please tick one box only)

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Partly so	<input type="checkbox"/>

If 'no' or 'partly so', please explain in what ways your experience was not what you had expected.

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5. CEASING TO BE A FOSTER CARER (please tick one box)

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.....

5.1 When did you leave fostering? (month/year) (If uncertain please estimate)

.....
.....

5.2 How many children (if any) were in your care when you ceased fostering? (Please write number)

.....
.....

.....
.....
(If no children were in your care, please go to 5.3)

.....
.....

What were their ages?

.....
.....

How many were male and how many female?

.....
.....

Did they constitute a sibling group?

.....
.....

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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5.3 What were the main reasons you ceased fostering? (please use extra paper if you need to)

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6. VOLUNTARY DEPARTURE

6.1 If you left fostering voluntarily, what factors might have changed your mind about leaving?

Nothing-the time was right for me to leave	<input type="checkbox"/>
More training	<input type="checkbox"/>
More respite care	<input type="checkbox"/>
Better access to services to assist the child (eg education, counselling, medical, dental)	<input type="checkbox"/>
More support from the foster care agency	<input type="checkbox"/>
More support from the Department (OCYFS)	<input type="checkbox"/>
More financial funding for the placement (s)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please describe below)	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

6.2 If you left foster caring voluntarily, did you (please tick all that apply):

Receive a letter acknowledging your contribution	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have a debriefing session with the foster care agency	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have a debriefing session with the Department (OCYFS)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel supported in your decision by the foster care agency	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel supported in your decision by the Department (OCYFS)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Receive support from the Foster Care Association of the ACT	<input type="checkbox"/>
Receive support from someone else	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel totally unsupported	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feel happy with the decision to leave and not feel the need for support	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

6.3 Would you like to see any changes to the processes which occur following a voluntary departure from being a foster carer?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> (please describe below)	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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.....

7.2 Were you given information about how you could request a review of this decision?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

7.3 Did you request a review?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unsure	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

7.4 Was the non voluntary departure a direct result of an allegation of abuse or neglect?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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.....

7.5 How long did the process of your non- voluntary departure take from the time you first became aware the process was occurring?

Less than one month	<input type="checkbox"/>
1 – 3 months	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 – 6 months	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 – 12 months	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 months to 2 years	<input type="checkbox"/>
Greater than 2 years	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

7.6 If applicable, what did you think about the fairness of the review process?

Very fair	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fair	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neither fair or unfair	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unfair	<input type="checkbox"/>
Very unfair	<input type="checkbox"/>

.....

7.7 Would you like to see any changes to the non-voluntary departure procedures?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> (please describe below)	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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8.3 What would need to change in order for you to return to foster caring?

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8. THE FUTURE *(please tick one box)*

8.1 Have you moved on from fostering to any other community/voluntary work?

.....

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not yet but planning to	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate what type

.....

8.2 Would you recommend becoming a foster carer to somebody else?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Please indicate your reasons for this

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8.4 Would you consider returning to foster caring if those things changed?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maybe	<input type="checkbox"/>

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8.5 Is there anything else about your foster care experience that you would like to share?

(Please use extra pages if you need them)

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CONTACT SHEET FOR THOSE WHO WOULD LIKE TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW

(please separate this sheet from survey)

In the Information Letter which accompanied this survey, we have indicated that in addition to the survey, we would like to interview some former foster carers about their experiences in order to gain a more in-depth understanding.

If you would be interested in participating in an interview, or would like more information about this, please complete this page, detach this page from the rest of the survey, place this page in one of the two pre-addressed envelopes provided and mail it separately to the survey. (Note: It may not be possible to interview everyone who contacts us).

The two envelopes are provided so that the survey and this contact sheet can be mailed separately to us in order that the survey remains anonymous.

We will contact you shortly.

Thank you again for your valuable time.

YOUR NAME.....
.....

PHONE NUMBER.....
.....

YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS (if applicable)
.....
.....

THE BEST TIME TO FOR US TO PHONE YOU
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APPENDIX C SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW WITH FORMER FOSTER CARERS PROFORMA

TITLE OF PROJECT: EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER CARERS

SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROFORMA FOR FORMER FOSTER CARERS

Background for interviewer

Broad areas of questioning are provided here. As a semi structured interview, the areas for questioning will be standard, but the exact wording and order of the questions will be responsive to the interviewee.

The purpose of the interview is to gain an understanding of the insights and experiences of former foster carers which another group (for example, current carers) may not be able to offer. For example, looking back were there situations where earlier intervention by someone may have prevented placement breakdown or the decision to leave? We also want to learn from the former foster carers what has worked well in the foster care system and we may develop some case studies of good practice.

1. PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

Explanation of purpose, Information letters and consent forms/ process.

2. FACTUAL DETAILS

This can most easily be undertaken by means of completing the factual fields on pages 1 and 2 of the survey proforma, as the surveys were anonymous and will not be able to be linked with those interviewed.

3. ORIGINAL REASON FOR FOSTERING

What attracted you to foster care?

4. PREPARATION

What sort of preparation for fostering did you receive/how well did that work for you? specific detail about the type of training provided

5. ASPECTS OF THE SYSTEM WHICH WORKED WELL

What parts of foster care did you most like?

What were the elements of the system which worked well? Can you give an example?

- .
- .

6. CHALLENGES

What aspects of fostering were difficult/challenging?

If you could change three things about the foster care system, what would they be?

What would you have liked to have known about foster care before you started?

7. DECISION TO LEAVE

What were your main reasons for ceasing to foster?

Possible prompts: Planned or sudden decision?; Who did you discuss it with? Trigger factor? What could have changed your decision?

Looking back, what, if anything may have made a difference to your decision to leave?

What sort of support did you receive? Where did it come from? helpful What could be improved? FCA support helpful?

Conflict resolution and mediation

8. ADVICE FOR OTHERS

What information/advice would you give newcomers to foster care?

9. ANY OTHER COMMENTS ABOUT EXPERIENCES OF FOSTERING

Thankyou etc

APPENDIX D SEMI STRUCTURE INTERVIEW PROFORMA - ORGANISATIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

Broad areas of questioning are provided here. These are indicative only. As a semi structured interview, the areas for questioning will be standard, but the questions will be responsive to the interviewee.

1. Role of the organisation in fostering in ACT- type of foster care etc
2. Rates of recruitment and numbers of foster carers ceasing.
3. What do you think are the main reasons foster carers discontinue fostering?
4. What would need to change in order to maximise retention?

Prompts

Policies?

Training?

Support?

Payment?

APPENDIX E INTERVIEWS WITH STAKEHOLDERS- SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

E.1 Introduction

Organisational representatives from foster care agencies (Barnardos; Marymead; Galilee; Life without Barriers and the ATSI Foster Care Unit) participated in interviews. Representatives from the CREATE Foundation, the Foster Care Association of the ACT Inc. and the OCYFS also participated in interviews. A representative of CaPACT provided a written response.

Questions were asked about the reasons carers leave, and what can be done to better retain carers. There were considerable areas of commonality in the responses, particularly across the non-government foster care agencies. Stakeholders with unique roles (the ATSI unit which is a foster care provider for Indigenous children and young people situated within the Office, the CREATE Foundation which provides a network and opportunities to young people in out of home care, the FCA of the ACT which supports carers, CaPACT which promotes the birth parenting relationship; and the Office itself) had particular emphases which we attempt to capture here.

E. 2. Reasons foster carer cease—general themes

There was acknowledgement that reasons for leaving may be multifactorial and interrelated. Although some stakeholders may have different emphases, there was little discrepancy in the themes which emerged as the main reasons given either singly or in combination, that carers left their foster caring role.

Natural life events or change in personal circumstances

The mobility of the Canberra population and the increased work commitments were particularly noted.

Discrepancy between expectations and the reality of caring

Carers want to help and care for children, and they may not anticipate the complex situations they need to deal with, nor the various organisations involved in foster care and how they impact upon caring. The CREATE Foundation emphasised that the young people may be different from what foster carers expect.

Contact with birth parents.

Contact with birth parents is an important part of many caring situations and is becoming more so with the recognition of the importance of cultural and family connections. Some carers may find this difficult. CaPACT noted that this can be an area of difficulty for birth parents and foster carers and foster children may feel pressure to choose between the two.

The ATSI Foster Care Unit emphasised the importance of family, community and cultural significance to their carers and young people and highlighted and that their carers work very hard towards getting the children back home and back to the extended family. Nevertheless it sometimes occurs that it is hard for some carers to understand that the birth parent still may have a say in a child's life.

Not being recognised or regarded as full partner in the care team

Carers may not feel listened to or considered when decisions are being made. They may find that decisions which affect their care of children are made without consideration of their points of view.

Feeling a lack of support may be related to dealing with the behaviour of the children. A couple of stakeholders mentioned adolescence as presenting particular challenges. All stakeholders were concerned about the high workloads of both the OCYFS and the non government agencies which may mean carers feel they do not get the assistance at the time they need it. CaPACT noted that this also affects the support available to birth families which may also impact upon foster carers. There

was general agreement across the stakeholders that situations which carers are required to deal with are becoming more complex.

Uncertainty due to decision making processes for children in care

This was commonly identified as one of the reasons stakeholders believed contributed to carers' decisions to leave foster caring. This uncertainty makes it hard for carers to plan their lives and accommodate the needs of the children in their care. One foster care agency said that foster carers can have the sense of being 'jerked around on the end of a string', and that it is difficult to mitigate against this although they try to.

Inadequate monetary compensation for caring.

Many stakeholders commented that the monetary compensation was insufficient. However there were mixed views on how significant this was as a reason for foster carers' leaving as stakeholders were clear that monetary reward was not the prime reason that carers choose to foster. There was recognition amongst the agencies that many foster carers in ACT needed to work in order to maintain their standard of living. If there was a higher monetary compensation, then it may be possible for carers who wanted to give more time to the foster caring role to do so. There was also recognition that specialist placements attract more funding than generalist placements. One issue raised was that sometimes the adequacy of support depended on how successfully the foster care agency advocated on behalf of a carer for particular services for a child. Most foster care agencies saw that they had a role with OCYFS as advocates for foster families needing additional financial support for the foster children. The representatives of CREATE considered that funding was a critical issue in order that foster carers were not out of pocket from purchasing needed items for foster children whilst waiting for the OCYFS to approve the purchase.

The Foster Care Association of the Act Inc indicated that carers have said to them that being a foster carer just becomes too expensive and they did not anticipate that this would be the case.

Other factors

Foster care agencies indicated that it was only in a very small number of situations where carers may not meet the standards of care required that resulted in their GPA being revoked by the Chief Executive. It appeared from interviews that sometimes the foster care agency and the foster carer may agree to part company if the foster care agency did not think the carer was meeting the standards of care required by the agency. This may not involve a formal process. The Foster Care Association of the ACT Inc. noted that the occurrence of allegations of abuse is one reason that foster carers leave. They argue that it can be a traumatic experience for foster carers because allegations are hard to defend against, and they are not entitled to defence assistance.

The Director of Care and Protection, Office of Children Youth and Family articulated the inherent conflict in the structures of foster care which affects carers' and workers' daily lives. This relates to two particular aspects.

The first relates to the legal nature of the relationships involved in the foster care system. *The Children and Young People Act 1999* gives parental responsibility to the Chief Executive of the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services for many children in out of home care³. Whilst the Chief Executive may authorise foster carers to exercise some parental responsibility, the Chief Executive, through OCYFS, still has responsibility for monitoring, case management and care planning.

The second point is that the OCYFS has to make decisions about how best to use the financial resources allocated for care, and this sometimes means saying 'no' to agencies or carers who want extra support for a particular placement for the purpose of sustaining that placement. This can be frustrating for carers and agencies.

³ Children and Young People Act 1999 s19 (3)

E.3 Current strategies for retaining workers

Support systems for foster carers

All foster care agencies and other stakeholders identified the importance of having strategies to support foster carers and provide them with information. Most foster care agencies had new or were developing strategies to assist with this. These strategies ranged from peer support workers and a more systematic approach to the support of foster carers, including 24 hour support, regular social and shared training events, to more careful matching of workers and carers. The agencies also indicated that they would like to do more in the way of support if resources permitted. However all workers in agencies are working to capacity.

One of the overarching themes in the area of carer support was the importance of workers developing respectful and appreciative relationships with carers. One agency spoke of the vital nature of the ‘human element’, of ‘sitting of the veranda and having a cup of tea’. The ATSI Unit pointed out that their workers are known in the ATSI community and it is appreciated that they are trying to assist children and families.

There was a recognition that each carer’s situation is different and that the foster care agency workers need to keep abreast of the carers’ changing needs, and be responsive to these.

A small number of stakeholders also identified the impact of the above situations on the carers’ own families and birth children as reasons that carers leave.

Training

It was recognised that initial training is critically important in preparing carers for what lies ahead. Finding the right balance between providing accurate information about what they will face and not scaring carers off has been a challenge. One foster care agency indicated that they now provide a more realistic picture of fostering which may lead to carers self selecting out. They also recognise that it is

hard for people to know what it is like caring for traumatised children beforehand and that workers who are not foster carers may not know this themselves. CREATE Foundation and the Foster Care Association of the ACT identified the importance of the participation of their organisations in training: the former to give a foster child's perspective and the latter to provide input from experienced foster carers. CaPACT considers that maximising retention involves recruitment and training of foster carers who are able to recognise the importance of the relationship between child and birth parents.

Some foster care agencies anticipate that the development of a new Certificate IV training package for carers may fill some of the training gaps. However there is also some concern that this increased requirement of training may be more than some carers are prepared to do, and that it is an example of the bar being raised. It may suit some and it may not suit others.

Collaborative working of all parties

It was noted that roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the care system need to be clear, so that effective cooperative working relationships can occur for the benefit of the children and the families (both foster and birth) involved. These need to be clear not only at the higher levels of working but also at the level of working with families. OCYFS referred to a recently drafted 'roles and responsibilities' document for the foster care sector which, when finalised, may assist in this. Most foster care agencies considered that there needs to be adequate levels of staffing for the key organisations (foster care agencies and OCYFS) for collaboration to work effectively.

Information to carers

Agencies mentioned newsletters, regular meetings and training sessions, quarterly meetings with management, in addition to the caseworker relationship with families as some of the ways they attempt to provide information to carers.

E.4 Systemic changes suggested

There were some themes which emerged about possible systemic changes which stakeholders considered would help increase the retention of foster carers.

Improved financial recompense for what carers do

A number of foster care agencies thought that carers should be paid a lot more for what they do as expectations of carers are becoming higher and higher and this should be recognised. However it was noted that financial support appeared to matter more to some carers than to others. One suggestion was that carers be paid a lump sum for expenses and not have the issue of applying for separate contingency payments. Both the CREATE Foundation and the FCA of the ACT considered the issue of increased payment to be key. The FCA of the ACT noted that a variety of payment schemes may be most appropriate, with the voluntary nature of long term care being maintained so that children know they are wanted. The ATSI Foster Care Unit identified a need for payment for kin-carers of children who are not on orders because if the placement breaks down, which may be due to financial strain, the children may end up going through the formal Care and Protection system. They felt it would be better to get more financial support for carers in the first place, which may assist to prevent the child entering the Care and Protection system.

Care planning process

It was suggested that clear care planning processes which include all relevant parties, including carers, could make a difference to carers' sense of their views being taken into account, and would enable the development of care plans which work. One of the current limitations noted by the OCYFS is that the capacity to provide information to carers is limited under the Act. In the future legislative changes may allow for more information to be provided to carers when it is in the child's best interest.

Strategies for minimising uncertainty

The stakeholders recognised that a number of different parties were involved in the decision making about children. These included the OCYFS, birth parents and the Children’s Court. One agency noted that the Act gives parents a number of chances to work towards restoration and that this can hinder permanency planning for children. The OCYFS indicated that if, under the legislation and court processes, it were possible to make decisions about children more quickly than is currently the case, this would assist carers with the issue of uncertainty.

Conflict resolution procedures

A number of stakeholders identified possible sources of conflict in the system, including disagreements about placement decisions and about contingency payments. One foster care agency would like to see arrangements in place whereby if a foster carer was unhappy with one agency, they were encouraged to sort that out with the agency before fostering with another agency, because otherwise the original agency might not know the source of the issue. The FCA of the ACT identified the need for a dispute resolution policy which is agreed between the OCYFS and the foster care agencies, which includes provision for mediation. CaPACT indicated that building relationships between foster carers and birth families through the skilled facilitation of family group conferences and mediation could reduce conflict which in turn would result in better outcomes for children.

E.5 Summary

All stakeholders interviewed were cognisant of the difficult job which foster carers do, the increasing expectations and demands on foster carers, and the need to respect, preserve, support and develop the valuable human resources of foster carers. There was also recognition that there may need to be a variety of options for foster care in the future, including variations along the professional/volunteer continuum.

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