Exploring the Experiences of the Children of Foster Carers: A Qualitative Study

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This thesis is submitted to the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Applied Social Research

Under the supervision of Dr. Helen Buckley
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work. It has not been submitted to this or any other institution for degree or publication.

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I want to dedicate this to my Dad who sadly passed away in June 2012, his determination has inspired me from afar.
ABSTRACT

While there is extensive research on the topic of foster care much of which centres on retention of foster carers and placement outcomes for children in care, an increasing body of knowledge on issues relating to the birth children of foster carers is emerging.

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of the adult children of foster carers and how fostering impacts on their lives. A qualitative study collecting data by means of seven semi structured interviews seeks to gain insight into the lives of these children as they have experienced a range of foster placements through several years of fostering. The rich narratives highlight the often unrecognised impact of foster placements on foster carers birth children and how the system in Ireland is experienced first-hand. Themes such as positive impact, information sharing, social awareness, levels of social work support and changing family structures emerge as dominant in the study. The complexities and adjustments involved for foster families are examined as children are identified as a resource in the fostering task. Findings suggest that children in the foster family play a significant role in the fostering assignment and the need to involve them in assessment and ongoing support is a challenge for fostering services in Ireland. Increased understanding may enhance the wellbeing of birth and foster children alike.

Keywords: Foster carers’ children, foster family, impact, children who foster, foster care
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Introduction

The aim of fostering is to enable vulnerable children to have positive, inclusive experiences of family life from which they can derive a sense of belonging, stability and consistency. A challenge for fostering services is to manage the gap between the demand for viable foster homes and the capacity of foster care agencies to recruit and train potential foster families (Twigg and Swan, 2007). Many studies focus on the needs of children in care and on foster carers, where the emphasis is frequently on stability of placements and retention of foster carers. Much attention is paid to matching the needs of the child in care to the foster family where the aim is to secure better outcomes for the child placed. Daly (2012) acknowledges that stability in young people’s care placement history is associated with more positive outcomes when leaving care.

It has been acknowledged that the way in which the fostering experience impacts within a foster carers’ family, and in particular on their children, can be a significant determinant factor for successful placement outcome or otherwise (Sinclair, 2005). The position of the children of foster carers has been recognised by Sellick and Howell (2003) not only because fostering agencies have a moral responsibility to protect their interests, but also because their welfare has a major impact on whether or not their parents carry on fostering. A common theme through the literature is the emphasis on retention of foster carers to enhance placement outcomes for children in care. In recent years several studies examine the experiences of the children of foster carers in an attempt to gain insight into the impact of fostering on family members.

Difficulties in recruitment have been found by numerous studies to be related to foster parents concern about the impact of fostering on their birth children (Sinclair et al, 2004; Twigg and Swan, 2007; Younes and Harp, 2007). Despite these concerns most birth children experience fostering to be an enriching and satisfying experience on a personal and familial level (Hojer, 2007; Mosek, 2013; Sinclair et al, 2004; Spears and Cross, 2003; Sutton and Stack, 2012; Watson and Jones, 2002). When birth children raise concerns, these mostly focus on the negative impact of fostering on their quality of life and relations with their parents (Sinclair, 2005).
As Hojer (2007) emphasises, the impact of fostering on the lives of sons and daughters of foster carers has largely been overlooked in research and practice. This is particularly evident in Ireland. The Children Acts Advisory Board (2010) points out that the experience of the children of foster carers in Ireland is not well documented. Exploration of the factors that contribute to placement breakdown and identification of factors that enhance the likelihood of a successful placement was acknowledged as a knowledge gap. This study’s exploration of the views and experiences of the biological children of foster carers has the potential to inform the complex and under researched process of fostering in Ireland. Research shows that the impact of fostering on the children of the foster family frequently features as an issue in disruptions hence the value of researching the nature of that impact from the child’s perspective.

As research was largely absent in the Irish context this study set out to explore the experience of foster carers’ children and gain insight on how fostering impacts on their lives. A qualitative approach was deemed an appropriate method to capture first-hand accounts from foster family members. While recent international studies have begun to focus on the experience and meaning of fostering from a birth child’s perspective, findings suggest that increasing awareness of the role played by foster carers’ children may be warranted in practice in fostering services in Ireland.

The study begins with a look at the policy context and legislative framework and then reviews the relevant literature looking at international studies on the perspectives of foster carers’ children. The research methodology is addressed in Chapter 2 which includes an overview of the research design, methods of data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations and the limitations of the study are also highlighted. Chapter 3 presents the study findings detailing participant’s narratives under the headings of the experience of the fostering assessment process, the impact of foster placements, information sharing, experience of birth family contact, increased awareness of social issues and lastly the issue of social work support. The final chapter discusses the study’s findings in relation to the relevant literature and considers implications for practice in fostering services. Recommendations for further research are also outlined.
Chapter 1 Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

Fostering may be described as a statutory service, whose structures and regulations are prescribed by policy and legislative frameworks, but which is delivered by social work professionals and foster families (Goodyer, 2010). Increasing recognition of the challenges posed by foster care has led to considerable research in the last two decades focussing on different facets of process and outcome. According to Fernandez and Barth (2010) the outcomes for children in care are rightfully the focus of research scrutiny and continuing efforts to build a knowledge base of how child welfare interventions such as foster care work to benefit children and young people are needed.

This chapter firstly outlines the policy context and legislative framework in which fostering services operate in Ireland and considers developments over time. A review of the relevant literature undertaken for the purpose of this research focussing on studies published since 1990 is then presented. Studies examined used differing methodologies ranging from in depth interviewing to focus groups and larger scale studies using questionnaires. The experiences of children of kinship carers were not addressed in this review as the focus of this research is general foster care. Most studies were exclusively qualitative providing some interesting insights into the perspectives of carers children on their experiences of fostering. Study samples tended to be relatively small, limiting possibilities of generalisation. Most adopted a retrospective design seeking perspectives of carers or their children on the impact of fostering as experienced in the past. Dominant themes through the literature are identified and explored under the headings of positive impact, information and communication, transitions, family structure and dynamics, the child as a social agent and the concept of home.

1.2 Policy Context and Legislative Framework

Foster care services in Ireland have undergone significant changes in recent decades which have seen the introduction of legislation, regulations, policies and standards governing practice. Periods of political, economic and social change have also impacted on service
delivery. Increasing demands for fostering services may be associated with the rising numbers of children in care coupled with the shift in focus away from placement of children in residential care settings. TUSLA Child and Family Services have a statutory responsibility to provide Alternative Care Services under the provisions of the Child Care Act, 1991, The Children Act, 2001 and the Child Care (Amendment) Act, 2007 (TUSLA, 2012). Children who require admission to care are accommodated through placement in foster care, placement with relatives, or residential care. Currently there are 6,489 children in care in Ireland (TUSLA Child and Family Agency, 2014). The vast majority (93%) of children in care are placed in foster care. These children are being cared for by 4,235 foster carers.

Examining research in Ireland, Browne (2000) sought to highlight what Irish foster parents themselves felt they needed as carers of foster children. A sample of Cork foster parents (74) were asked to make suggestions as to how they thought services could be improved. A qualitative analysis revealed that foster parents were able to make suggestions for improvements on a number of fronts, including permanency and accessibility of social workers, and also more preparation and training. The study concluded that many foster parents were well tuned in to the services that they needed in order to provide the best caring environments for the children in their care. In support of findings presented by Gilligan (1996), many of the responses indicated a high level of altruism in Irish foster parents and concurred that fostering agencies were not providing the best possible services to foster parents.

A key development was the report of The Working Group on Foster Care in 2001. The need for research was identified given that little published work on the operation of foster care services in Ireland was available at that time. The report made recommendations including the need for a recruitment strategy, emphasis on retention of foster carers, provision of training and establishment of support groups for foster carers. Subsequently the Social Services Inspectorates (2004) national audit found that despite the commendable efforts of the foster care teams, there were continuing difficulties in ensuring a sufficient number and range of carers for some of the young people in placements, particularly for adolescents and sibling groups.

More specific to the current study, Irwin (2005) examined the impact on 20 birth children of foster carers of attaching and separating from foster children placed in their homes. The findings suggested that the repeated exposure to separation and relationship endings did not
have a negative impact on the attachment process or on the emotional investment made by their parents and their birth children. The children identified positive social and altruistic aspects of being involved in fostering as well as emotional and psychological demands.

More recently in 2010 a National Audit of Foster Care Services was carried out by the HSE, the purpose being to benchmark compliance with its statutory obligations in relation to foster care. It was reported that most Local Health Offices had an active training programme in place for foster carers and recommendations included the need for a more robust monitoring and quality assurance systems at Local Health Office and Area level to manage compliance with Standards, Regulations, performance measures and good practice norms. Consequently HIQA (2013) reported on findings from an inspection of foster care services finding that the system of matching children’s needs with the skills of foster parents was often dependent solely on the availability of placements. The impact of staff shortages on the capacity of the HSE to deliver a safe high quality fostering service was highlighted recognising the difficulty for social workers to provide consistent support to foster carers.

In the Irish context a literature audit on children in detention and out of home care in 2010 identified exploration of the factors that enhance the likelihood of a placement being successful in foster care as a knowledge gap (Children Acts Advisory Board 2010). Recommendations from the audit included the need for future research to focus on gathering and building evidence that will enhance our understanding of ‘what works’. This report noted that the role of other children of the family who fosters is often forgotten and recommended that they should be included in the placement process and their views considered with due regard to their age and ability to reason.

Of note is a recent qualitative study by Tobin (2013) who examines young people’s experiences of foster care breakdown. Findings suggest that social work services need to focus attention on , and directly support foster carer’s children with specific intervention crucial to assist all members of the foster family to adjust to ‘new family life’ and negotiate a new family dynamic.

While there is recognition in fostering services in Ireland that the views of children of the foster family are important in the process, the current study will inform the reality of individual experiences in this regard. Having outlined the development of foster care services
in Ireland, the review of international studies specific to the experiences of children in the foster family are now examined under themes which were found to be dominant.

### 1.3 Positive Impact

Many of the studies reviewed by Twigg and Swan (2007) indicated that foster parents’ children found that growing up in a foster family had a positive impact on their lives. Most believed they had learned a lot and as a consequence were more sensitive, responsible and caring people (Twigg and Swan, 2007). Additionally, the young people suggested that participating in fostering enhanced their awareness of social issues, common responses referred to finding satisfaction watching children placed in their family grow and develop.

Other studies, for example Younes and Harp (2006) found that children cited positive outcomes such as learning about people, becoming more independent, making friends, and appreciating their families. Their results revealed the intensity of the fostering process on biological children and their families. Fostering altered the children’s relationships, family structure, personality, and view of the world. All children interviewed indicated that despite the traumatic process, fostering made them better people and expanded their understanding of the complexities of life. The outcome of this study may have practice implications regarding the impact of fostering on the family unit being addressed as part of the recruitment and training process.

Positive experiences in personal development for biological children of foster carers were also reported by Thompson and Mc Pherson (2011) including being better at communicating, listening and gaining in confidence, the benefits of gaining new friends to share activities and the value of helping others. In Hojer’s (2007) study in Sweden those who had positive experiences often referred to warm feelings for foster children and to what they described as an enhanced capacity for empathy and compassion.

### 1.4 Information and Communication

The importance of participating in the decision to foster is a key finding in many studies as emphasised by Hojer, Sebba and Luke (2013). Being involved in the decision to foster
enhances subsequent adaptation, therefore children need to be involved in family discussions and should not be seen as less significant, passive members of the family. Evidence suggests fostering will have an impact on their lives and they need to understand how and in what way they will be affected. Feedback from parents and children in research by Younes and Harp (2007) on the fostering decision and preparation was consistent regarding the reality being different from the preparation received.

Sharing information about the nature of fostering with the children of foster carers including both positive and negative aspects is also found to be important. Hojer, Sebba and Luke (2013) concluded that being informed about fostering and about each particular child reduces conflict in families. Some studies (Twigg and Swan, 2007; Spears and Cross, 2003) suggested peer support groups being a good way to give information however unless such schemes are subject to evaluation, their impact in terms of outcomes for children is unknown. Information was seen to be important not only in the initial stages but also throughout the entire process. The sharing of information about foster children before they joined the family was seen to make it easier for them to understand and cope with difficult behaviour, makes them feel involved, competent and part of the process. It was evident that those children and young people who had received relevant information developed a significantly better relationship with foster children (Hojer, Sebba and Luke, 2013).

In examining factors that improved the capacity of carers’ children to cope, the opportunity to have open discussions about perceived difficulties, primarily with their parents, but also with social workers was recommended by Hojer, Sebba and Luke (2013) following their international literature review. Being allowed to complain about things they found problematic and being able to display negative feelings resulted in carers children being better equipped to cope with problems. Some who participated in studies said they did not want to trouble their parents with their own difficulties and some had a notion they were not ‘eligible to complain’. Twigg and Swan (2007) recommend that both parents and their children need to take responsibility for keeping open channels of communication.
1.5 Transitions

The concept of transitions featured in Thompson & McPherson’s (2011) review of studies on this topic. Birth children reported that they were not given enough information and preparation for the realities of fostering. Many unexpected changes such as alterations to house rules, being exposed to more life events and raising awareness of difficult issues were highlighted. Some children felt pressured to be more responsible, caring and understanding, or having to be a good role model all the time. The pressure to be a positive and responsible role model seemed particularly strong for foster siblings. Differing expectations of behaviour and discipline for birth children and their foster siblings may have contributed to conflict and hostility. Birth children expressed that they were not given enough training and preparation to help their transition to fostering. Difficulties arising within the foster sibling relationship need to be recognised and managed to help prevent placement breakdown in the future.

The transition experienced by birth children due to the temporary nature of foster care meant that their role and place in the family constantly changed. Furthermore by living with a child with completely different experiences of being parented, birth children were exposed to difficult life events and different upbringings, which can be understood from an attachment perspective and perhaps even addressed with preparation or training informed by attachment principles.

1.6 Child as Social Agent

Hojer (2007) refers to a new perception of childhood looking upon children as active subjects and competent social agents, not just as passive receivers of care and attention. She highlights the lack of attention given to the biological children of foster carers by researchers and practitioners given the powerful changes connected to fostering in their lives. A possible explanation is that children and young people are often seen in terms of the family as a unit, and not as individuals in their own right, which makes them less visible (Brannen et al 2000). In addition foster carers are usually regarded as competent parents and caregivers, and therefore it may be taken for granted that their children consequently will be competent and resilient, able to cope with any strain connected to fostering. Whatever the reasons may be, according to Hojer (2007) it seems that sons and daughters of foster carers can be exposed to
dramatic changes in their lives, to difficult behaviour of foster children and to a substantial knowledge of children’s hardship. The study found that living with foster children has shown sons and daughters of foster carers that some parents lack the capacity and/or the possibility of adequate parental care. As Hojer (2007) observes insights into problematic life situations present a knowledge that was not always adjusted to the age and the cognitive capacity of foster carers’ own children.

Twigg and Swans (2007) review of fourteen research studies also provides evidence of how children and young people are involved in fostering. They are seen to take a considerable amount of responsibility towards their foster siblings. It is quite clear that sons and daughters of foster carers act as independent agents, and thus also have an impact on the way in which fostering activities are performed within the foster family. Their contribution to foster care ought to be acknowledged, and also rewarded, as it constitutes an important part of the fostering assignment.

1.7 Family Structure and Dynamics

The impact of fostering on relationships was addressed by Younes and Harp (2007) study on foster carers and their children. Time was a theme mentioned regarding relationships between biological children and their parents. The research also identified lack of privacy for the birth children, with stricter rules and expectations of them to be positive role models. Biological children reported an impact on their relationships with their siblings. Looking at shifting family structures, roles and expectations it was found that some children experienced a sense of displacement. Changes in family relations and family life were also outlined in Hojer, Sebba and Lukes (2013) review of international literature. Important messages from the research reflected the significant changes in everyday life that fostering brings about in the family. These changes involved both positive and negative aspects. Examples of the negatives included sharing parent’s time with potentially less attention from parents, sharing of belongings, less personal space and having to cope with difficult behaviour from foster children. Some said they resented these negative aspects, though many seemed able to cope.

In many of the studies children and young people suggested that their parents become extensively involved in their fostering task (Hojer, 2007; Spears and Cross, 2003; Younes and Harp, 2007). Some reported parents spending insufficient time with them and were
unable to listen to them adequately due to the demands of fostering. Sometimes birth children felt excluded in the family and forgotten by their parents. They acknowledged the importance of the fostering task and understood that their parents had to give adequate attention to the foster children but they still felt left out.

In Sutton and Stacks (2013) qualitative study involving six foster carers’ children, participants were found to embrace the change brought about by welcoming a foster child into their home and saw themselves as active members that influence and are in turn influenced by their environment. The participants’ acceptance and engagement in the process of fostering allowed them to feel a sense of pride when positive outcomes occurred. Regarding empathic learning, participants saw themselves very much in a caring role and displayed sincere empathy, showing an attitude mature beyond their years. The development of enhanced emotional literacy was highlighted as one of the positive adaptations that help young people internalise the fostering experience. In terms of social learning theory it seemed that individuals developed altruism through internalising societal norms, one of which is a responsibility to help those less fortunate. The study concluded that a greater understanding of the dynamics of the foster family as a whole unit will make it possible to create guidelines and interventions that could ensure the needs of all involved are met in the best possible way (Sutton and Stack, 2013).

1.8 Concept of home

Hojer (2007) points out that the aim of good foster care is to provide children and young people with a familial context where they can establish good and stable relations to foster parents and foster siblings, and living conditions that can give them a ‘life more ordinary’ a point that is reiterated by Sinclair (2004). One conclusion of Hojer's study is that in order to give foster siblings such an ‘ordinary’ life, sons and daughters of foster carers can be exposed to changes that subsequently can make their own lives less ‘ordinary’.

The concept of the home is discussed as usually being associated with positive feelings of close relations, recreation and rest. Borders are sometimes defined which can be closed when the family need privacy and opened up when there is a need for social interactions outside the family. When a family take up fostering, the borders can no longer be closed in the same way. Not only do they open up for foster children placed in the family but also to natural
parents and to the social services. Hojer (2007) makes the point that some of the privacy of the home is lost, to satisfy the demands of the public task of foster care. Such changes of life connected to the public assignment of foster care in a private context is seldom addressed and recognised. As changes in life can be quite substantial for sons and daughters of foster carers, more attention may need to be directed towards the situation of these children and young people.

Recommendations from Twigg and Swan (2007) pinpointed the primary challenge for the foster family as being to maintain its boundaries and integrity as a family unit, while accepting within its boundaries both the foster child and the foster care agency.

1.9 Conclusion

This literature review has considered the perspectives of biological children of foster carers and how they adapt to the fostering task. Emerging themes such as positive impact, communication and information, transitions, family structures and dynamics, the child as a social agent and lastly the concept of home have been examined.

While large scale studies may have effectively identified the factors associated with successful placements and tend to adopt a macro perspective, they may be less successful at unravelling complex intra familial dynamics. The contribution of small-scale intensive studies to professional knowledge about foster care is clarified as they can complement and expand on the larger studies. On their own small studies can easily be criticised but when considered in the context of broader knowledge, their relevance and scientific value are greatly enhanced (Thompson and McPherson, 2011).

Developments in practice need evidence based research on how service providers experience the current system. While services have improved significantly over recent years the need for in-depth information on how foster family members experience the foster care system is crucial. The current study aims to generate knowledge and understanding to inform practice and service provision in foster care in Ireland.
Chapter 2  Methodology

2.1 Introduction

An overview of the research design and methods are presented in this chapter including details of data collection methods and analysis. The benefits and related challenges of qualitative research are outlined. Ethical considerations and constraints associated with the study are also discussed.

2.2 The Study

Creswell (2009) speaks of the purpose statement as being the most important statement in the entire research study given that it orients the reader to the central intent of the study. This research aims to generate an in-depth understanding of the experiences of biological children of foster carers during the fostering process. Research shows that the impact of fostering on the children of the foster family frequently features as an issue in disruptions in placements hence the value of researching the nature of that impact from the child’s perspective (Triseliotis, Moira and Hill, 2000; Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs, 2004; Twigg and Swan, 2007). While there is a general lack of research in the Irish context regarding fostering services (CAAB, 2010) the study may redress the gap in knowledge on the experience of fostering for the children of foster carers in Ireland. This research may improve our understanding of the family dynamics involved and thus inform strategies to maintain a stable placement.

Engaging foster carers children in the fostering process and ensuring they are well informed and supported are key recommendations in Sutton and Stack’s (2013) research findings. This is a retrospective study gaining insight from adult children who have been part of a family who cared for foster children. The study was exploratory in nature which allowed themes to emerge as data was collected.
The objectives of the study are:

- To gain insight into the perspectives of foster carers’ children on their experience of fostering.
- To examine how children of foster families adapt when a child is placed.
- To explore the views of children of foster carers on their voice being heard in the process.
- To explore the aspects of preparation and support for children of foster families.
- To examine how children of foster carers experience placement endings.

2.3 Research Design and Approach

Research design, as Bryman (2012) outlines is the structure that guides the execution of research methods and analysis of subsequent data. The choice of research design reflects decisions about the priority being given to a range of dimensions of the research process. This study attaches importance to understanding behaviour and the meaning of that behaviour in a specific social context. The research is a qualitative study exploring the lived experience of being a member of a foster family. Experience is defined as having been part of an active foster family for a period of at least one year. The design gathers data at a single point in time.

The strengths of qualitative research may be in its inductive approach which enables a focus on specific situations or people. The participant’s perspectives on their experience of the fostering process are part of the reality of what we are trying to understand. The practical goals of this exploratory study are that the findings will inform and help develop policy while also promoting understanding in practice. The qualitative aspects of this design facilitate the gathering of substantial data from those who have directly experienced the reality of fostering. De Vaus (2001) acknowledges that the retrospective approach is most reliable when we are dealing with memorable events, thus the study’s exploration of childhood experiences as part of a foster family are valid.

In these circumstances a qualitative research strategy is sensitive to how participants interpret their social world. In adopting an interpretative approach to data, the subjective meanings that people bring to their situations are considered. One of the strengths of qualitative design is in
its validity, as it is designed to stay close to people’s experiences. However its reliability may be compromised, as it seeks to explore the subjective experiences of individuals rather than produce generalizable results that would be replicated in other samples.

De Vaus (2001) highlights the importance of research design in shaping the role and purpose of the investigation. He argues that design informs the process from framing research questions to analysis and reporting the data. Qualitative face to face interviewing was used to obtain personal perspectives and opinions.

2.4 Data Collection

Bryman (2012) describes a research method as simply a technique for collecting data. It can involve a specific instrument such as in this study, a semi structured interview schedule. As Kvale and Brinkman (2009) point out, the qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subject’s points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences and to uncover their lived world. In this way an interview is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose.

Semi structured interviews were conducted, which concentrated on participants’ experience of the fostering process. The qualitative approach facilitates an exploratory and interactive means of examining participant’s retrospective experience. The interview schedule was designed to allow for flexibility in structure and content and enabled the exploration of experiences and perspectives that is responsive to the accounts of individual participants. The emphasis was on being informal in style, reflecting the perspective that talk generated in an interview context is jointly constructed (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). In this way the study could uncover feelings, beliefs and opinions. Themes could also emerge as data was analysed which informed subsequent interviews.

The aim was to concentrate on issues such as participant’s experience of the fostering assessment process, the impact on their family when a foster child joined the family unit, how family members adjusted to the changes, their views on having a voice in decision making, their experience of placement endings and on how parents or social workers supported them in these circumstances.
Recognition of the intrusion of values and bias on the researcher’s behalf was also a consideration. Bell (2010) emphasises that while the interview process has the advantage of adaptability, it is a highly subjective technique involving the possibility of bias. Of importance is the freedom it allows participants to talk about what is of central significance to them rather than to the interviewer. The researcher demonstrated reflexivity by responding to events during the interview and the use of a semi structured approach helped reduce researcher bias.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to allow for thematic analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity were a priority in transcription with names changed to protect identities.

2.5 Recruitment, Eligibility and Sampling

The participants for the study were recruited by purposive sampling using the researcher’s professional network as a medium. Maxwell (2009) describes purposeful sampling as a strategy in which particular settings, persons or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices. Such selection decisions provide the information needed to answer research questions and are a most important consideration in qualitative research. As Maxwell (2009) points out selection decisions should also take into account the feasibility of access and data collection, your research relationship with study participants, validity concerns, and ethics. The objective of purposeful sampling according to Bryman (2012) is to sample cases/participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed.

The study aimed to recruit a minimum of eight adult children of foster carers with the following criteria for inclusion:

1. Being an adult child of a foster family (preferably in age range 18 to 25)
2. Male or female living in the family home or living independently
3. The family are no longer providing a fostering service
4. The family are no more than 5 years out of fostering
5. The family cared for a foster child for a minimum of 1 year

The criteria were established to ensure participants had substantial experience of the fostering process and also relatively recent experience to strengthen the reliability of retrospective accounts. Gender diversity was also sought and initially the emphasis was on families no longer involved in fostering to safeguard identities of children placed.

Direct contact was made by Team Leaders in fostering services in the Child and Family Agency with foster carers, to inform them of the proposed study and the need for participants. Information regarding the study was forwarded to an adult child of the household. Follow up contact was made by the Team Leader to establish if adult children were interested in participating. Subsequently the researcher made direct contact with participants to arrange interviews. The researcher recruited incrementally in order to prevent over subscription.

In total 12 foster carers were contacted regarding the study. From seven foster families contacted who were no longer fostering, three were interested in participating. Of the four who did not proceed, one declined, two did not respond and one was unable to proceed because of family circumstances. In order to avoid any potential conflict of interest and to preserve the integrity of the data, foster carers with whom the researcher had worked with in the recent or distant past were excluded from the election process. While this criteria was strictly adhered to, it resulted in a relatively smaller pool of prospective participants being available for selection. In these circumstances combined with the limited time scale involved it was decided to broaden the criteria to foster carers currently fostering. Five foster carers were thus contacted with four willing to participate and one not wishing to do so. While the initial aim was to interview eight participants a total of seven interviews were completed in the time scale allowed.

2.6 Access Negotiation

Access to participants was negotiated through the management structure of the Child and Family Agency, where the researcher is currently employed in the fostering service. Team leaders in the fostering teams were approached personally by the researcher giving details of the study and asked to identify possible participants meeting the criteria. The Child and Family Agency maintain records on foster carers approved by the agency. The researcher’s
professional network was invaluable in the recruitment process. Agency approval was sought and granted before fieldwork commenced.

Diversity was sought in the selection process regarding the type of fostering the family undertook e.g. short term and long term placements, sibling groups and children with special needs. The profile of participants indicates that such diversity was achieved as all participants had lengthy experience of several short term placements of varying periods of time while six of the seven participants had experience of long term placements for periods in excess of ten years. Four of the seven participants had experienced their family caring for a sibling group and one participant had experience of fostering a child with a disability.

Participants were drawn from the geographical area of Dublin Mid Leinster, specifically the Integrated Services Area of Dublin South, Dublin South East and Wicklow. This ensured access to foster carer families from three different geographical areas and hence three separate fostering teams. For reasons of ease of access, the study was limited to foster carers in the Child and Family Agency services and did not include foster carers operating in private fostering agencies.

2.7 Interview

While research questions formulate what you want to understand, interview questions are what you ask people to gain that understanding (Maxwell, 2009). As Rubin (2005) highlights the depth, detail and richness sought in interviews are rooted in the interviewees’ first hand experiences and form the material that researchers gather. In order to get to this level of detail, depth and focus, researchers are required to work out main questions, probes and follow ups. Main questions get a conversation going on a specific matter and ensure that the overall subject is covered, whereas probes are standardised ways to ask for more depth and detail and encourage the conversational partner to continue (Rubin, 2005). The subject area explored in the semi structured interview incorporated varying aspects of the participants’ experience in a foster family including the assessment process, impact of a foster child being placed in the family, information sharing, social work support and placement endings.
A total of seven individual interviews were conducted throughout the month of July. Interviews took place in a number of locations with convenience, privacy and anonymity for the participant being a primary concern. Six interviews took place in participant’s homes in a suitable quiet room free of interruptions. One interview took place at the participant’s workplace, again in a separate room where the participant was not interrupted. The interviews ranged in duration from 35 minutes to 80 minutes, the majority lasting 55 minutes. The interview invites and persuades individuals to think and to talk ‘that is to discourse’ their needs, wants, expectations, experiences and understandings at both the conscious and unconscious levels (Nunkoosing, 2008).

Before the interviews took place, the schedule was piloted with a test respondent in order to check that the language used was suitable and the flow of the interview worked well. Each respondent was presented with an information sheet concerning the project (Appendix 1) which they were given time to read and ask questions about prior to the interview. Following this, they were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 2) which outlined what was being asked of them and their rights as a respondent. Demographics were obtained either prior to the interview or at the final stage of the interview.

Interviews were guided by a semi structured interview schedule designed to highlight the issues emerging from the literature review and also aimed towards answering the research aims and objectives. The semi structured nature of the interviews allowed for open ended questions and flexibility in following the responses of the participants. The schedule was formed with a number of headings taking precedence followed by some sub-headings which were to be used as prompts through the interview. The primary questions developed from the main headings were open-ended and held a possibility of leading into the sub-headings. However, in the case where these were not covered, the interview schedule was present for reference purposes to ensure all topics were covered extensively.

The advantage of using this approach was the ability to ask open-ended questions and explore answers rather than having definitive results which offered little explanation as to the origins of why these results came about.
2.8 Data Management and Analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and accounts were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Transcribed data was stored on a password protected computer. All identifying information was removed and pseudonyms used to ensure confidentiality. On completion of transcription, recordings were securely stored for deletion following examination of the thesis. The transcribed files will be safely stored in a locked file for a maximum period of two years.

The main methodological approach used to gain clearer and better understanding of the data was conducted through a process of thematic analysis. Following the transcription of all the interviews, coding categories were deducted using the primary headings followed within the interview schedule and included some categories which were found to be emergent across the majority of interviews. Transcripts were coded manually using coding categories reflecting the research aims and objectives. Coding is recognised as one of the main categorising strategies in qualitative research whereby the aim is to rearrange data into categories which facilitate comparison both within and between categories (Maxwell, 2009). Coding is the process of organising the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). Views and experiences expressed by respondents were analysed thematically as the researcher examined the text for salient categories extracting key themes. Analysis was undertaken following the development of codebooks which were appropriately named to represent any new emerging themes as well as general topics under investigation. Accounts were compared across the data set.

2.9 Ethical Considerations

Initially the study sought to interview adult children of foster carers who fostered in the past but were no longer fostering. This was to ensure that there was no possibility of children in care placements currently in the fostering service being identified. However due to the difficulty in recruiting participants to fit this criteria and the timescale involved, the criteria was broadened with supervisory and agency approval to include foster carers in the fostering service currently. Hence extreme care was taken to preserve anonymity in transcripts and ensure that identification of a child in the fostering service was not possible.
As the researcher was a social worker in the fostering service every effort was made to avoid any potential conflict of interest in the selection process. Therefore foster carers with whom the researcher had worked in the recent or more distant past were excluded from the study.

The study conforms to the ethical principles outlined by De Vaus (2001) of voluntary participation, informed consent, no harm to participants and also anonymity and confidentiality. Voluntary and informed consent of each participant was obtained prior to their participation (see appendix 2). All participants received a detailed explanation of the purpose of the research as well as an account of what participation involved in terms of the commitment of time required and the nature and content of the interview (see appendix 1). All participants received an information sheet describing the project and a consent form that they were asked to sign before commencing the interview.

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Approval Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College, Dublin. Recommendations of the Ethics committee were adhered to regarding the initial approach to participants to be made by a senior member of the agency, and signed agency consent being obtained prior to commencement of the study.

2.10 Limitations

One of the key limitations of this research is that it is a small scale study. The limited time scale involved meant that the sampling population was restricted to seven participants. Though limited in number, the study elicited rich narratives of personalised experiences.

The retrospective nature of the study may also be seen as a limitation though as the criteria broadened to include adult children whose families were in the process of fostering, four participants were giving accounts of current experiences alongside recollections of past events. It is also important to note that of the three participants whose families were no longer fostering, the period which had elapsed since fostering was less than five years with all such participants continuing to be involved in foster sibling’s lives. Hence accounts given retrospectively may be considered relevant and represent participants considered views.

Selection of participants is a possible limitation as purposive sampling was the means used. Efforts were made to include a diverse range of participants which was achieved in terms of
the variety regarding gender mix, age and position in the family. Inclusion of the range of different types of fostering was also realised as evident in the sample profile in Table 3.1. Further diversity was apparent as two participants had experienced caring for sibling groups and one participant was from a family who cared for a foster child with a severe disability.

2.11 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the scope of the research study in terms of design, research methods, data collection techniques, sampling, ethical considerations and limitations. Details of how the researcher sought to address the research aims and objectives have been presented. The next chapter presents the analysis of the data collected and examines findings.
Chapter 3 Analysis and Findings

3.1 Introduction

As previously indicated this study is concerned with exploring how adult children of foster carers have experienced the fostering process. This chapter presents the analysis of data from interviews undertaken and outlines findings. Firstly a sample profile is presented along with a descriptive account of participants’ family circumstances and experiences of fostering. Subsequently findings are detailed under relevant sub sections highlighting the depth of information gathered. Areas covered include participant’s experience of the fostering assessment process, the impact when children were placed with the family, the practice of information sharing before and during assessment and placement, increased social awareness on the part of the children concerned and social work support.

3.2 Sample Profile

For the purposes of this study a total of seven adult children of foster carers were interviewed. The sample was drawn from the geographical area covered by the Dublin Mid Leinster Integrated Service Area of the TUSLA Child and Family Agency. Demographically the participants ranged in age from 21 to 34 years and included five females and two males. While the majority of the sample (five) were still living in the family home, two were living independently. The sample varied regarding the types of fostering involved with all families represented having experience of short term fostering\(^1\), six of the seven had experienced long term fostering\(^2\) while four participants had been involved in respite fostering\(^3\). Two participants were from a family where pre adoptive babies had been placed.

The table below shows details of participants’ position in their family, the family composition and their current status in terms of fostering. It is evident that six participants were of a

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1. Short term foster care provides temporary care for a child separated from their birth family. The child may, after a period, move back to their family or move on to a long term family.
2. Long term foster care is needed for children who are unlikely to be able to live with their birth family, and who, for a variety of reasons cannot be adopted. Many children in long term care become so much part of their foster family that they continue to live with them until their independence, as the birth children of the family do.
3. Respite care is defined in the National Standards for Foster Care as ‘short term care provided to a child in order to support the child, his or her parent(s) or foster carers by providing a break for the child and his or her primary caregivers’. 
similar age ranging from ten to twelve years when their family started the fostering process. One participant notably was approximately one year old when a foster child was placed. There was diversity regarding position in the family with the majority of participants (four) being the eldest, two participants were the youngest family member and one was second youngest in a family of several siblings. The researcher has purposefully not given specific details regarding the age of participants, the number of years fostering or the numbers of children placed in order to preserve the identity of the foster families involved and thus the possibility of identifying a child placed. The table also shows that three of the families were no longer fostering while four were still involved. The extent of the participant’s wealth of experience in fostering is clear as four had in excess of twenty years experience while the remaining three had over ten years experience.

Table 3.1 Sample Profile of Adult Children of Foster Carers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age when began fostering</th>
<th>Position in family</th>
<th>Type of fostering</th>
<th>Number of years fostering experience</th>
<th>Current status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female early 30’s</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2nd youngest</td>
<td>Short term, Long term, Respite, Pre Adoptive</td>
<td>20+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Early 30’s</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Eldest</td>
<td>Short term, Long term, Respite</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female early 30’s</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>Short term, Long term</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female early 20’s</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Eldest</td>
<td>Short term, Long term</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male mid 20’s</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>Short term, Long term, Respite</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male early 30’s</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Eldest</td>
<td>Short term, Long term</td>
<td>20+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female early 20’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Eldest</td>
<td>Short term, Respite</td>
<td>20+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3 Experience of Fostering Assessment Process

Exploration of participants’ experience of the assessment process in fostering garnered varying accounts with some having clearer recollections than others. While the focus of the this initial period of contact with the Child and Family Agency tends to be with prospective foster carers (fostering applicants) there is an expectation that assessment of a family’s potential to foster includes engagement with children in the family unit. Given that all those interviewed had been a member of a foster family for a period in excess of ten years, while three participants had been fostering for more than twenty years, it was understandable that accounts of their first encounter with fostering services were at times vague. Apart from one participant who was too young at the time, all remembered the assessment process in broadly similar terms as Lucy (early 30s) outlines:

“I remember kinda vaguely, … there was coming and going of different people to the house and obviously social workers, and they (parents) were taking part in the assessment, so obviously at 10 I didn’t know what an assessment was ... but then they kind of sat us down and am, asked us how we would feel about other children coming into the house to kind of stay for like little periods of time”.

Reports from all six participants who remember the beginning stage of their fostering history indicate an awareness of their parents having regular discussions with a social worker and direct contact being made with them as part of the process. Of interest was an account from a younger participant who recalled more specific details of her experience:

“I think some social worker came to us once a week, and she kind of did different activities with me and my (sibling) for an hour and am, spoke about how we felt and those kind of things”(Ciara, early 20s)

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4 Foster care applicants participate in a comprehensive assessment of their ability to carry out the fostering task and are formally approved by the Child and Family Agency prior to any child or young person being placed with them. The assessment is carried out by a suitably qualified and trained social worker within a recommended 16 week period. (Dept. of Health and Children, 2003, National Standards for Foster Care)

5 Section 14a.7 The National Standards for Foster Care (2003) states that ‘The applicants household is assessed and all family members including children, in accordance with their age, stage of development and individual needs, are involved in the process’. 
This reflects a possible move in practice towards more detailed engagement with children in the family in the assessment phase. Participants struggled to recall the first discussions about fostering in their families, some recalled feeling consulted by their parents before the process began while others had a sense of being told it was happening once parents had decided. The consensus was that this was a period when social workers met with the parents in the home over a period of time and talked about what fostering involved. All recalled a social worker meeting with them to seek their views.

3.3.1 Voice Heard

There were differing reports from interviewees regarding their sense of their voice being heard in relation to their family taking on the fostering task initially and also subsequently through the years. However the significance of feeling that their input was sought and listened to emanated from all participants recollections. Some participants spoke of a definite sense of their voice being heard from the beginning “we were kinda sat down and I know that, one of the social workers she would have said like ‘how do you feel about it’. ” and again “Oh yea, absolutely, they (social worker) asked how we felt about it, yea”.

Some participants had encountered circumstances whereby they relied on their parent to represent their views to the social worker rather than voicing their opinions directly. A distinctive experience was reported by one participant who explained her memory regarding the need to share a room with a sibling. While she recalls her parents making their views known at the beginning stages “I remember being told that I’d have to share a bedroom with (sibling) and not being very impressed with that” and thus not feeling her voice was heard, she further elaborates:

“I think I would have done enough moaning to my mother about it, to be honest with you, I don’t think I would have had .. the guts to actually sit down and go ‘well this is how I feel’ to the social workers you know and I would have always been kinda more ‘ah yea, that’s ok’ you know where I’d be kind of, I wouldn’t want to speak up if you know what I mean” (Kate, early 30’s)

Exploring the aspect of children’s voices being heard throughout their years fostering, (Susan, early 20s) spoke positively regarding her mother managing to incorporate the views of children in the household in the decision making process around placements:
“she has always sat down with us any time she got a call she’d say ‘ok I will talk to the (children) about it and she’d always run all decisions through us … and I think that has helped us hugely as well because it’s a whole, we’re a whole family team working with this you know yea, I definitely think that, and I think that was very supportive of her to do that even from a very young age I remember her doing that”

This approach recognises the importance of a collaborative element in terms of the success of a placement identifying the concept of ‘team’ in the process. The practicalities of a child being placed and the co-operation necessary to withstand the challenges anticipated for the whole family unit must be recognised. Susan again highlights this aspect:

“it’s another child coming into your household, am and if everyone isn’t on board it just won’t work out, life would be made a misery for everyone else then, so it’s definitely a one for all kind of job”

3.3.2 Expectations

Of interest were the reports from participants regarding their expectations of fostering at the beginning phase. Given the retrospective nature of the study while some were unable to recollect their thoughts, Rose (early 30s) encapsulates the reality of the prospect of fostering for a birth child and the apprehension felt:

“it was scary for me cos I was the baby of the family and I was kind of like .. spoiled rotten and I was thinking oh, someone’s gonna come in now and the jealousy kind of, you’d have that side to it as well and you’d be afraid of what’d happen and would they be in the family and would they settle in the family, would they cause disruption, you know”

Others seemed less daunted by the prospect and reflected a generally positive outlook:

“I can’t really remember, I wasn’t sure what to expect … I suppose I thought it was just going to be having a friend for a while” (Ciara, early 20’s)

“I never really thought about it like … I was at the age where you just kinda look at it as you’re helping .. you know me Ma and Da were helping kids that needed help like, that’s the way I looked at it “ (Dermot, mid 20s)
One participant also referred to the futility of expectations at the beginning phase given the impossibility of a younger child having any capacity to “envision the impact it would have on your life”. (Stephen, early 30s)

3.4 Impact of Foster Placements

As expected the impact on the family once a foster child was placed heavily dominated all the narratives in the study. Experiences of impact ranged across areas such as physical environment, family dynamics, norms, behaviours, relationships and featured both positive and negative aspects. Reports from participants varied substantially regarding their experience of foster children in their homes and given the vast numbers of children placed in a relatively small number of foster families interviewed, the accounts show a rich flavour of the reality of fostering from a birth child’s perspective.

3.4.1 Behaviours

It is important to note that differing experiences of the impact of behaviours of foster children placed were recounted by participants. Some behaviour was specific to particular children and not representative of the broader experience of children placed. The majority of participants recounted many incidents of episodes of demanding behaviour occurring in the family home when foster children were placed. In contrast two participants considered themselves not to have come across difficult behaviours in the course of their fostering experience. Instances recalled related to physical aggression “punching or kicking or stuff like that” and verbal aggression in terms of cursing which was frequently directed towards a foster carer. A common thread was a sense of the routine in the family being disrupted and the difficulty associated with persistent behaviour “it’s just constant turmoil or you can see them constantly trying to cause trouble or constantly trying to get a reaction”. Much concern was also expressed by participants regarding how behaviour impacted on their parents as outlined by Rose (early 30s) relating to a foster child refusing to go to school:

“a lot of the times it seemed to upset my mother more so than my father because she would be thinking like ‘oh God, like I’m failing him, like why isn’t he doing this’ you know she would think things like that and she’d be saying
'why do I always have to like, everything has to be a fight with him trying to get him to go to school’, you know it was so much work on them’

In some situations participants differentiated between difficulties present in the earlier stages in long term placements which subsequently resolved over time as a child settled to be part of the family. An example was a child placed who was close in age to the youngest sibling in the foster carer’s home. Whereas the youngest sibling had been accustomed to parents “whole undivided attention” for several years, a younger foster child placed resulted in continuous arguing, “constant tell-tale” and “for the first couple of years they just didn’t see eye to eye”. As reflected in other similar narratives relationships developed into a connection where they were “inseparable” into their teenage years and beyond. This participant was also cognisant of the impact on her parents which was a theme common to all interviewees. She had an awareness of the foster child being “quite needy” and how incessant attention seeking was exhausting for her mother.

One participant had a vivid memory from earlier years of a regular weekend respite placement for a teenage boy. Kate (early 30s) relates the direct impact experienced:

“I still to this day I remember (name) and being like terrorised by him cos I would have been quite shy when I was younger and quiet and .. I remember like he tormented me for a few weeks and in the end I ended up freaking out and I was in floods of tears and all .. it was when he stole my bike”

She reasons that “once my Mam started taking difficult kids, it was like they (social workers) knew she could handle them and more difficult kids were placed with her”. Hence her recollections of short term placements in the earlier years with some older children presenting challenging behaviours. Contrary to other accounts from participants the placement which had the greatest impact in her experience was a child placed as a baby who subsequently stayed long term. It seems particularly challenging behaviours manifested themselves in later years which unfortunately resulted in placement breakdown.

Recurrent problematic behaviour involving tantrums and compulsive lying were a common feature of the household. An aspect that was most disconcerting was the unpredictability of the behaviour as the child was likely to “start screaming her head off .. nobody would be near her” while another was the difficulty around honesty “she was a compulsive liar .. she didn’t even know she was lying”. While there was recognition of a particular diagnosis regarding
the behaviour issues experienced Kate was cognisant of how the lived reality affected the household.

“a lot of the time in the house am things were done for peace sake with (name), it was kind of like where it didn’t matter what everybody else wanted it was ‘oh for peace sake we’ll just do what (child) wants’ .. she got basically, not what she wanted all the time but if she didn’t .. [it was] guaranteed .. screaming”

As a youngster in her teens this participant powerfully recollects the physical aggression and threat felt from a child several years her junior, “she was strong and she was big .. she brought me to tears on more than one occasion between threatening and screaming and fighting and there was always arguments in the morning”.

This powerful account of the lived reality for a child in a foster home reinforces the need for social workers to be vigilant in monitoring the experiences of foster carer’s children. In this situation the participant was aware that her mother “may have held back on the extent of what was happening” to prevent placement breakdown as she “didn’t want to give up”.

3.4.2 Sharing

All participants talked of the practical implications of having a foster child come into their family home with the issue of space featuring in all accounts to varying degrees of importance. Some participants reported little impact in this regard in circumstances where bedroom space was not an issue. Others seemed unperturbed with the need to share bedroom space “I had to share a room like but, it never bothered me at all” as reported by a participant who did not consider this problematic in his early teenage years. As mentioned previously another participant was keenly aware of her discontent with the need to move back to sharing a bedroom with a sibling and for periods of time in between placements she compensated by staying “in the spare bedroom” which was not ideal. In current practice the issue of space in the foster carer’s home is addressed in the early pre application stages with an emphasis on ensuring children in the home are not discommoded in this regard.

Another practicality mentioned by several participants related to sharing belongings. Some interviewees did not see it as a significant issue signalling previous practices in the household as synonymous with a more relaxed outlook:
“In our family we were a quite close extended family, so I’d always play with my cousins, so for us it was just someone else in the house, like there wasn’t an issue where you’d have to share your toys or anything like that cos there was always people in and out but because of the way our family was setup, it was just another one in the house .. it was always, you didn’t have a choice, you shared and that was it” (Stephen, early 30s)

In the same vein another participant associated his family’s prior involvement in child minding to be a precursor to the impact of fostering as he was accustomed to children coming in and out of their home. There seemed to be an understanding and acceptance of the sharing element in many narratives with Susan (early 20s) reflecting circumstances from a family who cared by children of all ages for shorter periods of time:

“now we are very open and we share absolutely everything .. sometimes some things like expensive things might have to be locked up away in our bedrooms and stuff .. but yea we’ve shared everything, TV remotes was the biggest argument over the last number of years but sure you get that in every household anyway, hair straighteners you know all that kind of thing”

Kate (early 30s) was the one participant who reported a negative response regarding the practical impact on sharing belongings which related to her younger siblings experience where the foster child:

“broke her play station or something at one stage , just out of sheer temper, thrown it on the ground”

It is pertinent to note that this experience relates to a child with particularly challenging behaviour and was not the norm across many other placements. In her own circumstance she took precautionary measures to guard her personal belongings which involved locking her bedroom door. The overall message from the data was that sharing was considered to be an inherent part of fostering and was embraced by children in the foster family.

3.4.3 Rules

Consideration of how fostering impacted on rules in the household did not feature significantly in the data. References were made to a noticeable higher threshold in the home
in terms of foster children’s behaviours. Stephen’s (early 30s) account encompasses the sentiment:

“I always thought they (foster children) were tolerated more than us so they play by different rules cos obviously you can’t be as hard .. well he (foster child) has different circumstances so you can’t tell him this, that or the other and that’s .. for him, he was really frustrating and annoying, and he would frustrate you no matter how nice you were”

Kate (early 30s) also voiced her frustration with her parent’s management of demanding behaviour:

“It was annoying, like quite annoying .. you’d be kinda going ‘for God’s sake like’ here she is throwing another tantrum, doing it again, if I did half of what she did what would you do, like the stuff (foster child) has done, if me or (sibling) ever done that, she (parent) wouldn’t have put up with it, but she (parent) just takes it and takes it”

The sense of preferential treatment of a foster child was felt by some participants in the early stages of a long term placement:

“just thinking like ‘God he (foster child) can get everything he wants, like I’ve been asking for such a thing for so long and then he gets it’, you know, it was just little petty things like that but it meant so much to me at the time it was really important to me” (Rose, early 30s)

This participant recalls how things improved over time when her parents “realised that they were kind of over compensating for (foster child)” and decided to pursue a strategy of “no we’ll treat him as our own, no special treatment”. It seems changes regarding household rules following a child’s placement did not feature significantly in participants reports of how fostering impacted on their lives.
3.5 Information Sharing

A key concept throughout all the narratives was the issue of communication and the sharing of information. This featured in experiences of birth children in relation to their parents and also to social workers (dealt with in more detail later). The significance of access to information throughout all stages of the fostering process was evident.

3.5.1 Background Information

Regarding the placement of foster children in their homes, a common thread in reports was the idea of information being shared on a ‘need to know’ basis which participants found largely satisfactory and understandable. At times information on the background of a child being placed was relayed by parents in the family. Participants spoke of understanding basic details in terms of parents or family members not being able to care for a child. There was an awareness of parents being selective in information given and wanting to convey a sense of “it’s really hard for” the child in circumstances where a birth mother “had a really tough life and .. was really struggling”. Presenting background information to children in a non-judgemental, empathic manner was a dominant feature in the narratives and may be central to promoting children’s altruistic capacity at a young age. The value of open channels of communication between parents and children was acknowledged by participants as beneficial:

“each foster child was different and obviously as each one came you kinda got more information or you got a clearer understanding, I found that if we approached our parents and asked something they didn’t fob us off .. they kinda it was the attitude of you know, you can ask us questions and we might not be able to answer them because of .. it’s not fair for you to know something”. (Lucy, early 30s)

The need to be protective of foster children’s background history also featured in accounts from participants. While details seemed to be shared on a “need to know” basis it was evident that an emphasis on being mindful of confidential information was encouraged. All participants echoed this sentiment, one recalling “we were always told to keep it to ourselves, not to let anybody else know .. and we all did, we all respected that”. The idea of the sharing of information being age related was also a common element with one participant identifying “the sit downs before a child comes into our care have obviously got longer as we’ve grown up and we understand more”. Developing an understanding of the context around children
coming into care and relating that to the emotional upheaval associated for a child in such
circumstances is recognised as a key component in fostering. The availability of significant
information as a means of facilitating the children in the household adapting to a foster child
joining the family is emphasised by Susan (early 20s):

“we would have known quite a lot about the background, and I think that was
very important for us because we knew what we were helping you know and it’s
nearly like a new adjustment to us because we know we’re helping a child but
why are we helping a child, so having that little bit of information ‘oh they’re
going through a bit of a hard time at the minute, they’re not getting on with
their Mammy and Daddy’ you know that kind of thing, I think it helped us
transition more easily”

The need to be conscious of a child’s capacity to take in substantial details was also
mentioned by interviewees. The concept of parents filtering information was deemed
satisfactory by Stephen (early 30s) who explicitly refers to a method which worked well in
his family:

“I remember being so young there’s a lot of information to take in, I think it’s
better to have bite size bits of it than am everything coming into you like an
information over load”.

3.5.2 Placement Endings / Uncertainty
Reflection on participants understanding of future planning for the foster children in their
families was addressed during interviews. Some participants had several experiences of
placement endings depending on the type of fostering the family was undertaking. A theme
emerging from many such narratives was the uncertainty felt given the frequent lack of
concrete information on whether a child would remain as part of the family or not. While this
very issue is an inherent problem in the current model of child protection services in Ireland
the impact of such uncertainty on birth children in a foster family is not always prominent.

The nature of short term fostering and the demands it places on children in the foster family
was represented in all accounts in the study. Conflicting feelings were expressed by a
participant from a family who cared for pre adoptive babies in the earlier years of the
family’s fostering experience. While recollecting the sadness felt when the first baby moved
she was aware of a shift in thinking towards the next possible placement. At a later stage
however as another baby moved on she remembers being extremely upset and thinking “I don’t think we can do this anymore”. In this circumstance it seemed the process of building up an attachment to new born babies and coping with the emotional aftermath of them moving on from their home was becoming too difficult for a child in her early teenage years. Interestingly a sense of doubt and uncertainty was also prevalent in some circumstances even though a placement was confirmed to be long term. Lucy (early 30s) recalls:

“I’d say to my mum like do you think will they (birth parents) take her and she’d say ‘no, no, no she’s happy here .. her mum and dad aren’t well so they’re not well enough to look after her so she’s not going anywhere’.”

Despite such reassurance a level of doubt still resonated for children in the household “but we kinda thought what happens if the mother just changes her mind one day” and permeated their experience “You kinda felt that uncertainty”.

Comparable accounts of a sense of insecurity about a foster child’s future in the family were prevalent through the majority of the narratives. One situation involved a child who had been placed with the foster family from birth and was aged three when it was confirmed that she would be remaining with the foster family on a long term basis. It must be recognised that the current system of fostering services in Ireland where the reality of children being placed with foster families for several years without decisions being made regarding their future is wholly inadequate. From the perspective of foster carer’s children the presence of such ambiguity in their everyday lives is a source of anxiety as in “you don’t know if they’re just going to be taken off you one day”.

Regarding placement endings there were diverse accounts from interviewees on how this aspect of fostering was managed. Three participants reported positively in this regard and talked of knowing from the outset that placements were going to be for a specific period of time. One participant having limited experience of two short term placements recalled efforts being made by social workers to adhere to agreed timescales. Susan (early 20s) also talked about the ending of placements happening in a planned way for the most part “but like it’s a natural process you know they go for a day, they go for an overnight, they go for a weekend, it’s a smooth transition, we’ve always had a smooth transition”.

In contrast was a participant who spoke of the experience of a sudden end to a placement very close to Christmas where a young child had been part of the family for a lengthy period
of time. The child’s placement ended abruptly “I just assumed she was going for access you know and she never came back”. While he acknowledged the impact on his family unit “it’s hard like .. cos we only thought she was going for access with her Mam whatever and then, she didn’t even really get to say goodbye or nothing like, you know” he at the same time recognised the positive side for this child “she got to spend Christmas with her Mam then like .. which wasn’t a bad thing either you know, but still”(Dermot, early 20’s).

Across the data similarities were evident regarding participants opinions on the issue of information sharing. All of the narratives expressed views inextricably linking the availability of information with a positive sense of being part of a family unit involved in fostering.

### 3.6 Experience of Birth Family Contact

The aspect of familiarisation with sensitive information relating to the backgrounds of children placed with foster families was a topic for discussion during interviews in the study. As previously mentioned participants seemed cognisant of the need to be respectful of such details. Also replicated in the narratives was their heightened awareness of differing circumstances for others. Arrangements for foster children to meet with birth parents on a regular basis while placed with a foster family resulted in foster carers’ children having first-hand knowledge of family backgrounds and the reality of the significant people involved in their lives. Most interviewees talked about such access visits happening outside of the family home and not involving direct contact with a foster child’s family of origin.

Of the total of seven participants, five had encountered situations whereby visits with birth parents of foster children were organised for the most part by social workers and took place at social work offices or alternative venues. Circumstances varied including foster parents and foster children being collected and returned to the foster home by social workers. However in most cases foster parents were actively involved in bringing foster children to meet their birth parents. This practice ensures the child has the security of their primary carer in potentially upsetting situations and also provides an opportunity for foster carers to connect with birth

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6 The Child Care Act, 1991 Section 37: places a duty on the Child and Family Agency to “facilitate reasonable access to the child by his parents, any person acting in loco parentis, or any other person who, in the opinion of the Child and Family Agency has a bona fide interest in the child”.

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parents and share information on the child’s past and present concerns. An understanding of
the upset felt by foster children regarding these visits was expressed by one participant:

"sometimes she (birth mother) wouldn’t even turn up, ya know like, it’d be set
up, and my mother would be waiting there, wherever the location is and then
the social worker would ring and say well actually they’re not coming, ya know
that’d be heart breaking for him (foster child), ya know" (Rose, early 30s)

Another participant recalled that “the social worker was always the middle man” regarding
contact with birth parents in earlier years although this had evolved to direct contact as their
family fostered a second generation of children. Openness to facilitating parents at special
occasions was also acknowledged in this family as “there would have been special occasions
where (foster parent) would organise a birthday party and would invite the parents over, of
course that would have been the case” (Susan, early 20s).

Notably in one participants family there was an open and inclusive approach to contact with
birth parents through many foster placements spanning a period of over twenty years. Lucy
(early 30s) explains how their family functioned regarding contact:

“when the parents came for access, they came to our house ... I don’t know if
this is something my mam and dad just done .. that they could come here or if
that was the norm back then that parents went to foster parents houses but it
was kind of very much done on like ‘well she’s part of the family so you’re part
of the family’ and that’s kind of something that you kind of .. there’s certain
kind of foster children that have gone through the house, that went through the
house 20 years ago and we’re still in contact with”

This welcoming attitude undoubtedly promoted lasting positive relationships between foster
parents and birth parents of foster children which seem to have engendered lifelong
connections and enhanced outcomes for the children placed.

A second participant also reported his family facilitating birth parent contact in the foster
carer’s home relating to children who were placed long term. In one situation a birth father
was welcome to “see her like any time and that so .. like he comes down, he’s more than
welcome to come into the house, like he could come in, have a cup of tea whatever, he could
sit here with her, he could take her out like”. Similarly another adult foster child in this
family had open contact with his siblings “they can come see him like, they were here for his debs and that you know”.

While most participants experienced arrangements for birth family contact happening outside of the foster home, it was clear that those families who encouraged this contact in their homes were instrumental in building supportive, lasting relationships with birth family members. This practice may have impacted on foster family members though the data shows in reports from two participants it increased their understanding of the foster child’s background and children in the family embraced their parents welcoming attitude.

### 3.7 Increased Awareness of Social Issues

Looking at the broader aspect the experience of fostering appears to have focussed participant’s outlook in terms of social awareness. As one participant simply states “you kinda learn that, like everyone’s different and everyone’s situations are different”. The following account details a perspective representative of many participants:

“I think it opens up your eyes on life itself, to me it made me happier for what I have and I think it has changed me for the better and I think I’m less self-centred ... I know I was only 14 but I still think it has changed the way I look at things completely in life .. I think like Jesus you’re moaning about A, B or C where your life could be 10 times worse, you know the way they say the grass is always greener on the other side, you get to see the other side where it’s not so green, that type of thing” (Stephen, early 30s)

While Susan (early 20s) describes the diversity of placements in her family’s fostering history “we’ve had some challenging children and their stories would have been quite challenging and you know dealing with the parents and sometimes the actual birth parents can be more challenging than dealing with the foster child” she also details the differing circumstances foster children may have come from “we’ve had children from all different backgrounds, .. parents have been in prison, addiction .. you know along the lines of children seeking asylum, .. you know we’ve had all different stories and backgrounds” and links such experience to her own enhanced social awareness in a positive way:
“it has also given me huge life skills and realisation of peoples backgrounds .. I think a good perspective on life”

Similarly Ciara (early 20s) recognised the way fostering has broadened her outlook and recalled “you’d be just be more aware of .. how just people are brought up differently”.

It seems to be that in general participants were likely to develop increased awareness of social issues relating to parental backgrounds such as addiction, homelessness, mental health concerns and in some cases incarceration particularly in situations where placements extended for longer periods and the reality of foster children’s family circumstances became apparent.

3.8 Social Work Support

Strong views on the frequency of social work contact and the quality of the support available were outlined in all the narratives. While some participants reported positively on their experience of social work input others referred to inconsistencies over time. A key concept commented on by all participants was the high levels of turnover in staff more particularly regarding social workers supporting the foster child placed. Several participants were more accepting of scarce resources in terms of the foster family support element but were worried by the lengthy periods of time during which a child in care did not have an allocated social worker.

Several participants expressed varying levels of satisfaction with their perception of social work support, some having direct contact when the social worker visited their home and others aware that their parents had contact and put forward their views. Comments ranged from reports of a parent feeling “extremely supported” to a participant’s recollection of the fostering social worker being “very friendly and that like, always got on well with her”. Another interviewee details her experience of the fostering social worker visits “anytime she’d be in the house she’d always make an effort to sit down and kind of talk to us”. Similar experiences were reported by five of the seven interviewed, recognising the availability of social workers and efforts made to engage with them on visits.
Concern however regarding the issue of high turnover in social worker positions was pinpointed by participants as a negative factor. In most accounts this related more specifically to the social worker for the foster child. Rose (early 30s) explains:

“Sometimes the social workers would change quite quickly with (foster child). You know over the years my mam would say oh he’s got another new worker so they’d come, see him, get to know him and by the time they got to know him it might be a different one so that’s the only downfall, the only pitfall that my mother always said like that there was never kind of a constant social worker for him”.

Consistent disruption in terms of social workers assigned to the children in care and the possible detrimental impact for the children involved was referred to by all seven participants. One participant highlighted this experience of a social worker having “changed several times” a fact that “didn’t help (foster child) build up a relationship”. The particular placement unfortunately ended in breakdown in later years and the lack of consistency in social work support for the child was identified as a factor that was not helpful. A suggestion that came from a participant in this regard was the need for a time commitment to be given by social workers to minimise such disruption. The practice implications of such are complex though the means to address the reasons for such high turnover and take possible practical steps to reduce the destabilising effects for children in care are a priority.

It was evident from some accounts that social work support for foster carers was at times inconsistent through their fostering history. Reports suggested a high level of support at the beginning phase of fostering however contact lessened over time in some instances. Such inconsistencies were highlighted by Rose (early 30s) who recollects the frustration felt by her mother at times:

“she felt that she was hitting a brick wall, she wasn’t getting enough help, I think as the years went on the help kind of stopped, there wasn’t as much, am at the start there was so many social workers there was so much help but as (foster child) got a bit older it was like as if . . unless my parents contacted them they were happy to leave it, the visits kinda dwindled down a lot, they wouldn’t be here as regular”
Reflecting on her family’s experience of support over a period of twenty years fostering one participant succinctly reports “it could have been a lot better and it should have been a lot better”. Her views reiterated other’s accounts on the need to be able to contact a social worker when necessary and be assured of a response “need to pick up the phone and not have to wait weeks for an appointment”. Periods of time when families were without a social worker were also identified as a cause for concern. Dissatisfaction could be avoided by “not having gaps with no one because you’re kinda left in limbo”.

Another participant spoke of particular circumstances relating to his family’s care of a foster child with a severe disability who was placed long term. In contrast to previous accounts he recalls limited support in earlier years “I think we had the bare minimum contact” while acknowledging that social work support was more readily available subsequently. Reflecting on the benefits of regular contact, this participant’s prime concern was in relation to his parents perceived needs:

“I think maybe for my parents it would have been a bit better, based on our special needs .. I suppose if I was a foster carer I’d like to know at least someone’s checking in to see are you ok, seeing they know it’s a difficult situation, not to do anything but more ‘hey how are you doing’ type thing .. I think if I was fostering even a five minute chat, obviously not every week but every now and again .. I think that would be beneficial” (Stephen, early 30s)

A distinctive experience was elucidated by this participant relating to support specific to fostering a disabled child. He drew attention to a particular example of his family experiencing a dearth of support in circumstances where a modified vehicle was needed for their foster child. He vividly recalls the effort required of his parents to fight for funding for essential equipment:

“all I remember is my parents going crazy and my mother losing sleep .. and I didn’t see anybody helping her out .. it nearly gave my mother a nervous breakdown and from that perspective it was the one time I felt we needed them and they weren’t there for us”.

As his family cares for a severely disabled child who will not be able to live independently Stephen shares his worries for the future:
“I don’t worry about my job, I don’t worry about money for myself, I don’t worry about having a roof over my head, I worry as they (parents) get older and as (foster child) gets older, how are they going to cope and that’s my worry now”

Varying views on the experience of social work support were reflected in the data. While some were positive, others reported inconsistency over time with all participants voicing concern for the high levels of turnover in social workers for the foster children. This viewpoint emerged organically which illustrates an altruistic, empathic nature in foster carers children.

### 3.9 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter the perspectives of adult children of foster carers have been illustrated as individual experiences are drawn from rich narratives and analysed. Many facets of the fostering experience have been presented in an attempt to gain insight into the reality of life in a foster family. Themes emerging from the data are categorised under broad areas including experience of the assessment process, impact on the family of children being placed, information sharing, raising the social awareness of birth children in the family and social work support. Dominant issues highlighted by participants focussed on many positive aspects of being a member of a foster family including a sense of achievement in taking an active part in helping a child needing care. The lasting relationships formed with foster children despite particularly challenging circumstances were an unexpected finding, as was the continuing contact maintained post placement in many situations. Appreciation of their own family in the context of the heightened awareness of others circumstances was also identified as a positive. The negative aspects highlighted included the recognition of participants of the stresses of fostering on their parents and also the effects on foster children of regular changes in social worker.

In the next chapter the findings are discussed incorporating the relevant literature and practice implications are considered. Further research recommendations are also put forward.
Chapter 4  Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 Introduction

Despite the wealth of knowledge and research in existence regarding foster care from the perspectives of the needs of children in care and the involvement of foster carers, there is a dearth of understanding relating to the experience of the biological children of foster carers. This study, which will be referred to in this chapter as ‘the current study’ presents and analyses the narratives of seven adults in an exploration of their vast experience as members of foster families caring for large numbers of children in care over lengthy periods. Although the study is small in scale the personalised accounts given build on an expanding body of knowledge in this area.

Following on from the findings presented in the previous chapter, several significant themes have emerged and merit further discussion. These included the impact of fostering on family dynamics, the significance of information sharing and the experience of social work support. Discussion of these issues will highlight implications for social work practice and service provision in fostering services. The chapter concludes with specific recommendations for further research.

4.2 Impact on Family Dynamics

As outlined in the previous chapter, the current study produced rich narratives detailing how children of foster carers experienced changing family dynamics once a foster child was placed in their home. While views on impact ranged across specific areas of space, sharing, rules and belongings, the dominant issue emanating from the data was the behaviour of foster children and the effect this had on their parent’s time.

Concern regarding the sharing of parent’s attention with foster children was highlighted in findings with a reduction in the availability of parent’s time being identified as one of the key components. This finding is reflected across the literature as Hojer, Sebba and Luke’s (2013) international literature review notes that sharing parent’s time is one of the most tangible impacts on children’s lives when their parents start to foster. The sense that fostering ‘takes
over’ a parents focus in terms of both time and energy was accepted as inevitable by some and somewhat resented by others.

The findings reflect a theme identified in the literature as Younes and Harp (2007) refer to parent’s unavailability impacting on relationships with their birth children. Findings in the current study show a particular acceptance of the specific practicalities around sharing and household rules for instance. High levels of tolerance were noted in many areas while concern about the stress levels for parents was evident. Many participants were found to embrace the changes in their families and focussed on the positive aspects such as the possibility of making a difference in a young child’s life. This aspect of findings correlates with Sutton and Stacks (2013) study where engagement in the fostering process was seen to evoke feelings of pride in positive outcomes. The contribution of children in the foster home to the placement experience for children in care is clear in findings given the demands placed on them and their ability to adapt in challenging circumstances.

Looking at practice implications it is crucial to note the Fostering Network’s (2010) assertion that for the most part foster carers children remain largely ‘invisible’ in terms of the degree to which they are acknowledged explicitly in the policy and legislative arena. In this regard it is imperative that efforts are made to fulfil existing practice guidelines. The findings may focus practitioner’s attention on the obligation set under the National Standards for Foster Care regarding link workers’ support of foster carers and their children. The challenge therefore is to be innovative and intuitive regarding ways of engaging with children in order to build a relationship which will encourage exchanging of views.

4.3 Communication and Information Sharing

The significance of information sharing and clear communication channels both within the family structure and between the family and the social work service was highlighted throughout the data. This aspect also features in earlier research and is deemed a key element in Hojer Sebba and Luke’s (2013) literature review recommendations which also highlights

7 The National Standards for Foster Care, 2003, Dept. Of health and Children, 15.3 states that “Link workers responsibilities generally include providing regular supervision and support for foster carers and their children”, 15.4 states that “Link workers meet with foster cares on a regular basis and have separate meetings with foster carers own children”.

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the need for foster carers to consider how their children could be involved in discussions and decisions about starting to foster. The review suggest that fostering services may be in a position to encourage this by recognising the children of the foster family as potential caregivers. The findings in the current study concur with existing knowledge by recognising the importance of involvement of foster carer’s children in the decision making process in the beginning stages and the need for consideration of their views (Brown, 2008; Twigg and Swan, 2007). As the findings from the current study suggest children need to be recognised as having a central role from the outset given the evidence of how fostering impacts on their lives. Practice implications include the need to ensure children are considered in the decision making process prior to the assessment beginning. While current practice operates under the National Standards for Foster Care which states “The applicants household is assessed and all family members including children, in accordance with their age, stage of development and individual needs, are involved in the process” (14a.7) the extent of this involvement is shown to vary in the study’s findings. As Gill (1993) argues, professionals have a key role in engaging the children of prospective foster carers not just in one or two meetings but by involving them in a more intensive way in the entire process. While such involvement was experienced in one situation in the current study, it was not the norm. Lessons for practice may be the need to focus more specifically on the children in the household to determine their views. As also indicated in findings the current study showed that the parental version of a child’s view may not accurately reflect the reality. The need to allow for reticence in children in expressing their views is vital in order to ensure a credible assessment of their viewpoint. Consideration of more widespread use of group training opportunities for the children of foster carers may enhance their understanding and facilitate shared learning.

Information sharing and communication was also highlighted in the current study in relation to the placement of children and continued support services. Reports in the study suggested that talking to the biological children about the circumstances of children being placed helped them to understand the task involved. As evident from the findings, the confidential nature of this information was understood by all involved. This compares with Hojer, Sebba and Luke’s (2013) conclusion that such information results in children feeling involved.

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8 National Standards document is based on the relevant legislation, regulation, guidance and best practice derived from evidence based research and professional experience. These standards apply to those services provided under the Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995 and the Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations, 1995.

9 ‘New Beginnings’ is a training package for the children of foster carers available from the Irish Foster Care Association which is aimed at involving and including them in the fostering process.
competent and part of the process. It also may make it easier for them to cope with possible difficult behaviours. The message for foster carers and social workers alike is that it is important to recognise the role biological children in the foster family play in the fostering process. The experiences of the children of foster carers in the current study contrasts to Hojer (2007) as findings indicate that information was adjusted to children’s age and cognitive capacity. The findings also bear out Gill’s (1993) contention that information prepares the whole family.

4.4 The Need for Support

McDermid, Holmes, Kirton and Signoretta (2012) while discussing retention of foster carers, refers to the difficulty in measuring the concept of support given its complex dynamics and strong subjective elements. Studies such as Sinclair et al (2004) look at its key aspects finding that feelings of support were linked to ‘objective’ measures such as frequency of supervising social worker visits, having an allocated children’s social worker, receipt of care plans and prompt annual reviews. Findings in the current study regarding the experiences reported by adult children of foster carers concur with aspects identified in the literature regarding the availability and responsiveness of social work support. While there were many positive reports of sufficient support in this regard, the one area featuring in all accounts was the issue of high turnover in social work staff. Of interest is Strijker’s (2008) reference to research showing the variables which correlate to a chance of a disrupted placement in fostering as being: frequency of contact between foster parents and care worker, the amount of energy care workers invest in foster families, and the number of changes in care workers during placement. As identified in the current study’s findings, participants were concerned by the impact of multiple changes in social work personnel for the children in foster care. This is a stringent challenge for fostering services in Ireland given the resource restrictions in place currently in the Child and Family Agency (HIQA, 2013). Younes and Harp (2007) reflect widespread constraints in resource allocation in fostering services referring to funding cuts

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10 This is an agreed written plan, drawn up by the Child and Family Agency social worker in consultation with the child, his or her family and all those involved with his or her care, for the current and future care of the child that is designed to meet his or her needs. (National Standards for Foster Care, 2003, Dept. of Health and Children)

11 Reviews of the care plan take place within legally defined time limits. (National Standards for Foster Care, 2003, Dept. of Health and Children)
impacting on staffing, worker caseloads and turnover which undermine the success of foster care and the provision of supportive services to foster families.

Sellick and Thoburn (2002) regard social work involvement as pivotal for foster carers. Likewise Colton, Roberts and Williams (2008) looking at recruitment and retention of foster carers refer to foster carers being most positive about social workers who display an interest in how carers manage; are easily contacted and responsive; listen and encourage and pay heed to the family’s needs and circumstances (Fisher et al, 2000; Sellick, 1999). These earlier findings were replicated in the current study, where the adult children of foster carers also expressed satisfaction with support while identifying gaps. The sense of children in the family being forgotten about is also dominant in literature (Twigg and Swan, 2007) and also appears in findings from the current study. Findings from the current study indicated that support was generally more intensive in the beginning stages of fostering, but was not sustained. A particularly striking finding was the lack of support experienced by an adult member of a foster family caring for a severely disabled foster child. As already highlighted the need for focus on measures to stabilise the support system for children in foster care, foster carers and their own children is crucial in maintaining a robust foster care service. One consideration may be the emphasis on a support group network for the children of foster carers which Watson and Jones (2002) reported as having potential benefits. Findings in the current study supported such a concept as a means of sharing experiences and acknowledging the part played by children in the foster family.

4.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Given the significant gaps in the knowledge base regarding the experience of birth children of foster carers, this small scale study has attempted to enhance our understanding of the pertinent issues in the Irish context. As there is a recognised lack of research in this area, the need is evident for a large scale study focussing on birth children of foster carers across a diverse sample which would give a more balanced picture of how fostering is experienced on a regional or national level.

While in current practice there is recognition of the need to be inclusive of the views of foster carers’ children during the assessment process and on an ongoing basis, research into the
implementation of the current training package which specifically focuses on the children in the foster family would highlight if such training is being offered and also evaluate its effectiveness.

4.6 Conclusion

The motivation for this study centred on a desire to focus on birth children of foster families who are a crucial and insufficiently acknowledged resource in fostering. Their lived experiences are captured in personalised accounts reflecting the quality of the relationships that have evolved between them and the foster children.

Findings broadly support existing qualitative literature and highlight the significant role that the children of foster carers play as part of the fostering team. Discussions revealed their perspectives on the impact of fostering on their daily lives, their experience of being included in the fostering process, their views on adapting when a child is placed and the support structures available. The findings shed considerable light on the complexities, dynamics and adjustments experienced by foster carers’ children. Practice implications outlining the need to focus on children in the foster family as a resource in the fostering task have been highlighted. Fostering services need to be more effective in ensuring foster family members are recognised and their views heard. The need to engage them in the fostering process, ensure they are well informed and provide ongoing support must be a priority for service delivery. Increased understanding of the central role played by foster carers’ children may enhance stability in placement as well as contributing to the wellbeing of birth and foster children alike.
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet
Appendix 2: Consent Form
Appendix 3: Letter to Agency
Appendix 4: Agency Consent Form
Appendix 5: Interview Schedule
Appendix 6: Coding Categories
Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

This research is a study being carried out by Teresa Loftus, a Master in Applied Social Research student in Trinity College, Dublin. Part of the academic requirements for this course is to complete a research dissertation. The title of the research study is: The Children of Foster Carers: Exploring their Experiences

What is the study about?

This study is trying to learn about how the children of foster carers’ experienced being in a family who fostered. The researcher will be asking eight adult children of foster carers to take part in an interview. It is hoped that by learning about your experiences, we can understand more about what fostering is like for everyone in the family. In this way we can learn about how we can support families better.

What does taking part involve?

Taking part is your choice. If you decide that you would like to take part, the researcher will interview you in a place and at a time that suits you. The interview will last less than an hour. During the interview the researcher will explore aspects of your experience of being a member of a foster family such as involvement in decision making, changes in your family, positive and negative aspects, family relationships and information sharing. It is important that you know that you do not have to answer questions on any topic that you would prefer not to talk about. Your privacy and your choices will be respected at all times.

Confidentiality

With your permission the interview will be audio recorded. This is to ensure that I have a complete record of the interview. The recorder can be paused or turned off at any time if you are not comfortable with it. The content of the interviews will be anonymised. The recording will be transcribed by the researcher, after which the recording will be deleted. The transcript will be stored securely.

The only exception to anonymity would be in the event that information comes to light in an interview that implies that a child or children are at any risk. If that happened, it would be addressed under the Children First guidance.

What happens to the information you provide?

The findings of this research will be used for academic purposes only. The research findings will be used in the first instance, to write an academic thesis. It is also likely that they will be used in presentations at conferences, academic papers and may be utilised at local or national level to inform practice and policy on foster care.
After the interview

A fostering link worker will be available to you during the weeks following the interview if you want to talk with them about any issues that may have come up for you during the discussion.

Contacting the Researcher?

If you would like to discuss the study in more detail, you can contact the researcher at any time. The researchers name is Teresa Loftus and she may be contacted at 087 6763069. The research is being supervised by Dr. Helen Buckley who may be contacted at 01 8962065
Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

Consent Document - For Participation in Research Project Titled:

‘The Children of Foster Carers: Exploring their Experiences’

(Please tick or mark ×)

I have been given information about this project and understand what participation involves. □

I understand that the information I give will be treated with complete confidentiality and anonymity. □

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason. □

I understand that the interview will be recorded and stored in a secure place. □

I understand that the information I provide will be used to complete a research project. □

____________________  _______  ______________
Name of Participant (print)  Date  Signature

____________________  ________  ______________
Name of Researcher (print)  Date  Signature

If you need further information, please contact the researcher, Teresa Loftus at 087 6763069 or Dr. Helen Buckley (Supervisor) at 01 8963593.
Liz Cullen
Principal Social Worker
Child and Family Agency
Glenside Road
Wicklow

21/05/2014
Dear Liz,

Re: Research Study on the Experiences of Children of Foster Carers

I am writing to request your permission to access adult children of foster carers who may be interested in participating in a research project entitled ‘The Children of Foster Carers: Exploring their Experiences’. The research is part of the academic requirements for the M. Sc. Applied Social Research course. The completed dissertation will be held by the School of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity College.

This research aims to generate an in-depth understanding of how the children of foster carers experience the fostering process. This will inform our practice and enhance placement stability for children in foster care placements. This is an exploratory study and the hope is to interview eight adult children of foster carers. In order to safeguard the identity of any child in a family and ensure anonymity, only adult children of foster carers no longer fostering will be approached.

I enclose a copy of the information sheets for research participants and the consent form. I also enclose a consent form for you to sign and return at your earliest convenience if the Child and Family Agency is in a position to facilitate recruitment.

If you require additional information please do not hesitate to contact me (treasa.loftus@tusla.ie; 087 6763069) or my supervisor Dr. Helen Buckley (Tel. 01 8962065).

Kind regards

Teresa Loftus
Senior Social Work Practitioner
Appendix 4: Agency Consent Form

TUSLA Child and Family Agency
Dublin South East
Unit 9 Nutgrove Retail Park
Churchtown
Dublin 14

Agency Consent Form

Name of Organisation: Tusla Child and Family Agency, Dublin Mid Leinster
Date: 21/05/2014

I have read the information provided on a research project entitled, ‘The Children of Foster Carers: Exploring their Experiences’, and can confirm that permission has been granted to the researcher (name and details below) to use the service named above as a recruitment site.

Researcher: Teresa Loftus treasa.loftus@tusla.ie;loftust@tcd.ie Tel. 087 6763069
Supervisor: Dr. Helen Buckley hbuckley@tcd.ie Tel. 8962065

___________________              ___________________               ___________________
Liz Cullen                                        Principal Social Worker               Signature
Appendix 5: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Topic: The Children of Foster Carers: Exploring their Experiences

Background
- Family composition - Tell me about who is in your family?
- Foster Care History – Could you tell me about how your family has been involved in fostering, when started, children placed, how long doing it, how long part of family while fostered?

Recollection of hearing about fostering
- Information from parents – can you remember back to when you first heard about fostering, how did you hear, what age, what you thought about the idea, were your views sought?
- Information from social worker – can you tell me about your contact with a social worker, when it happened, did you feel your views were listened to, were important?
- Expectations – can you recall what you thought it would be like, what did you expect in the beginning?

Experience of assessment process
- Contact with social worker – did you have contact with the social worker while your parents were being assessed, what was that like?
- Discussion with parents / family members – was there discussion in the family about fostering or the assessment?
- Sense of being listened to – do you think the social worker was interested in what you thought or if you had any worries, did you feel your views were important in the process, did you feel listened to?
**Child placed**

- Recollection of how it was for the family – can you recall the first time a child came to stay with your family, what was that like?
- Changes in family – what was different in the household, in what way did the family change?
- Information sharing re history of child (sensitive information withheld) – did you know anything about the child’s background, did you know why the child was in care?

**Impact**

- Time with parents – how was it for you in terms of time with your parents, did fostering change how available they were to you?
- Sharing belongings/space – how did that work out, how did you feel?
- Difficult behaviours – was there times when a child’s behaviour had an impact on your family, was there an opportunity to talk about these behaviours, to help you understand them?
- Awareness of adverse circumstances of children’s lives – did you know about the circumstances of the child’s background, how different their experience of life had been.
- Opportunity to discuss issues / voice concerns – was there an opportunity to talk openly about any difficulties or worries you had?

**Placement ending**

- How managed – can you remember times when a child moved from your family, what was this like for you?
- Preparation, did you know in advance that a child was moving, was there a way to get ready for this?
- Support, do you feel that the family got support at this time, did you know where the child was going and why the move was happening, is there any way this could have been made easier?
Appendix 6: Coding Categories

Coding Categories

1. Profile / Demographics
2. Fostering Experience
3. Assessment Process
4. Impact
5. Information Sharing / Communication
6. Foster Sibling Relationships
7. Social Awareness
8. Social Work Support
9. Placement Endings
10. Post Placement Impact