

## Editorial

This issue of the *Review* includes papers that were presented at 'Fostering Matters: a Symposium Focussing on the Future of Foster Care' which took place on 28th March 2007 at the University of Salford. The event, which contributed to the 'national debate on the future of care', was organised by myself on behalf of the journal's publishers Whiting and Birch as well as the national charity the Fostering Network<sup>1</sup>. This national debate was prompted by growing concern that the care system was failing children and the government's subsequent introduction of the Green Paper *Care Matters: Transforming the lives of children and young people in care* (DfES, 2006). The event was attended by policy makers, the senior managers of children's services, as well as leading academics. Presentations were made by: Bob Broad (De Montfort University); Dave Crimmens (University of Lincoln); Nick Frost (Leeds Metropolitan University); Steve Hicks (University of Salford); Derek Kirton (University of Kent); and Clive Sellick (University of East Anglia). In addition, papers have been commissioned from Jo Dixon (University of York), Janette Logan (University of Manchester) as well as Jo Lipscombe and Elaine Farmer (both at the University of Bristol).

Papers by Broad, Kirton, Sellick as well as Lipscombe and Farmer have already been published in the previous issue of the *Review*. This issue contains the final four papers that were made available for publication (with or without the associated presentation) and, apart from the paper submitted by Dixon, it reflects a team approach to writing: Sellick has joined Logan to produce a contribution on lesbian and gay fostering, whilst I have worked with Frost to develop his paper on corporate parenting and with Blackburn to offer readers insights from the foster carers perspective. Although the White Paper (DfES, 2007) has been published since the symposium was held, the content of this edition reflects themes and issues that will continue to be a source of discussion, particularly as policy initiatives develop and new approaches to 'good practice' in fostering begin to emerge (see, for example, the Fostering Network, 2008).

The first paper in this edition is a development of the scene setting presentation made by Nick Frost, professor of Social Work (Children, Childhood and Families), at the symposium. Attention is focussed on the role of government acting as corporate parent to children who are unable to live with their birth parents. It is acknowledged that, irrespective of the good intentions of policy makers, placement providers and professionals, these children have not always been given the care and help adequate to their needs. Today, meeting their needs, particularly in terms of placement stability and educational support, is seen as essential in order for them to become included adult members of society. This paper outlines the policy initiatives that are being introduced as a means of achieving this goal, as well as some of the criticisms that have been levied.

Acknowledgement is made of the ideological influences on public policy in the United Kingdom (UK) and their contribution to the proposals. It is suggested that the proposed changes will make corporate parenting of the future an improvement on the minimalist and stigmatising provision of the past.

The second paper by Jo Dixon reports on an empirical project carried out in the UK between 2001 and 2003 which aimed to explore the early career progress of young people leaving care. It provides evidence for the argument acknowledged above: that is, the recent policy focus has not enabled care leavers to actively engage in education, employment or training (EET) as actively as the wider population (Dixon et al., 2006). Although some progress appears to have been made, it has nevertheless been disappointingly slow. However, Dixon also points out that the obstacles to participating in (EET) can occur prior to the young person's admission to care. For example, before becoming accommodated a child may experience loss or trauma, poor parenting, family problems, and socio-economic disadvantage, all of which might have long term implications that inhibit participation in EET. Dixon traces the problems that might occur whilst a child is looked after: placements may break down which disrupt home life and school attendance. There is a reduced likelihood of participating in EET if whilst in care, young people commit criminal offences and misuse drugs and alcohol. When exploring the obstacles encountered post-care, Dixon structures her discussion by means of the typology generated by the Work Foundation. That is, obstacles may be: personal; institutional; local or structural. Finally, Dixon suggests some policy and practice changes that might help young care leavers to avoid a future of unemployment.

The paper by Logan and Sellick does not relate directly to the government's *Care Matters* agenda. Instead, it draws attention to the ongoing and important (though often neglected) topic of foster care and sexuality. Over recent years the social climate has evolved and the currently liberal culture enables lesbians and gay men to adopt and foster children. However, the authors of the paper play with paradox by arguing that although legislation and policy has introduced greater equality, prejudice continues. This means that lesbians and gay men may still feel socially excluded and ostracised. Whilst this has numerous implications for fostering, the authors focus on the potential vulnerabilities of young people and the need for sensitivity if they identify themselves as lesbian or gay. The second issue discussed by Logan and Sellick concerns the assessment of lesbian and gay foster carers. Although the potential contribution of lesbian and gay foster carers has been officially accepted, the criteria by which they are assessed may not have been discussed. With the dominance of the heterosexual family form, Foster Placement Workers or Supervising Social Workers may feel uncertain of how to proceed.

Finally, this edition includes a paper that offers a foster carer's perspective on the *Care Matters* agenda and in a more limited way the 'Fostering Matters' symposium. Foluke Blackburn was invited to attend the symposium not only on the grounds of being a foster carer, but also of being a trainer of foster carers, an experienced social work practitioner and currently a Lecturer in Social Work. The main theme of this

paper is the professionalisation of foster care. Referring to her own experiences as a foster carer, Foluke reflects with some ambivalence on this current trend (see Kirton, 2007). In addition, approaches to the assessment and training of foster carers are also considered. Although it is appreciated that the opinion of foster carers will vary in relation to their social characteristics, their personal biographies and the context in which their opinions are elicited, it is hoped that this paper will provide insights that have value for all those charged with the responsibility of developing and improving services in this field.

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With the completion of the two special editions on foster care, my term as editor of the journal of *Social Work and Social Sciences Review* has come to a close. When I took over the role in 2004 the journal was known for publishing thought provoking contributions on social work and I hope I have facilitated the continuation of this reputation. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all of the academics and practitioners who have submitted their work. I would also like to acknowledge the good work of David Whiting, the publisher, members of the Editorial Board, and all of the reviewers who have shared the burden of responsibility in ensuring that papers published have been appropriate and rigorous. With the leadership of the new Editor, Dr Carol Lewis of Bournemouth University, and a re-launch planned for 2009, the journal is set to go forward as an important outlet for international scholars to showcase their work and critically review developments in all aspects of social work and the social sciences.

**Elizabeth Harlow**  
Editor

## **Note**

1. The Fostering Network, the UK's leading charity for everyone involved in Fostering, has a membership of almost 50,000 foster carers, local authorities and trusts, independent fostering providers as well as local foster care associations.

## **References**

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