Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care:

A Grounded Theory Study

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"Foster carers are special people."

"Foster carers are like the bread and butter of social work, without foster carers, if they weren't there, we wouldn't be able to do our jobs."

Participant Quotes

To begin, I would like to acknowledge the dedication of foster carers and fostering social workers in their role to support children and young people to thrive. I would like to thank all those who generously gave their time to participate in this research and made it possible. I have a genuine appreciation for the work you do and hope this study is a small token to recognising the importance of fostering.

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ABSTRACT

Nationally, there are challenges recruiting and retaining foster carers. A scoping review identified that whilst there is a depth of research and recommendations published about foster carers' needs and experiences, foster carers still report that their needs remain unmet in supporting care experienced children.

To address this identified research-practice gap, the current study sought to explore what is currently in practice to support the needs of foster carers. It set out to understand what impacts on implementing research knowledge into practice within foster care, including barriers, from the perspectives of fostering professionals.

To develop a model to explain the research-practice gap and provide recommendations for improving fostering practices, a Grounded Theory methodology with a critical realist lens was chosen. Eighteen documents relating to fostering practice were analysed as part of theoretical sampling to identify areas to explore within the focus groups. Four focus groups were conducted with social workers and managers working in fostering services in England. A follow-up questionnaire, completed by nine focus group participants, supported the construction of the emerging theory and model.

The Theory of the Research-Practice Gap and an adapted Ecological Model was generated. Grounded in the data, the presented theory indicates that the lack of synergy and continuity across fostering practice is due to the distribution of resources (specifically money), differing values held by the systems, and the ever-changing social context. This results in the research-practice gap within foster care.

The literature supports that the Ecological model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the research-practice gap in foster care, offering insights into the complexity of implementing research knowledge into practice. A summary of implications, recommendations and areas of future research are provided.

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1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the thesis style and structure, followed by an introduction to the research topic of foster care, particularly the role of foster carers in caring for care experienced children. Key terms within foster care are defined and a summary of the current context of foster care is described.

1.1. Thesis Overview

In this introductory chapter, the context and background to the research topic is provided. Chapter Two presents' findings from a scoping review, which sought to identify the existing research and legislation relating to foster carers' needs and gaps in knowledge. The chapter concludes with the proposal of a research-practice gap in foster care and the chosen research questions. The study's philosophical framework (critical realism) and methodology (Grounded Theory) are outlined in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four, the study's method is outlined, describing the iterative and constant process of data collection and analysis, alongside considerations of credibility, ethics, and reflexivity.

Constructed from the analysis of eighteen documents, four focus groups and nine follow-up questionnaires, Chapter Five uses an adapted Ecological model to present the theory of the research-practice gap. Chapter Six summarises the theory of the research-practice gap in relation to the research aims and relevant literature, providing implications and recommendations for practice. A critical and reflexive review on the research is provided. The chapter concludes with areas of future research and a succinct overall of the study.

To note, in Chapter Five and Six a first-person account is used, as writing in the first person encourages the researcher to reflect beyond the content and process of the study, and to further examine their positionality within the research. This is in keeping with the study's methodological approach, acknowledging that it is not only the 'researched' but also the researcher who is subject to enquiry (Charmaz, 2011).

1.2.   Definition of Terms

1.2.1. <u>Child Looked After</u>

A 'child looked after' or 'a looked after child' refer to a child who has been accommodated in the care of their local authority (LA) for more than 24 hours; or are subject to a care or placement order (Department for Education, [DfE], 2023). Under the Children Act 1989 a care order places a child in the care of the LA by the court when they are suffering or at risk of experiencing significant harm (DfE, 2023).

There is a movement to reduce the stigma and dehumanizing language that exists within children's social care by using 'Language that Cares' (Jacob-Thomas, 2021; TACT, 2019). This includes using 'care experienced' for describing children looked after. Therefore, within this study, the term 'care experienced children' is used. 'Children looked after' is used when referring to guidance or legislation where this is the terminology used.

In line with the existing literature, the terms child and children include anyone who has not yet reached their eighteenth birthday (DfE, 2023).

1.2.2. <u>Children's Social Care</u>

This service supports children, young people, and families. Children's social care teams exist within LAs, and children's social workers have a statutory duty to support children who are looked after (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, [NICE], 2021).

1.2.3. <u>Foster Care</u>

Foster care is provided by anyone who is not the child's birth parent, and the LA hold the legal rights of parental responsibility (DfE, 2023). There are several types of fostering placements and arrangements, including with a foster carer, long- and short-term (Baginsky et al., 2017; DfE, 2023). Care can also be provided by kinship carers and residential homes (DfE, 2023).

Fostering services can be within a LA, or an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). IFAs can be either for profit or non-for-profit services (Ott et al., 2023).

1.2.4. <u>Foster Carers</u>

Foster carers are approved individuals under The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, who care for children when they cannot live with their birth families. Foster carers undergo several checks and assessments, undertaken by a social worker from the chosen fostering provider, to ensure their suitability as carers (DfE 2023; Glass, 2013).

Throughout various government documents and websites, including the Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards [NMS] (DfE, 2011), the term foster carer is used interchangeably with 'foster parent'. Throughout this study the term foster carer will be used for consistency.

1.2.5. <u>Kinship Carers</u>

Kinship carers differ from foster carers as they are approved for specific children who are already known to them (i.e. a family member or friend). This can only happen through a LA fostering provider (FosterLine, 2023; Ofsted, 2022).

In this study, the research specifically relates to foster carers, and not of kinship carers.

1.2.6. <u>Fostering Services and Social Workers</u>

Within fostering services, there are fostering social workers who support with the recruitment and assessment of foster carers (GOV.UK, n.d.). Additionally, supervising social workers (SSWs), are responsible for supporting foster carers once approved and throughout their role as a foster carer (DfE, 2011). In some services the terms of SSW and fostering social worker are used interchangeably, and both terms will be used in this study.

Fostering social workers are distinctly different to children's social workers. Fostering social workers focus on supporting foster carers whilst children's social workers' role is centred on the needs of the child. Children's social workers are not included in this study.

1.3.   Context of Foster Care

In the UK, foster care is the main provision of care for children looked after and the majority of which is provided by foster carers (Ofsted, 2023b). Nationally, there are ongoing challenges of recruiting and retaining foster carers, whilst demands for foster placements grow, due to the increasing number of children coming into care (Competition and Markets Authority, [CMA] 2022). This shortage is resulting in an absence of support for children (Ofsted, 2021), and is against the backdrop of foster carers feeling they do not have the status, support or training they require to meet the needs of the children they are caring for (The Fostering Network, 2021). Furthermore, there are ongoing economic difficulties within the UK, resulting in the cost of living crisis (Francis-Devine et al., 2023), that has increased pressures and restricted budgets faced by children's social care services (Holmes, 2021). The evidence shows there is a reduction in preventative non-statutory services supporting children and families that prevent children from becoming looked after, exacerbating the shortage of suitable foster placements (Holmes, 2021; National Audit Office, 2019).

1.3.1. Foster Care in England

Foster carers are considered self-employed, receiving a fostering allowance to cover the cost of caring for a child, and some may also receive an additional fee. This is dependent on the fostering provider, and factors such as where they live, the age of the child, the child's needs and their skills and experience (The Fostering Network, 2023a). Some foster carers may be entitled to 'qualifying care relief' on their taxes (GOV.UK, n.d.). Consequently, the amount paid to foster carers differs across the country (The Fostering Network, 2023a).

Fostering is devolved in the UK and as such policies and legislations vary across countries (The Fostering Network, 2022). This is further impacted by the growing number of IFAs and the differing fostering incentives and package available (Ofsted, 2023b; The Fostering Network, 2023a). For these reasons, and that the researcher is situated in England, the study presented will be localised to the context of foster care in England. As discussed, there are two types of fostering providers, LAs, and IFAs, both are included in this research.

The Ofsted (2023b) report on fostering in England, stated the data collected accounted for 99% of all foster carers, found there were 36,050 foster carer households, and 61,360 approved foster carers. In comparison there were 7,855 kinship fostering households. The report highlighted that over the last five years there has been a decrease in applications to become a foster carer and an increase in the use of IFAs, although, 6 in 10 of all foster carers are LA foster carers. The report also highlighted that LA foster carers tend to stay registered for longer than foster carers within IFAs. For both providers, deregistration is highest within the first two years of approval. The retention of foster carers and fostering capacity is an ongoing issue, with more foster carers becoming deregistered than approved in the last year. Over recent years, the use of kinship carers has been growing and playing a significant role in meeting the demand of the rising numbers of children in care (Ofsted, 2023b). It is indicated that kinship care is preferred as it is hoped to maintain the child's connection with their birth family (Baginsky et al., 2017; Broad, 2001; DfE, 2023).

The demographic of foster carers in England is broad, however a large proportion (41%) are in their fifties and identify as white (81%). There are fewer instances of foster carers in their twenties and thirties (10%) and a greater proportion of foster carers from ethnic minority backgrounds being from IFAs (Ofsted, 2023b). Gender and sexuality were not captured within the annual Ofsted report and also were absent across publications, particularly in relation to foster carers from LGBTQIA+ communities (Baginsky et al., 2017). Additionally, the report found that most fostering households had two carers, of which 49% were offering non-permanent placements (care that is not intended to continue when the child turns eighteen or considered looked after by the LA and court); 40% offering permanent placements and 11% offering other forms of placement, including emergency, fostering to adopt, parent and child, and short-break placements (Baginsky et al., 2017; Ofsted, 2023b).

As of 31st March 2022, there were 82,170 children looked after, of which 57,540 were living with foster families in England (DfE, 2022). This data included foster placements with kinship carers, which accounted for 15% of the placements. Of the 82,170 children, 56% were identified as male and 44% as female; 39% were

between the ages of 10 to 15 years old, 25% were aged over 16 years old, 18% were aged 5 to 9 years, 14% were aged between 1 to 4 years old and only 5% were aged less than 1 years old. Although 73% of the children looked after were reported to be of white ethnicity, the number of children from Black, mixed, and other ethnic groups were over-represented in the population of care experienced children (DfE, 2022).

This data emphasises the gap between the number of foster carers registered and the number of children requiring fostering placements. The Fostering Network (2023) have estimated that to ensure all children can be cared for in England, a further 6,000 fostering families are required.

1.3.2. Children's Experiences of Care

It is well documented that most children of care experience will have suffered abuse or neglect, in addition to other Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs), and that their later life outcomes are poorer compared to the general population (DfE, 2022; Green et al., 2005; Simkiss, 2019). Foster carers play an essential role in caring for care experienced children, providing stability, and forming safe relationships (Blackburn & Matchett, 2022). Stability in foster placements has been found to correlate with positive future developmental outcomes, including educational success, mental health and wellbeing, and lower behavioural difficulties (Blackburn & Matchett, 2022; Ott et al., 2023). Therefore, the skills of foster carers are an important aspect of maintaining placements, providing a source of healing from previous early experiences, and supporting the child's development (Blackburn & Matchett, 2022; Golding, 2003; Rock et al., 2013). Since many care experienced children have suffered abuse or neglect, they can exhibit difficulties with emotional regulation, executive functioning and building safe and positive relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Hughes, 2017; Van der Kolk, 2005). As such, foster carers need to be appropriately trained and skilled to understand children's experiences and respond in a way that supports the child to feel safe and secure (Hughes et al, 2017; Ott et al., 2023).

The vital role of foster carers is particularly poignant when considering one systemic model for understanding a child's development: Bronfenbrenner's (1986) Ecological model. The Ecological model, stemming from

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) Ecological Systems Theory, focuses on how a child's development is shaped by interactions between interconnected environmental systems. The quality of such interactions impacts on development and longer-term outcomes (Coman & Devaney, 2011). These systems exist in a child's immediate surroundings, such as family and school, to more distal systems, like the Government and mass media. Additionally, the model acknowledges the influence of broader societal structures, including the political system, social norms, laws, and cultural values (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). For a care experienced child, their environments are highly complex, including their experience of care prior to becoming looked after and the impact of different caregivers throughout their care experienced journey (Coman & Devaney, 2011). The LA, and more directly the child's social worker, as the child's corporate parents, are responsible for making decisions regarding their care. These are then enacted by other people within the child's environment, including their birth parents, foster carers, therapists, teachers etc.

This model emphasises the role of foster carers in supporting the development of care experienced children. In turn, this model can be used to support a rationale for focusing on the social and economic environments of foster carers and considering how interactions between the different systems, such as the political system (i.e. the Government) and fostering services, impact on their role as a foster carer (McGregor et al., 2019). It would therefore follow that unless fostering practices reflect the needs of foster carers, supporting them socially and economically, fostering services may lack the effectiveness to recruit and retain foster carers (Blackburn & Matchett, 2022).

There is an increasing recognition for considering the team around the child (Muro et al., 2017; The Fostering Network, 2022b), yet to date, research and reviews on foster care appear to be child-centred, whilst other aspects of children's social care are neglected, such as the role and needs of foster carers (MacAlister, 2021, Narey & Owers, 2018). Given that children's experiences of care are influenced by their caregiver (Bowlby, 1969; Hughes, 2017), and the current recruitment and retention challenges facing foster care in England (e.g., Ofsted, 2021), it clearly indicates that further research into this area is required.

1.4. Summary

As such, this study focuses on foster carers, considering how to address their needs so that they can best support the children in their care. The next chapter is a scoping review of the existing research and legislation relating to foster carers.

2. CHAPTER TWO: SCOPING REVIEW

In this chapter, the aims, method, and findings of the scoping review are outlined. Grounded Theory and a critical realist ontology and epistemology were adopted when reviewing the literature, revealing a research-practice gap that exists in foster care. A rationale for exploring the research-practice gap is proposed, and the chapter concludes with the chosen research question.

2.1. The Process of the Scoping Review

2.1.1. A Grounded Theory Framework

There is a debate amongst grounded theorists as to when the appropriate time is to engage with existing literature, including the conduction of a literature review (Timonen et al., 2018). Classical grounded theorists, like Glaser (1998), are against engagement with existing literature prior to data collection and analysis due to its potential influence on the interpretation of the analysis and the validity of the emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is contradictory to other methodologies which typically use literature reviews as the foundation for the study (Dunne, 2011). Thornberg and Dunne (2019), propose that engaging with the literature early in the study only becomes problematic when one theory is privileged and positioned as the truth or superior, over holding many possibilities.

Within the context of research processes today, including providing a rationale for research and ethics applications, both Charmaz (2014) and Dunne (2011) argue it is unrealistic for the researcher to have no prior knowledge of the existing literature. Contemporary grounded theorists, as such, take a flexible approach to researchers reading literature on their topics prior to commencing the research (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). This is within the expectations that researchers "take an open, non-committal, critical, analytic view of the existing literature in the field" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p.321).

Beyond practicalities, other rationales for engaging with literature early on in a Grounded Theory study include:
- Supporting the contextualisation of the study,

- Orienting the researcher to how the phenomenon has been studied and understood to date,
- Developing 'sensitizing concepts' and stimulating theoretical sensitivity,
- Directing theoretical sampling, and
- Providing supplementary validity (Dunne, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

'Sensitising concepts', as described by Charmaz (2014), "give researchers initial but tentative ideas to pursue, and questions to raise about their topics. Grounded theorists use sensitizing concepts as tentative tools for developing their ideas about processes that they define in their data" (p. 30). Sensitising concepts therefore generally provide an initial point of inquiry, forming a loose frame for looking at the area of interest (Charmaz, 2014).

In sum, engagement with the literature at this stage will sensitise the researcher to the wider topic of foster care and the needs of foster carers. It will also be used to identify any gaps in existing knowledge, research, and practice, to support the direction of the study.

2.1.2. Aims

This scoping review is used to identify the existing research and legislation relating to foster carers and to conceptualise foster carers' needs and experiences. The following questions to guide the scoping review are:

- What research and legislation exists relating to foster carers' needs to date?

- What are the needs of foster carers that have been identified?

- What recommendations are provided relating to the needs of foster carers?

2.1.3. Method

A hermeneutic approach to a scoping review was chosen (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014) rather than conducting a replicable systematic review, as this would have taken the study down a different path and methodology. Scoping reviews, unlike systematic reviews, are not limited to peer-reviewed journals (Mak & Thomas, 2022), and so to provide a broad overview and exploration of foster care literature, a review of the grey literature was required. Grey literature is considered as a range of documents that are not controlled by commercial publishing organisations and include different forms of media (Adams et al., 2016). Additionally, the method of hand-searching (Craane et al., 2012) was employed. Hand-searching involves reviewing reports, articles, journals, documents, blogs, and websites that were not brought up by the initial searches but cited within the literature reviewed (Craane et al., 2012). This enabled the identification of important historical literature, whilst ensuring that current literature remained the focus.

The approach to reviewing the literature was also influenced by the researchers' understanding of research-practice processes within foster care. Figure 1 demonstrates how research influences policy, policy influences implementation, and then further research is conducted to review policy and implementation of research knowledge. The research-practice cycle continues as new policies and research are produced. The scoping review will enable the mapping of the range, nature, and extent of the existing literature within the research-practice process cycle, as well as identifying possible gaps (Mak & Thomas, 2022).

The method of the scope consisted of a search of published studies through PsycINFO and Google Scholar, followed by a review of grey literature gathered from different UK websites, and completed with hand-searching. Search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the literature included are presented in Appendix A. The literature included totalled **115.**

Figure 1

Research-Practice Processes
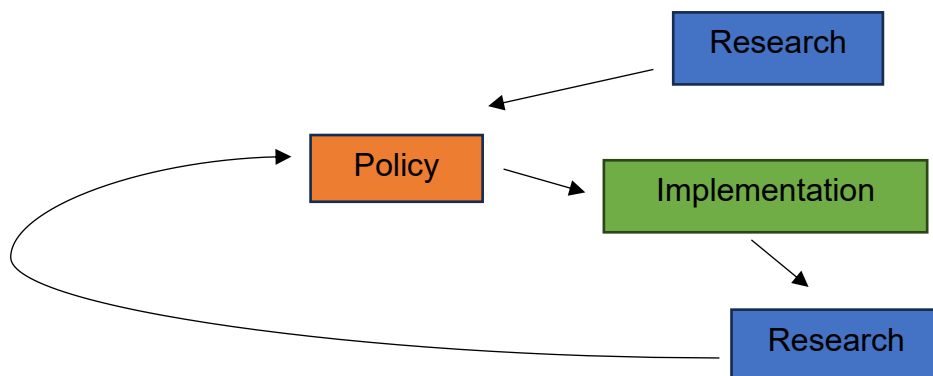
2.2. Findings

2.2.1. Summary of the Literature

The scoping review found a wealth of research and legislation relating to foster carers' needs. Due to the broad nature of the scope, references provided are a representation of the extensive literatures available (see Appendix A).

The literature reviewed employed a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, including focus groups, interviews, surveys, and self-reported measures (e.g. Parental Stress Scale). The identification and understanding of foster carers' needs was dominated by the narrative of ensuring that foster carers provide the best care possible (Golding, 2003; MacAlister, 2022). Similarly, legislation, government guidance and policies for fostering practices were to ensure the safeguarding of care experienced children; the rights and needs of foster carers were also acknowledged (Care Standards Act 2000; *Children Act 1989;* DfE, 2011, 2013). Of the identified literature, there was no direct research into whether these documents were fit for purpose or regularly reviewed, despite one review recommending that two of the standards within the NMS report were amended (Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016). Fostering allowance guidance was the only exception to this, as the Government review this annually (Petitions UK Government and Parliament, 2023; The Fostering Network, 2023a).

Another reoccurring narrative within studies was the improvement of placement stability (i.e. reducing the risk of breakdowns and the number of moves children experience) (McDermid et al., 2012; Randle et al., 2017). In more recent research, this included focusing on improving retention and recruitment of foster carers (McKeough et al., 2017; Onions, 2018; Ott et al., 2023). Whilst the importance of focusing on the needs of care experienced children are paramount, this area reinforces the importance of the role of the foster carer in upholding and sustaining stable placements (Fergeus et al., 2019; Midgley et al., 2019, 2021; Samrai et al, 2011).

The scope accentuated that foster carers' experience 'role ambiguity' (Baginsky et al., 2017, p. 111) due to complex nature of the role, involving both parenting and professionalism; "their family is their work, and their work is their family—so roles are not so clearly separated, and boundaries are not so clearly defined" (Schofield et al., 2013, p. 46). The literature indicated that foster carers' perception of their role is impacted by their motives for fostering, the types of placement they offer, the number of children in their care and the needs of each child (Adams et al., 2018, Gouveia, et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2004). Studies using qualitative methods also identified that some foster carers view themselves as parents rather than carers (Blythe et al., 2013; Harlow & Blackburn, 2007). Schofield and colleagues (2013) further highlight that foster carers tend to primarily identify as either carers or parents, and that some can move flexibly between these roles. For those who cannot, this can cause stress and role conflict. Thus, suggesting that a one-size fits all approach is unlikely to be beneficial as there are differing needs amongst foster carers.

Furthermore, terminology across the literature was inconsistent with some sources using the term 'foster parent' rather than 'foster carer' (DfE, 2011, 2018; MacGregor et al., 2006), alluding to differing perspectives, understandings, and role positioning. Kirton (2022) argues that the use of 'foster parent' is an explicit rejection of the notion of foster carers being deemed professionals and is a shift away from the current trend of using 'foster carer'. Although a clear definition is lacking within the field, there is an agreement and recognition that the role goes beyond solely a parental one. This includes

attending training and being part of the child's professional support network (Buehler et al., 2006; Pinto & Luke, 2022; Pithouse & Lowe, 2008).

To understand foster carers' needs within the broadest context, global studies were included in the review. However, it is important to acknowledge that findings from studies conducted outside of England may be limited in transferability due to the differing context of foster carers and fostering practices. For example, Pinto and Luke's (2022) study highlighted clear differences in policies and alternative care context between England and Portugal.

2.2.2. What are the needs of foster carers that have been identified?

Foster carers have a variety of needs which require support from the systems around them: families, peers, fostering services, children's LA, and specialist services (Adams et al., 2018; Blythe et al., 2014; McDermid et al., 2016). Three broad themes: '**Value and Respect', 'Support**,' and **'Training'** are used to describe and discuss the most salient and frequently identified needs from the scope.

2.2.2.1. Value and Respect

One of the key needs reflected in UK literature was for foster carers to feel **valued and respected**. Independent reviews (Baginsky et al., 2017; Lawson & Cann, 2017, 2019; Narey & Owers, 2018) found that foster carers voiced that there is a lack of role recognition, acknowledgement of the burden of care, information sharing and involvement in decision-making regarding their child's care. The large-scale reviews utilised mixed method approaches, including surveys, interviews and focus groups, to gather thousands of foster carers' perspectives. These findings were also echoed in other qualitative studies conducted internationally (Brown & Bednar, 2006; Murry et al., 2011; Randle et al., 2017). Kirton et al. (2007) comments that variations in foster carers' experiences of feeling valued or listened to is likely due to differing fostering provision practices.

The literature also highlighted an ongoing debate about whether foster carers should be defined as **professionals, and given employment status** (Baginsky

et al., 2017; DfE, 2018; Wilson & Evetts, 2006). Although Kirton (2022) suggests that 'employment status and professionalisation' should not be conflated together, as in practice the two are quite different.

The professionalisation movement comes from an increasing recognition of foster carers managing more behaviours that challenge, further administrative demands and external pressures, and managerialism within fostering (Kirton, 2007, 2022; Sellick, 2006; Wilsons & Evetts, 2006). Professionalisation is not a simple issue as it raises the complex relationship between 'love and money', and 'family and work' (Kirton, 2007, pp. 12-13). In Narey and Owers' (2018) review, they argue a professional status would undermine foster carers' role as a parent and negatively impact the children in their care. They further comment that although foster carers should be treated professionally, this does not equate to being given the classification of a professional status like that of a social worker. Those for the professional status, including Kirton (2007, 2022) and Sinclairtfn (2019), argue that it would result in foster carers receiving better support and improve their ability in their role; they would be "…clearly incorporated into the children's workforce" (Kirton, 2022, p. 4023). This includes further training opportunities, such as National Vocational Qualifications, improved pay and annual leave, and more autonomy in day-to-day decision-making for the child in their care (Ogilvie et al., 2006; The Fostering Network, 2022a; Wilson and Evetts, 2006).

In sum, it is important that foster carers are valued and respected, and their skills and expertise are recognised. However, some of the current practices and policies appear to undermine foster carers' position as part of the team around the child, resulting in some foster carers feeling unheard, undervalued and their needs unmet.

2.2.2.2. Support
The role of support in retaining and recruiting foster carers, including **financial, emotional, practical, social and peer support**, was consistently highlighted in the literature (Colton et al., 2008; Gouveia, et al., 2021; Lynes & Sitoe, 2019). **Access to specialist services**, such as mental health and education provisions, were also identified as essential support (Hiller et al., 2020;

Whitehead et al., 2023; York & Jones, 2017). However, many of these forms of support are often unavailable, difficult to access or in short supply (Hiller et al., 2020; Murray et al., 2011; York & Jones, 2017).

In recent studies using interviews, focus groups and surveys, it has been emphasised that foster carers have a **need for greater emotional support** from fostering services, particularly from social workers (Adams et al., 2018; Blackburn & Matchett, 2022; Harding et al., 2020a). Placement transitions, allegations, and children's behaviour that challenge and complex needs, can all impact on foster carers' emotional wellbeing (McKeough et al., 2017; Pickin et al., 2011; Riggs et al, 2022). Several studies, like Bridger et al. (2020), Hannah and Woolgar (2018) and Sloan Donachy (2019), considered the risk of foster carers experiencing secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue related to caring for children who have experienced developmental trauma. Thus, emphasising the need for fostering services, especially SSW to consider and respond to foster carers' emotional wellbeing (Bridger et al., 2020; Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016).

Additionally, the evidence suggests that foster carers' intentions to foster and continue, correlates with strong ratings of feeling supported and respected by their social worker (Blackburn & Matchett, 2022; Randle et al., 2017). Some studies, including Sinclair et al., (2004), found that foster carers are more satisfied when they had **regular visits and contact** from their SSW, and their child had a **consistent social worker**. Poor communication with social workers can result in foster carers feeling undervalued in their role (Farmer et al., 2005; Sinclair et al., 2004; Samrai et al., 2011). Also, inadequate support and communication, especially during allegations investigations, was suggested to reflect a lack of understanding and respect of foster carers as co-professionals (Boffey et al., 2019; Narey & Owers, 2018).

Peer and social support were identified to be factors that can increase fostering satisfaction, decrease stress, and improve retention rates (Adams et al., 2018; Butler & McGinnis, 2021; Farmer et al., 2005). Forms of peer and social support provide foster carers opportunities to learn from others, offload their worries and concerns with people who have a shared understanding

(MacGregor et al., 2006; Luke & Sebba, 2013; Sinclair et al., 2004). Whilst some support groups were offered by fostering services, due to the time of day, location, and lack of childcare, they were not always suitable for meeting the diversity of carers' needs (Ott et al., 2023).

In terms of **practical support** needs, **access to respite care** and **covering financial costs** were highlighted (Murry et al., 2011; Randle et al., 2017; Whitehead et al., 2023). There was variation in access to respite care; some foster carers had regular respite as stipulated in their child's care plan, whilst others had never had respite support offered (CMA, 2022; Ott et al., 2023). The literature indicated that a lack of respite can contribute to burnout and compassion fatigue, suggesting that it is important for this support to be made available (Fergeus et al., 2019; Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016; Sebba & Luke, 2013).

The NMS sets out that foster carers should not be financially disadvantaged because of their fostering role (DfE, 2011; DfE and Skills, 2006). Despite this, financial support needs (a fostering allowance, adequate pay for their skills and expertise, and a retainer fee) remain unmet, and exasperated by the cost of living crisis (Hatcher, 2022; Lawson & Cann, 2019). Variation in financial costs, was also evident. Hatcher's (2022) findings from a freedom of information request, found that fourteen local authorities in England were paying below the national minimum allowance.

In sum, the literature identified that foster carers need financial, emotional, practical, social and peer support to remain in their role and feel satisfied. Fostering services, in particular SSWs, have a crucial role for ensuring such support is available and that policies are adhered too.

2.2.2.3. Training
Many foster carers report, like other forms of support, that their **training needs go unmet** (CMA, 2022; Murray et al., 2011). This can impact on the stability of placements and foster carers' emotional wellbeing (Adams et al., 2018; Octoman et al., 2013; Whenan et al., 2009). An independent survey of 3,352 foster carers from across the UK, identified training needs relating to trauma and attachment, therapeutic parenting, understanding behaviours, children's

mental and physical health needs, allegations, and looking after teenagers (The Fostering Network, 2021).

Small scale pilot projects and service evaluations, have explored specific areas of training, including behaviours that challenge (Holmes & Silver, 2010; Turner et al., 2007), trauma-informed parenting and care (Lotty et al., 2020), mental health awareness (Mosuro et al., 2014) and attachment (Begum et al. 2020; Gibbons et al., 2019; Laybourne et al., 2008). For some studies, whilst training was well received by foster carers, little was found to suggest measurable change in practice (McDermid et al., 2022; Pithouse et al., 2002). This relates to the need for **continued and systemic support** (Whitehead et al., 2023).

In sum, foster carers require tailored and specialist training, which is part of an ongoing support package. Given that studies have identified suitable and welcomed training areas, it is unclear why training needs are not being met.

2.2.3. <u>What recommendations are provided relating to the needs of foster carers?</u>

Similarly to the identification of foster carers' needs, three themes are used to encapsulate and discuss the most identified recommendations in the literature. These were:

'Status: Valued and Respected', 'Fair Pay and Recognition: a better offer', and **'Standardised, Tailored and Continued Support'**.

Within the literature, authors addressed who was responsible for making the change and at which level changes should be implemented, including the Government, children's placing LA, regulatory bodies, and fostering service providers.

2.2.3.1. Status: Valued and Respected

To ensure foster carers feel valued and respected, several papers recommend that foster carers are **invited to professional meetings** (MacAlister, 2022), **collaborate** with social workers (Kirton et al., 2007; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2016)

and **support with the delivery of training** (McDermid et al., 2012; Rees & Handley, 2022). Foster carers delivering training also provides a peer mentoring model, mitigating feelings of isolation and a lack of support (Bulter & McGinnis, 2021; Sebba & Luke, 2013). Furthermore, fostering services should actively seek the opinions of foster carers and listen to their experiences and ideas about service improvements (McDermid et al., 2012). These suggested changes can **improve the retention and the wellbeing of foster carers** (Ott et al., 2023; Whitehead et al., 2023).

Transparency and information sharing through a foster carers' journey was another recommendation. Information sharing is essential to good fostering practice, and foster carers should always be given the appropriate information they need to support the child in their care (DfE, 2011). Relating to this, Ottaway and Selwyn (2016) recommended that Standard 13 of the NMS, is amended to explicitly state that prospective foster carers can expect to encounter issues and demands in their role and should be prepared for managing these.

Information sharing is also important during allegation investigations. There is clear guidance in the NMS about the management of allegations and the support foster carers should receive (DfE, 2011). To reduce the impact of allegations, other reports also stress that fostering services need to ensure this guidance is followed, are actively publicising the support available and are transparent with foster carers throughout the process (Boffey et al., 2019; Narey & Owers, 2018). On a wider level, The Fostering Network (2021) recommended that Governments should **consult foster carers** about the amount of information they require to care for a child.

To further improve the status and professionalism of foster carers, The Fostering Network and fostering community members are campaigning for UK Governments to introduce a **national register of foster carers** (Sinclairtfn, 2019; The Fostering Network, 2021). The campaign aims to bring foster carers in line with other regulated and registered workers in children's social care and to improve their terms and conditions, namely their status and ability to move more easily to different fostering services (Sinclairtfn, 2019). Furthermore, from a child-focused prospective, Narey and Owers (2018) urged the Government to

consider the proposal, as a national register, due to information being readily available, could "provide a vacancy management system and radically improve matching" (p. 50).

In addition to a national register, The Fostering Network (2021, 2022a) are promoting that every fostering service should develop and embed **a foster carers' charter**. The charter represents an agreement between the child's LA, the fostering service, and the foster carer. It includes a commitment to working together in the best interests of the child, and highlights the distinct roles and expectations held by each member. Foster carers can expect partnership working, information sharing through good communication and consultation, that they are supported and treated fairly, and learning and development opportunities are provided (The Fostering Network, 2022a).

In sum, the literature recommends tenable ways of ensuring foster carers feel they have status and are valued and respected by the professional system. This includes a national register, a charter, transparent information sharing, and involvement in training and meetings. The recommendations indicate that foster carers should be treated as equals to other professionals in the team around the child.

2.2.3.2. Fair Pay & Recognition: a better offer
Financial support was highlighted as an ongoing need for foster carers. Recommendations included reviewing and implementing **retainer payments, a fee payment scheme, and increasing fostering allowances** (Colton et al., 2008; Hatcher, 2022; The Fostering Network, 2021). This would alleviate financial and emotional stressors when a child is not in placement, thus supporting the retention of existing foster carers and maintaining a workforce (Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group, 2021; Ogilvie et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2008).

Additionally, the literature reinforces that to address the demand for foster carers, and the decline in recruitment and retention, **funding and a strategic approach** is required (CMA, 2022; DfE, 2023; MacAlister, 2022). The strategic approaches and initiatives suggested are linked to addressing the identified

needs of foster carers: to feel supported and valued, greater pay, and treated with respect as a member of the team around the child (Colton et al., 2008; Randle et al., 2017). However, regardless of the range of proposals and national action for improving such recruitment and retention, there is a lack of evidence and consensus amongst stakeholders as to which approach would be most impactful (CMA, 2022). The CMA report (2022) indicates that the English Government needs to follow the Welsh Government's approach, moving beyond local solutions, and instead taking on an all-England approach. This solution was also suggested by Narey and Owers (2018) and The Fostering Network (2021) but has yet to be considered or implemented by the Government (DfE, 2023).

In sum, recommendations indicate that changes at both local (fostering providers) and government level are required to improve financial support for foster carers. Approaches to recruitment and retention are suggested to be inconsistent and is an area to be explored further in this study.

2.2.3.3. Standardised, Tailored and Continued Support
There were many recommendations which addressed foster carers' training and support needs. In summary, these encompass:

- **A systemic approach**, including training incorporating current foster carers' experiences and advice (Gouveia et al., 2021; Lynes & Sitoe, 2019; Whitehead et al., 2023).
- **Support networks** (MacGregor et al., 2006; Sebba & Luke, 2013; Sharda, 2022).
- **Training for social workers, other professionals, and friends and family members** to better understand foster carers' needs and experience (Blackburn & Matchett, 2022; Butler & McGinnis, 2021; Sheldon, 2010).
- **Consistent social workers** to enable trust and openness (Lotty et al., 2020; Valentine et al., 2019).
- **Access to external support services**, e.g., when psychological difficulties arise, such as grief after a placement ends, to support the attachment needs of the child, or their mental health (Golding, 2004; Thomas & McArthur, 2009; Sargent & O'Brien, 2004).

- **Good communication and information sharing** within the professional network (Kirton et al., 2007; Octoman & McLean, 2014).
- **Access to respite care** (Harding et al., 2020; MacGregor et al., 2006; Sebba & Luke, 2013).
- **A social pedagogical approach** within foster care (Furlong et al., 2021; McDermid et al., 2022; Sprecher et al., 2021).
- **Supporting continued relationships**, when appropriate, between the child and foster carer when placements end (Lynes & Sitoe, 2019; Samrai et al., 2011).

These factors also contribute to foster carers feeling valued, respected, and part of the professional network around the child.

It was highlighted that fostering services, should consider foster carers' support needs and existing support networks at the beginning of their journey and during the assessment stage (Buehler et al., 2003; Farmer et al., 2005; Sharda, 2022). Several sources stressed the importance of connecting foster carers with other foster carers, recommending the use of support programmes, such as 'The Mockingbird Programme', (MacAlister 2022; Narey & Owers, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2004). The Mockingbird Programme is an evidence-based model led by The Fostering Network, structured on an extended family (The Fostering Network, 2022b). Initial evaluations found this approach contributed to the stabilisation of placements and retained foster carers through providing an additional support network (DfE, 2023). The NICE guidelines (2021) also suggest that peer support should be at accessible places and times for foster carers, including online. These recommendations indicate that support systems around the foster carer are crucial.

This is also the case for training and formal forms of support offered by fostering services (DfE, 2013). According to the State of the Nation's Foster Care Report, "fostering services stated that the most important change needed to retain more foster carers would be improving the support they offer" (The Fostering Network, 2021, p. 26). Such support includes access to out-of-hours support services and respite care, mandatory training topics (therapeutic, attachment

and trauma-informed parenting and self-care), and tailored training related to the child's specific needs (DfE, 2011; Golding, 2003; NICE, 2021).

The literature also recommended that training is provided to social workers, to ensure that their support is optimal, and that they have a good understanding of the impact that fostering has on their foster carers' wellbeing (Pithouse et al., 2004; Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016). The evidence clearly states that SSWs have a vital role in supporting foster carers (Austerberry et al., 2013; Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016). Foster carers should feel empowered and supported by social workers to have an open dialogue about the stability of placements, and that concerns raised are heard (Lynes & Sitoe, 2019; Valentine et al., 2019). The foster carer's relationship with their SSW is also important for enabling them to request additional learning (DfE, 2011, 2012).

In keeping with this, the literature further indicated that all foster carers should have an agreed annual learning and development plan which identifies both standard and specialised learning and development needs (DfE, 2011, 2012; Lotty et al., 2020; Ogilvie et al., 2006). The NMS, "Standard 21 – Supervision and support of foster carers" (p. 42), could be considered vague in specifying specific learning and development needs (DfE, 2011). Subsequently, like in Wales, The Fostering Network (2021) recommended that other UK Governments implement an accredited pre- and post- approval learning and development framework.

As discussed, when training is provided, although it is well received by foster carers, the extent to which learning is transferred into the home and care for children is low (Pithouse et al., 2002). So, authors, such as McDermid et al. (2022) and Pithouse et al. (2004), have recommended that it would be useful for research to first determine the support needs of foster carers and the children in their care before developing training and a comprehensive support package. Whilst this appears a valid recommendation, this scoping review suggests that research has identified the support needs of foster carers, and therefore, future research would be more beneficial if it focused on understanding why these support needs are not being adequately met.

In sum, there was a wealth of literature which recommended ways that standardised, tailored, and continued forms of support can meet the needs of foster carers', what is lacking across the literature is why this support is not being implemented.

2.3.   Scoping Review Summary

The scoping review has successfully achieved the aim of identifying the existing research and legislation relating to foster carers' needs, resulting in the identification of three themes to conceptualise such needs: **value and respect, support, and training**. These themes can be considered as sensitising concepts. Whilst the role of a foster carer and their needs are complex, this scope would suggest that research has identified their various needs. Additionally, the literature clearly indicates that by addressing areas **of status, pay, and support**, fostering services and the Government can improve the retention and recruitment of foster carers. Interestingly, these recommendations are not new and have been identified in the different literature sources for several years, with little to indicate that meaningful change has occurred. This would suggest that recommendations are not successfully being implemented into practice and therefore presents evidence of a research-practice gap existing in foster care. It was observed that whilst the literature acknowledged the disparities between research and practice, sources did not specifically identify or address why this was occurring, thus, indicating a direction of future inquiry. Following this, the concluding part of this chapter will introduce the purpose of this research study which is centred on addressing the identified research-practice gap.

2.4.   Purpose of the Research

2.4.1. Addressing the Research-Practice Gap

Despite the scoping review outlining the depth of knowledge related to foster care, including several national reviews (Narey & Owers, 2018; Ott et al., 2023; The Fostering Network, 2021), and plethora of studies conducted, the literature

indicates that foster carers needs remain unmet (e.g., Adams et al., 2018; The Fostering Network, 2021). This would suggest that there is a research-practice gap which exists in foster care. A research-practice gap can be defined as what is evidenced in research is not put into practice (Denvall & Skillmark, 2021; Teater, 2017). For example, there is a growing evidence base of training programmes for foster carers, yet national reports, like The Fostering Network (2021), have found the training provided by fostering services do not adequately meet foster carers' learning and development needs. Furthermore, some of the literature highlighted that, although solutions to recruitment and retention had been identified (e.g., Narey & Owers, 2018), they have not been implemented (Foster & Kulakiewicz, 2022; Ott et al., 2023). Subsequently, this study will seek to understand why this apparent research-practice gap exists within foster care and how to close the gap. To date, there is no theoretical understanding or model constructed that addresses what impacts implementing research knowledge into practice within foster care.

In addition, this study will consider how the research-practice gap may contribute to the ongoing challenges of recruiting and retaining foster carers (CMA, 2022; Foster & Kulakiewicz, 2022). The scoping review identified that although this is not a new issue, with several reviews conducted before and strategies attempted (Baginsky et al., 2017; DfE, 2016, House of Commons Education Committee, 2017), this remains a dominant issue in England and is one aspect of the Government's 'Stable Home, Built on Love' strategy (DfE, 2023). The Government have stated their intentions to invest over twenty-seven million pounds over the next two years in delivering a fostering recruitment and retention programme (DfE, 2023). To develop a successful programme, one which is using economic resources to its full potential, it is essential that an understanding and exploration of the barriers to implementing research into practice are also considered. This provides further justification for conducting this study. The recommendations provided can contribute to the existing evidence-base and support the Government's investment in reforming children's social care in England.

Furthermore, understanding the research-practice gap in foster care will also improve the outcomes for care experienced children. The literature highlighted

that children's experiences of care are somewhat dependent on those caring for them (Pickin et al., 2011). Therefore, research and practice must address the needs of the carers, so that they can best support and meet the child's needs. The evidence-base suggests that a stable foster care home may reduce the risk of poorer psychosocial outcomes in adulthood for care experienced children (Biehal et al., 2010; Dregan & Gulliford, 2012; Strijbosch et al., 2015). Therefore, understanding and conceptualising the research-practice gap within foster care, specifically in relation to foster carers, is crucial. Such understandings can aid future recommendations to improve the implementation of support for foster carers, which in turn can have a positive impact on the wellbeing of the child in their care.

Lastly, research-practice gaps have always existed and will continue to exist across disciplines (Mallonee et al., 2006). Evidence-based practice (EBP) is seen to be integral to the role of a clinical psychologist (Shapiro, 2002), within the context of the NHS (NHS, 2019), and a growing aspect of the social work discipline (Beddoe, 2010). However, whilst there is an ongoing drive for evidence-based interventions across disciplines, the translation of research into practice is often slow (Castle-Clarke et al., 2017; Lewig et al., 2006; Mallonee et al., 2006; Teater, 2017). As such, the findings of this research may provide recommendations which are applicable to other social and public health services in England.

In sum, this research aims to provide a theory and a preliminary model, through using principles of Grounded Theory, to explain the research-practice gap within foster care. This will entail an examination of the current research and legislation, alongside gathering the perspectives of fostering professionals. It is hoped that a model grounded in the experiences of individuals working in foster care will enable the identification of practical and useful recommendations to address the research-practice gap. The recommendations will have important implications for improving support for foster carers and for care experienced children. Recommendations may include organisational, process and policy framework changes.

2.4.2. Research Questions

The nature of this research is explanatory and will seek to understand "What impacts on implementing research knowledge into practice within foster care?". To do so, the following sub questions are proposed for exploration:

Question 1: Within fostering services, what is in practice to support the needs of foster carers?

Question 2: What are fostering professionals' perspectives on the barriers to implementing research knowledge into practice in foster care?

2.5.   Summary

To conclude this chapter, the scoping review identified the existing research and legislation, along with a provisional set of sensitising concepts for understanding the main needs of foster carers. The literature shows that there is a gap between the recommendations made by researchers and policymakers to meet these needs and the actual provision that is offered to foster carers. The literature also indicated that some of the legislation and guidance is not fit for purpose, and seemingly contributes to some of the difficulties foster carers experience. This scope has created a solid foundation for the development of a theory to explain the research-practice gap in foster care, the process and outcome of which are presented in the remainder of this thesis.

3.   CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The research aim is to develop a theory to explain the research-practice gap in foster care. For this study, a critical realist epistemological and ontological position was selected due to being most complementary to the research topic of foster care. This chapter explains how critical realism, applied to Grounded Theory, can provide a rigorous framework for research.

3.1.   Identifying a Philosophical Framework: Critical Realism

Critical realism has been described as a meta-theory which provides concepts to help researchers create more accurate explanations of social phenomena than those which currently exist (O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014). Bringing together elements of positivism and social constructionism, critical realists believe that an objective world exists independently of people's perceptions, language, imagination, or experience; meaning the world is composed of certain and sure things. Critical realists also recognise that any knowledge of these things is constructed and subjective to the individuals' experience of these (O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014; Oliver, 2012). Consequently, this shapes individuals' perception of reality. Critical realism is centred on the nature of reality, prioritising the ontological question 'what must the world or the nature of reality be like to make it a possible object of knowledge?' (Bhaskar, 2008; Danermark et al., 2002), rather than "the epistemological question of how knowledge is possible" (Danermark et al., 2002; p. 5).

A founding figure in critical realism is Bhaskar (1986). In his pursuit of understanding the world, he identified three differentiated ontological domains in which social reality exists:

- *The empirical*, events which are experienced,
- *The actual*, all events regardless of whether experienced,
- *The real*, the underpinning mechanisms which generate the *empirical* and *actual* (Bhaskar, 1986; 2008).

A critical realist's position of foster care sees '*the actual*' as children becoming 'looked after' and foster carers being able to care for them and provide a home (DfE, 2022). The scoping review showed that '*the empirical*', the understanding of foster carers' needs and their role in caring for children looked after, differed among stakeholders. This consequently impacted on the support recommended and implemented in practice. Additionally, it is known ('*the actual*') that fostering services are not currently meeting the demands of children requiring placements, and this is experienced and interpreted subjectively ('*the empirical*') as a recruitment and retention crisis of foster carers in England (CMA, 2022; Ofsted, 2023).

The emphasis in critical realism is on the examination of properties that cause events rather than the observable event itself. In other words, rather than focusing on the lived experiences of individuals or attempting to generalise truths, critical realism encouragers researchers to explore and understand mechanisms which cause events, focusing on '*the real*' (Oliver, 2012). Therefore, this approach helps researchers to explain social events and suggest practical policy recommendations to address social problems (Fletcher, 2017). It makes critical realism useful for understanding the research-practice gap, whilst providing the opportunity for recommendations to resolve the gap.

In critical realism causality is expressed as 'mechanisms', referring to "causal powers or ways of acting of structured things" (Bhaskar 1998, p. 187). Put simply, what makes something happen in the world. Critical realist researchers, therefore, are interested in identifying mechanisms, establishing causal relationships, and understanding the necessary connections which generate *the actual and empirical* (Bhaskar, 1998). In this study, existing causal mechanisms, and the way they are maintained and reproduced through different fostering practices, need to be critically explored (Yalvaç, 2014). This will support the understanding of the proposed research-practice gap and provide recommendations for improvements.

3.2. Identifying a Methodology: Grounded Theory

As discussed, critical realism is a meta-theory which acts as a general orientation to research practice, it does not however provide a prescribed method that is clear for conducting empirical research (O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014). Consequentially, a methodology which aligns with a critical realist position and facilitates the development of a theory was required. Grounded Theory was identified as the appropriate method to achieve this. It is a methodological package which enables an exploratory study and centres on generating a theory rather than testing an existing theory. It is a data-driven approach to developing a theory and is inherently used to explore and understand understudied and under-defined topics (Friese et al., 2022; Tweed & Charmaz, 2012). This is therefore a fitting methodology for understanding the research-practice gap in foster care. Furthermore, Grounded Theory methods facilitate the exploration "…of changes in social settings and situations where the studied phenomenon occurs as well as delineating the conditions under which it arises, is maintained, or varies" (Tweed & Charmaz, 2012, p. 134). Therefore, this approach will also support the examination of mechanisms underpinning foster care and the research-practice gap. Before providing evidence for the appropriateness of using a critical realist informed approach to Grounded Theory in this study, an overview of Grounded Theory is provided.

3.2.1. <u>Grounded Theory</u>

Grounded Theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a qualitative methodology which aims for 'the discovery of theory from data' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). At the time, this was opposed to the dominant deductive method (testing hypotheses derived from existing theory) within social and nature sciences (Charmaz, 2006). The development of a theory is achieved inductively by the researcher through a continual process of comparative coding and analysis, designed to identify conceptual categories within and between data. New sources of data are selected through 'theoretical sampling' to inform the emerging theory. A theory is developed when no further conceptual categories can be derived from the data, reaching 'theoretical saturation' (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The comparative process and simultaneous collection and analysis of data within Grounded Theory is unique

in comparison to other qualitative methods. As a methodology, Grounded Theory requires the researcher to deeply engage with the data and is a useful way of studying processes.

3.3. Critical Realism and Grounded Theory

3.3.1. The Compatibility of Critical Realism and Grounded Theory

Contemporary versions of Grounded Theory, including Charmaz (2006, 2014) and Corbin and Strauss (2015), take a flexible approach, with an acknowledgment of multiple realities, seeking diverse perspectives, and engaging in critical analysis throughout the research process. Consequently, the epistemological flexibility of Grounded Theory facilitates a critical realist position. Charmaz's (2006) constructivist approach to Grounded Theory complements the critical realist epistemology as it sees the production of knowledge to be impacted by the context, which consequently will involve the subjective interpretation of data. Bhaskar's (2008) notion of 'epistemic fallacy' challenges researchers to recognise that their knowledge is vulnerable to errors, and understandings should be provisional and tentative. The Grounded Theory methods, including 'constant comparison' and 'memo writing' allows for the conceptualisation and reconceptualization of emerging ideas and the developing theory.

Critical realism and Grounded Theory have been combined to create a research methodology in various disciplines of research, including social work (Bunt, 2018; Oliver, 2012), human geography (Hoddy, 2019), and organisational studies (Belfrage & Hauf, 2017). However, there appears to be a lack of structured methodological guidance or broad uniformity as to how this is achieved (Fletcher 2017; Hoddy, 2019; Oliver 2012). For this reason, this study draws upon the common methodology techniques of Grounded Theory and the data is interpreted through a critical realist lens.

3.3.2. Achieving the Research Aims

This study is seeking to address the question of 'What impacts on implementing research knowledge into practice within foster care?", and by nature requires an

explorative approach beyond investigating individual experiences. Critical realism addresses this through its focus beyond the individual, situating the research in the context of societal structures, and understanding mechanisms which cause events, such as a research-practice gap (Bhaskar, 1986; Oliver, 2012). This is of particular importance in the context of children's social care, where there has been a longstanding history of blame culture and pathologising individuals (Oliver, 2012). Critical realists recognise that social structures influence the actions of individuals. Whilst individuals can replicate or alter these structures through their actions, this is within the constraints of pre-existing structures and power (Oliver, 2012). Hence, a critical realist framework provides an exploration of the research-practice gap in foster care within the context of social processes and structural conditions, including policies and service provisions, whilst exploring the impact at an individual level.

The methods of Grounded Theory facilitate the exploration of these mechanisms and structures, through anchoring the data in context and thereby avoiding only attending to the experience of the individual. Furthermore, Glaser and Strauss (1967) in developing Grounded Theory intended to construct theories of social processes by asking the questions of how people act in social contexts and what happens. Strauss and Corbin (1998) indicate that grounded theories not only enhance understanding but lead to meaningful action. This is important as it is hoped that this research will provide recommendations which will enable the identification of practical and useful recommendations to address the proposed research-practice gap. These recommendations will have important implications for improving support for foster carers and, subsequently, the wellbeing of the children in their care.

3.4.   Chapter Summary

To conclude, this chapter has outlined the study's epistemological position and methodological approach. The use of Grounded Theory principles within a critical realist paradigm will enable the development of a theory for the existing research-practice gap in foster care, thus addressing the research question, "What impacts on implementing research knowledge into practice within foster care?".

4.   CHAPTER FOUR: METHOD

This chapter outlines a qualitative Grounded Theory design for data collection and analysis of documents, focus groups and questionnaires, concluding with considerations of credibility, ethics, and reflexivity.

4.1.   Data Collection

4.1.1. Rationale for Chosen Data Sources

Principles of Grounded Theory methodology were followed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2014), employing a multimethod qualitative, interpretive approach, encompassing document analysis, focus groups and questionnaires. Document analysis was used as part of theoretical sampling and the initial development of codes and categories, supporting the direction of data collection, and developing semi-structured questions for the focus groups. The constant-comparison method during the analysis of both documents and focus group transcription were also used to develop codes to categories, supporting theory construction. Questionnaires following the focus group were used to support theoretical saturation and confirming theory development.

4.1.2. Theoretical Sampling

The process of engaging with the data in this study is depicted in Figure 2. The literature identified in the scoping review provided the initial sampling direction of data collection and generation, with documents purposively selected to answer the research question. This provided the initial data for coding and category development which then directed future sampling and data collection. This is known as theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014; Timonen et al., 2018). This process deepens the researcher's insights whilst increasing the scope and power of the emerging theory of the research-practice gap (Timonen et al., 2018; Urquhart, 2013).

Figure 2 also highlights that the conceptualisation of issues within foster care and foster carers' needs, stem from the scoping review, research-practice

processes, data collection and analysis, and the researcher's personal interest and experience in foster care. These sensitising concepts, as is expected in a Grounded Theory study, will be held loosely, hence the representation of question marks within Figure 2. It is possible as the study progresses that these conceptualisations may change and develop based on the data examined.

Figure 2

Data Engagement and Theory Development
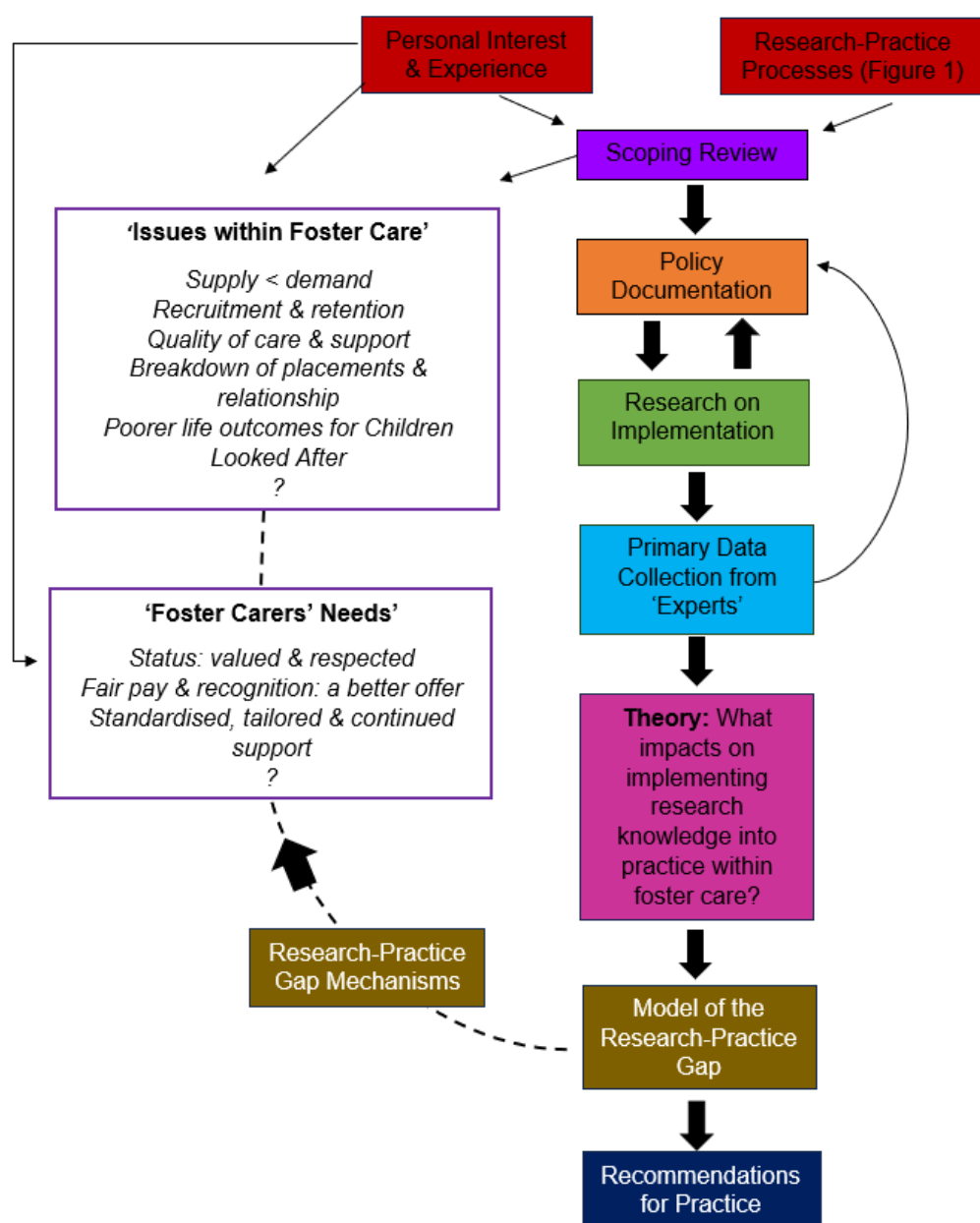
4.1.3. <u>Phase 1: Documents</u>

Grounded theorists have identified several potential document sources, including media publications, government reports, organisational policy, and journals, which are useful for developing a theory (Birks and Mills, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis of different documents provides a range of comparisons available for the researcher to discover (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Prior to conducting the document analysis, contextual positioning (Ralph et al., 2014) was employed. This involved using targeted questions to consider the document's purpose and objective, the intended and unintended audience, and context in which it is situated (Charmaz, 2006; Hawkins, 2017; Ralph et al., 2014) (see Appendix B for an example). Contextual positioning was used to compensate for the researcher's lack of engagement with the production of the data within the documents and to situate the data in the context of the researcher's position and the study. This enables the researcher to approach the analysis with a greater level of awareness and reflexivity.

Additionally, contextual positioning encourages a critical realist lens to the analysis; 'what must the nature of reality be like to make it a possible object of knowledge?' (Bhaskar, 2008). It can be the case that texts, like government records, reports, or organisational policies, can be treated like objective facts (Prior, 2002), as such, all documents were treated as provisional and fallible (Bhaskar, 2008; Thorberg & Dunne, 2019).

The documents, including government and independent reports, national standards, and peer-reviewed journals, were selected, as mentioned, via theoretical sampling, and based on Flick's (2008) four factors: "Authenticity, the extent to which a document is genuine; credibility, the extent to which a document is free from errors; representativeness, how typical a document is; and meaning, the significance of a document's content" as cited by Morgan (2022, p. 71).

The analysis was used as a foundational platform for data collection and was considered in support of triangulation and theory building. Triangulation was achieved in the sense of using different data sources, also referred to as 'slices

of data' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 65), as part of theoretical sampling to find contradictions and complementarity in the data rather than just confirmation and corroboration (Flick, 2019). This is part of the process of reaching theoretical saturation. The analysis phase of the documents is described in section 4.5 of this chapter. A list of the documents analysed, are recorded in Appendix B.

4.1.4. Phase 2: Focus Groups

Focus groups were considered as the optimal method for exploring the research-practice gap, enabling the collection of multiple perspectives about the same topic. Prompting questions encourage discussions between participants and stimulate participants to consider their perspectives and understandings related to their experiences in fostering (Sargent et al., 2016). Additionally, this method can generate substantial amounts of data from multiple participants in a relatively brief period (Sargent et al., 2016).

In studies using Grounded Theory and focus groups, the preferable number of participants per focus group is three to six. It is suggested that there are sufficient participants to encourage participation and allows for all voices to be heard (Foley & Timonen, 2015; Sargent et al., 2016). The literature also recommends researchers conduct three to five focus groups to get a sufficient spread of data (Sargent et al., 2016). In this study, four focus groups, each lasting 90 minutes in duration, with each group comprising between two and five participants, were conducted. Participants were allocated to focus groups based on their job role within fostering services and the groups were mixed in terms of fostering provision (See Appendix C). The decision to not facilitate further focus groups was because no new salient views were being identified, and as such theoretical sufficiency, described in section 4.1.6., had been reached.

The focus groups were sought to understand the research-practice gap and potential barriers from the perspective of the participants working within foster care. The questions developed from the document analysis were used to elicit the participants' reflections of implementing research and guidance into their practice. This approach required the researcher as the interviewer and group facilitator "to listen, to observe with sensitivity, and to encourage the person to respond" (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 25-26). Subsequently, the researcher's role was

facilitating the exploration through asking participants to expand their responses and ask clarifying questions. It was expected for the participants to speak the most.

All focus groups were held on Microsoft Teams, with each focus group digitally recorded. Participants were advised to talk in turn, partially to facilitate transcription, but also for group cohesion. A memo was written immediately after the focus group.

4.1.4.1. Focus Group Schedule

An initial focus group schedule with open-ended questions was developed from the first phase of document analysis. The schedule developed following each focus group (as shown in Appendix C). Glaser's (1998) caution of using a schedule, which he claims can influence the data before collection has begun by situating the data into a preconceived category, was acknowledged. However, as the questions were constructed from data gathered from the document analysis and the focus groups, the use of the schedule was merely part of the theoretical sampling process. Additionally, Charmaz (2006) advocates for the use of loose interview schedules, particularly for novice researchers, as the schedule can prevent researchers asking loaded questions. Charmaz (2014) also states that the use of an open-ended interview schedule is not equivalent to imposing codes on the data collected.

4.1.4.2. Transcription

Within a week of the focus group, the digital recording was transcribed verbatim using a simple transcription scheme. This was adapted on Banister's, et al. (1994) transcription conventions as shown in Appendix C. During transcription, completed by the researcher, identifiable information was removed or pseudonymised.

4.1.5. Phase 3: Follow-Up Questionnaire

All participants consented to being contacted again following participation in a focus group. Nine participants completed the follow-up questionnaire.

The questionnaire, included in Appendix D, was developed from emerging theoretical categories within the focus groups and document analysis. As part of triangulation and prior to confirming the questions, the emerging categories were discussed in a consultation with a fostering consultant working in one of the leading fostering support organisations.

The follow-up questionnaire was used for category development, refinement, and theory construction (as described in section 4.5.2.). This was achieved using a Likert scale of agreement (Joshi et al., 2015), with the final question asking participants to provide any additional comments relating to any areas which they felt have not been included as to why there are barriers to implementing research knowledge into practice in foster care. The additional comments, provided by four participants, were coded, and compared to the developing categories. The Likert scale responses were used as weighting for either supporting or challenging the emerging categories and theory development. The findings are detailed in Appendix D.

4.1.6. <u>Theoretical Saturation and Sufficiency</u>

The idea of 'theoretical saturation' is central to Grounded Theory, and pragmatically defined by Strauss and Corbin as "where collecting additional data seems counterproductive; the new that is discovered does not add much more to the explanation at this time. Or, as is sometimes the case, the researcher runs out of time or money, or both." (1998, p. 136). Going beyond an assumption that nothing new is happening, Charmaz (2014) further adds that theoretical saturation is when "your categories are robust because you have found no new properties of these categories, and your established properties account for patterns in your data" (p. 213).

Across the field of qualitative research there is uncertainty and inconsistency in the conceptualisation of saturation (Nelson, 2016; Saunders et al., 2018). This study is striving for what is considered theoretical sufficiency and is related to the development of theoretical categories through theoretical sampling to achieve an adequate depth of understanding that can enable the development of a theory (Dey, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saunders et al., 2018). Theoretical sufficiency will be pursued using Nelson's (2016) criteria of

conceptual depth (see Appendix E). The evaluation of using Grounded Theory as a method, including the concepts of theoretical saturation and sufficiency, are discussed in Chapter Six.

4.2. Participants

4.2.1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The study was open to individuals working as social workers, team managers, and service managers in fostering services in England, from both LAs and IFAs. Participants required access to Microsoft Teams, with a working camera and microphone.

Individuals who could not communicate in English without the use of an interpreter were excluded from the study. Additionally, trainees, for example, a apprentice social worker, or those in roles supporting only kinship carers, were excluded from the study.

4.2.2. Recruitment

Three recruitment approaches were used. Firstly, two of the UK's leading fostering support organisations promoted the study and supported recruitment by sharing recruitment materials with their networks. Secondly, fostering services were contacted directly via their central inbox to request that the study poster, shown in Appendix F, containing recruitment information, was cascaded to members of the fostering service. Finally, the study's poster was shared on social media outlets (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn). New accounts were set up for the purpose of the study.

Twenty-two individuals expressed an interest in participating in the study by contacting the researcher via email. Following this, they were sent the participant information sheet and consent form. Fourteen individuals returned the completed consent form, and then were sent a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix G) to support the focus group allocation and asked their preferred time for attending the focus group.

4.2.3. Participant Characteristics

The demographics and profiles of participants are provided in Table 1. To note, not all participants answered every question on the demographic questionnaire or answered 'prefer not to say'.

Fourteen individuals, twelve females and two males, attended one of the focus groups. Most participants were White British (93%) and aged between 44-65 years old (72%).

At the point of data collection, seven participants worked in a LA provision (50%); seven participants worked for a IFA (50%), it was not known whether these services were non-profit.

Half of the participants were SSW (50%), followed by those who were in managerial roles, accounting for 35% of participants. The title of one participant's job role was specific to their service so to preserve anonymity, their role was categorised as 'Team Manager Other' (7%). Two participants were team managers (14%) and two were registered managers for their service (14%). The remaining two participants worked in recruitment and assessment social work roles within fostering. Of the fourteen participants, two had experience as foster carers (14%).

Participants had worked on average in fostering for 9 years and 6 months and in their current role for 6 years and 3 months.

Participants worked across England, with three participants working across several regions (21%), one of whom worked across all regions. The region in which most participants worked was the South East of England (30%).

Table 1

Participant Descriptive Statistics

Sample Size	*N = 14*
Gender Identity	Female = 12 (86%)
	Male = 2 (14%)
Age Categories	25-39 years old = 2 (14%)
	44-65 years old = 10 (72%)
	Did not answer = 2 (14%)
Ethnicity	White British = 13 (93%)
	Prefer not to say = 1 (7%)
Service Provision	LA = 7 (50%)
	IFA = 7 (50%)
Job Role	Recruitment & Assessment Social Worker (RASW) = 1 (7%)
	Recruitment Social Worker (RSW) = 1 (7%)
	Supervising Social Worker (SSW) = 7 (50%)
	Team Manager (TM) = 2 (14%)
	Registered Manager (RM) = 2 (14%)
	Team Manager Other (TMO) = 1 (7%)
Length of Time Working in Fostering (mean to the nearest month) (min, max)	9 years and 6 months (1 year to 20 years)
Length of Time Working in Current Role (mean to the nearest month) (min, max)	6 years and 3 months (6 months to 12 years)
Experience of being a foster carer	*N = 2* (14%)
Geographical location	South East = 6 (29%)
	South West = 5 (23%)
	North East = 3 (14%)
	North West = 2 (9%),
	West Midlands = 2 (9%)
	London = 2 (9%)
	Yorkshire & the Humber = 1 (5%)

Note. Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number, and therefore not equal to 100 percent. Geographical location percentage and number are representative of participants working across several regions.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations outline by the professional Codes of Ethics and Conduct (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021a), Code of Practice for Research Ethics (University of East London [UEL], 2015) and the BPS's Code of Human Research Ethics (2021b) were used to guide the research. The study received ethical approval from UEL (Appendix H). Informed consent was sought, the right to withdraw was explained, and all participants were debriefed following completion of a focus group, and if completed, after responding to the questionnaire. All materials can be found in Appendix I.

All participants were briefed and provided with an information sheet explaining the nature, purpose, and planned dissemination of the results of the study. Their ability to decline participation or withdraw at any stage was explicitly stated and always respected. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout. Quotes provided in Chapter Five are pseudonyms. Additionally, to ensure confidentiality, anonymity and protection of data, a data management plan was developed according to the UEL Research Data Management Policy and approved by the Research Data Management Officers at UEL (Appendix J). No links between participants and locations were included and participants are kept entirely anonymous in the findings and discussion. Grounded Theory's approach distances individuals from the research conclusion as the preliminary model is an aggregation of the researcher's perspective of the different data sources (Houston, 2010).

4.4. Data Analysis

As discussed in Chapter Three, a critical realist lens, drawing upon Charmaz's (2014) constructivist Grounded Theory for guidance, was used to analyse the data and the development of codes into categories. In keeping with the principles of this methodology, as far as possible, data collection and analysis were iterative and constant. The method to theory construction was cyclical and concurrent, rather than a linear or stepwise process, and involved several

components: data collection, coding, constant comparison, memo writing, and diagramming.

4.4.1. <u>Coding</u>

Within Grounded Theory, coding is the fundamental link between data collection and the development of an emergent theory to explain what is happening in the data and what it means (Charmaz, 2006). Like other methods of qualitative analysis, Grounded Theory researchers are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Therefore, it is expected that the researcher draws upon their skill set and intuition to filter data through an interpretive lens (Bowen, 2009).

Handwritten reflections were recorded throughout coding and once the round of coding for that data source was completed a typed memo was written. Visual aids were used to represent and organise the codes and categories identified. Example coding is shown in Appendix K.

4.4.1.1. Initial Coding

To 'open up the data', each data source began with line-by-line coding, involving an initial descriptive label which identified active processes within the data, such as, 'feeling connected' and 'held accountable' (Charmaz, 2014). Mechanisms and interconnecting systems were also noted, for example, 'hierarchy', 'social norms of parenting' and 'professionalisation'. Coding using this method, supported later analysis and theory development by helping the detection of processes, whilst paying close attention to interactions between structures and the actions and responses of authors and participants. Initial codes were regarded as provisional and highlighted areas of recurring themes as well as gaps in the data which required further explanation and exploration through additional data sources.

In some documents, given that they consisted of over one hundred pages and covered various aspects of children's social care outside of the remits of fostering, coding each line seemed arbitrary. As such, when a code was not evident within a single line, the next line or the whole paragraph were coded.

This approached enabled closeness to the data whilst preventing an uncritical synthesis of the authors views (Charmaz, 2014).

4.4.1.2. Focused Coding

The second phase is known as 'focused coding', and involved using the most frequent, salient, and significant initial codes to organise and integrate the large amount of data collected and analysed so far (Charmaz, 2014). Codes were examined for suitability and appropriateness. Theoretical sensitivity was an essential part of the process and involved immersion in the data through multiple readings. Focused codes go beyond the descriptive nature of the initial codes and require meaning and interpretation of the data. Retroductive reasoning ("what must be true for this to be the case?", Oliver, 2012, p. 379) was used in developing focused codes.

4.4.2. Codes to Developing Theoretical Categories

Focused codes were then examined for conceptual themes and identified as emerging theoretical categories, and potential mechanisms for implementing research into practice. These were held tentatively and compared back to the data, codes, and other emerging categories. The concurrent process of data collection and analysis enabled the confirmation and disconfirmation of categories. Focused codes and categories which did not complement existing ones prompted a recursive process of construction and deconstruction, examining the underpinning mechanisms which were considered present (Oliver, 2012; Timonen et al., 2018). This is the process of abduction (Charmaz, 2006). Follow-up questionnaires helped to refine the significance of categories, shaping the theory construction of the various aspects contributing to the research-practice gap in foster care.

4.4.3. Theory Construction

The construction of the theory was achieved through the integration, conceptualisation, and formulation of the developed core categories from the three phases. This was the final stage of analysis which pulled together the connections across the data sets to produce a theoretical explanation for what impacts implementing research knowledge into practice in foster care.

4.4.4. Memo Writing

Memo-writing is a key process within Grounded Theory and was used throughout the study to document the researchers' reflections during data generation and analysis, including the development of codes, categories, and theory construction (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). It also severed as space for sustaining reflexivity by discussing the data in light of pre-existing knowledge and consciously examining any preconceived ideas or influences on codes and category development (Charmaz, 2014). As emerging theoretical ideas developed, memo writing aided the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014) and served as a "storehouse of ideas" as the dataset increased (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 4; Timonen et al., 2018). Appendix L consists of excerpt memos.

4.4.5. Constant Comparison Method

The constant comparison method underpins what Timonen et al. (2018) identifies as the key premise of coding; it encourages the researcher to continue to ask, "what is this data doing in relation to this inquiry?" (p. 7) and is used to establish distinctions within the data, making comparisons at each stage of analysis. This involved identifying similarities and differences within a data source and then comparing to other data sources, such as the NMS (DfE, 2011) and focus group transcripts (Timonen et al., 2018).

4.4.6. Diagramming

Diagramming, also known as integrative diagrams (Strauss, 1987; Urquhart, 2013), were used throughout the study to support theoretical coding. Grounded theorists, such as Clarke (2003, 2005) and Strauss & Corbin (1998), emphasised that diagramming is a way of visually laying out conceptual relationships during data coding. In this study, diagramming supported thinking around the relationships between focused codes and categories.

Additionally, drawing diagrams whilst memo writing supported with understanding of the data, in particular mapping out structures and processes. One such example was depicting the structure of foster care within children's social care (Appendix M). This drew attention to the hierarchical structure and

supported the researcher's understanding of how decision-making may be experienced in fostering provisions.

4.5. Quality of the Research

Within the arena of qualitative data analysis, partially due to the broad range of qualitative approaches with differing ontological and epistemological assumptions, an overarching criterion for quality remains elusive (Barbour, 2014; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Glaser and Strauss (1967) declared that objectivity, validity, reliability, and replicability, principles typically associated with deductive quantitative research, would inhibit Grounded Theory's approach to theory construction (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Subsequently, they argue that through using the direct knowledge of the studied phenomenon, theorising creates high quality research and can be conducted with rigor (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

For this study, Charmaz's constructivist Grounded Theory (2014) quality criteria: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness, was used. These quality criteria, alongside Nelson's (2016) criteria for conceptual depth, are reviewed and evaluated in Chapter Six.

4.6. Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a key component of Grounded Theory. It is a process in which the researcher is self-aware, and through memo writing and the constant comparison method, consciously reflects upon their own influence and experiences when interpreting the data (McGhee, 2007). Whilst it is accepted that the researcher's own creativity is an integral part of theory construction, codes and categories should be inductively derived from the data collected and not forced into preconceived ideas held by the researcher (McGhee, 2007). Therefore, it is important that during data collection, generation, and analysis, the researcher remained as open as possible to anything which emerged within the data. Furthermore, preconceived ideas that may influence interpretation of

the data and theory construction were consciously and continuously examined (Charmaz, 2006).

To achieve this, throughout the study, memos and personal reflections were kept to account for how the researcher's experiences may influence or bias the interpretation of the data. Additionally, the use of contextual positioning and the critical realist question of 'what must the nature of reality be like to make it a possible object of knowledge?' (Bhaskar, 2008; Danermark et al., 2002), supported a broader examination of the data and generated findings, situating them within a social, political, cultural, and historical context (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Urquhart, 2013). It is hoped that the use of supervision, consultations with people working within foster care, and being grounded within the data will enable the pursuit of the most plausible explanation for the research-practice gap. This awareness is an underpinning aspect of the study.

5. CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

This chapter summarises the theory underpinning the research-practice gap in foster care, constructed using a Grounded Theory approach and presented using an Ecological model. Each system of the model is discussed in relation to the identified sub-mechanisms, and the overarching three causal mechanisms are then presented to support the theory of the research-practice gap.

The findings presented are an accumulation of the multiple phases of analysis and the use of the constant comparison method. A comprehensive summary of each phase can be found in Appendix B: Document Analysis, Appendix C: Focus Groups and Appendix D: Follow-Up Questionnaires. This includes the development of codes to theoretical categories, and descriptive statistics, representing the findings from the follow-up questionnaires, which supported the emerging theory and construction of the model.

5.1. The Theory of the Research-Practice Gap: An Ecological Model

The analysis found that the research-practice gap is multifaceted and the process of embedding research knowledge into practice is dynamic, influenced by social, political, and cultural factors. Successful implementation of research knowledge into fostering practice necessitates an investment in resources, including robust policies, frameworks, and a clear Government strategy that is committed to foster care. The intertwined nature of the causal mechanisms to be discussed, highlight the barriers to such implementation. Grounded in the data, the presented theory posits that the lack of synergy and continuity across fostering practice is due to the unequal distribution of resources (specifically money), differing values held by the systems, and the ever-changing social context. Taken from the document analysis and a focus group, two quotes that reflect this are presented below:

> ***"The gap between policy and practice must be closed to ensure we retain safe and loving homes for children in foster care"*** (Hatcher, 2023, p. 6).

*Jessica (RASW, LA): **"A lot of its whole systems change […] we could do a much better job if the whole system worked […] But I'm just aware there's so much more that needs to be done."***

Several systemic models and frameworks, such as Dahlgren and Whitehead's (2021) model of Health Determinants, Bronfenbrenner's (1986) Ecological model and Hagan and Smail's (1997) Power Mapping, were considered when thinking about how to present the study's findings of the research-practice gap in foster care. In chapter one, the Ecological model, stemming from Bronfenbrenner's (1986) Ecological Systems Theory, was discussed in considering how a child's development is shaped by interactions between interconnected environmental systems, including the role of foster carers. It was also suggested that the model can be used to support a rationale for focusing on the social and economic environments of foster carers and considering how interactions between the different systems, such as the political system (i.e. the Government) and fostering services, impact on their role as a foster carer.

Additionally, the Ecological model is compatible with a critical realist understanding of how systems operate, and as such fits well with the research epistemology. It was therefore decided that Bronfenbrenner's (1986) Ecological model offered the most appropriate framework for understanding the theory presented and as such was selected over other systemic models. The utility of this adapted Ecological model is discussed and evaluated in the chapter to follow.

The interrelated nature of the Ecological model, shown in Figure 3, conceptualises how the interactions between **five systems** (Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, Chronosystem) impact on implementing research knowledge into practice, underpinned by the causal mechanisms of **resources, values, and social context**. Cumulatively, these interactions have a direct effect on the experiences of foster carers, who are at the centre of the model, in addition to the development of the children they care for. Within the causal mechanisms that exist across all systems are sub-

mechanisms, as shown in Figure 3, which contribute to the implementation of research into practice.

Continuity is only possible when there is a synchronized systemic approach, and therefore is represented in the model as a key component for ensuring sustainability and effective fostering practices*.*

Figure 3

The Ecological Model: Implementing Research Knowledge into Practice
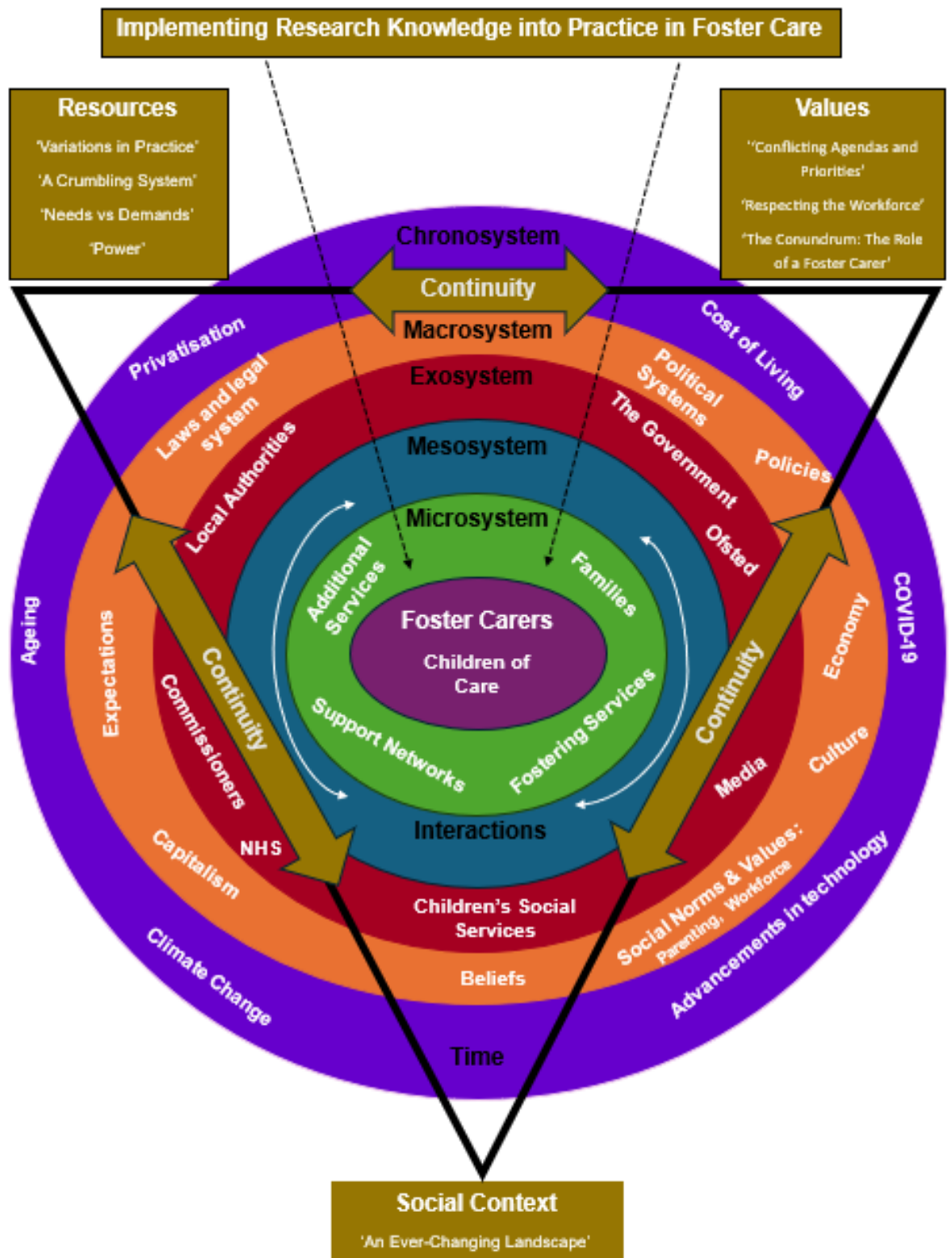
5.2. The Ecological Model

5.2.1. <u>Foster Carers</u>

At the centre of the model, and the heart of this study, are foster carers and the children they care for. Previous research has indicated that foster carers do not feel valued and respected. The analysis found that there was an appreciation for foster carers across data sources.

> *Tiley (SSW, LA): **"Foster carers are like the bread and butter of social work, without foster carers, if they weren't there, we wouldn't be able to do our jobs."***

> ***"[…] foster carers to be treated as equal and valued members of the team around the child"*** (Ott et al., 2023, p. 2).

The uniqueness of fostering adds further complexity to the implementation of research within an under-resourced provision. The NMS highlights the importance of fostering provisions tailoring their approach to the child.

> ***"The standards are designed to be applicable to the wide variety of different types of fostering service. They aim to enable, rather than prevent, individual providers to develop their own particular ethos and approach based on evidence that this is the most appropriate way to meet the child's needs"*** (DfE, 2011).

Yet, participants expressed this was not possible in practice due to the lack of funding and financial support given to foster carers. Participants expressed that additional government funding is required to ensure the specific needs of each foster carer and the children in their care are met. This included fostering allowances.

> *Jane (TM, IFA): **"[…], they don't need to wait three months for a resource panel. Things would have disrupted by then. So, it is also the agencies having access to those resources internally so that we can be quite responsive."***

> *Chris (TM, LA): "[…] budgets are tight everywhere in every local authority across the country but I do think it's a real issue that if we don't give the financial support for our children in care to the foster carers and give them the autonomy about how it's spent, I do think we're in danger of losing carers because people are saying to me I can't afford it."*

These are examples of how the causal mechanism of resources and values impact directly on foster carers and the implementation of research knowledge into practice.

5.2.2. Microsystem

As the social setting of foster care, and the most immediate environment and relationships for foster carers, this system includes people and services which foster carers have direct interactions with, as well as support networks and additional services. This system is where research knowledge should be directly implemented into practice.

5.2.2.1. Respecting the Workforce

Highlighted across the scoping review and all data sources was the assertion that services and professionals around the foster carer, especially fostering social workers, are essential for ensuring foster carers' needs are considered and supported. This indicates the importance of the fostering workforce, yet the current analysis found that the Government do not adequately value and respect, nor fund, or resource fostering services. Under-resourcing in this area therefore contributes to whether good practice recommendations can be implemented.

> *Tiley (SSW, LA): "I wish there was another me to help me. That's what I need. I need another me."*

> *Katherine (TMO, IFA): "you can only retain carers if they've got good support networks, and you've got to retain your social workers, […]."*

Jessica (RASW, LA): *"[…] also high rates of sick leave etc., as wellbeing staff support is being cut etc, lack of social work bursaries, too high caseloads etc."*

Participants voiced that they did not feel respected, appreciated nor valued by other professionals in the systems. This impacts on keeping and maintaining a workforce who feel supported in their role, and in turn can support foster carers.

Anna (SSW, IFA): *"my line manager did say to me that actually, fostering social workers are deemed to be, you know, (.) less, less than, you know, other social workers. So that that is something that that is felt I think across the board."*

Participants reflected that the focus groups had been an opportunity to not feel alone with the challenges they faced and to have a space to feel heard.

Thomas (SSW, LA): *"[…] I really appreciate that someone wants to listen to my experience and views. Really, I feel quite humbled by that."*

Natalie (TM, IFA): *"It's just reassuring hearing everybody else's views, 'cause, it's always the similar issues, isn't it?".*

Sophie (SSW, LA): *"I think it's been really nice to reflect really and have an opportunity to like just, yeah, chat, in a relaxed forum about our role and the challenges."*

The analysis suggests that fostering is positioned secondary to frontline children's social care teams, offering a plausible explanation as to why fostering provisions are not prioritised and resourced adequately. The findings also show that services which exist in the exosystem (i.e. the Government and commissioners, to be explored later in this chapter) exert their power and influence into day-to-day practice.

Additionally, the focus groups identified how macrosystem beliefs and expectations were filtered down into microsystem practices, specifically that individuals working in children's social care will go above and beyond their role. At times, it felt that the workforce was exploited by the system, left feeling burnt out and somewhat hopeless. Consequently, this will impact on fostering social workers' capacity to support their foster carers.

> *Bella (SSW, LA): **"I also feel social work as a whole, I think, I don't think it's just fostering there is this unwritten expectation that we, go above and beyond."***

> *Natalie (TM, IFA): **"You know, we have a crisis here already. I don't really see it's going to get very much better if I'm honest, but and I'm not normally a doom and gloom person, but I just feel as though it feels a massive mountain to climb."***

In summary, to provide the support foster carers require, it is essential that fostering social workers are respected, supported, and resourced in their role.

5.2.2.2. Variations in Practice

Within the microsystem, variations in practice were evident between the two types of fostering providers. Due to smaller caseloads, participants working in IFAs commented on having more time and flexibility to be available for foster carers compared to LA participants.

> *Pauline (SSW, IFA): **"Like if a carer needed me at 3:00 o'clock today, unless I had something that I could not cancel, I would be there at 3:00 o'clock. erm whether or not it's duty […] and we've kind of got smaller caseloads".***

These differences were also apparent in the context of support mechanisms. Participants' responses indicated that IFAs had more in-house resources in comparison to LAs. This included access to training and additional support systems (e.g., support workers, therapists, and consultation spaces).

Jane (RM, IFA): **"[…] we've got all the mandatory training that's required in the regs and the minimum standards but we've invested quite heavily in therapeutic training again for all our foster carers and all our staff because we feel that if we don't give people the knowledge and the tools and you know those reflective spaces to think about what's happening for them, what's happening for the children, then we're expecting them to do a job kind of blindfolded."**

Chris (TM, LA): **"I think for us, you know, we've been able to commission, you know, pace, pace training and DDP. […], we can't always afford to do it for everyone within the team. We that's our aim, but sometimes it's what's in the budget. So, we are restricted."**

Whilst it was apparent that IFAs have more accessibility to resources, the analysis also highlighted resources LAs predominately had access to. This was related to the Government's 'Stable Home, Built on Love' strategy of implementing regional recruitment hubs and the expansion of the Mockingbird model. However, participants highlighted that access to these initiatives was not consistently available.

Diane (RM, LA): **"So I think in terms of support models, I think that's an excellent model, although it doesn't cover everybody because it's only a small proportion because of the cost of buying in Mockingbird it makes it prohibitive to do across the whole."**

Sophie (SSW, LA): **"They've [foster carers] got quite an inaccurate understanding of Mockingbird […] So there's a real kind of uncertainty around what it is and why it's happening."**

Anna (SSW, IFA): **"I'm really unfamiliar with Mockingbird. I haven't got a clue what you're talking about."**

This results in variations in practice underpinned by the availability and accessibility of resources.

Participants' conversations indicated that the structuring of the provisions also impacted on the agendas implemented. IFAs, due to being in the private sector, appeared to have more flexibility in shaping their practice and support offer compared to LA provisions.

> *Hannah (RSW, IFA):* **"I think that ethos of our agency works really well. It's very child focused and I think that feeds down on, you know, what we offer carers because we are pretty unique."**

> *Jessica (RASW, LA):* **"And then you know, constantly the local authorities are under pressure with all the new requirements in government and you know of Ofsted."**

> *Pauline (SSW, IFA):* **"There's a difference for our IFA carers as well, and what local authority foster carers are expected to do because we're on contracts, so unless it's been agreed in a contract as an IFA, we just say we can't do that […] whereas it's a very different position for local authority carer. I think there's a little bit more expectation on them. They don't have a contract that protects them."**

Suggestions of standardising aspects like fee packages and allowances to minimise variation across fostering practices were viewed negatively by participants, particularly by those in management positions. Their rationale related to the differences in commissioning and the profit-making business model; alongside participants stating that fostering provisions need flexibility in their practice, and resources to tailor to the specific needs of each foster carer.

> *Natalie (TM, IFA):* **"you do have that divide, you've got your local authorities and you've got your IFAs […] from my point of view, IFAs have got a stronghold […] I think it would struggle because obviously IFAs are profit making. And so, with finance, it's so complex. (.) Could there be a generic? (.) I don't know. I don't think it would work."**

> Jane (RM, IFA): *"I think it would be a big challenge to have something standardised because I think no, even as independent fostering agency, our offers differ so much."*

Variation in practice was also reflected in the management of delegated authority and allegations, areas of concerns for foster carers. An IFA manager commented in the follow-up questionnaire on this being significantly impactful for foster carers who are caring for children from different LAs.

> *"Delegated authority and managing allegations is a significant area of concerns for foster carers, at present carers could have children in their home placed with differing local authorities who all apply regulations, policy and delegated authority differently."*

Whilst geographical differences were not discussed specifically by participants, the quote above provides an example of how geographical location may impact on policies and the support available for foster carers. Geographical differences in the availability and accessibility of resources was also found regarding the location in which regional recruitment hubs were implemented and the expansion of the Mockingbird model. The North East was identified as the pilot locality for the regional recruitment hubs, with the Mockingbird model being expanded and introduced within southern regions of the country. This was supported both by the document analysis and focus groups. It was not clear how these locations were selected, although participants working in the South East and South West of the country indicated that the implementation of the Mockingbird model was related to the fidelity of the model and cost. Participants indicated that the LA had to purchase the model.

> *"Started co-designing the North East Fostering Pathfinder to develop a foster care recruitment and retention programme - the 'Foster with North East' Support Hub will be fully operational by September 2023, and we are continuing to work on a regional comms campaign and Mockingbird expansion across the North East"* (DfE, 2023a, p 41).

*Chris (TM, LA): **"We do actually have, have our own hub support that's based on Mockingbird, and the reason why we did that was the fidelity of the model and the cost."***

In summary, the findings indicate that Government strategies, guidance, and policies, are not reliably filtered down or implemented into practice as a consequence of limited resources. Additionally, variations in practice within the microsystem are influenced by broader aspects of the ecological systems; LAs are part of the public sector and more directly impacted by Government agendas and priorities than private sector IFAs. These findings reinforce the intertwined nature of the causal mechanisms across systems and that implementing research into practice does not happen in silo.

5.2.3. The Mesosystem

This system relates to the interactions between different services and people within the microsystem, highlighting that they do not function independently of one another. The Mesosystem is important for ensuring the needs of foster carers are known and met, and conflict within such interactions can negatively impact foster carers.

5.2.3.1. Needs versus Demands

Conflict within mesosystem interactions were identified by participants in the focus groups, who shared the challenges of balancing the needs of foster carers versus the multitude of demands their role entails.

> *Sophie (SSW, LA): **"Like I sometimes I just don't feel like I'm doing any social work at all because it's so admin heavy like copying and pasting to several forms."***

> *Anna (SSW, IFA): **"[…] we need to do the data, but they [foster carers] just want to offload, you know, or talk about, you know, get their stuff out, you know?"***

This related to pressures and priorities directed from the exosystem (children's social care and Ofsted), impacting on how fostering provisions were able to prioritise limited resources. The lack of fostering social workers' time and the competing demands of their role impacted on their capacity to support the needs of foster carers.

> Tiley (SSW, LA): *"That can be really tricky when you're in a visit and you only have like a certain amount of time and it's like right, I need to go on to the next thing I need to go and visit another foster carer. I need to get back to the office. I need to do XY and Z, and that can be really sad. That can be really quite tricky because, like you want to give them that time."*

> Thomas (SSW, LA): *"[…] And you get one placement that's breaking down suddenly […] that takes up your whole week. […] just haven't got time to deal with everything."*

Demands and pressures impacting on the implementation of research knowledge were also evidential in relation to recruitment and retention. Participants reflected on the wide range of demands for, and challenges of foster placements (e.g., the lack of placements, the matching process, adequately preparing foster carers, and creating sustainable placements). The document analysis also supported this, for example, Narey & Owers (2018):

> *"Matching is overwhelmingly supply led and not needs led"* (p. 14).

> Thomas (SSW, LA): *"[…] also our recruitment team have got statistics they've got to hit you know, recruit all these new carers."*

It was apparent that participants were knowledgeable of good practice, however, due to the lack of resources implementing this was not always possible.

> *Diana (RM, LA): "[…] it's at 5:00 o'clock in the Friday with a child being driven around the car park while you're trying to find a carer […] The carers get very upset because you call them and you try and sort of encourage them to take the placement and you know it causes a lot of friction and a lot of bad feeling, but you've got a child at the end of the day who hasn't got a bed."*

This was also reinforced in a LA participant's response to the follow-up questionnaire:

> **"We have a range of peer support available including mentors during the assessment process, peer guides available once through panel and lots of support groups and days out […] However, with less staff and funding available, again getting harder to deliver."**

5.2.3.2. Conflicting Agendas and Priorities

Participants' comments also emphasised that differing agendas and priorities held by teams within children's social care, functioned as barriers to foster carers being treated with respect and as part of the team. The availability and capacity of people's resources to consider the broader picture was also a contributing factor.

> *Katherine (TMO, IFA): "[…] if you're in court from a child's perspective, you've got restrictions put on yourself and you're not always necessarily trying to make life harder for the carer or supervising social worker, but that can be a battle."*

> *Chris (TM, LA): "I think foster carers, you know, need to be empowered to, to be confident in asking for support without feeling that there's going to be any criticism, […] sometimes it's OK for foster carers, it's just to say I'm having a really crap day today. It's been really difficult, you know, but I'm all right, I'm here, you know, without that kind of fear, I think."*

Participants identified that misunderstandings and a lack of knowledge surrounding the work of fostering services impacts on a systemic approach being implemented effectively to support care experienced children and foster carers. Feedback indicated that little was included within the training for social workers', and participants' knowledge of fostering was through placements and learning on the job.

> *Tiley (SSW, LA):* **"I think we had like one lecture on looked after children, but it wasn't even about supervising social workers. […] I just don't really remember learning much about, at all about fostering. I think it's something that's kind of like neglected in social work. I feel like it's a very neglected part of social work."**

> *Pauline (SSW, IFA):* **"We talked about young carers and caring, but never in my three-year degree did I speak about the role of a foster carer or to be honest, I wasn't even sure what fostering was until I stepped into a placement."**

One LA participant wrote in their follow-up questionnaire that fostering research is not clearly accessible, indicating the need for social workers to have greater opportunities to engage in research. They felt that over time this would translate to increased implementation of research knowledge into practice. This would require additional resourcing, with time again identified as a barrier.

> **"[…] more training in research awareness for social care teams such as around how to read and critically analyse research, journal clubs, etc. […]."**

In sum, these findings suggest that conflict between microsystem interactions can impact on foster carers' experiences. Additionally, embedding a systemic approach to supporting foster carers is difficult due to the external influences of the broader ecological systems.

5.2.4. Exosystem

The allocation of resources and decisions made by services and organisations in this system, indirectly influence foster carers through what is prioritised and implemented into practice within the microsystem.

5.2.4.1. Power

The analysis, supported by the diagram in Appendix M, established a hierarchal structure within fostering. Emerging categories in the early phases of the document analysis, including 'duty and responsibility of the system', 'values and agendas', and 'hierarchy, structures, and processes', were situating aspects of fostering practice within a wider context and identified the role of power in contributing to the research-practice gap.

The power of the exosystem in influencing research-practice was supported within the focus groups. Participants discussed Ofsted, expressing that the organisation negatively impacted their role and delivery of support. This related to processes being data- and paperwork-driven, rather than focusing on relational ways of working.

> *Ruth (SSW, IFA):* **"I think paperwork is the bane of my life and I'm not very good at it. [...] it's very much of Ofsted led."**

> *Bella (SSW, LA):* **"Because like I said, I feel lots of supervision is just about ticking those boxes. Making sure Ofsted is happy. [...] The system is so oppressive".**

The influence of the hierarchical structure for enacting change was noted by an IFA manager in their follow-up questionnaire response. This related to embedding 'Language that Cares' into practice.

> **"Charities and local authorities can be drivers for change but there needs to be trauma informed learning at a government and Ofsted level and a review of the impact of their language and how that translates to policy and practice."**

These findings indicate that processes are not representative of practice needs or as highlighted in the research. Additionally, due to the competing demands and availability of resources, it is difficult to prioritise and implement relational ways of working if policies and regulations are not representative of these.

5.2.4.2. A Crumbling System

As discussed, the analysis identified that resources are key to adequately supporting foster carers.

> *"[…] emphasised the need for sufficient and consistent financial commitments to underpin implementation. Funding was mentioned particularly in relation to recruiting social workers, financial support for carers, developing high-quality placements and supporting staff training"* (DfE, 2023a, p 35).

Although the analysis showed that the 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' strategy was a starting point, it highlighted that the Government is still not doing enough to improve children's social care, and should provide further investment.

> *Sophie (SSW, LA):* *"[…] our government and they do not prioritize vulnerable children and vulnerable adults. They do not prioritize money to the local authorities and as a result we are in a system that is broken, and our children are being failed. So yeah, I think it's it starts at the top."*

> *Follow-up questionnaire respondent (TM, LA):* *"Recruitment and retention of foster carers is a significant issue and further support from the government is required to help improve the situation. National campaigns (funded by the government) using all available media outlets would help."*

> *"Love and a stable home should definitely be key. The missing pillar is more funding"* (Foster carer, DfE, 2023a, p. 14).

A lack of resourcing, consistency and stability provided by the exosystem has resulted in a crumbling microsystem. Participants expressed that fostering teams were 'plugging gaps' and 'scaffolding children's social care teams'. This was in addition to the absence of joint working across the microsystems, highlighting the challenges in continuity, a key aspect of relational approaches and represented clearly in the suggested Ecological model.

> *Bella (SSW, LA):* **"I mean, we are a crisis service, but we're not, in a way, in fostering we shouldn't be, but we are. We pick up that slack all the time."**

> *Ruth (SSW, IFA):* **"Lack of joined up working with other services, such as housing to support foster carers."**

Whilst more collaborative, the Government's resourcing of regional recruitment hubs and the Mockingbird Project, neglect addressing the broader factors which impinge on people's ability to foster, e.g., having a big enough spare room or a steady income.

> *Hannah (RSW, IFA):* **"It's difficult for people financially without a second job. Erm. Again, we're asking a lot for this to be a main job without a guaranteed income. And er I got a lot of people who would love to leave jobs to foster. But because of that, not that guaranteed income, they're not willing to do that now. You can't blame people, can you? Especially in today's cost of living crisis."**

> **"It is important the Government recognises that the retention of foster carers is a broader issue and Mockingbird cannot fix this on its own. The status of foster carers must be improved, and they need to be treated as equal and valued members of the team around the child, receive allowances that fully cover the cost of caring and a fee that recognises their time, skills and experience"** (Hatcher, 2023, p. 8).

Consequently, these strategies fall short of making sustainable changes. To achieve the desired positive outcomes, strategies and initiatives cannot be achieved with one-off approaches or in silo. Resources are required at the various levels within the systems for research knowledge to be implemented.

5.2.5. Macrosystem

Although distal, the macrosystem has significant ramifications for foster carers. This system covers the economy, culture, social norms, and the values of society, which are reflected in current laws, policy guidance and practice in children's social care, including fostering. This section focuses on the economy's current capitalist model and the conundrum of the role of a foster carer.

5.2.5.1. A Capitalist Economy

The analysis has explicitly identified how the distribution of resources (specifically money), contribute to the research-practice gap within foster care. This links to capitalist structures and ideologies. Capitalism is characterised by a focus on the open market, competition, and profit making, as well as supply and demand. It is at odds with the familial and relational fostering practice model, which is traditionally a non-profit-making system. This difference provides a challenge for research knowledge being implemented into practice.

The analysis has indicated that foster care has not been prioritised by the Government and resources are being distributed elsewhere.

> *Sophie (SSW, LA):* ***"There is plenty of money in this country. Our government wasted tens of millions of pounds on inadequate PPE equipment, er back handed to multimillionaires through private arrangements. […] I think it's all about our government's lack of prioritising our money that we are investing in into this system."***

Building upon this, within a capitalist model, the Government are likely to invest money into other services, companies, etc., to create a profit and boost the country's economy. As such, prioritising and resourcing relational practices within fostering, and more broadly, children's social care, are neglected.

The role of capitalism influencing fostering practice was evidential across the analysis, stemming from a chain of policy, practice, and legal developments in the last thirty years. This included the formation of IFAs to support the increasing demand for placements. The Government's shift to increasingly commissioning services outside of the public sector to lower costs and meet demands, has resulted in a free labour market in which foster carers have become a commodity. Some documents even positioned foster carers as 'supply':

> "***More needs to be done to attract the right supply of the right sort of carers***" (Narey & Owers, 2018, p. 58).

As supply, foster carers are evaluated on their effectiveness and costs. This is within the context of there not being enough foster carers available to meet the needs of care experienced children, creating a competitive market and driving costs. Therefore, to recruit and retain foster carers in the current economic context, fostering services need to consider ways of attracting foster carers using a business-model, making competitive offers. This challenged the values of some participants in management positions.

> *Jane (RM, IFA):* ***"In terms of what's at the forefront for us, retaining carers, trying to be creative in what we can offer with no more funding. [..] (location) is saturated with IFAs so there's a lot of competition from really large organisations who are recruiting very aggressively. Personally, I don't think all of it is ethical."***

> *Diane (RM, LA):* ***"[…] you do get the issue with people kind of becoming very money orientated […] it doesn't feel very comfortable you know […] But I do appreciate that if the fees and allowances aren't high enough, people aren't going to be able to foster and they're going to have to work alongside fostering because of the cost of living, [..]."***

> *Hannah (RSW, IFA):* ***"But it struck me today about how business minded I am right? Like I've taken a step back from the social worker. […] My head's more in the business side of it."***

The exploitation of the workforce was a further consequence of a capitalist economy and restricted budgets. This was expressed by participants across focus groups.

> *Bella (SSW, LA):* ***"So we are doing two jobs at the same time, and that is acceptable even though you raise it, I need help, I'm drowning. […] But do they change anything? No […]."***

> *Hannah (RSW, IFA):* ***"And I guess we are asking a lot. Well, aren't we for the fee, you know, that we're paying. And I think the list just gets longer and longer."***

These findings support the argument that the current economic system is creating conflict within the delivery of fostering practices, undermining the quality and offer of support available.

5.2.5.2. The Conundrum: The Role of a Foster Carer
The analysis of several Government documents, including the NMS, indicated policies were centred on the child's needs rather than those of foster carers. This was underpinned by the assumption that the overarching aim of fostering is to support children to thrive.

> ***"…child's best interests at heart, is central to good decision making"*** (The Fostering Network, 2021, p. 4).

In the preliminary stages of the document analysis, it was unclear whether foster carers' and care experienced children's needs were conflicting, a potential mechanism impacting on the research-practice gap. As the analysis progressed, the developing theory regarding this shifted, instead focusing on society's understanding of a foster carer's role, and the conundrum of whether they are parents or professionals. The lack of consensus on this matter, also

seen in the focus groups, results in confused policy, and led to the developing hypothesis that the expectations of fostering social workers and the professional network may differ. This impacted fostering services' support offer, and subsequently the foster carer's ability to do their role effectively.

> *"The consequence is a confused policy stance where professionalisation is rhetorically rejected while many of its core elements are endorsed"* (Kirton, 2022, p. 4021).

> *Jessica (RASW, LA): "There's still the debate going on there about whether it should be seen as a profession and paid accordingly […] Fostering is kind of almost like walking a tightrope. On one hand, you've got to be the professional and the other you're being a parent."*

> *Katherine (TMO, IFA): "It's about that professional role and I know there's been lots of conversations where I'm around employee law and contracts. […] our agency have just extended a well-being offer, […] But there was a lot of legal research we had to do."*

This highlights that even within a common macrosystem context, social values, and beliefs regarding the role of a foster carer differ, as do interpretations of policies and guidance. This understandably makes embedding research knowledge into practice difficult, coupled with the challenges of the location of power, availability of resources and prioritisation of beliefs and agendas.

It was evidential from the analysis, that the Government have significant power in resourcing and implementing research. For example, the Government's strategy promotes the use of kinship care, funding the setup of regional hubs and the expansion of the Mockingbird programme, whilst issues such as foster carers' employment status, and a standardised and accredited framework for training are not present.

> *"[…] "foster care has been overlooked and underfunded for too long. […] the Government's pledged investment should be a starting point and the many issues missing from the strategy addressed"* (Hatcher, 2023, pp. 8-9).

Furthermore, the complexity of the role, along with limited resources, resulted in participants speaking to the ever-growing expectations required of foster carers. These expectations are then not supported adequately by fostering provisions in terms of training, pay and status, and further examples of the exploitation of the workforce.

> *Natalie (TM, IFA):* **"It was mainly about how foster carers are quite often seen as non-professionals, and then when required they are super professionals when they are needed to roll out life story work. [...] So I think their role is quite confusing. It seems to be getting worse. (.) er, and I think that's with budgets and staff shortages from local authorities."**

> *Pauline (SSW, IFA):* **"And we're not just asking them to care for children. […] there's an expectation that can use facilities like the computer or be able to log on, whereas historically it was Mr and Mrs Anybody who would look after a child and, you know, feedback when needed. […] It shifted so much over the years, the expectation of a carer."**

Additionally, the uniqueness of fostering implies that a one size fits all approach does not work. SSWs in the first focus group expressed that aspects of the Training, Support, and Development Standards (TSD) were not relevant to all foster carers, in some circumstances leading to the process feeling like a tick box exercise, lacking purpose and meaning. Two participants even suggested that the TSD standards should be scrapped.

Ruth (SSW, IFA): "I've quite a few first carers that really struggle with the online training. There's the 50% of our foster carer's kind of said, actually, but they wanted to go back to face to face training. So, we were in this quandary of wanting, not wanting, it's really difficult."

Tiley (SSW, LA): "Yeah. I just feel like it's like a tick box, kind of like exercise. And it's not really like something that. (.) Exactly like what you measure them against."

Pauline (SSW, IFA): "I think we just need to scrap it and just focus on topics that are relevant to the child they've got."

To conclude, the analysis found that the role of a foster carer and the support provided is impacted by policies and guidance created by the Government. These are influenced by a capitalist model which conflicts with relational approaches. This is in addition to a lack of consensus amongst the different systems as to whether foster carers are parents or professionals, preventing a synergized and systemic approach. The availability of resources also exacerbates this.

5.2.6. Chronosystem

This system relates to shifts and transitions during the span of children's social care and how changes in the world and historical events impact on fostering practices, including social expectations. Foster carers' responses to such transitions depend on the support of the various ecological systems.

5.2.6.1. An Ever-Changing Landscape

Participants across the focus groups commented on how changes in the chronosystem result in shifts and transitions in the fostering environment. This included the growth of technology, understandings of developmental trauma and a professionalisation of a caring role. Participants felt that fostering practices could not keep up, resulting in foster carers being ill-equipped and adequately prepared for the role.

> *Chris (TM, LA): **"It's quite difficult for us actually, when we're doing our kind of skills to foster training, to kind of keep up to date with the changing world as it were."***

> *Tiley (SSW, LA): **"I think the landscape of fostering has changed over time. I think it's evolved. […] Foster caring maybe 20 years ago might have been very different to foster caring now so […]."***

> *Natalie (TM, IFA): **"I totally agree that life has not caught up with foster care training. […] We're really behind in the times. It's quite worrying."***

The analysis noted that neither the TSD standards, nor the NMS, had been updated for over ten years, suggesting that current research knowledge is not represented in the guidance and policies underpinning fostering practices. Participants agreed these needed reviewing and updating to be reflective of current knowledge and practice.

> *Pauline (SSW, IFA): **"But I just think they just they need to be updated like this is from like 2011, like I think they need to be updated with within the 2020s."***

> *Jessica (RASW, LA): **"[…] the national minimum standards, you know it doesn't reference things like developmental trauma. And you know the kind of new ways of working because it's probably been the last 10 years […] But some of the kind of new ways of working perhaps could be referenced in it".***

Participants also reflected upon the demographics of foster carers and the specific characteristics required for fostering. These highlighted barriers to who can foster, which appear a consequence of the current social context, i.e., ability to drive, size of home and use of technology. These factors are likely to be contributing to the recruitment and retention difficulties facing foster care.

Chris (TM, LA): **"When I first started in our fostering team, I would have foster carers who would have three bedrooms available, be able to take sibling groups of three or three different children […] I think now we're seeing, there's less rooms available for people coming into fostering, so if they take a child, it tends to be one child."**

Thomas (SSW, LA): **"I mean, all our foster carers have to log on now to record their logs, their foster carer logs which can be used in court. But our older foster carers really struggle. […] But we've got a really older population of foster carers still in their 70s that are still doing it you know. But I think that they haven't, they haven't kept up."**

Jessica (RASW, LA): **"[…] we do tend to say you need to be a car driver, but we are finding more people who can't because of the cost. […] People are less likely to want to drive cause of climate crisis. You know, there's a whole different range of reasons and young people why they're not driving. So again, there's all these societal changes that are happening that we haven't even thought about."**

Given that the evidence, knowledge-base and understanding of care experienced children is continuously growing, the analysis acknowledges that 'an ever-changing landscape,' combined with restricted 'resources', is likely to limit the use of research knowledge in practice. This may explain why current guidance, and policies are not up to date with practice needs.

To conclude, the model supports the argument that to achieve sustainable change, synergies across the systems are required. It also provides a plausible explanation as to why foster carers' needs have remained unmet for several years despite the growing body of research.

5.3. Causal Mechanisms Underpinning the Research-Practice Gap

Drawing together the findings presented, the three overarching causal mechanisms which impact on research knowledge being implemented in practice can be reviewed. These will also be discussed further in the next chapter.

5.3.1. Resources

The concept of resources encapsulates elements required for good fostering practice, supporting the implementation of research to meet foster carers' needs. This includes power, finances, time, a workforce, robust policies and frameworks, and support mechanisms, like training and access to additional services.

The analysis found that the availability and accessibility to resources were contributing aspects to research not being implemented into practice consistently. This significantly exacerbates the difficulties in the recruitment and retention of foster carers. The sub-mechanisms included *'A Crumbling System'*, which influences the ability to implement recommended research into practice and linked to *'Power'; 'Variations in Practice'*, highlighting the importance of resources being available and accessible across the different systems for practice delivery; and *'Needs versus Demands'*, captures the allocation of resources and the impacts on foster carers' experiences.

5.3.2. Values

This second mechanism underscores the impact of values held by various parts of the Ecological model on fostering practices. '*Conflicting Agendas and Priorities'* describes which research implemented in practice not only in foster care, but in wider children's social care. '*Respecting the Workforce'* emphasised by the fostering social workers, considered the need for role recognition. *'The Conundrum: The Role of a Foster Carer'* discussed the influence of differing understandings of the role on expectations and reflects the positioning and value of foster carers within children's social care.

5.3.3. <u>Social Context</u>

Social context as a mechanism refers to contextual factors that indirectly influence fostering practice and each system of the ecological model. A sub-mechanism, linked to continuity, is '*An Ever-Changing Landscape'* which represents how continuous changes and developments are problematic for fostering provisions when embedding research-knowledge into practice and providing continuity for their foster carers.

5.4. Concluding Findings

In summary, the Ecological model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the research-practice gap in foster care. By considering each system as interconnected and understanding causal mechanisms (values, resources, social context), the model offers insights into the complexity of implementing research knowledge into practice and the implications of such dynamics for foster carers and fostering provisions.

6. CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the theory of the research-practice gap and the adapted Ecological model in relation to the research aims, findings and relevant literature, and provides the implications and recommendations for practice. A critical and reflexive review on the research will be provided. The chapter concludes with areas of future research and a succinct overview of the study.

6.1. Contextualisation, Implications and Recommendations

This section seeks to provide a comprehensive discussion of the theory of the research-practice gap in relation to the research aims and the pertinent literature.

The scoping review provided a broad overview of the existing literature and the sensitising concepts of foster carers' needs: **value and respect, support, and training.** Importantly, the scoping review identified the research-practice gap in foster care as foster carers reported that these identified needs are often unmet, despite the wealth of research knowledge (e.g., Adams et al., 2018; The Fostering Network, 2021). This was in the wider context of a national demand for foster placements alongside difficulties with recruiting and retaining foster carers (CMA, 2023).

As such, the study sought to answer the research question: "What impacts on implementing research knowledge into practice within foster care?". The two sub-questions "Within fostering services, what is in practice to support the needs of foster carers?" and "What are fostering professionals' perspectives on the barriers to implementing research knowledge into practice in foster care?" were also explored. These questions were addressed by the multiple phases of analysis, including the experiences and views of participants working in fostering services, resulting in a theory to explain the research-practice gap, and the development of an adapted Ecological model to support the theory.

The analysis found that the research-practice gap is complex and the process of embedding research knowledge into practice is multifaceted, influenced by

three overarching interconnected causal mechanisms: **resources, values, and social context**. The theory of the research-practice gap indicates that, due to the characteristics of a capitalist economy, the Government does not adequately invest in children's social care, resulting in under-resourced services and a stretched workforce, subsequently effecting the support available for foster carers. In addition to ongoing demands, children's social care and fostering provisions appear to experience top-down decision-making which drives data led processes over needs- and person-centred practices. The gap is further exacerbated by the ever-changing social context of society, presenting a challenge for fostering provisions to keep up to date with limited resources. This, therefore, results in foster carers' needs going unmet.

The causal mechanisms, and the implications of these, will now be used to explain some of the existing difficulties within foster care, as identified within the scoping review.

6.1.1. The Causal Mechanisms of the Research-Practice Gap

6.1.1.1. Resources
The Ecological model indicated that the location of power for resourcing and implementing research knowledge into practice within children's social care is held by those in the macro- and exo-system (i.e. the Government, commissioners, and policymakers). The lack of investment financially and structurally offers an understanding as to why 'good practice' is not always adhered to. The scoping review identified that foster carers reported that the availability of their social worker and the child's was important for the stability of the placement (e.g., Farmer et al., 2005), yet in this study, some SSWs felt this was unachievable, particularly those working in LAs, due to their high caseload and feeling stretched by the competing demands of their role.

The matching of placements is also another example of the impact of under-resourcing in foster care. The study found that matching is being driven by the demand for placements rather than considering the specific needs of the child or the foster carers' skills. Whilst providing a short-term solution (i.e. a child has a bed), it is unlikely to be a sustainable placement in the long-term. As

demonstrated by the literature, the matching process and foster carers' experience of placement breakdowns, impacts on their intentions to continue fostering, whilst also affecting the outcomes of care experienced children (e.g., Golding 2003; Sprecher et al., 2021), therefore, indicating that the distribution of resources contributes to the research-practice gap.

Bolstering the explanation of resources contributing to the research-practice gap, was the finding that there are variations in resources between the two types of fostering providers. The current study found that IFAs, due to being situated within the private sector, typically had additional resources available, and as such were able to offer foster carers a more robust support package in comparison to LAs provisions, including the availability of SSWs, specialist training and access to therapeutic support. Differences in the financial package foster carers receive was also apparent. Participants in this study, who worked in a LA, emphasised that whilst they have advocated to commissioners for an increase in the financial package for foster carers the budget has not allowed for this. This may explain why Hatcher (2022) found that some LAs were not even paying foster carers the minimum allowance. In summary, resources, and the availability of resources within fostering provisions', provides an explanation to why foster carers across the country report differences in support, in addition to a rationale for the increase in foster carers joining IFAs (Kirton et al., 2007; Ofsted, 2023b).

In sum, this study has identified that the accumulating sub-mechanisms of resources: variations in practice, a crumbling system, needs versus demands, and power, impact on fostering provision's ability to support and equip foster carers in their role. Importantly, this study revises views that fostering provisions do not understand the needs of foster carers and that further research is required to determine the support needs of foster carers before developing comprehensive support packages (McDermid et al., 2022; Pithouse et al., 2004). Rather, it has highlighted that it is the lack of resources and investment in foster care as to why foster carers report unmet needs and there are retention difficulties (Ofsted, 2023a; Ott et al., 2023). Given these findings, a key priority for the Government and commissioners should be further investment in foster care.

6.1.1.2. Values

The different values across the ecological system are at least partly responsible for the conundrum of whether foster carers are professionals or parents, and what support is implemented into practice as a result. As such, this can lead to aspects of foster carers' needs going unattended, i.e. professional status and a better financial offer (Hatcher, 2022, 2023). The study validates the scoping review's findings that there is a lack of consensus surrounding the role, coupled with a confused policy stance from the Government (DfE, 2018; Kirton et al., 2022), and a lack of training on fostering and the role of foster carers within the training courses for social workers. These impact on the support fostering provisions provide, in addition to the expectations held by the professional network regarding the foster carers' role. In agreement with the literature, including, The Fostering Network (2021) and Sinclairtfn (2019), for foster carers to feel valued, respected, and supported in their role, their status as professionals requires clarity, and supported by sufficiently resourced provisions.

The values held by the exosystem, e.g., Ofsted, were also significant in shaping fostering practices and processes. The study identified that the values and priorities of the broader systems did not encourage the relational-based processes and approaches recommended by the research-knowledge (e.g., Lotty et al., 2020; Valentine et al., 2019). Data- and paperwork-driven processes, alongside the demand pressures and limited resources, impose on fostering social workers' ability to incorporate relational needs within their practice. The findings implied that if policies, regulations, and processes were not representative of research recommendations, they are less likely to be prioritised or implemented into service processes and fostering practices.

Values held by the ecological systems regarding foster care and the role of fostering social workers also impacts on foster carers' needs being met and a systemic approach being achieved. A striking finding of this study was that fostering social workers, similar to foster carers (Baginsky et al., 2017), do not always feel valued or respected by other professionals, nor appreciated more broadly by children's social care. Time, caseloads, demand pressures, and

understandings of their role were significant factors. Evidence has shown that social workers, to support their clients, also require adequate social and emotional support (Figley, 1995). However, this study found, for some fostering social workers, particularly those working in LAs, this support was not available. This is indicative of capitalism, which does not prioritise nor value the wellbeing of the workforce. This is a critical issue for fostering provisions, and more broadly the Government as without additional support being implemented for social workers there will be fewer available to support foster carers.

In sum, the causal mechanism of values highlights the importance of understanding the research-practice gap within the Ecological model, and that a capitalist structure, top-down beliefs, and approaches which do not value nor prioritise research knowledge, significantly impact on fostering practices, and ultimately foster carers.

6.1.1.3. Social Context

The social context mechanism and the exploration of the chronosystem within the theory of the research-practice gap can offer a plausible explanation as to why there is a decrease in applications to become a foster carer (Ofsted, 2023b). The findings highlighted that due to the current social context there are barriers to who can foster, for instance the ability to drive, size of home, limited finances, and use of technology. The strategies endorsed and prioritised by the Government for improving the recruitment and retention of foster carers have neglected to address these broader factors which impact on people's ability to foster, and capacity to continue. Therefore, as indicated through the depiction of the Ecological model, this study reinforces the suggestions within the literature that a strategic and well-funded approach, which goes beyond single initiatives, is required for improving the recruitment and retention of foster carers (CMA, 2022; Hatcher, 2022; Ott et al., 2023).

The study's findings, because of an evolving social context of fostering practice, have implications for those within the macrosystem: policymakers, the children's commissioner, and other commissioning bodies. Current policies and guidance, including the NMS and TSD standards, are outdated and not representative of current fostering practice. The analysis and scoping review (e.g., Ottaway &

Selwyn, 2016) indicated the need for improved frameworks to adequately support the needs of foster carers, in addition to highlighting a lack of cohesion across policies and guidance. Participants shared that fostering practices have been unable to keep up and therefore are ill-equipping foster carers in their role. Therefore, foster carers needs will remain unmet if national policy, legislation, regulations, and guidance are not reflective of practice needs. Without changes to these policies, foster care will continue to face recruitment and retention challenges.

A capitalist economy and current political context create conflict within the delivery of fostering practices, undermining the quality and offer of support available. This is not a new notion within social care. For example, in 1978, Corrigan and Leonard's book linked social work challenges to the nature of capitalism in Britain and acknowledged the challenges of implementing change within this context. More recent research has examined the privatisation and commissioning of foster care (Sellick, 2011, 2014). Whilst participants' spoke of the differences between LAs and IFAs broadly, the role of privatisation, and types of commissioning arrangements and contracts, although identified as part of the capitalist model, were not areas which were explicitly explored within this study. Therefore, future research could explore this area further to provide a richer understanding of the impact on fostering and children's social care.

6.1.1.4. Summary

Three causal mechanisms: resources, values, and social context, were developed by this study to explain why a research-practice gap exists within foster care. The next section considers the Ecological Model as a framework to present these findings within the broader context of children's social care.

6.1.2. The Ecological Model

The Ecological Model (Figure 3, p. 50) conceptualises the mechanisms which impact implementing research knowledge into practice within foster care. The proposed model adapted the principles of the Ecological Systems theory, building on the traditional positioning of the child's development in a complex system of relationships influenced by several interconnected environmental systems, to also include such influences on foster carers themselves

(Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1992). Chapter One, section 1.5.2., provides further details of the theory.

Whilst the use of the Ecological model in this context is novel, other studies have utilised the framework for understanding other aspects of children's social care, supporting the rationale for using the Ecological model in this study. For example, Coman and Devaney (2011) draw on the model to consider the needs of care experienced children to address poorer later life outcomes, with their findings highlighting that interventions and approaches need to be systemic for this to be achieved. McGregor et al. (2021) specifically considered the role of power using the model; they emphasised the importance of recognising and locating power within each system to improve service delivery for young people. These studies, alongside the analysis in this study, demonstrate that the Ecological model can be used to indicate the location of needs and highlight where support is required. This is in addition to outlining the importance of considering the function of power in order to influence change.

Continuity was also considered an important component when considering relational approaches and included across models. McGregor et al. (2021) found from the perspectives of care experienced children that continuity influenced the permanency and stability of placements. This current study similarly identified that continuity was indeed a key component for ensuring sustainability and effective fostering practices. This implies that interconnecting systems working together consistently can achieve continuity for foster carers, which in turn provides stability for care experienced children, which can improve their later life outcomes (Adams et al., 2018; Coman and Devaney, 2021; McGregor et al., 2021).

The model is also consistent with the recommendations identified in the scoping review and document analysis. For example, both The Fostering Network (2021) and Ott et al. (2023) clearly state that changes, and implementation of these, are required within the multiple systems surrounding the foster carer. This included the Government, children's placing LA, regulatory bodies (i.e. Ofsted), and fostering provisions. Additionally, other sources, particularly McDermid et al. (2022), have highlighted the importance of taking a 'social

pedagogy' approach for change to be effective. This holistic approach, similarly, to the theory proposed, considers the individual's development within society, and requires the support of the wider systems.

To conclude, these findings show the utility of the theory of the research-practice gap and the Ecological Model in the context of foster care. The Ecological model presented in this study is complimentary to the existing knowledge base for understanding and supporting foster carers. This is in addition to the newfound insights of the causal mechanisms which enable and prevent research knowledge from being implemented to meet the needs of foster carers. The implications of these findings, supported by the existing literature, emphasise that to enable change within the systems working directly with foster carers (implementing research knowledge into practice), change is first required within the distal systems.

6.1.3. <u>The Broader Context of the Research-Practice Gap</u>

The research-practice gap is not exclusive to foster care, nor new within the discipline of social work (Fisher, 2013; Mallonee et al., 2006). In accordance with the presented findings, previous studies have shown that the integration and implementation of research-knowledge into practice is complex, influenced by the resources available (funding, infrastructures, and time), the organisation's values (current policies, competing demands, respect and understanding), and the social and political context in which services are operating in (Beddoe, 2011; Denvall & Skillmark, 2021; Gray et al., 2024; Lewig et al., 2006). The consistency of the causal mechanisms across the studies, strengthens the validity and applicability of the research-practice gap theory presented.

The current study suggests that research knowledge is not reliably filtered down into practice, nor is it clearly accessible. Whilst resourcing and the prioritisation from the macrosystem and exosystem has been identified as mechanisms for this; the lack of opportunities within fostering provisions was also found, identifying the need for further opportunities to be available for fostering social workers to engage with the current knowledge and evidence-base to support their practice. Given this, and the increasing emphasis on developing EBP in

social work to improve quality standards, outcomes for service-users and professional competency (Beddoe, 2010), future research, from the perspectives of fostering social workers, in this area would be beneficial.

6.1.4. <u>Recommendations</u>

Given the study's findings and the implications discussed, areas of recommendation are as follows:

6.1.4.1. A Whole Systems' Approach

- To improve the implementation of research-knowledge into practice and, in turn, the recruitment and retention of foster carers, **strategies and initiatives cannot be in silo**. This needs to be considered within commissioning and planning.

6.1.4.2. Macrosystem and Exosystem: Changes and Reviews

- A key priority for the Government should be **further investment** in foster care. This includes additional funding; building and maintaining a supported workforce around the child; robust policies and frameworks; training and a clear Government strategy that is committed to foster care.

- **A review of the existing national policies, legislation, and guidance for fostering**. Such reviews to ensure the views of fostering provisions, foster carers (prospective, current, and previous), and children's social care teams are sought. The **NMS should consider a clearer stance of the support available to both fostering social workers and foster carers**. This would increase the likelihood of policies being fit for practice, in addition to the fostering workforce feeling valued and respected.

- **A review of the training content for social workers** and to consider **incorporating learning** relating to **foster care** and engaging with and using **research-knowledge to inform practice**.

- **Research knowledge and EBP needs to be resourced and prioritised** in policies and strategies underpinning fostering practices.

This includes being embedded in the training of social workers and continued professional development.

These recommendations can then support the implementation of research at the microsystem level and enable fostering provisions to support the known needs of foster carers.

6.1.4.3. Mesosystem and Microsystem: Building Practice

- **A review of fostering practices**, including current processes and whether they are representative of the knowledge base.

- To develop the professional networks' understanding of fostering and the role of foster carers, children's social care services to consider **ways of facilitating collaborative working, joint practice sessions and training across departments and services.** These opportunities should also **involve foster carers**.

- Fostering provisions to consider **incorporating opportunities for fostering staff to engage with research**, including setting up a journal club, engaging with current fostering practice forums, or establishing local forums.

- **Support to be made available for fostering social workers**. For example, access to reflective practice, consultations.

These recommendations are targeted at improving a collaborative approach within children's social care, alongside supporting, and maintaining the workforce. The implementation of these recommendations can improve continuity and stability for foster carers and care experienced children.

6.2. Critical Review

6.2.1. Quality of the Research

There are differing perspectives for evaluating the quality of qualitative research (Barbour, 2014; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). As detailed in Chapter Four, the quality of the research in this Grounded Theory study was evaluated using Charmaz's (2014) criteria: Credibility, Originality, Resonance, and Usefulness.

In response to these criteria, I suggest that the **credibility** of this study lies in the use of multiple data sources which have led to a plausible theory of the research-practice gap in foster care. This is in addition to providing a model grounded in the data, which represents and aids the understanding of the dynamic and complex nature of embedding research knowledge into practice. To the author's understanding, it is currently the first UK-based explanatory Grounded Theory study which has comprehensively endeavoured to do so. The use of an adapted Ecological model in this context also offers **originality** as it attempts to provide new insights into an under-studied area within foster care. The three overarching causal mechanisms identified are **useful** for understanding the barriers to implementing research knowledge into practice. This is important given that existing research has identified clear ways to support the needs of foster carers which can improve retention and recruitment. The study's findings are therefore useful for indicating areas of improvement and have provided relevant recommendations, whilst also appearing useful and applicable to support understandings of research-practice gaps which may exist in other social and public health services.

The criterion of resonance is evidenced in the next section. Credibility is also further evidenced within the sections of range and complexity.

6.2.2. Theoretical Sufficiency

As mentioned in Chapter Four, the concept of 'theoretical saturation' is central to Grounded Theory, yet the conceptualisation of saturation is somewhat unclear, and some authors indicate that reaching saturation is unrealistic and futile (Dey, 1999; Saunders et al., 2018; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). Theoretical sufficiency differs to saturation as it focuses on achieving an understanding of the data that is of adequate depth to enable the theory development rather than attempting to reach an ultimate limit, in which it is

impossible to find new insights (Dey, 1999). Saturation was felt to be unachievable within the timeframes of the clinical psychology doctoral programme. Therefore, theoretical sufficiency was sought using Nelson's (2016) criteria of conceptual depth, consisting of: *range and complexity, subtlety, resonance, and validity* – as detailed below.

6.2.2.1. Range and Complexity

Firstly, this study has clearly demonstrated that a wide **range** of evidence can be drawn from the data to support the causal mechanisms identified, the theory of the research-practice gap and the Ecological model developed. The range of evidence was achieved through the methods of theoretical sampling, triangulation and multiple phases of data collection and analysis (discussed in Chapter 4). The constant comparison method supported the development of codes and categories, with Appendix B providing an example of codes and categories. Direct quotations from the data sources and the use of existing literature, identified in the scoping review, further support the range of evidence that supports the conceptualisation of the theory-practice gap.

The Ecological model is a clear visual representation of the **complexity** of the research-practice gap. The model, built upon the codes and categories from the data sources, demonstrates the network of systems and the interconnected nature of the mechanisms and sub-mechanisms identified. The use of diagramming supported the identification of how decision-making within foster care, and more broadly children's social care is hierarchical. This was important for considering where changes would be most effective. Prior to developing the Ecological model presented, diagramming was used for mapping foster carers' social world (Clarke, 2005). A provisional Ecological model in which care experienced children were in the centre was also drawn and used as a comparison.

6.2.2.2. Subtlety

Subtlety relates to the examination of the nuances of the codes which are summarised into categories. This was achieved using the constant comparison method and memo writing to deconstruct the meaning of codes, including similarities and differences, and identifying areas of ambiguity, (Nelson, 2016).

For example, two focused codes of similarity: 'plugging gaps' and 'scaffolding children's social care teams'. Both codes, whilst **subtly** different, were speaking to the broader context of fostering provisions supporting the crumbling system of children social care. 'A Crumbling System' became a sub-mechanism to encompass this theme.

Additionally, for the **subtlety** criteria to be met, categories should be checked and interrogated to ensure they represent the meaning and experiences of participants. Quotations were used throughout the findings and the language of participants were embedded in categories. This included 'An ever-changing landscape', which was developed from participants' comments about a changing world and societal changes.

6.2.2.3. Resonance

Charmaz's (2014) perspective of resonance, speaks to whether the categories identified portray the fulness of the experiences studied. The use of the follow-up questionnaire provided a method for validating whether the emerging categories and causal mechanisms were adequate reflections of the participants' experiences. Within the questionnaire none of the statements were disagreed with, suggesting these were a representative portrayal of the experiences discussed within the focus groups. Reinforcing this claim of **resonance**, the additional comments provided by participants all fell within existing categories and none provided new insights. Charmaz (2014) also questions whether the analysis offers participants deeper insights about their lives and worlds, and as highlighted in the findings, participants in this study were appreciative of the space to reflect upon their practice and described the experience as useful.

Nelson's (2016) criteria relates to the categories as resonating with existing literature in the area being investigated. The discussion has shown that the study's finding resonates with the existing literature and that the theory of the research-practice gap provides a plausible explanation for why foster carers' needs have remained unmet despite the wealth of knowledge available.

6.2.2.4. Validity

Prior to developing the follow-up questionnaire, the emerging categories, developed from the focus group and document analysis, were discussed with a fostering consultant working in one of the leading fostering support organisations. The consultation supported the **validity** of the emerging categories and highlighted the importance of considering the broader factors which impact on implementing research knowledge into practice. To test the scope of the theory and validity in a wider context, arrangements have been made to disseminate the study's findings within a fostering practice forum in July.

In sum, the conceptual depth criteria used has shown that the conceptual categories developed were robust and supported the theory development of the research-practice gap and the Ecological model of implementing research knowledge into practice.

6.2.3. Limitations of the Research

6.2.3.1. Recruitment and Sampling

One must acknowledge that other data sources could have been considered within this study, for example observations and field notes. This may have resulted in further themes emerging, alongside inviting additional lines of theoretical sampling, which may have led to the concept of saturation. However, as evidenced, the theoretical account constructed is considered to be of quality and depth (Charmaz, 2014; Nelson, 2016).

The recruitment process, due to the self-selected nature, could also be considered as a limitation, potentially creating respondent bias (Smith & Noble, 2014). Studies have indicated that participants with an interest in the topic are more likely to partake in the research (Clark, 2010; Negrin et al., 2022). Those who heard about the study via the two fostering support organisations, will have required membership or signing up to the organisation's newsletter. One may assume that they are more likely to be considering their practice and open to engaging in research. However, the recruitment method employed was three-

pronged to have the greatest reach to potential participants and minimise such bias.

Similarly to the findings in this study, resources, in particular time, is an additional factor which influences individuals' ability to participate in the research (Beddoe, 2011; Newington & Metcalfe, 2014). Several potential participants did not participate in the study due to availability. Additionally, one participant shared that they had been the decided person to attend for the team, alluding to the availability of staffing resources. This highlights that to facilitate change and improve the embedding of research knowledge into practice, it is important to understand the engagement of research within a broader context.

Whilst it is viewed as helpful to have a relatively homogeneous sample in focus groups (Rapley, 2014), it is important to take caution in generalising the findings. The sample were predominately individuals who identified as females (n = 12), White British (n = 13) and aged between forty-four and sixty-five (n = 10). Data from the Department for Education reported that in 2023, social workers for children and families working in LAs are predominately white female and aged between thirty and thirty-nine (DfE, 2024). Further research, therefore, needs to be conducted to identify whether the participants' demographics were representative of the social care workforce within fostering practice. Nevertheless, the participant sample varied in terms of job role, fostering provisions, geographical locations, and duration of service in fostering and current role, and therefore, areas of lived experiences amongst the sample were both of conference and divergence.

Overall, it is important to acknowledge that the recruitment method and sample size may be considered limitations of the study, as those who chose to participate may only represent a particular portion of fostering professionals in terms of their views, experiences, motives, and identities (Beddoe, 2011). These limitations and potential biases are not exclusive to this study and as such, research studies are seeking to improve participant recruitment (Clark, 2010; Newington & Metcalfe, 2014; Riese, 2019). Future research in the context of this study regarding sampling is discussed in Section 6.4.

6.2.3.2. The Caveat to the Recommendations

Lastly, the recommendations which have been suggested, if considered and actioned, would improve the support for foster carers, impacting on recruitment and retention, and the experiences of care experienced children, including placement stability and later psychosocial outcomes (Dregan & Gulliford, 2012). However, it is vital to recognise that due to the complexity of implementing research-knowledge into practice, this requires a systemic shift. It is important to be realistic and acknowledge this is a challenge, particularly given the current economic model. As such, the further resourcing and investment of foster care is unlikely, and subsequently, systemic, and relational approaches indicated, will not be readily embedded into fostering practice. It is hoped, however, that at the very least this study has provided compelling evidence which can support the existing knowledge base and support the direction of the Government's investment in foster care, in addition to areas of consideration for commissioners, policymakers and fostering providers.

6.2.4. The Methodology: Critical Realism and Grounded Theory

6.2.4.1. The Construction of Knowledge

The adopted epistemological stance of critical realism for this study suggests that the researcher's theories of reality and how they seek to investigate it, is constructed (Oliver, 2012). Complementary to this, Grounded Theory acknowledges that researchers begin their studies with a set of general interests and sensitising concepts that drives the research (Charmaz, 2006). It is therefore important to acknowledge that the construction of categories and the overall analysis are likely to have been influenced by my own personal experiences, values, and beliefs, including working in foster care, and supporting care experienced children. This is further explored in section 6.3.

To mitigate personal biases influencing the research, sensitivity to the participants' experiences and the construction of meaning and understanding were attended to. This was achieved through using follow-up questions within the focus groups, and the follow-up questionnaire, which whilst used to support theory construction, also provided another opportunity to check whether I had captured participants' intended meaning and experiences. To further moderate

the influence of my lens and ensure I stayed grounded in the data; direct quotations from participants and the documents were embedded throughout the findings.

Additionally, it is also imperative to consider that participants' responses are also shaped by their construction of reality and experiences. This includes being part of the workforce within capitalist structures and individual motives for working in fostering. As such, participants' statements and reflections may not be representative of all those working in fostering provisions in England. It is therefore important that I recognise that the theory proposed and the model for understanding the research-practice gap cannot entirely summarise the implementation of research-knowledge in all fostering practices. Additionally, a critical realist perspective would suggest that multiple interpretations of the data were possible, and the one I have provided is just one explanation.

However, critical realists also suggest that some theories can be more or less like reality depending on the knowledge produced (Fletcher, 2017). The proposed theory in this study is grounded in the experiences of those working within fostering provisions and supplemented by the existing knowledge base through document analysis. This, along with the use of the Ecological Model, encompasses causal mechanisms and recognises the broad social context of fostering at this current time. Therefore, one could suggest that the findings are helpful for understanding the research-practice gap and are likely to represent reality of fostering in this current time and context.

6.2.4.2. Attending to Power

As mentioned in Chapter Four, a longstanding blame culture has existed in children's social care, resulting in the pathologising of workers and services (Oliver, 2012). For this reason, it was considered vital to use a methodology which situated the research beyond the individual. The chosen methodology achieved this through the development of the Ecological model.

The findings identified the location of power within foster care and children's social care and highlighted the implications for embedding research knowledge into practice. For example, although participants expressed agency in their

roles, what they could realistically put into practice was dependent on the resources available, the policies underpinning practice and the directive of those in positions of power regarding the priorities. Subsequently, this methodology has been crucial for understanding the research-practice gap within societal structures rather than solely focusing on the microsystem and agency of the individuals.

Within data collection and generation, attempts were also made to reduce any potential experiences of power, especially in the focus groups. Participants were allocated based on job role, attempting to create peer-like spaces to enable participants to speak freely from those who may hold more senior positions. In considering my role as the facilitator, I 'warmed' the context of each focus group (preparing the participants of what to expect and my context within this topic area) (Burnham, 2018), and throughout sought to put participants at ease, through encouraging questions, summaries of what I had heard and considering non-verbal cues (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). This encouraged participants to speak openly about their experiences, which was reflected in the positive feedback provided by participants.

6.2.4.3. Compatibility of the Methodology

It has been commented that Grounded Theory can be a difficult method to implement due to the lack of consistent guidance and somewhat flexible nature of the approach (Urquhart, 2013). I would partially agree; I found using Grounded Theory principles with a critical realist lens, as a novel researcher to this methodology, at times testing. This was in addition to the time-consuming nature of the process, and the amount of data required. On reflection, this was an ambitious methodology to use within the context of clinical training.

Whilst challenging, this methodological framework enabled a systemic and relational approach to constructing the theory of the research-practice gap and achieving the research aims of the study. This was achieved through the different data sources, phases of data collection, and considering potential causal mechanisms. Given the findings discussed, Grounded Theory was an essential method for understanding what impacts on implementing research knowledge into practice in foster care. My experience provides evidence that

critical realism and Grounded Theory can be blended as a methodology. It would be useful to see further application of this methodological framework in future research, as this would support the development of clear guidance and uniformity as a research methodology (Fletcher 2017; Hoddy, 2019; Oliver 2012).

6.3.　Reflexivity

Consistent with the idea that the researcher is also subject to enquiry, this section aims to reflect on the bi-directional influences between the researcher and research processes (Charmaz, 2011, 2014). Reflexivity was achieved through memo writing, the constant comparative method, and supervision discussions, which aided decision-making and the research process which led to the theory of the research-practice gap.

This study evolved from my experience of working in children's social care prior to clinical training. I observed placement breakdowns, often due to what I perceived as foster carers feeling overwhelmed and unable to meet the child's needs. I held perceived notions that perhaps foster carers did not understand the needs of children who had experienced developmental trauma and was curious about understanding this further. Clinical training has also contributed to the shaping of my understanding of foster care and subsequently the research presented. During the study I was on a six-month placement in a children's looked after team, in which I was working closely with social workers and foster carers. This experience, alongside taking part in this research, has challenged some of my previous understandings, whilst broadening my knowledge of children's social care and most importantly the impact of the distal systems on fostering practices.

As the study progressed my position as 'knowledgeable outsider' shifted to an 'insider' perspective (Milligan, 2016). I noticed that as the focus groups continued, I became more aligned with participants experiences, and was mindful of how this may be shaping my interpretation of the documents, in particular government ones. As such, memo-writing and the constant

comparison method were essential tools for ensuring I stayed close to the data and acknowledged what was influencing the shaping of the analysis.

My role as a trainee clinical psychologist may have also influenced participants' contributions to the focus groups. I was not aware of the participants' previous experiences of working with psychologists. From my experience of working with social workers, support from psychologists was often welcomed, although was sometimes experienced as time consuming. Social workers within consultations, due to the demand pressures and limited resources, would often position psychology as having a 'magic wand' and the answers which could provide a solution. I held these experiences in mind, and tried to ensure that I avoided positioning myself as an expert within the focus groups, and rather was there as a facilitator, to listen, be curious, summarise and interpret. As a psychologist, it is also important to recognise that I am in a position which holds influence within systems and my input can provoke change. This may not be the experiences of some of the participants within their roles. Therefore, I saw my role and purpose within this study as somewhat as a vessel, collating their voices and experiences.

I have a genuine appreciation for the role of foster carers and for the fostering provisions and individuals who support them. My understanding of the 'problems' within fostering, have shifted. I was naive to the broader picture and the challenges fostering experiences day to day. I can acknowledge, whilst uncomfortable, that I had also been complicit in pathologising the workforce of children's social care. I will strive to embed the new insights of the study's findings into my own practice and continue to critically interrogate my beliefs.

6.4. Future Research

Following the evidence presented within this chapter, in addition to the recommendations suggested, there are four additional areas which would necessitate future research:

The use of critical realism and Grounded Theory as a methodological framework. This could include the development of clear guidance to provide uniformity as a research methodology. Additionally, the methodology could be used within other aspects of social care and psychological research. This would strengthen its application and utility as a methodological package.

To test the scope of the research-practice gap theory through a larger scale study, sample, or in a wider context, such as in a fostering practice forum, or more broadly, another area of social care in which a research-practice gap is evident. This would aid the validity and reliability of the current research study, demonstrating its relevance and application to social care, clinical practice, and other disciplines, including clinical psychology.

To explore the role of the UK's capitalist economy and the impact of privatising foster care. These findings could be considered within the context of the research-practice gap and how they may continue to contribute to the shaping of fostering practices and children's social care.

The use of research within fostering provisions daily practice, including using EBP. Social workers within other children's social care teams should also be considered. This would facilitate a deeper understanding of how social workers and children social care team's view and use research within the profession. This would supplement the study's findings of the constraints which exists to implementing research knowledge into practice more broadly. Potential findings could also support changes within practice through identifying further methods of embedding research into social care practice more readily.

6.5.   Conclusions

This study began with the identification that the support needs of foster carers were unmet despite a wealth of research knowledge, indicating a research-practice gap existing in foster care. This was within the context of an ongoing national challenge to recruit and retain foster carers, whilst the demand for foster placements increases. The scoping review identified that to date no

theoretical understanding or model exists that addresses the issue of a research-practice gap within foster care. Subsequently, the study sought to understand why this research-practice gap exists and how to close the gap. This was achieved through using multiple data sources to explore what is already in practice for foster carers, and from the perspectives of fostering professionals, what impacts on implementing research knowledge into their practice, including the barriers. The findings highlighted three crucial mechanisms: resources, values, and social context, to understand the implementation of research in foster care.

The study constructed a theoretical understanding of the research-practice gap and used an Ecological Model to show that the gap is due to the allocation of resources, differing values held by the systems, and an evolving social context in which fostering, and more broadly children's social care exist. The model emphasises that the process of embedding research knowledge into practice is complex and dynamic, influenced by the interactions between the different systems in the model and the three causal mechanisms identified. As such, the findings highlight that resources are required within the various systems to address the broader factors which impact on fostering practices, beginning with further investment into foster care, and reviewed and renewed policies. This study advocates for a systemic and multi-faceted approach which is centred on relational and tailored support. These changes are vital for improving fostering practice, and will have significant implications for foster carers, and in turn the wellbeing and experiences of the children in their care.

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8. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Scoping Review Supplementary Content

The guiding questions in the literature scope were:

- What research and legislation exists relating to foster carers' needs to date?
- What are the needs of foster carers that have been identified?
- What recommendations are provided relating to the needs of foster carers?

Databases Accessed

- PsycINFO through EBSCO
- Google Scholar

Grey Literature Search

- GOV.UK
- The Fostering Network
- Children's Commissioner for England
- Children's Social Care Independent Review
- Social Care Online through Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)
- The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE)

Search Terms

To access the relevant literature, the following search terms were used and combined:

Foster carers

Foster care

Fostering

Experience

Perspective

Needs

Legislation

Limiters

- English language only
- Published since 2002

Inclusion Criteria

In addition to the limiters applied, all studies were considered regardless of:

- The country of origin (apart from for the Grey Literature)
- The type of methodology
- How foster carers' needs were investigated
- Sample size

Exclusion Criteria:

- If the literature did not relate to foster carers, for example articles on the experiences of biological children of foster carers or kinship carers
- Only accessible with payment

During August and November 2022, the above search terms and limiters were used in the following databases: PsycINFO via EBSCO, and Google Scholar. The search of *'foster carers' experience of 'fostering'* on PsycINFO provided six studies. Search of *'foster carers' perspective of 'fostering'* produced five studies. Search of *'foster carers needs'* produced a result of thirty studies. Additionally, Google Scholar was used with the search terms *'foster carers' experience of 'fostering and foster carers' needs'*. The first ten pages were used as the result produced 8,410 articles, sorted by relevance. Nine papers were removed as appeared in more than one of the searches.

This was followed by a review of grey literature, using a limited search*: 'fostering', 'foster carers'* and *'foster care legislation'*. The grey literature reviewed was from UK only sources. A hand search was also conducted. The grey literature and hand search was conducted between April to June 2023. Figure 4 shows the scoping review process**.**

The searches identified relevant literature including empirical studies, legislation, government and independent reviews, reports, and evaluation

(Table 2). Table 3 shows the number of literatures per country included. Table 4 provides a summary of the topic areas and aims of the existing research, policies, and legislation. This is followed by a presentation of each literature reviewed in the scope (Table 5 and Table 6)

Figure 4

Flow Chart of the Scoping Review Process
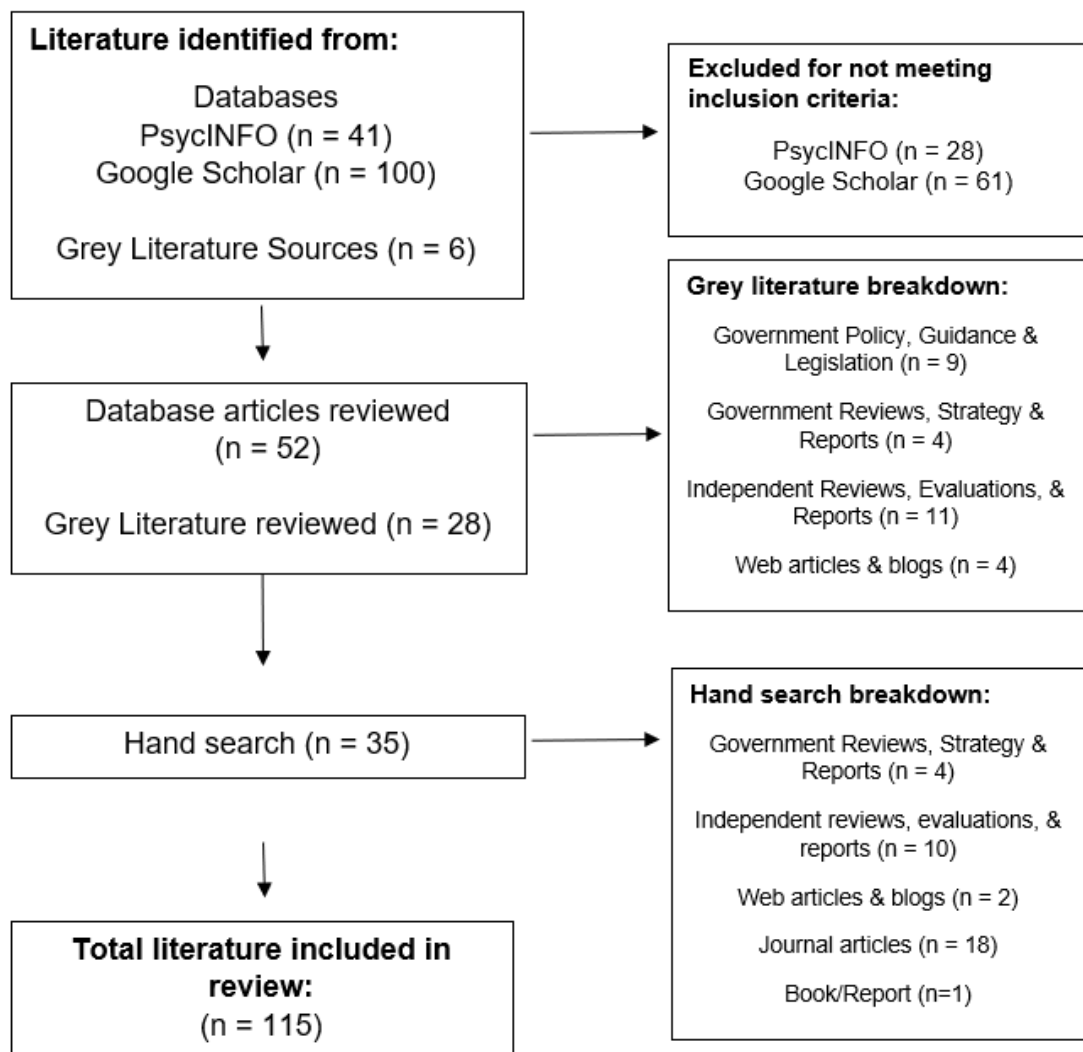
Table 2

Type of Literature Reviewed

Type of Literature	Total
Articles	70
Government policy guidance & legislation	9
Government reviews, strategies & reports	8
Independent reviews, evaluations, &reports	22
Web articles and blogs	6

Table 3

Literature Country of Origin

Country	Number of studies
Australia	13
Belgium	1
Canada	2
New Zealand	2
UK	44
England	30
Ireland	3
Northern Ireland	1
Scotland	1
Wales	7
USA	3
International (several countries included)	8

Table 4

Topic Areas and Aims of the Literature

Topic Area	Aim(s)	Literature
Foster carers' perspectives on their experience and role as a foster carer.	To understand the lived experiences of foster carers and their perceptions of their role and motives for fostering. To guide social care practices and policy by considering ways to enhance support and meet the needs of carers.	Adams et al., 2018; Blackburn & Matchett, 2022; Blythe et al., 2013; Blythe et al., 2014; Boffey et al., 2019; Brown & Bednar, 2006; Buehler et al., 2003; Butler & McGinnis, 2021; Gouveia, et al., 2021; Hiller et al., 2020; Lawson & Cann, 2017, 2019; MacGregor et al., 2006; McDermid et al., 2012; Murray, et al., 2011; Octoman & McLean 2014; Octoman et al., 2013; Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016; Pickin et al., 2011; Pithouse & Lowe, 2008; Randle et al., 2017; Sargent & O'Brien, 2004; Samrai et al., 2011; Sprecher et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2008; The Fostering Network, 2021; Thomas & McArthur, 2009; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2016; York & Jones, 2016.
The role of a foster carer.	To identify the several tasks involved in being a foster carer, linked to understanding the differing perspectives of what the role entails and the crossover between parent and professional.	Austerberry et al. (2013); Blythe et al., 2014; Buehler et al., 2006; DfE, 2011, 2012; Harlow & Blackburn, 2007; Kirton et al., 2007; Kirton, 2007; 2022; Ogilvie et al., 2006; Pinto & Luke, 2022; Schofield et al., 2013; Sellick, 2006; Sinclairtfn, 2019; Wilson and Evetts, 2006.
Foster carers' wellbeing, the impact of fostering on foster carers and placement outcomes	To identify and understand foster carers' psychological needs and ways of supporting their wellbeing. This is to ensure foster carers can support the varying needs of children in their care and maintain placements.	Adams et al., 2018; Boffey et al., 2019; Bridger et al., 2020; Buehler et al., 2006; Farmer et al., 2005; Fergeus et al., 2019; Furlong et al., 2021; Golding, 2004; Hannah & Woolgar, 2018; Harding et al., 2020; Harding et al., 2020a; Lynes & Sitoe, 2019; McKeough et al., 2017; Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016; Pickin et al., 2011; Pithouse & Lowe, 2008; Sharda, 2022; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003; Sinclair et al., 2004; Sloan Donachy, 2019; Valentine et al., 2019; Whelan et al., 2009; York & Jones, 2016.
Foster carer training and support.	To support the wellbeing of foster carers and improve their confidence, skills, and expertise in supporting the needs of children looked after.	Begum et al., 2020; Furlong et al., 2021; Gibbons et al., 2019; Golding, 2003, 2004; Golding & Picken, 2004; Holmes & Silver 2010; Laybourne et al., 2008; Lotty et al., 2020; McDermid et al., 2016; McDermid et al., 2022; Midgley et al., 2019, Midgley et al., 2021; Mosuro et al., 2014; NICE 2021, 2021a, 2021b; Onions, 2018; Pithouse et al., 2002, Pithouse et al., 2004, Rees & Handley, 2022; Riggs et al., 2022; Sargent & O'Brien, 2004; Sebba & Luke, 2013; The Fostering Network, 2022b; Turner et al., 2007; Whitehead et al., 2023.
Fostering and Children Social Care reviews.	Reviewing and evaluating fostering practices and children's social care; identifying the needs of children looked after and foster carers. Providing recommendations for practice.	Baginsky et al., 2017; CMA, 2022; DfE, 2023; Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group, 2021; Hatcher, 2022; House of Commons Education Committee, 2017; Lawson & Cann, 2017, 2019; MacAlister 2021, 2022; Narey & Owers, 2018; Sebba & Luke, 2013; Sellick, 2006; The Fostering Network, 2021, 2023a; Wilson et al., 2004.
Recruitment and retention.	To gain insight into ways to improve recruiting and retaining foster carers, thus addressing the current difficulties, including the shortage of placements.	Colton et al., 2008; CMA, 2022; Foster & Kulakiewicz, 2022; Gouveia, et al., 2021; MacGregor et al., 2006; McDermid et al., 2012; Onions, 2018; Ott et al., 2023; Petitions UK Government and Parliament, 2023; Randle et al., 2017; Sheldon, 2010; Sinclair et al., 2004.
Legislation, government guidance or strategy, and independent guidance.	To set out regulatory frameworks and guidance for foster carers, fostering service providers, local authorities commissioning use of fostering services and regulatory bodies. It aims to provide relevant information for foster carers and their rights, whilst safeguarding children of care experience.	Care Standards Act 2000; Children Act 1989; DfE, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2023; Department for Education and Skills, 2006; GOV.UK (n.d.); The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011; Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group, 2022; NICE 2021, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Ofsted, 2023a; Petitions UK Government and Parliament, 2023; The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013; The Fostering Network, 2017, 2022, 2022a, 2023a.

Table 5

Peer-Reviewed Literature

Study	Design, Methods, and tools	Purpose/Key Concept(s)/Findings (e.g., legislation, needs, recommendations)
Adams et al. (2018). What do we know about the impact of stress on foster carers and contributing factors? UK, covering international studies.	Review syntheses. Electronic literature search using PsycINFO, ASSIA, Web of Science and Google Scholar 15 papers met the specific inclusion criteria.	The review syntheses evaluated the current empirical evidence on the causes and consequences of stress experienced by foster carers and the factors that lessen or increase it, e.g., service framework and children's behaviour. Clinical implications highlighted the promotion and provision of effective training and support, and the development of integrated ways of working with services and foster carers' families.
Austerberry et al. (2013). Foster carers and family contact: foster carers' views of social work support. England.	Large-scale survey.	Explores a sample of foster carers' views on family contact and the professional support they receive concerning their role in this activity. Foster carers valued social workers who considered the interests of all parties affected by contact plans and decisions.
Begum et al. (2020). Increasing parenting self-efficacy in foster carers: an evaluation of the attachment-centred parenting programme. UK.	Evaluation study. Mixed methods: qualitative information gained weekly and quantitative data from pre and post-test administered questionnaires.	An evaluation of an Attachment-Centred Parenting (ACP) six session programme. Findings provided evidence that the ACP programme offers valuable support for foster carers, enabling them to parent therapeutically when faced with challenging behaviours and circumstances.
Blythe et al. (2013). Perceptions of long-term female foster-carers: I'm not a carer, I'm a mother. Australia.	A qualitative storytelling approach, informed by feminist principles. Semi-structured interviews, using multiple interview techniques (Face to face, telephone, or email).	Provided insight and understanding of the provision of long-term foster-care from female carers' perspectives who viewed their role as a mother. This understanding is essential to recruitment, retention, and foster-carer satisfaction, and indicates appropriate evidence-based strategies to support foster-carers.
Blythe et al. (2014). The foster carer's experience: An integrative review. Australia.	The integrative literature review method outlined by Whittlemore & Knafl (2005). Conducted using: CINAHL, Health Source, MEDLINE, Psych-articles, PsycINFO and sociINDEX. 18 articles met inclusion criteria.	Provided a synthesise of current literature investigating foster carers and their experiences to enable a better understanding of their unique care-giving context. Foster care has both positive and negative effects on foster carers' well-being, this is influenced by the foster carers' perception of their role as either parental or professional, the relationship with children's social care staff and their ability to manage children's difficult behaviours.
Bridger et al. (2020). Secondary Traumatic Stress in Foster Carers: Risk Factors and Implications for Intervention. UK.	Quantitative study using surveys.	High levels of secondary traumatic stress and burnout was found among foster carers. Self-care was identified as a promising factor for intervention however the roles of empathy and resilience were ambiguous. Structural support was recommended.

Butler & McGinnis (2021). 'Without the support of my family, I couldn't do the job': Foster-carers' perspectives on informal supports in the role. Northern Ireland.	Qualitative methods using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.	Explored foster carers' experiences of family and friends support and how this promoted their resilience, enabling them to continue as foster-carers. Recommendations included how to train and provide information about the role of fostering to friends and family.
Colton et al. (2008). The Recruitment and Retention of Family Foster-Carers: An International and Cross-Cultural Analysis. International.	International comparative analysis from empirical research and on information collected as part of a much broader study of family foster-care.	Explored international and cross-cultural issues which impact on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Three key themes emerged: motivation and capacity to foster; professionalism versus altruism; and criteria for kinship and unrelated carers. Recruitment and retention are global issues. Cultural norms impact the recruitment of foster-carers as do the financial implications of caring, with much debate focusing on the need for enhanced remuneration for carers. This is linked with the professionalism versus altruism dilemma, characterized by the perceived conflict between moral obligation and financial reward for caring for children looked after. It highlighted that the failure to recognize and acknowledge the nature and needs of children looked after also contributes to the current difficulties in recruiting foster carers.
Farmer et al. (2005). Foster carer strain and its impact on parenting and placement outcomes for adolescents. England.	A one-year prospective, repeated-measures design. Reviews of case files, semi-structured interviews, and standardised measures (The General Health Questionnaire and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire).	Identified strained carers had higher rates of placement disruptions; these placements were also less beneficial to the young people. Strains experiences were lessened when carers received help from friends or from local professionals. Difficulties contacting social workers increased foster carer strain, therefore improvement in social services support was recommended.
Fergeus et al. (2019). The needs of carers: applying a hierarchy of needs to a foster and kinship care context. Australia.	Structured interviews with foster and kindship carers. Thematic analysis.	Interviewing using the CUES-C measures, which assess carers' perceived needs and satisfaction. Findings highlighted the importance of addressing both the needs of carers and those children they look after. Recommendations for timely and holistic support to improve the burden of care and increase satisfaction in the caring role.
Golding (2003). Helping foster carers, helping children: Using attachment theory to guide. UK.	Qualitative. Case study.	Review of The Primary Care and Support Project. Carers felt more supported following the intervention, benefiting from increased access to psychological advice and support. For this to be a successful resource, fostering services need to recognise the therapeutic needs of the children looked after and foster carers are supported to meet these needs.
Golding (2004). Providing Specialist Psychological Support to Foster Carers: A Consultation Model. UK.	Qualitative study.	The use of consultation to support foster carers, which they reported being highly satisfied with as a service. The consultation model increases access to psychological advice and facilitates shared plans for further support. Further experimental research is needed to support these findings.

Golding & Picken (2004). Group work for foster carers caring for children with complex problems. UK.	Limited qualitative evaluation using feedback, knowledge quizzes, questionnaires, and standardised measures (The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire).	Group interventions for foster carers, parent-training programmes on management techniques and attachment needs. Groups helped carers to increase their understanding of the needs of foster children and their skill in managing these children on a day-to-day basis.
Hannah & Woolgar (2018). Secondary trauma and compassion fatigue in foster carers. UK.	Online survey, including self-report measures of compassion fatigue and associated risk factors.	Foster carers experience compassion fatigue. High compassion fatigue was associated with lower intent to continue fostering and job satisfaction, therefore fostering services should pay attention to the wellbeing of foster carers. Recommendations include direct support through reflective practice and clinical interventions such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).
Harding et al. (2020). Understanding the parental stress scale with a foster carer cohort. Australia.	Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to examine the Parental Stress Scale (PSS).	The study supported the use of the PSS in research with foster carers to capture stress, rewards and satisfaction related to their parenting role. Future research and programs for foster parents should focus on reducing stressors and bolster opportunities for reward and satisfaction in the role. Strength-based training can increase retention and recruitment.
Harding et al. (2020a). The wellbeing of foster and kin carers: A comparative study. Australia.	Online surveys including measures (The Brief Assessment Checklist for Children, The Parent Mental Health Scale, and the PSS).	Assessed stress, role satisfaction, mental health, perceptions of the child in their care, and access to services that support their role. Kin carers reported greater stress and mental health concerns, accessing fewer services, training, and support; and had significantly less contact with service providers as compared to foster carers. Policies and service delivery practices recommended to include training, support, and access to services for all carers, with specific attention to improving wellbeing and satisfaction.
Harlow & Blackburn (2007). Fostering matters. UK.	Individual case study interview.	Perspectives of foster carers can contribute to the organisation, management, and provision of placements to children looked after. Focus on professionalism, considering the impact of their role to care for a child looked after as well as implications for fostering services.
Kirton et al. (2007). Still the Poor Relations?: Perspectives on Valuing and Listening to Foster Carers. England.	Mixed methods. Quantitative survey data and qualitative material from focus groups and interviews.	The status of foster carers varies in practice and causes divisions among social work professionals on the question of whether carers should be regarded as 'colleagues'.
Laybourne et al. (2008). Fostering Attachments in Looked after Children: Further Insight into the Group-Based Programme for Foster Carers. England.	Evaluation using a mixed method design.	Evaluation of a training programme for foster carers based on the attachment needs of foster children. Found that group work may be beneficial in helping carers to develop their knowledge and understanding of the needs of children with attachment difficulties and reducing some of the stress they experience when caring for their foster children.

Lotty et al. (2020). The experiences of foster carers and facilitators of Fostering Connections: The Trauma-informed Foster Care Program: A process study. Ireland.	Process study. Focus groups with semi-structured open-ended questions. Thematic analysis.	Explored the experiences of foster carers and facilitators who participated in a psychoeducational program, Fostering Connections: The Trauma-informed Foster Care. Developed due to a gap in training provision. Training promoted change. To sustain the changes that foster carers made, it is suggested that ongoing supports for foster carers, training for wider stakeholders in foster care and supports for facilitators are needed.
Lynes & Sitoe (2019). Disenfranchised grief: the emotional impact experienced by foster carers on the cessation of a placement. UK.	Qualitative study using telephone interviews. Using principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA.	'Disenfranchised grief' experienced by foster carers when placements end. This grief was not always recognised by social workers. Implication for practice include preparing foster carers to expect a grief response when their children move on, recognising the potential of disenfranchised grief and to enhance peer and professional support during this time.
McDermid et al. (2012). The demographic characteristics of foster carers in the UK: Motivations, barriers and messages for recruitment and retention. UK.	Rapid response review. 1) Reviewing of existing literature. 2) Geographical Information Systems (GIS) Analysis of the database of foster carers from one national association of foster carers.	Examines existing knowledge regarding the demographic characteristics of foster carers in the UK. Explores existing research on what motivates individuals and families to become foster carers and the barriers they identify (e.g., confidence, mistrust of social workers and fear of allegation). It considers recruitment and retention strategies (e.g., targeted campaigns geographically, specific groups and informal support). Also identifies examples of good practice, and gaps in existing knowledge (matching of foster carers demographics with children looked after, research including males and ex-foster carers).
McDermid et al. (2022). Foster carers' receptiveness to new innovations and programmes: an example from the introduction of social pedagogy to UK foster care. UK.	Mixed-method, longitudinal approach. Semi-structured interviews over a period of three years.	Outline's themes related to foster carers' engagement with social pedagogy, using data from the Head, Heart, Hands (HHH) programme evaluation. Considers implications for implementing practices within the current children's social care system. Importance of the wider system being receptive to the approach for foster carers to engage.
McKeough et al. (2017). Foster carer stress and satisfaction: An investigation of organisational, psychological and placement factors. Australia.	Quantitative study using surveys.	Examined stress and contributing factors among foster carers, and carers' perceptions on organisational support and training. Challenging behaviour is the most stressful demand on carers and largest predictor of carer stress. Carers report a need for more training to support them in their role. This would improve placement stability and carer retention.
Midgley et al. (2019). Supporting foster carers to meet the needs of looked after children: A feasibility and pilot evaluation of the Reflective Fostering Programme.UK.	Piloting and feasibility study. A mixed methods design. Series of outcome measures (quantitative) and focus groups using framework analysis.	Evaluation of the Reflective Fostering Programme. Group-based program to support foster carers. The program was evaluated as feasible, acceptable, and effective. Improvement was noted in foster carers' reported stress.

Midgley et al. (2021). The reflective fostering programme: evaluating the intervention co-delivered by social work professionals and foster carers. UK.	Evaluation using mixed-method. Carer- and child-focused outcomes. Focus interviews.	Evaluation of Reflective Fostering Programme designed to support foster carers co-facilitated by a social work professional and experienced foster carer. The effectiveness of the programme was found to improve all outcome measures and the delivery of the programme was relevant and helpful.
Mosuro et al. (2014). Mental health awareness and coping in foster carers: The impact of a counselling skills intervention. England.	Repeated measures quantitative study.	Examined the impact of a 30-hour counselling skills training course intervention on foster carers' confidence in their mental health awareness and their ability to cope. Results highlights the need for further training for foster carers.
Murray et al. (2011). Foster carer perceptions of support and training in the context of high burden of care. New Zealand.	Mixed methods study. Semi-structured interviews analysed using a domain method. Standardised measured used.	Foster carers reported unmet needs in support and training, particularly in managing and responding to their children's mental health difficulties. Children's mental health difficulties related to foster carers' high burden of care. Social workers and other foster carers were their greatest source of support. Support and training were therefore recommended for decision-makers to consider in social care policy and practice. Training focused on addressing complex trauma and attachment related difficulties impacting on children's mental health was recommended.
Octoman & McLean (2014). Challenging behaviour in foster care: what supports do foster carers want? Australia.	A non-experimental, exploratory online survey. The support rating scale contained 21 items and asked carers to rate each one on a Likert scale.	Explored their perspectives on the support required for managing challenging behaviour to improve support offers. Findings indicated that foster carers required accurate information about children's behaviour, good quality relationships with professionals and in-home support delivered by knowledgeable people, predominately other foster carers.
Octoman et al. (2013). Children in foster care: What behaviours do carers find challenging? Australia.	Online survey completed by foster carers using a behavioural rating scale.	Four distinct behaviour profiles were identified: aggressive and controlling, anxiety-based, behaviour reflecting underlying cognitive difficulties, sexual and other risk-taking behaviour. Targeted support and training were suggested to enhance placement stability.
Ogilvie et al. (2006). Foster Carer Training: Resources, Payment and Support. UK.	Mixed method design.	A study of remuneration and performance in foster care. Found foster carers have fairly high levels of participation in training when satisfied with the quality of the training. Training strategies in fostering agencies are lacking and the suitability of NVQ training for all foster carers was raised. Linked with debates on professionalisation and foster carers place within the workforce of children's social care.
Onions (2018). Retaining foster carers during challenging times: the benefits of embedding reflective practice into the foster care role. England.	Qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews at two time points. A comparative thematic analysis was conducted.	Considered the benefits of embedding reflective practice into the role of foster carers. Reflective practice considered useful in addition to training. This additional support may reduce challenging behaviour and the risk of placement disruption.

Ottaway & Selwyn (2016). 'No-one told us it was going to be like this': Compassion fatigue and foster carers. England.	Literature review and quantitative study using online surveys.	Presented a professional quality of life model tailored to foster carers. Identified symptoms of compassion fatigue within foster carers and that this risk needs to be recognised by fostering services, in particular supervising social workers (SSW). SSW need more training to offer adequate support to foster carers. The Mockingbird approach was also recommended. The authors recommend two amendments to the Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards (2011).
Pickin et al. (2011). Exploring the emotional experiences of foster carers using the photovoice technique. UK.	Photovoice and interpretive phenomenological analysis	To provides an understanding of the emotional needs of foster carers. Implications in terms of provision to support their needs, including support from wider organisations, collaborative working, and support networks. Additionally recognising and respecting foster carers as a member of the professional team.
Pinto & Luke (2022). The role of foster carers in England and Portugal: Is it solely a parenting role? England and Portugal.	Qualitative study using focus groups and adapted Grounded Theory.	Findings reflect policies and alternative care context differences between England and Portugal. English foster carers and social workers focused on the different roles of foster carers, including the parenting role. Highlighted the need to understand the historical and cultural contexts behind the differing policy, practice, and services.
Pithouse et al. (2002). Training foster carers in challenging behaviour: a case study in disappointment? Wales.	A semi-experimental investigation. Intervention and non-intervention group. Standardised measures, questionnaires, and interviews.	The training had limited impact on the child conduct and carers' capacity. There is a mismatch between carers' positive response to the training and the lack of measured intervention impact. The role of stress was considered as an impacting factor, as was inadequate support and social workers not being adequately trained in areas of behavioural management.
Pithouse et al. (2004). Foster carers who care for children with challenging behaviour: a total population study. Wales.	Foster carer profiles, behaviour measures. Unclear if interviews or surveys were used.	Identifying foster carers' demographics and behaviours they find challenging to understand their personal background, experience, and perception about their role. Topics included training, support from social services and stress. Findings indicate areas of capacity-building in carers through support and training provided by fostering services.
Randle et al. (2017). What makes foster carers think about quitting? Recommendations for improved retention of foster carers. Australia.	Purposive, self-selection sampling strategy from three fostering organisations. A posteriori segmentation analysis.	Identifies aspects of dissatisfaction within the foster carers' role, some of which were within the control of foster care agencies. Dissatisfaction correlated with thoughts about discontinuing fostering. Recommendations included tailored individual support and improved training in preparation of foster carers beginning their roles. Highlighted the important role of caseworkers in making foster carers feel appreciated and taken seriously.
Riggs et al. (2022). "There's no disenfranchisement when you're sitting in that room": Evaluating a South Australian loss and grief support group for foster and kinship carers. Australia.	Evaluation using interviews. Thematic analysis was conducted.	Evaluation of a support group for carers who have had an unplanned placement ending. The results highlight the benefits of a restorative practice approach to addressing disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss.

Sargent & O'Brien (2004). The emotional and behavioural difficulties of looked after children: foster carers' perspectives and an indirect model of placement support. UK.	Evaluation of a joint social services and health authority project.	Evaluation of a project developed to support foster carers and professionals responsible for children in foster placements. Foster carers' perspectives were sought on their foster children's difficulties and the services offered. Recommendations indicate an indirect approach to providing support for children through systemic network meetings which foster carers are part of as well as consultations with CAMHS.
Samrai et al. (2011). Exploring foster carer perceptions and experiences of placements and placement support. England.	Qualitative method of Grounded Theory to analyse verbatim data from eight semi-structured interviews. Six main categories emerged through the analysis.	Identified that the basis of a successful placement was through the interactions between the support the foster carer received and their relationship with social workers and the child. Successful placements occurred when both relationship cycles worked effectively in the context of appropriate support. The findings provide an increase understanding of the support foster carers need and are well supported by existing literature and recent policy directives.
Sheldon (2010). A Word in Your Ear': A Study of Foster Carers' Attitudes to Recommending Fostering to Others. Ireland.	Mixed-method using questionnaires and interviews.	Exploring foster carer recruitment and retention which identified 80% of carers would recommend fostering and word of mouth could be used as recruitment strategy. An acknowledgment for fostering becoming more difficult in recent years as well as the vital support offered by social workers and the fostering agency.
Sloan Donachy (2019). The caregiving relationship under stress: foster carers' experience of loss of the sense of self. Scotland.	Interviews with foster carers, SSW and children's social workers using IPA.	Identified the importance of accounting for the foster carers emotional experience of caring for a child who has experienced abuse and neglect when understanding placement breakdowns.
Sprecher et al. (2021). No typical care story: How do care-experienced young people and foster carers understand fostering relationships? UK.	Qualitative investigation using interviews and workshops with care-experienced young people and foster carers. IPA.	Relationships were understood through comparing fostering relationships to birth families and impact of the foster care system and processes. The study identified barriers to creating relationships and ways to overcome these, e.g., individualised, and tailored support from social workers. Children's social workers need to consider the young person's experiences when placement planning and matching.
Taylor et al. (2008). Foster carers' beliefs regarding the causes of foster children's emotional and behavioural difficulties: a preliminary model. England.	Qualitative study using semi-structured interviews. Grounded Theory methodology.	Foster carers believe that much of foster children's difficulties were related to early experiences of adversity or inadequate care prior to being fostered. Foster carers sensed that children's difficulties could be exacerbated by subsequent experiences within the care system. Recommendations state the need for improved support systems. For foster carers this includes pay, training, respite, and the availability of professionals.
Thomas & McArthur (2009). Who's in Our Family?: An Application of the Theory of Family Boundary Ambiguity to the Experiences of Former Foster Carers. Australia.	Mixed-method using surveys and interviews.	Exploring the reasons why foster carers had ceased fostering and the formers experiences of fostering. Themes of ambiguous loss and uncertainty were considered useful for fostering services and policy workers to consider when understanding foster carers experiences and the support provided.

Turner et al. (2007). Behavioural and Cognitive Behavioural Training Interventions for Assisting Foster Carers in the Management of Difficult Behaviour. International.	Systematic review.	Systematic review of behavioural or cognitive-behavioural training interventions for foster carers. The review found no evidence for the efficacy of these programmes, rather identifying the potential harm they can cause children looked after.
Valentine et al. (2019). When carers end foster placements: exploring foster carers' experience of adolescent foster placement breakdown. UK.	Semi-structured interviews with foster carers, analysed within an IPA framework.	Explored foster carers' experience of ending foster placements involving older children, and specifically where the placement ending was at the carers request. Grief and shame were emotional experiences identified and therefore indicates the importance of social workers providing a warm and non-judgemental experience to foster carers.
Vanderfaeillie et al. (2016). Support needs and satisfaction in foster care: Differences between foster mothers and foster fathers. Belgium.	Quantitative study using questionnaires.	Support needs of foster parents and satisfaction with the foster care placement were measured with the SNSQ-FP. No differences between foster mothers and foster fathers were found. Support around contact with birth families was highlighted. Recognise of the foster carers expertise and including them in decision-making was also a contribution to foster carers' satisfaction.
Whenan et al. (2009). Factors associated with foster carer well-being, satisfaction and intention to continue providing out-of-home care. Australia.	Questionnaires, including standardised measures.	Foster carer self-efficacy of managing challenging behaviour was shown to be an important factor for foster carer well-being, satisfaction, and intention to continue providing fostering care. These have implications for fostering agencies, including training for foster carers.
Whitehead et al. (2023). Foster carers' perceptions of the long-term effectiveness of the Fostering Changes programme. New Zealand.	Interviews with foster carers. IPA informed data collection and analysis.	Foster carer perceptions of the long-term effectiveness of a carer-focussed training intervention indicated that although the training was effective and relevant, carers also simultaneously require ongoing access and support from clinical service. Therefore, therapeutic training is preferably integrated within ongoing, systemic, multi-component interventions, rather than offered as discrete, stand-alone intervention.
York & Jones (2017). Addressing the mental health needs of looked after children in foster care: The experiences of foster carers. England.	A Grounded Theory approach and semi-structured interviews.	Explored the views of foster carers regarding the mental health needs of young people in their care and their experiences of accessing mental health services. Findings indicate that professional support to foster carers include facilitating peer support; as well as clinical interventions for the looked after children.

Table 6

Grey Review and Hand Searched Literature

Study	Design, Methods, and tools	Purpose/Key Concept(s)/Findings (e.g., legislation, needs, recommendations)
Baginsky et al. (2017). The fostering system in England: Evidence review. England.	Quantitative and qualitative scoping review and interviews.	This review was conducted to contribute to the government's national stocktake of fostering in England to better understand the system and identify where improvements were required. The biggest issue was how to secure future foster carers and retain high-quality carers. This has been an ongoing issue for the last 18 years and the approaches for offering a solution are unsystematic.
Blackburn & Matchett (2022). 'A little piece of my heart goes with each of them': Foster carer reflections on current fostering practice. UK.	A mixed-methods approach. Online survey of more than 420 foster carers and eight interviews. Quantitative data from closed/rating survey questions and qualitative data was analysed.	Conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings highlighted two key themes of transformative professional relationships and translations of professional love. Recommendations for professional training across disciplines. Limitation of the study noted that it would have been beneficial to explore the experiences of fostering agencies and social workers to compare the accounts given by foster carers.
Boffey et al. (2019). Understanding the impact of allegations made against foster carers in Wales. Wales.	Consultation with foster carers and a literature review.	Aimed to explore experiences of facing an allegation and the subsequent investigative process. The findings were supplemented by a literature review. Highlights the need for substantial improvements in the allegation investigation processes, to improve recruitment and retention of foster carers.
Brown & Bednar (2006). Foster parent perceptions of placement breakdown. Canada.	Telephone interviews with foster carers using concept mapping.	Exploring foster carers perceived causes of placement breakdown. Nine themes were identified, many which were consistent with the existing literature. Gaps in the research were identified: violence in general foster care, foster parent perceptions of contributions to a foster child's transition back to his or her birth family, and the process of foster parent decision-making in cases of placement breakdown.
Buehler et al. (2003). Foster parents' perceptions of factors that promote or inhibit successful fostering. USA.	Semi-structured interviews with foster carers.	Foster parents' perceptions of familial and parental factors which promote or inhibit successful fostering were examined. Indicated the importance of training during the applicant stage, highlighting the need for foster parents to be skilled at creating a family life.
Buehler et al. (2006). The potential for successful family foster care: Conceptualizing competency domains for foster parents. USA.	Literally review. Excluded kinship carers competencies.	Developing and supporting competency in 12 domains to ensure a successful start to fostering and helping guide the assessment process. Example domains include managing the demands of fostering on personal and familial well-being and working as a team member. It recommends that these domains are implemented into legislation and practice.

Care Standards Act 2000. UK	UK Public General Act. Legislation.gov.uk	An Act to establish a National Care Standards Commission, includes the provision for the regulation and inspection of local authority fostering and adoption services, as well as the registration, regulation, and training of social care workers; and safeguarding children and vulnerable adults.
Children Act 1989. UK.	UK Public General Act. Legislation.gov.uk	An Act to reform the law relating to children; includes local authority services for children in need and fostering practices.
Competition and Markets Authority (2022). The Children's Social Care Market Study. UK.	Market study and review of provisions.	Market study into children's social care in England, Scotland, and Wales. Significant problems in how the placements market is functioning, particularly in England and Wales. Issue of the right type of placement and private placement providers.
Department for Education (2011). Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards. England.	Government guidance. GOV.UK	Regulations for fostering service providers, including foster carers. Identifies needs and recommendations for foster carers that fostering service providers must uphold.
Department for Education (2012). Training, support, and development (TSD) standards for foster care. England.	Government documents for foster carers to complete. GOV.UK.	Requirement that foster carers evidence they are meeting the standards required through completing a TSD workbook within their first 12 months of being approved as a foster carer. There are two guides, one for foster carers and the other for care managers and SSW.
Department for Education (2013). Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations. England.	Government guidance. GOV.UK	Statutory guidance. From the Children Act 1989, for local authorities and independent fostering agencies on the assessment and approval process of foster carers for children looked after. It is also relevant information for foster carers about the process and their rights.
Department for Education (2016). Putting children first, delivering our vision for excellent children's social care. England.	Documents how the government will reform children's social care in England. GOV.UK	The government's strategy for reforming three pillars on which the children's social care system stands. Includes funding new ways of attracting and retaining foster carers, ensuring foster placements work through understanding the different needs of foster carers.
Department for Education. (2018). Fostering better outcomes. England.	Government report. GOV.UK	Government response to the Foster Care in England report by Narey and Owers (2018), and the Education Select Committee's inquiry into fostering. Sets out five overarching ambitions for foster care.
Department for Education (2023). Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation. England.	Government report. GOV.UK	The government setting out their vision for reforming children's social care. The strategy is based on recommendations from 3 independent reviews. Request for consultation on their vision.
Department for Education and Skills (2006). The national minimum fostering allowance and fostering payment systems: good practice guidance. UK.	Government guidance found on Social Care Online from SCIE.	It is set out in two parts: explaining the background and scope of the first national minimum allowance for foster carers. and sets out a good practice framework for fostering payment systems.

Foster & Kulakiewicz (2022). General debate on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. UK.	Government debate. Briefing document.	Overview of children looked after statistics, policy development from the independent review of fostering and children's social care. Provides the government's position, parliamentary and press material, and further reading.
Furlong, et al. (2021). The incredible years parenting program for foster carers and biological parents of children in foster care: a mixed methods study. Ireland.	Mixed methods. Interviews and focus groups were analysed using Grounded Theory. biological and foster parents (including kinship carers).	Assessed the utility and perceived effectiveness of the 18-week Incredible Years Parenting Program (IYPP). Delivered, on an exploratory basis. IYPP could add value to the standard training and supports for foster parents, children, and biological parents. Considerations for implementing training, such as difficulties in engaging both foster and biological parents.
Gibbons et al. (2019). Is Nurturing Attachments training effective in improving self-efficacy in foster carers and reducing manifestations of Reactive Attachment Disorder in looked after children? UK.	A mixed-methods evaluation. Pre and post measures of self-efficacy and Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD). Semi-structured interviews.	Nurturing Attachments training was developed specifically to support carers. The intervention was successful in increasing foster carers' feelings of self-efficacy but was less effective at reducing the RAD-type behaviours. Suggested this was related to external factors, e.g., contact with birth family. Recommendations for social workers include post-training follow-up and support, and additional training regarding working with birth families and supporting children with family contact.
Gouveia et al. (2021). Foster families: A systematic review of intention and retention factors. England, Spain & Portugal.	Systematic review. Databases: PsycArticles, PsycInfo, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science. SPIDER method.	Aimed to provide a critical analysis of the literature, identifying factors that explain the intention to become and to continue as a foster family. 49 studies included. Intention and retention were associated with foster carers' motivations, personal and family characteristics, and perceived familiarity or support from the child protection system. Identified the role of support from the child protection system in retaining foster carers.
GOV.UK. Becoming a foster parent (n.d.). England.	Government website and guidance.	Information regarding becoming a foster carer, recommendations for supporting foster carers through the process and once approved.
Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group. (2021). National Fostering Framework. Wales.	ADSS Cymru website. Report on the proposed National Fostering Framework. Developed from working with all key stakeholders.	Welsh Senedd Cymru have developed a National Fostering Framework to provide a co-ordinates Wales wide approach to supporting foster care services. The framework identifies and addresses the needs of foster carers, including harmonising fees and allowances for foster carers, developing a national training framework for foster carers to meet learning and development needs.
Hatcher (2022). England Foster Care Allowances Survey 2021-22. The Fostering Network. England.	A survey of all local authorities in England via freedom of information (FOI) requests.	Fourteen local authorities are paying below the National Minimum Allowance (NMA) set by the Department for Education and one local authority does not separate their fees and allowances. Recommendations targeted at fostering services were to ensure NMA for foster carers and transparency relating to the administration of payment. For the government, fostering services should be monitored for ensuring foster carers are paid at least the NMA, a comprehensive review of the minimum levels of fostering allowances is required and a NMA should be implemented for Staying Put arrangements.

Hiller et al. (2020). Supporting the emotional needs of young people in care: A qualitative study of foster carer perspectives. UK.	Qualitative focus groups and short questionnaires.	Gathered in-depth information about foster carers' views on supporting their foster children's emotional well-being, and experience of training and sense of competence. Found a key barrier to foster carers' providing effective support to children in their care was a lack of communication between services, poor support from services and poor access to CAMHS support. Implications for practice and policy around carer training and support, as well as how services support the mental health needs of young people in care.
Holmes & Silver (2010). Managing behaviour with attachment in mind. UK.	Qualitative and quantitative evaluation of a group programme in a clinical setting. Series of questionnaire measures pre and post participation.	Evidence that group interventions based on attachment theory, social learning theory and principles of PACE are a good source of support. Foster carers preferred the support as part of their training in preparation for a child being placed in their care.
House of Commons Education Committee. (2017). Fostering. First Report of Session 2017-19. England.	Government inquiry into fostering.	Report on fostering, together with formal minutes relating to the report by members of the House of Commons Education Committee. Focuses on valuing young people, foster carers, and care. Fostering is under pressure and the sector needs to be adequately resourced and supported.
Kirton (2007). Step forward? Step back? The professionalization of fostering. UK.	Review of literature.	Examines theoretical debates on professionalisation and contemporary policy in relation to looked after children. Hybrid nature of foster care straddling the domains of 'family' and 'work'. Reflects on how this hybridity must be balanced carefully, so that professionalism does not undermine the personal and familial aspects of foster care.
Kirton (2022). Exploring the Anti-professional Turn in English Foster Care: Implications for Policy, Practice and Research. England.	Document analysis of Fostering Better Outcomes, feeder reports. Thematic analysis.	Role of professionalism, arguing policy since the Fostering Better Outcomes has taken an 'anti-professionalism' stance. There is confused policy stance where professionalisation in some respects is rejected whilst core elements are endorsed. Failure to acknowledge the hybrid nature of foster care is part of the current problem and needs addressing.
Lawson & Cann (2017). State of The Nation's Foster Care. UK.	UK online survey sent to foster carers.	Allowances, foster carers status, and peer support were areas which were highlighted in the survey. Recommendations focused on increasing allowances, campaigning for the status of foster carers and considering new methods of peer support (the Mockingbird Family Model project).
Lawson & Cann (2019). State of The Nation's Foster Care. UK.	UK online survey sent to foster carers.	Support and training, lack of respect and financial support were areas highlighted. Overall foster carers felt that there was a lack of support, training, respect, and remuneration. Recommendations include the need for all members of the system around the child to recognise the role and status of foster carers. A learning and development framework should be implemented across of four UK nations.

MacAlister (2021). The independent review of children's social care: The Case for Change. England.	An initial report aimed at "starting the conversation" of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.	The report sets out the urgent need for a new approach to children's social care in England. It provides an initial summary of aspects of the review and proposes questions, welcoming responses to shape the ongoing review of children's social care.
MacAlister (2022). The independent review of children's social care: Final Report. England.	An Independent Review of Children's Social Care. Using a Design Group. Interviews and focus groups.	Looks at the needs, experiences and outcomes of children supported by social care. Recommendations were provided across 10 chapters, focused on the best interest of the child. In relation to foster carers, a recruitment programme is indicated and that foster carers should be given the ability to make day to day decisions.
McDermid et al. (2016). Evaluation of head, heart, hands: introducing social pedagogy into UK foster care: final report. UK.	Evaluation of the impact of Head, Heart, Hands programme. Semi-structured interviews, surveys, focus groups, and data (financial and national statistics).	The programme enabled small changes which had a big impact on individual fostering households. The evaluation shows the contribution that social pedagogy made to increasing the foster carers' knowledge of fostering practice and confidence. Indicates support around the foster carers and working together using social pedagogy principles.
MacGregor et al. (2006). The needs of foster parents: A qualitative study of motivation, support, and retention. Canada.	Qualitative study using focus groups.	Examined motivation, support, and retention of foster parents. Foster parents were mostly intrinsic and altruistic motivators. Support from agencies was most important but also lacking. Importance of emotional support, trust and good communication, respect for their abilities and opinions, and being considered part of the childcare team were identified. To increase retention of foster carers, improvement in support is required and providing accurate information about the child and introducing foster parents to their role gradually.
Narey & Owers. (2018). Foster Care in England. England.	A Review for the Department for Education.	Review of the fostering system in England which includes 36 recommendations to the government about how the outcomes of children in foster care can be improved.
NICE. (2021). Looked-after children and young people. UK.	National guidance developed with Public Health England.	The guidance identifies foster carers as primary carers (section 1.3 valuing carers) and provides recommendations relating to supporting and involving carers and training. These recommendations were following three evidence reviews for looked-after children and young people (NICE, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).
NICE. (2021a). Looked-after children and young people: [A] Interventions to support care placement stability for looked-after children and young people. International.	Literature review. Qualitative and quantitative evidence.	Reviewed interventions to support placement stability in children and young people who are looked after. Supports evidence for guidance on supporting looked-after children and young people.
NICE. (2021b). Looked-after children and young people: [B] Barriers and facilitators for supporting care placement stability among looked-after children and young people. UK.	Literature review. Qualitative and quantitative evidence.	Reviewed barriers and facilitators for supporting care placement stability among children and young people who are looked after. Highlights ways that placement stability can be improved.

NICE. (2021c). Looked-after children and young people: [C] Interventions to support positive relationships for looked-after children, young people and care leavers. International.	Surveillance review.	Considers interventions to support positive relationships in children and young people who are looked after and care leavers. Evidence suggests that new interventions may be required.
Ofsted. (2023a). Guidance Social care common inspection framework (SCCIF): independent fostering agencies. England.	Guidance. GOV.UK	Guidance on how Ofsted inspects independent fostering agencies. The framework focuses on the standard of care provided to the children by Independent Fostering Agencies.
Ofsted. (2023b). Fostering in England 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. England.	Data collected from Local Authorities (LA) and eligible Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA).	Fostering in England statistics for the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. Decline in the number of foster carers whilst an increase in demand for foster placements. Data on the numbers of foster carers and foster places and placements, in both LA & IFA, and types of foster care, registrations, and deregistrations.
Ott et al. (2023). Foster carer recruitment and retention in England. England.	Scoping design. Secondary data analysis, surveys, interviews and focus groups.	Research highlights that investment in foster carer recruitment and retention is warranted. Funding for support for members of the team around the child, targeted recruitment campaigns, respect for foster carers, improved relationships, and more research.
Petitions UK Government and Parliament (2023). Review and increase foster care allowances and tax exemptions. England.	Webpage, parliament petition.	Petition to government to review and increase allowances paid to foster carers, and tax exemption levels, so they reflect the true cost of caring for a child. Allowances are reviewed annually. Minimum rates were agreed to rise by 12.43% from April 2023.
Pithouse & Lowe (2008). Children in foster care with challenging behaviour in Wales (UK): Key themes and issues for practice and research. Wales.	Interviews and standardised measures.	Offered insight into the perceived behaviours of children and the difficulties faced by carers. Acknowledge the importance of support for foster carers and being treated as professionals yet skills are based on experience rather than receiving specialist training.
Rees & Handley. (2022). Final Report - Evaluation of Fostering Wellbeing. Wales.	Evaluation of a Pilot project. Interviews, surveys and focus groups.	An evaluation of a Welsh funded pilot programme called 'Fostering Wellbeing'. The programme is designed to improve the wellbeing and educational outcomes for care experienced children through skilling and supporting participates, including foster carers. There needed to be better recognition of foster carers' professional abilities and they are included in discussions when making decisions.
Schofield et al. (2013). Professional foster carer and committed parent: Role conflict and role enrichment at the interface between work and family in long-term foster care. UK.	Qualitative data from 40 interviews with long-term foster carers. Thematic approach to analysis.	Highlights the complexity of foster carers' roles, with two different spheres of activity, with different role identities and cultural meanings. Foster carers primarily identified as carers or as parents. For foster carers who could be flexible, the two roles enriched each other rather than causing stress and role conflict. The findings highlight that social workers and the care planning systems need to respect the duality of the role.

Sebba & Luke (2013). Supporting each other: An international literature review on peer contact between foster carers. UK and international.	International literature review. Electronic databases and websites found 33 studies from the UK, Ireland, North America and Australasia, since 2000 and included of only non-kinship foster carers and range of methodologies (in-depth interviews and case studies to large-scale surveys).	The study identifies the ways in which foster carers come together and the forms of support they have. Importance of peer support, through a group facilitator, however a one-size fits-all approach is not beneficial, therefore fostering providers need to provide local support and advocacy groups, social contact, training sessions, mentoring, and buddying schemes. Respite schemes were also highlighted as an area of support.
Sellick (2006). From famine to feast. A review of the foster care research literature. UK.	Literature review.	The paper argues that historically the knowledge base of foster care in Britain was limited, however in the past decade there has been a substantial body of research knowledge: supervision and support for foster carers, network around the child and a targeted recruitment strategy.
Sharda (2022). Parenting stress and well-being among foster parents: The moderating effect of social support. USA.	A cross-sectional quantitative design using a web-based survey. Included kinship and foster carers. Multiple linear regression analysis.	Parenting stress experienced by foster parents negatively impacted their wellbeing. Social support acted as a buffer to parental stress on parents' wellbeing. Recommendations focused on more awareness of support options for foster parents, and support options should be highlighted within foster carer training and assessment.
Sinclair & Wilson (2003). Matches and mismatches: The contribution of carers and children to the success of foster placements. UK.	Triangulation approach to qualitative study. Questionnaires and longitudinal follow-up.	Successful placements depended on three factors: the child's characteristics, qualities of foster carers and the interaction between the child and carer. Support from social workers is better early in relational difficulties between the child and carer to prevent placement breakdown. Implications for supervision and training programmes.
Sinclair et al. (2004). Foster Carers: Why they Stay and Why they Leave. England.	Study of approximately 1000 foster carers in seven English local authorities.	Found that support needs to be adapted to the specific needs of carers' including group support, relief breaks, reasonable payment, and relevant training. Reliable social work support that is responsive and sensitive to serious crises, and treating carers as part of a team is also an important part of retaining foster carers.
Sinclairtfn (2019). Register of foster carers. The issue. UK.	From The Fostering Network. Webpage.	The Fostering Network is calling for the introduction of a national register of foster carers in each of the four countries of the UK.
The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013. UK.	UK Statutory Instrument. Legislation.gov.uk	Part of sections of the Children Act 1989 and the Care Standards Act 2000. The Secretary of State for Education makes the Regulations, providing a framework for fostering service providers and includes approval of potential foster carers and changes to approved foster carer's terms of approval.
The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011. England.	UK Statutory Instrument. Legislation.gov.uk	Regulations made by the Secretary of State for Education for fostering service providers, including foster carers, under the Children Act 1989 and the Care Standards Act 2000. Identifies needs ad recommendations for foster carers and fostering service providers.

The Fostering Network (2017). Fosterline Wales Factsheet LGBT foster carers. Wales.	Information 'factsheet'. Rights and signposting.	Factsheet for LGBT foster carers regarding fostering rights, placement matching, tips from other LGBT foster carers, resources and support available from The Fostering Network.
The Fostering Networking (2021). State of The Nation's Foster Care. UK.	UK online survey sent to foster carers and social workers. Qualitative thematic analysis.	Three areas of focus: children and young people, foster carers, and the fostering system. Evidence of a recruitment and retention crisis, highlighting the need for foster carers' role to be valued and recognised. The recommendations focus on how foster carers' terms and conditions can be improved.
The Fostering Network. (2022). Fostering legislation in England. The Fostering Network. England.	Webpage. The Fostering Network.	Information regarding legislation about care and foster care across the UK. In England the main legislative body is the Westminster parliament and primary responsibility for fostering in England is held by the Department for Education.
The Fostering Network (2022a). Foster Carers' Charter. UK.	Produced by The Fostering Network. Available online.	Document detailing the Foster Carers' Charter. Highlighting commitments and roles of the cooperate parent, the fostering service, and foster carers.
The Fostering Network. (2022b). Mockingbird Impact Report 2022. UK.	Impact report.	Impact report of The Mockingbird programme developed by the Fostering Network. Programme for supporting foster carers through an extended peer support system.
The Fostering Network. (2023a). Foster care allowances survey 2023-4. UK.	FOI requests to all local authorities and questionnaire.	Report on the fostering allowance across the UK. Outcome of the report is calling for a fairer funding framework for children and young people in foster care, supporting foster carers in their role.
The Fostering Network. (n.d.). Fostering Allowances. England.	Webpage.	Information regarding fostering allowances and National Minimum Allowance. Promoting a campaign for the cost of funding.
Wilson et al. (2004). Fostering success, an exploration of the research literature in foster care. England.	Literature review. Social Care Institute of Excellence.	The reviewed aimed to identify what impact foster care has for fostered children and young people and to provide a practice guide on fostering. Chapter 6: Implications for organisation and practice is most relevant for this study – identifies who are the carers and seeks to answer how can more carers be recruited and retained. Section 6.7 suggests a need for "an adequate system for recruiting, training and supporting fosters carers…" (Wilson et al., p. 64). Recommendations include providing specialist training and intensive support such as out of hours support, and that all carers are trained in a specialist approach.
Wilson and Evetts (2006). The professionalisation of foster care. UK.	Review.	Foster carers increasingly identify themselves as professionals. Article reviews changes within fostering services and argues that although professionalisation can be a way of bringing proper recognition, status and standards of practice, carers and practitioners should view cautiously the managerial motivation in moves towards it.

Appendix B: Phase 1: Document Analysis

Part A: Contextual Positioning

Contextual positioning was completed for each document prior to analysis. Below is an example of how contextual positioning was used on The State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 Report (The Fostering Network, 2021).

Table 7

Example of Contextual Positioning

Questions		Sample Response
Who	Who participated in conceiving, supporting, shaping, writing, editing, and publishing the text?	Conducted by the Fostering Network, an accredited charity set-up to support foster carers and improve the way social services support foster carers. Foster carers and social workers experiences shaped the report through two surveys. The survey was open to all foster carers. However, the fostering services' survey was open only to fostering services who were members of the Fostering Network.
	Who was its production intended to benefit?	It was made to give foster carers a voice as well as understanding the perspectives of social workers. Highlights good practice and areas of improvement for fostering services, local authorities, government, and regulatory bodies.
What	What stated or assumed purposes does it serve?	To provide insight into the UK's fostering system and recommendations for all four nations to implement to improve foster care, ensuring the needs of children and young people who are looked after, are met.
	What specific value does this text bring to the current study?	It brings together multiple perspectives from stakeholders in the foster care system. This was the first-year social workers were included in the study. Provides an understanding of foster carers' needs, issues, and experiences as well as social worker's perspectives. Also highlights the 'research' into 'practice' as well as gaps.
	What are the parameters of the information?	Responds to specific survey questions preselected by The Fostering Network. Topic areas differ across the two surveys.

When	When was the document conceived, produced, updated?	The survey is conducted every three years, and this data was collected via an online survey in 2021, open for 10 weeks. The report was produced at the end of the year and later three thematic analyses were conducted. Reflective of the current context of foster carers and social workers, which are related to existing policies and service structures. To note, impact of covid-19 and cost of living crisis, e.g., reduced access to resources.
	What is the document's intended lifespan?	Ongoing evidence-base for the state of fostering, with clear recommendations for implementation. Renewed every three years with existing areas identified for research.
	To what extent are the issues that influenced and informed the production of this document relevant to the temporal context of the current study?	Helpful to the current study as provides pre-existing insight into fostering and gives a foundation for understanding the current context. The recency of the report means the data is of relevance and provides a timeframe for recommendations to be implemented. Opportunity for this study to review whether research is implemented into practice. The historic state of the nation reports also provide comparison of the issues and experiences over time.
Where	Where was the document produced?	Produced from the four UK nations.
	Where is the document intended for use?	Within fostering in the UK across the different systems.
	Where is the document positioned in respect of sociological context?	The survey/report are promoting social action.
Why	Why would the text be used?	To give insight into fostering and make change for the better. Used as an evidence base for The Fostering Network and foster carers' campaigns for improved allowance and status.
	Why, if at all, is the text unique, reliable, and consistent?	The NGO status would suggest that the Fostering Network is independent from the government. The report is cited in several government documents which would indicate that it is a reliable and consistent source. It provides a broad spectrum of insight and later provides an evaluation of the study's impact.
How	How (if at all) do the authors of the text propose it be used?	Proposes it is used for making changes within foster care as well as mapping the current state of fostering, which the insight it provides is a resource to foster carers, fostering services, the government, and regulatory bodies.
	How is the text written?	The findings of the survey and report is presented as user friendly and is visibly attracted. The report is supplemented with thematic analyses to give more depth.
	How is the document achieving its purpose?	Provides a clear overview of the survey's findings which are complimented with recommendations for different parts of the fostering system.

Note. Questions as suggested by Ralph, N., Birks, M., & Chapman, Y. (2014). Contextual positioning: Using documents as extant data in grounded theory research. *Sage Open*, *4*(3). (https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014552425).

Part B: Documents Analysed

Table 8

Documents Analysed and Example Codes

Document	Example Initial Codes	Example Focused Codes	Emerging Theoretical Categories for Focus Groups
Department for Education. (2011). Fostering Services: national minimum standards.	Parenting Family life Child-centred Relationships Skilful and trained Responsible and held accountable Professional status Assessed, monitored, and reviewed	Obligation and duty The best interest of the child Skilled Workforce: set of specific skills and characteristics Suitability and characteristics of foster carers	**Obligation and duty in the best interest of the child** **Guidance fit for fostering practice** **Expectations of foster carers** **Expectations of the fostering system**
The Fostering Network. (2021). State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 Report.	Stability: a secure base Relational bonds & connection United: part of the workforce Availability & access to resources Children at the heart of what we do Status: feel valued & respected Communication: open & transparent Expectations: parent & professional	Getting it right from the start Whole system approach Learning, development, and training Parent and Professional	**The conundrum of the role: parent or professional** **Expectations of the fostering system** **Duty and responsibility of the system** **Good fostering practice**
Department for Education. (2012, November). Training, Support and Development Standards for foster care. (Guidance for Foster Carers Guidance for Managers, Supervising Social Workers Guidance Evidence workbook	Gentle and guiding hand Know, understand and do Child-centred Allocation of responsibility Journey of experience and progress Variation in practice Rights of the child Standards and expectations	Learning, development, and training Tailored and individual support Getting it right from the start Availability of resources	**Resources: availability and accessibility** **Guidance fit for fostering practice** **Expectations of foster carers** **Expectations of the fostering system**

Department for Education. (2012, July). Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations. Volume 4: Fostering Services.	Hierarchy and level of authority Duty and obligation Professionalism Restriction: limited to remit Right type of person To protect Processes: timely and transparent Transferable workforce	History of foster care: a changing context Obligation and duty in the best interest of the child Skilled Workforce: set of specific skills and characteristics Children at the heart of what we do	**Hierarchy, structures, and processes** **Guidance fit for fostering practice** **Obligation and duty in the best interest of the child**
The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, No. 581.	Power Best interest of the child Duty to protect Integrity and good character Obligation and duty of fostering services Competent and fit to practice Qualified, skilled and experienced Family life	Obligation and duty Children at the heart of what we do Skilled Workforce: set of specific skills and characteristics Getting it right from the start	**Expectations of fostering systems** **Obligation and duty in the best interest of the child**
Hicks (2005). Lesbian and gay foster care and adoption: A brief UK history.	Feeling connected Subjectivity: who can foster Weaponisation of evidence base to support political agendas Heteronormative values Equality Rejection Valuing knowledge and skills	Societal norms and discourses History of foster care: a changing context Suitability and characteristics of foster carers	**Expectations of foster carers** **Guidance fit for fostering practice** **Hierarchy, structures, and processes** **Values and agendas**
Cocker& Hafford-Letchfield (2021). LGBT+ parenting.	Complicated identity Robust services Navigating the nuance Responsive services Othering Entrenched heteronormativity Scaffolding around the foster carer Family values	Suitability and characteristics of foster carers Societal norms and discourses History of foster care: a changing context	**Experience of processes: recruitment, assessment, approval, retention** **Hierarchy, structures, and processes** **Values and agendas**
NSPCC Learning. (2023). History of child protection on the UK.	Legal obligation Risk and threats Professional network Collaboration	Whole system approach Children at the heart of what we do	**Hierarchy, structures, and processes** **Obligation and duty in the best interest of the child**

Roehlen (2021). A brief history of the UK care System	The need for love, care, and nurture, more than just shelter Family life A home Responsibility of the state Process of regulation Developing a workforce	Skilled Workforce: set of specific skills and characteristics History of foster care: a changing context Parent and Professional	**Resources: availability and accessibility** **Expectations of foster carers** **Duty and responsibility of the system**
FamilyCare (n.d.). History of Foster Care	Duty and obligations Process of regulation Change and moving with the times Suitability of parents Shelter rather than a home Basic needs Motivation of money	History of foster care: a changing context Parent and Professional Children at the heart of what we do	**Expectations of foster carers** **Resources: availability and accessibility** **Hierarchy, structures, and processes**
Ott, E., Wills, E., Hall, A., & Gupta, S. 2023. Foster carer recruitment and retention in England.	Crisis or gap in provision Scaffolding support Help children to thrive Realistic expectations Respect Building relationships Financial compensation Inefficient processes – 'bureaucratic and unprofessional'	Genuine appreciation Whole system approach Investment in the workforce Firm foundation	**Resources: availability and accessibility** **Duty and responsibility of the system** **Experience of processes: recruitment, assessment, approval, retention**
The Fostering Network. (2014). Working with Social Workers. Information for foster carers	Systems of support and action Expectation Part of the team Collaboration and partnership Delegated authority Valuing voices and opinions A resource of knowledge and support Policy to protect	Whole system approach Professional Network Getting it right from the start Parent and Professional	**Expectations of the fostering system** **Duty and responsibility of the system** **Good fostering practice**
Narey & Owers (2018). Foster care in England.	In it for the money Substitute parent Treated professionally Foster parent not employees Business model Available workforce Mismatch in ideal to what happens in practice Capabilities and capacity	Motivations to foster Shifting values and understandings of foster care Children at the heart of what we do Firm foundation	**Values and agendas** **Issue of professionalism** **Expectations of the fostering system** **Obligation and duty in the best interest of the child**

Sellick (2006). From famine to feast. A review of the foster care research literature.	Shifting interest Limited knowledge Political agenda Failing system Scaffolding around the carer Beyond parenting Fostering is not a one size fits all Mixed economy position	Continuum of vocation vs profession Shifting values and understandings of foster care Fostering: a social policy	**Experience of processes: recruitment, assessment, approval, retention** **The conundrum of the role: parent or professional** **Values and agendas**
Kirton (2022). Exploring the Anti-professional Turn in English Foster Care: Implications for Policy, Practice and Research.	Growing movement Complex and hybrid nature Status and value Cherry picking Familial discourse Trend Workforce Bureaucratic processes	Continuum of vocation vs profession History of foster care: a changing context Differing practices: variation across provisions	**Issue of professionalism** **The conundrum of the role: parent or professional** **Hierarchy, structures, and processes**
Department for Education (2018). Fostering Better Outcomes.	Rights Feasibility Policies and protocol Collaborative and partnership Unified Advocacy Investment Valued and skilled workforce	Skilled Workforce: set of specific skills and characteristics Differing practices: variation across provisions Whole system approach	**Values and agendas** **Expectations of the fostering system** **Obligation and duty in the best interest of the child**
Hatcher (2023). Children's social care: stable homes, built on love. Response from The Fostering Network	Voice of foster carers Children to thrive Family environment Policy not fit for practice Wraparound support Expectations Responsibility Rocky foundations	Duty and responsibility of the system Firm foundation Getting it right from the start Investment in the workforce	**Guidance fit for fostering practice** **Hierarchy, structures, and processes** **Duty and responsibility of the system**
Department for Education. (2023a). Stable Homes, Built on Love Government Consultation Response.	Workforce Stability Team around the child Stable and loving homes Moving forward Collaborative and partnership working Business interest Levels of changes	Skilled Workforce: set of specific skills and characteristics Investment in the workforce Children at the heart of what we do Whole system approach	**Obligation and duty in the best interest of the child** **Guidance fit for fostering practice** **Values and agendas** **Duty and responsibility of the system**

Appendix C: Phase 2: Focus Group

Part A: Summary of Focus Group Allocation and Participants

Table 9

Participants' Allocation, Pseudonym, Role, and Provision

Focus Group	Pseudonyms	Role	Fostering Provision	Number of Participants
1	*Tiley*	*Supervising Social Worker*	*LA*	
	Thomas	*Supervising Social Worker*	*LA*	
	Ruth	*Supervising Social Worker*	*IFA*	
	Pauline	*Supervising Social Worker*	*IFA*	*4*
2	*Hannah*	*Recruitment Social Worker*	*IFA*	
	Jessica	*Recruitment & Assessment Social Worker*	*LA*	*2*
3	*Chris*	*Team Manager*	*LA*	
	Natalie	*Team Manager*	*IFA*	
	Katherine	*Team Manager Other*	*IFA*	
	Jane	*Registered Manager*	*IFA*	
	Diana	*Registered Manager*	*LA*	*5*
4	*Bella*	*Supervising Social Worker*	*LA*	
	Sophie	*Supervising Social Worker*	*LA*	
	Anna	*Supervising Social Worker*	*IFA*	*3*

Note. A total of 14 people participated in the focus groups. Focus groups were allocated based on job role and availability of participants.

Part B: Focus Group Schedules

Each focus group began and ended the same. The researcher began with setting the context of the focus group, including covering confidentiality, the role of the researcher as the group facilitator and a reminder of participants' right to withdraw. Introductions then followed, with each participant stating their name and what initially drew them to working in fostering. The focus group closed with a final question asking participants if they were taking anything away from the focus group and their experience of it. The researcher concluded with thanking participants for their time and a summary of the next steps (debrief information sheet to be sent and if indicated on their consent form a potential follow-up questionnaire to be sent and a summary of the study's findings).

Focus Group 1

1. What characteristics and skills determine someone's suitability to be/remain a foster carer?
2. Within staff induction and/or social work training what is covered about the role of foster carer?
3. What training is provided in your service for foster carers and how is this decided, and who attends?
4. What are your key properties in your role/service?
   a. Are there barriers to achieving these?
   b. What would improve these things?
5. What barriers do you experience in implementing Standard 21 (supervision and support of foster carers) of the National Minimum Standards?
   a. What would improve these barriers?

Focus Group 2

1. What characteristics and skills determine someone's suitability to be a foster carer?
2. Within staff induction and/or social work training what is covered about the role of foster carer?

    a.   What training and learning opportunities do you have in your role?

3.   What are your key properties in your role/service?

    a.   Are there barriers to achieving these?

    b.   What would improve these things?

4.   Are there barriers you experience in implementing recruitment and assessment guidance? (e.g., assessing for support networks, connecting with other foster carers, STANDARD 13 - Recruiting and assessing foster carers who can meet the needs of looked after children)

    a.   What is your recruitment and assessment strategy within your service?

Optional:

5.   What training is provided in your service for foster carers and how is this decided, and who attends?

6.   What barriers do you experience in implementing Standard 21 (supervision and support of foster carers) of the National Minimum Standards?

Focus Group 3

1.   What characteristics and skills determine someone's suitability to be a foster carer?

2.   Within staff induction and/or social work training what is covered about the role of foster carer?

    a.   What training and learning opportunities do you have in your role?

    b.   How are you supported in your role?

3.   What are your key properties in your role/service?

    a.   Are there barriers to achieving these?

    b.   What would improve these things?

4.   How is research/government guidance and policy filtered down into practice? (e.g., Stable Homes Built on Love strategy: new initiatives: mockingbird project and fostering pathfinders, delegation of authority, allegations, fee payment, recruitment, and assessment strategy)

a. Is the current guidance fit for practice? (gaps in the process) (e.g., has the needs of fostering changed since the standards were introduced in 2011 – complex needs of CYP and understanding of trauma)

Optional:

5. What training is provided in your service for foster carers and how is this decided, and who attends?

6. Are there barriers you experience in implementing recruitment and assessment guidance? (e.g., assessing for support networks, connecting with other foster carers, STANDARD 13 - Recruiting and assessing foster carers who can meet the needs of looked after children)

7. What barriers do you experience in implementing Standard 21 (supervision and support of foster carers) of the National Minimum Standards?

a. What would improve these barriers?

Focus Group 4

1. What characteristics and skills determine someone's suitability to be a foster carer?

2. Do the different aspects of a foster carers role influence how you are able to support them? (e.g., parent or professional)

a. What barriers do you experience in implementing Standard 21 (supervision and support of foster carers) of the National Minimum Standards?

b. What would improve these barriers?

3. Within staff induction and/or social work training what is covered about the role of foster carer?

a. What training and learning opportunities do you have in your role?

b. How are you supported in your role?

4. How is research/government guidance and policy filtered down into practice? (e.g., Stable Homes Built on Love strategy: new initiatives: mockingbird project, fostering pathfinders and staying put, delegation

of authority, allegations, fee payment, recruitment, and assessment strategy)

     a.   Is the current guidance fit for practice? (gaps in the process) (e.g., has the needs of fostering changed since the standards were introduced in 2011 – complex needs of CYP and understanding of trauma)

5.   What are your key properties in your role/service?

     a.   Are there barriers to achieving these?

     b.   What would improve these things?

Optional:

6.   What training is provided in your service for foster carers and how is this decided, and who attends?

7.   Are there barriers you experience in implementing recruitment and assessment guidance? (e.g., assessing for support networks, connecting with other foster carers, STANDARD 13 - Recruiting and assessing foster carers who can meet the needs of looked after children)

Part C: Transcription Conventions

Table 10

Transcription Conventions

Symbol	Explanation
(.)	Pause
[inaudible]	Inaudible section of transcript
[laughter]	Indicates laugher during the focus group
<>	Brief interruption or overlap of speaking
[…]	Indicates some speech has been removed – no more than 5 words

Note. Adapted from Banister, et al. (1994)

Part D: Findings: Theoretical Categories and Sub-Categories

Evolved from participants' voices and supported by the findings from the document analysis, Table 11 presents the constructed theoretical categories identified as casual mechanisms to implementing research knowledge into practice.

Table 11

Categories and Sub-Categories of Causal Mechanisms

Categories	Sub-Categories
Resources	A Crumbling System
	Variations in Practice
	Needs vs Demands
Values	Conflicting Agendas and Priorities
	Respecting the Workforce
	The Conundrum: The Role of a Foster Carer
Social Context	An Ever-Changing Landscape

Appendix D: Phase 3 Follow-Up Questionnaire

Part A: The Questionnaire

The statements are related to themes which were discussed in the focus groups attended by yourself, and other fostering social workers, team, and service managers. Please answer all the questions below by <mark>highlighting</mark> your response, which is based on your perspective and experience.

1. **Job Role:**

2. **Type of Fostering Service:**

Local Authority	Independent Fostering Agency

3. **The government's 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' strategy, is a starting point, however they are still not doing enough to prioritise vulnerable children, especially children looked after.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

4. **The government do not adequately value and respect, fund, or resource fostering services. This impacts on keeping and maintaining a workforce who are supported in their role.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

5. **In an ever-changing world, there is a lack of consistency, continuity, and stability across children's services. Consequently, fostering is 'plugging gaps' and is unable to always achieve what is needed for foster carers and children looked after.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

6. **Fostering is unique and a one size fits all approach does not work. We need flexibility and resources to tailor to the specific needs and circumstances of each foster carer.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

7. **There is an ethical conundrum of whether foster carers are professionals or parents. This impacts on the support fostering service can offer, and subsequently the foster carer's ability to do their role effectively.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

8. **Processes are typically outdated, data/paperwork driven, rather than focusing on relational ways of working. Therefore, they are not representative of what is needed in practice.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

9. **Government strategies, guidance, policies, and initiatives are not consistently filtered down or implemented into practice.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

10. **Any additional comments, including any areas which you feel have not been included that relate to why there are barriers to implementing research knowledge into practice in foster care.**

Part B: Questionnaire Data and Findings

Nine participants completed the follow-up questionnaire, of which four participants (44%), provided additional comments. No new codes emerged, and comments fell within the existing categories, thus supporting theoretical sufficiency. The categories were: 'Resources' and 'Values'. Subcategories were 'variations in practice', 'needs vs demands', 'conflicting agendas and prioritises', 'allocation in resources', and 'a crumbling system'. For example:

"Children and YP are having to face of a life in care where they are moving homes primarily because the resources available. This means that children are being matched with families who are not always able to meet the needs of that child." Team Manager in a Local Authority.

Table 12 provides a summary of the follow-up questionnaire data using descriptive statistics. Of the nine participants, four worked in a local authority provision and five worked in an independent fostering agency as shown in Figure 5. At least one participant from each focus group and job role completed the questionnaire. Figure 6 shows the distribution of job roles.

A noticeable finding, and evidence of theoretical sufficiency, was that no participant *'disagreed'* or *'strongly disagreed'* with any of the seven statements. Although, one participant, a supervising social worker in a local authority, responded *'neither agree nor disagree'* to four of the statements. It is important to acknowledge that this questionnaire, and subsequently the model and theory of the research-practice gap, cannot entirely summaries the experiences of all participants.

The statements in which all participants 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' were statement 5 *("In an ever-changing world, there is a lack of consistency, continuity, and stability across children's services. Consequently, fostering is 'plugging gaps' and is unable to always achieve what is needed for foster carers and children looked after")*. Statement 6 (*"Fostering is unique and a one size fits all approach does not work. We need flexibility and resources to tailor to the specific needs and circumstances of each foster carer."*) all participants 'strongly agreed'.

On three of the other statements, 3, 4 and 7, all participants apart from one participant either 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed'. Statement 9 *(Government strategies, guidance, policies, and initiatives are not consistently filtered down or implemented into practice)* was an area which fewer participants (33%) 'strongly agreed' with. However, 45% of participants still 'agreed' with the statement. This can be linked with the subcategory of variations in practice.
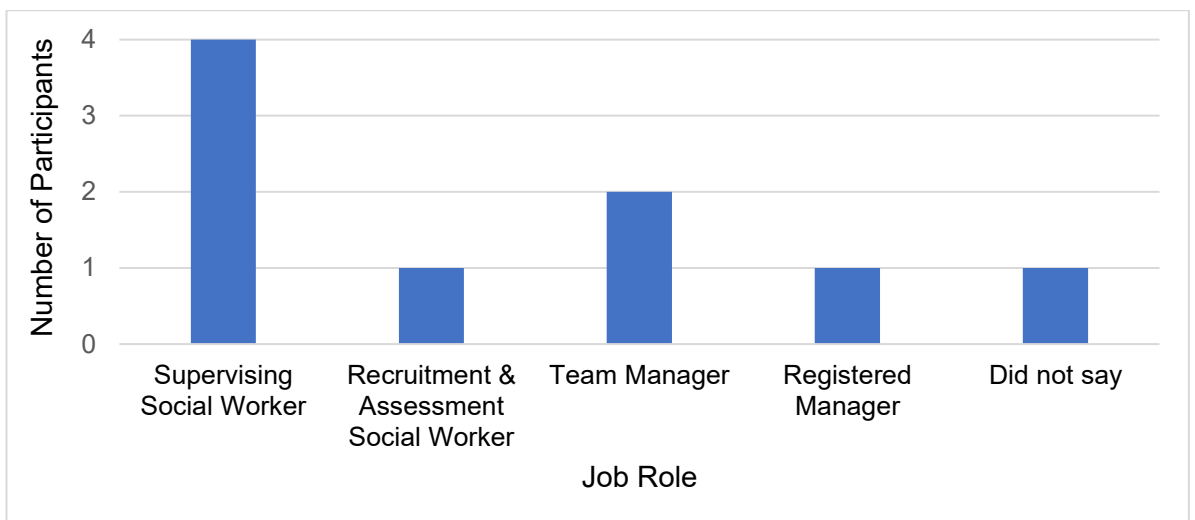
Figure 5

Percentage of Participants Per Fostering Provision
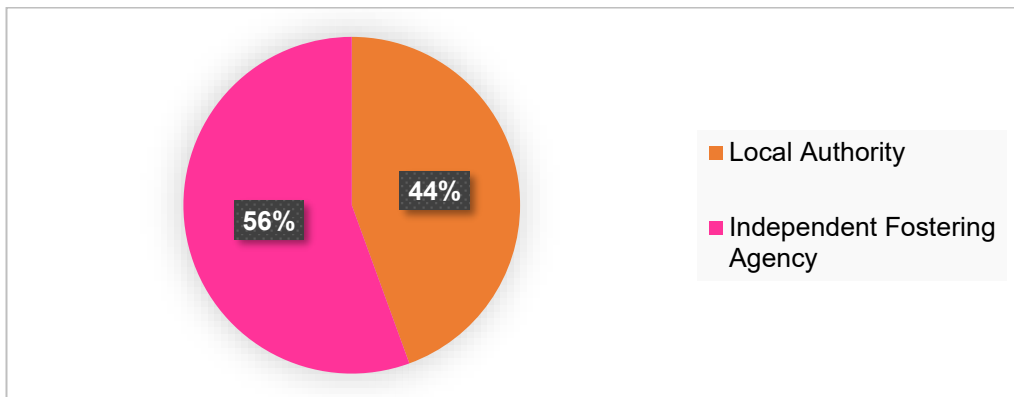
Figure 6

Distribution of Participants' Job Roles

Table 12

Descriptive Statistics of Participants Responses

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3	4 (44%)	4 (44%)	1 (12%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
4	7 (78%)	1 (11%)	1 (11%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
5	7 (78%)	2 (22%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
6	9 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
7	4 (44%)	4 (44%)	1 (12%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
8	5 (56%)	3 (33%)	1 (11%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
9	3 (33%)	4 (45%)	2 (22%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Note. Percentage is representative of 9 responses. Percentage to the nearest whole number and therefore may not equate to 100 percent.

These findings specifically indicate the importance of resources, including funding, in implementing research knowledge into practice. This was used to support the theory construction and is discussed in relation to the different aspects of the Ecological Model, presented in Chapter Five.

Appendix E: Criteria of Conceptual Depth

Theoretical sufficiency was pursued throughout the study using Nelson's (2016) criteria of conceptual depth. There are five: Range, Complexity, Subtlety, Resonance, and Validity.

1. "A wide **range** of evidence can be drawn from the data to illustrate the concepts.

2. The concepts must be demonstrably part of a rich network of concepts and themes in the data within which there are **complex** connections.

3. **Subtlety** in the concepts is understood by the researcher and used constructively to articulate the richness in its meaning.

4. The concepts have **resonance** with existing literature in the area being investigated.

5. The concepts, as part of a wider analytic story, stand up to testing for external **validity**."

<div align="right">(Nelson, 2016, p. 559).</div>

Appendix G: Demographic Questions

> **Please answer all the questions below.**
> *Responses can be given by highlighting the option which is applicable to you.*
> *An example response:*
>
> How would you describe your gender?
>
> Man   Non-binary   <mark>Woman</mark>   Prefer not to say
> Prefer to self-describe:

1. **How would you describe your gender?**

   Man   Non-binary   Woman   Prefer not to say
   Prefer to self-describe:

2. **Is your gender identity the same as the gender you were assigned at birth?**

   Yes   No   Prefer not to say

3. **What age group do you fall into?**

   18-25   25-39   40-65   Over 65   Prefer not to say

4. **How would you best describe your ethnic origin?**

   Asian or Asian British   Black or Black British

   White   Mixed or multiple ethnic group

   Other (please specific ethnic group):

   Prefer not to say

5. **What is your current job role within your fostering service?**

   Supervising Social Worker   Social Worker   Team Manager

   Service Manager   Other (please specific):

6. **Which type of fostering service do you work in?**

   Local Authority   Independent Fostering Agency

7. **Which geographical region do you work in?**

North West   North East   West Midlands   East Midlands

South West   South East   London   East of England

Yorkshire and the Humber

8. **How many years have you worked in your current role?**

_ months and _ years

9. **How many years have you worked in foster care?**

_ months and _ years

10. **Do you have experience of working as a foster carer?**

Yes   No

If yes, for how long for?

_ months and _ years

Appendix H: Ethics Application and Approval Confirmation

Part A: Ethics Application

University of
East London

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON
School of Psychology
APPLICATION FOR RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS
(Updated October 2021)
FOR BSc RESEARCH;
MSc/MA RESEARCH;
PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE RESEARCH IN CLINICAL, COUNSELLING & EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Section 1 – Guidance on Completing the Application Form	
	(please read carefully)
1.1	Before completing this application, please familiarise yourself with: ▪ British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct ▪ UEL's Code of Practice for Research Ethics ▪ UEL's Research Data Management Policy ▪ UEL's Data Backup Policy
1.2	Email your supervisor the completed application and all attachments as ONE WORD DOCUMENT. Your supervisor will look over your application and provide feedback.
1.3	When your application demonstrates a sound ethical protocol, your supervisor will submit it for review.
1.4	Your supervisor will let you know the outcome of your application. Recruitment and data collection must **NOT** commence until your ethics application has been approved, along with other approvals that may be necessary (see section 7).
1.5	Research in the NHS: ▪ If your research involves patients or service users of the NHS, their relatives or carers, as well as those in receipt of services provided under contract to the NHS, you will need to apply for HRA approval/NHS permission (through IRAS). You DO NOT need to apply to the School of Psychology for ethical clearance.

	▪ Useful websites: https://www.myresearchproject.org.uk/Signin.aspx https://www.hra.nhs.uk/approvals-amendments/what-approvals-do-i-need/hra-approval/	
	▪ If recruitment involves NHS staff via the NHS, an application will need to be submitted to the HRA in order to obtain R&D approval. This is in addition to separate approval via the R&D department of the NHS Trust involved in the research. UEL ethical approval will also be required.	
	▪ HRA/R&D approval is not required for research when NHS employees are not recruited directly through NHS lines of communication (UEL ethical approval is required). This means that NHS staff can participate in research without HRA approval when a student recruits via their own social/professional networks or through a professional body such as the BPS, for example.	
	▪ The School strongly discourages BSc and MSc/MA students from designing research that requires HRA approval for research involving the NHS, as this can be a very demanding and lengthy process.	
1.6	If you require Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) clearance (see section 6), please request a DBS clearance form from the Hub, complete it fully, and return it to applicantchecks@uel.ac.uk. Once the form has been approved, you will be registered with GBG Online Disclosures and a registration email will be sent to you. Guidance for completing the online form is provided on the GBG website: https://fadv.onlinedisclosures.co.uk/Authentication/Login You may also find the following website to be a useful resource: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service	
1.7	Checklist, the following attachments should be included if appropriate: ▪ Study advertisement ▪ Participant Information Sheet (PIS) ▪ Participant Consent Form ▪ Participant Debrief Sheet ▪ Risk Assessment Form/Country-Specific Risk Assessment Form (see section 5) ▪ Permission from an external organisation (see section 7) ▪ Original and/or pre-existing questionnaire(s) and test(s) you intend to use ▪ Interview guide for qualitative studies ▪ Visual material(s) you intend showing participants	

Section 2 – Your Details		
2.1	**Your name:**	**Charlotte Watson**
2.2	**Your supervisor's name:**	**Dr Navya Anand**
2.3	**Name(s) of additional UEL supervisors:**	**Dr Matthew Jones Chesters** 3rd supervisor (if applicable)

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2.4	**Title of your programme:**	**Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology**
2.5	**UEL assignment submission date:**	**20/05/2024**
		Re-sit date (if applicable)

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3" align="center">Section 3 – Project Details</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Please give as much detail as necessary for a reviewer to be able to fully understand the nature and purpose of your research.</td></tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Study title:
Please note - If your study requires registration, the title inserted here must be the same as that on PhD Manager</td>
<td>Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care: A Grounded Theory Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Summary of study background and aims (using lay language):</td>
<td>Nationally, there are ongoing challenges of recruiting and retaining foster carers. There is also a growing demand for more foster placements as the number of children coming into care increases (Competition and Markets Authority, 2022). There is a depth of research (Berridge, 1997; Lynes & Sitoe, 2019; Sellick, 2006; Sinclair, 2005) and recommendations (Golding, 2003; Ott, 2023; Narey, 2018; The Fostering Network, 2021) which have been published about foster carers' needs and experiences. However, foster carers still report that their needs remain unmet in supporting the children in their care (Golding & Picken, 2004; The Fostering Network, 2021). This is known as a research practice gap; what is found in research is not put into day-to-day practice. For example, there is a growing evidence base for different training programmes for foster carers, however national reports (The Fostering Network, 2021) have found the training provided by foster care services do not adequately meet foster carers' learning and development needs. Currently the reason for why foster carers' needs are not supported in practice has not been fully explored or explained. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand why this research practice gap</td>
</tr>
</table>

		currently exists within foster care in England. This will be achieved through analysis of pre-existing documents in the public domain: journals, government policies, legislations, reviews, and evaluations, which relate to foster carers' needs, followed by focus groups, and a potential follow-up questionnaire with professionals from fostering services working in England, including supervising social workers, and fostering managers. At the end of the study, I aim to provide an explanation for the research practice gap within foster care. It is also hoped that the findings from this study will identify future recommendations which can be used to improve support for foster carers and the wellbeing of the children in their care.
3.3	**Research question(s):**	The proposed research question is: "What impacts on implementing research knowledge into practice within foster care?". To address this question, the study proposes to answer the following sub questions: 1. What research and legislation exists relating to foster carers' needs? 2. Within foster care services, what is in practice to support the needs of foster carers? 3. What are professionals' perspectives on the barriers to implementing research knowledge into practice in foster care?
3.4	**Research design:**	This is a cross-sectional grounded theory qualitative study using secondary data sources already available in the public domain, primary data collected from focus groups, and a potential follow-up questionnaire
3.5	**Participants:** Include all relevant information including inclusion and exclusion criteria	In keeping with grounded theory, participants for this study were identified through theoretical sampling, directed by

the documents analysed so far. The study will be open to social workers, supervising social workers and members of management (team managers, service managers) working within fostering services from both Local Authority and Independent Fostering services. Allocation to a focus group will be based on the individual's role within the fostering service. For example, focus group one consisting of supervising social workers and social workers*.

Focus group two, fostering service's managers. The number of participants in each focus group will be a maximum of 6 individuals, with no more than 4 focus groups conducted.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Social worker, supervising social worker, team manager, or service manager currently working within LA or fostering service in England.

- Have access to technology which allows participants to use MS Teams for a video interview.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Individuals who cannot communicate in English without the use of an interpreter.

- Individuals who are currently in training (e.g., trainee social workers).

- Individuals whose role entails supporting kinship carers rather than foster carers.

- Individuals working in foster care services outside of England, e.g., Wales or Scotland. This is because fostering is a devolved issue in the UK. * Within fostering services, professionals consist of social workers, supervising social workers, duty team managers, team managers and service managers. The role of a social worker in a fostering service tends to differ to that of a supervising social worker in that their role is within the early stages of a foster carer's

		career, supporting recruitment and assessment (Becoming a foster parent, n.d.). Supervising social workers are responsible for supporting foster carers once approved and throughout their role as a foster carer (Department for Education, 2011). In some services these terms are used interchangeably. It is to be clear that both these roles are distinctly different to that of a children's social worker. Children's social workers will not be included in this study.
3.6	**Recruitment strategy:** Provide as much detail as possible and include a backup plan if relevant	I have contacted two of the UK's leading fostering support organisations, xxxx and xxxxx. xxxxx have agreed to support recruitment by sharing recruitment materials with their networks, following receiving evidence that the study has ethical approval. The policy manager at xxxxxx had confirmed sharing the recruitment materials, however, has since left. I am awaiting confirmation from the new member of staff. Neither organisations are not jointly conducting the study and are not officially affiliated with this research. Therefore, internal organisational approval is not required. Details about the organisations can be found at their websites: https://xxxxxxxxx/ https://xxxxxxx/ I will also be using professional networks and contacting local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies directly. This will involve contacting the services' central inbox and requesting the study poster containing recruitment information is cascaded to members of the fostering service. Again, as none of these organisations are jointly conducting the study or officially affiliated with this research, internal organisational

		approval is not required. Additionally, social media outlets (Facebook, Instagram, and X, formerly known as Twitter, LinkedIn) may also be used to recruit participants using the study poster. New accounts will be set up for the purpose of the study. If individuals are interested in participating in the study, they can email the researcher who will then email the information sheet and consent form. See appendix A for the study poster, appendix B for the participant information sheet and appendix C for the consent form. Within the consent form participants will be asked if they are willing to be contacted again for follow-up questions. This will be in a brief questionnaire, sent to participants who have consented to being contacted again following their attendance in the focus group. Documentation for this can be found in appendix E part A and B.
3.7	**Measures, materials or equipment:** Provide detailed information, e.g., for measures, include scoring instructions, psychometric properties, if freely available, permissions required, etc.	A Laptop with access to Microsoft Teams and Microsoft Office software – word and excel. UEL email account. UEL OneDrive for Business. Memo journal. Access to the internet for searching for relevant documents. Printer for printing documents and transcripts. Locked cabinet to store memo journal and any printed documents for coding. No measures will be used within this study. Demographic questions and draft focus group schedule (appendix D). Follow-up questionnaire questions will be developed following the analysis of the focus group data. I will submit an amendment to ethics, prior to sending out the follow-up questionnaire.
3.8	**Data collection:** Provide information on how data will be collected from the point of consent to debrief	From the start of the study, personal data (names and email addresses) will be collected to send the information sheet and consent forms to following potential

		participants expressing an interest in participating in the study. Demographic data via a brief demographic questionnaire will be collected following the completion of the consent forms to provide contextual information and to allocate participants to the relevant focus groups (see appendix D). Data collected from the focus group will be qualitative data relating to the participants' experience of working in foster care, in particular their work with foster carers. Focus groups will be conducted via Microsoft Teams and will be between 90 to 120 minutes. The focus groups will produce data in the form of audio-recording. Any identifiable information shared during the focus group will be removed or pseudonymised at the time of transcription (e.g., names, service name/location). Audio-visual recordings will be deleted once transcription has taken place. Each participant will be given a pseudonym. If required, and participants have consented, participants may be contacted for a follow-up. This would include a limited number of specific questions which have evolved from the focus group and will add to the understanding of the research-practice gap within foster care. This will produce qualitative data from a brief questionnaire using Qualtrics. Any identifiable information shared within the questionnaire will be removed or pseudonymised prior to conducting data analysis.	
3.9	**Will you be engaging in deception?**	YES ☐	NO ☒
	If yes, what will participants be told about the nature of the research, and how/when will you inform them about its real nature?	If you selected yes, please provide more information here	
3.10	**Will participants be reimbursed?**	YES ☐	NO ☒

	If yes, please detail why it is necessary.	If you selected yes, please provide more information here
	How much will you offer? Please note - This must be in the form of vouchers, not cash.	Please state the value of vouchers
3.11	**Data analysis:**	Data will be analysed using grounded theory methodology with a critical realist lens. Grounded theory employs an approach known as theoretical sampling. This is a process for generating a grounded theory induced from the data. Data collection and analyses are stimulation (Charmaz, 2014). The analysis of the data is to code for comparisons of similarity and differences to develop categories which build a theory. The principle of theoretical sampling is that the use of different data sources enables the checking of categories across different sources to develop theories of the widest scope (Charmaz, 2014). The focus group conversations will be transcribed, and line-by-line analysis will be conducted. The codes will be developed based on the thematic content of the discussion. The crux of this analysis will focus on conceptual understandings of processes within foster care as well as meaning-making of professionals' experience of working in foster care and supporting foster carers. The follow-up questionnaire will be analysed and coded for theoretical saturation of categories. This will also be supported by continued document analysis and the constant comparison method. From these stages of analyses, a preliminary model explaining the research practice gap in foster care will be developed. Memo writing is also part of grounded theory methodology when coding data so a reflexive journal will be kept by the

		researcher. Only reference to pseudonyms will be made in the journal.

Section 4 – Confidentiality, Security and Data Retention

It is vital that data are handled carefully, particularly the details about participants. For information in this area, please see the UEL guidance on data protection, and also the UK government guide to data protection regulations.

If a Research Data Management Plan (RDMP) has been completed and reviewed, information from this document can be inserted here.

4.1	Will the participants be anonymised at source?	YES ☒	NO ☐
	If yes, please provide details of how the data will be anonymised.	Participants will be allocated a participant number at point of contact and email addresses will be kept separate from any data collected.	
4.2	Are participants' responses anonymised or are an anonymised sample?	YES ☒	NO ☐
	If yes, please provide details of how data will be anonymised (e.g., all identifying information will be removed during transcription, pseudonyms used, etc.).	Any identifiable information shared during the focus group will be removed or altered at the time of transcription (e.g., names, service name, location). Each transcript will be saved as a pseudonymised word document (date_Trans_FG1) for analysis. Audio-visual recordings (date_Audio_FG1) collected from Microsoft Teams of the focus group (mp3) will be deleted once transcription has taken place. Questionnaires collected as follow-up data will be saved as a pseudonymised word document (date_Q_1) following being downloaded from Qualtrics for analysis. Any identifiable information shared will be removed or altered prior to analyse.	
4.3	How will you ensure participant details will be kept confidential?	Pseudonymised data (transcripts and questionnaires) will be stored securely, encrypted and separately from data that could reidentify someone (e.g., recordings of focus group or personal/demographic data), in accordance with GDPR. They will be stored in separate files on the researcher's	

		UEL OneDrive for Business which is secure and encrypted. Security will also be ensured by password protecting all documents and storing the data and meta data on UEL's OneDrive for Business which is secure and encrypted. Personal Data and Demographic data will be stored separately, each in a password protected excel spreadsheet and saved on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business.
4.4	**How will data be securely stored and backed up during the research?** **Please include details of how you will manage access, sharing and security**	Documents (word and pdf) and Excel sheets will be stored on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business. Data will be saved and organised using folders and subfolders on UEL OneDrive. A consistent procedure for file naming will be followed, including the date, title, and version number of each file. UEL's OneDrive for Business is only accessible via the researcher's username and password. The completed consent form documents (which will be saved as pdf) will be stored in a separate from the identifiable data, in a separate password protected file in OneDrive for business. For the data collected in the focus groups, each audio file will be named with a number (date_Audio_FG1) and deleted once transcribed. Pseudonymised transcripts of focus groups will be stored in a password protected word file. These files will be named using the focus group number (date_Trans_FG1). If follow-up questionnaires are completed, each file will be named with the participant's number. Pseudonymised questionnaires will be stored in a password protected word file. These files will be named using the given participant number (date_Q_1). The list of identifiers (pseudonyms) will be stored separately on the UEL OneDrive Business. Data will also be backed up on a password protected hard-drive only accessible to the

		researcher. Hard drive will be stored in a locked cabinet.
4.5	**Who will have access to the data and in what form?** **(e.g., raw data, anonymised data)**	The researcher will be the only person who has access to the raw data collected. The identifiable data (namely, MS Teams recordings of the focus groups or if required questionnaires) will not be shared with anyone. Only pseudonymised data, e.g., transcripts and questionnaires, produced for the thesis write-up will be shared with research supervisor(s) and, if requested, the examiners. Only pseudonymised data will be included in the thesis and any subsequent publications, presentations etc. The thesis will be publicly accessible via UEL Research Repository. Participants will be required to consent to this prior to participation via the consent form. Pseudonymised data underpinning the research, full focus group transcripts, will not be deposited on the UEL Research Repository. This is to protect participant confidentiality. Extracts, quotations, and feedback from participants may be included within the thesis (or any subsequent publications, presentations etc.). This will be carefully monitored for anonymity and any potentially identifiable information will be removed or altered prior to inclusion.
4.6	**Which data are of long-term value and will be retained?** (e.g., anonymised interview transcripts, anonymised databases)	The MS Teams recordings produced from focus groups will be destroyed once the data has been transcribed and they are no longer needed. The thesis will be stored on UEL's Research Repository. Pseudonymised data (transcripts) and metadata (consent forms, analysis data) will be moved and deleted from the researcher's UEL Business OneDrive by October 2024 as the researcher will no longer have access to UEL storage facilities as their course will have finished. They will be sent to the research supervisor who will store them on their UEL OneDrive

		for Business for up to 3 years. This is for the case that the thesis may be required to be reviewed for publication. Identifiable data e.g., consent forms will be stored separately from pseudonymised data (e.g., transcripts) and again, will be password protected and be stored in encrypted files for up to 3 years. After 3 years, all the consent forms, pseudonymised data and all meta data will be deleted. Participants will be informed that consent forms and pseudonymised data will be kept by the research supervisor for up to 3 years.	
4.7	**What is the long-term retention plan for this data?**	**The pseudonymised coded transcripts will be retained for 3 years post-examination, after this the data will be deleted. During this time, the data will be stored safely and securely on the researcher's supervisor UEL OneDrive for Business**	
4.8	**Will anonymised data be made available for use in future research by other researchers?**	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☒
	If yes, have participants been informed of this?	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐
4.9	**Will personal contact details be retained to contact participants in the future for other research studies?**	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☒
	If yes, have participants been informed of this?	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐

Section 5 – Risk Assessment			
If you have serious concerns about the safety of a participant, or others, during the course of your research please speak with your supervisor as soon as possible. If there is any unexpected occurrence while you are collecting your data (e.g., a participant or the researcher injures themselves), please report this to your supervisor as soon as possible.			
5.1	**Are there any potential physical or psychological risks to participants related to taking part?**	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☒

	(e.g., potential adverse effects, pain, discomfort, emotional distress, intrusion, etc.)			
	If yes, what are these, and how will they be minimised?	Please detail the potential risks and include measures you will take to minimise these for your participants		
5.2	**Are there any potential physical or psychological risks to you as a researcher?**	**YES** ☐		**NO** ☒
	If yes, what are these, and how will they be minimised?	Please detail the potential risks and include measures you will take to minimise these for yourself as the researcher		
5.3	**If you answered yes to either 5.1 and/or 5.2, you will need to complete and include a General Risk Assessment (GRA) form (signed by your supervisor). Please confirm that you have attached a GRA form as an appendix:**	**YES** ☐		
5.4	**If necessary, have appropriate support services been identified in material provided to participants?**	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☐	**N/A** ☒
5.5	**Does the research take place outside the UEL campus?**	**YES** ☒		**NO** ☒
	If yes, where?	**The focus groups will be conducted remotely via MS Teams.**		
5.6	**Does the research take place outside the UK?**	**YES** ☐		**NO** ☒
	If yes, where?	Please state the country and other relevant details		
	If yes, in addition to the General Risk Assessment form, a Country-Specific Risk Assessment form must also be completed and included (available in the Ethics folder in the Psychology Noticeboard). Please confirm a Country-Specific Risk Assessment form has been attached as an appendix.	**YES** ☐		

	Please note - A Country-Specific Risk Assessment form is not needed if the research is online only (e.g., Qualtrics survey), regardless of the location of the researcher or the participants.	
5.7	**Additional guidance:** ▪ For assistance in completing the risk assessment, please use the AIG Travel Guard website to ascertain risk levels. Click on 'sign in' and then 'register here' using policy # 0015865161. Please also consult the Foreign Office travel advice website for further guidance. ▪ For on campus students, once the ethics application has been approved by a reviewer, all risk assessments for research abroad must then be signed by the Director of Impact and Innovation, Professor Ian Tucker (who may escalate it up to the Vice Chancellor). ▪ For distance learning students conducting research abroad in the country where they currently reside, a risk assessment must also be carried out. To minimise risk, it is recommended that such students only conduct data collection online. If the project is deemed low risk, then it is not necessary for the risk assessment to be signed by the Director of Impact and Innovation. However, if not deemed low risk, it must be signed by the Director of Impact and Innovation (or potentially the Vice Chancellor). ▪ Undergraduate and M-level students are not explicitly prohibited from conducting research abroad. However, it is discouraged because of the inexperience of the students and the time constraints they have to complete their degree.	

Section 6 – Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Clearance			
6.1	**Does your research involve working with children (aged 16 or under) or vulnerable adults (*see below for definition)?** If yes, you will require Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) or equivalent (for those residing in countries outside of the UK) clearance to conduct the research project	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☒
	* You are required to have DBS or equivalent clearance if your participant group involves: (1) Children and young people who are 16 years of age or under, or (2) 'Vulnerable' people aged 16 and over with particular psychiatric diagnoses, cognitive difficulties, receiving domestic care, in nursing homes, in palliative care, living in institutions or sheltered accommodation, or involved in the criminal		

	justice system, for example. Vulnerable people are understood to be persons who are not necessarily able to freely consent to participating in your research, or who may find it difficult to withhold consent. If in doubt about the extent of the vulnerability of your intended participant group, speak with your supervisor. Methods that maximise the understanding and ability of vulnerable people to give consent should be used whenever possible.		
6.2	**Do you have DBS or equivalent (for those residing in countries outside of the UK) clearance to conduct the research project?**	**YES** ☒	**NO** ☐
6.3	**Is your DBS or equivalent (for those residing in countries outside of the UK) clearance valid for the duration of the research project?**	**YES** ☒	**NO** ☐
6.4	**If you have current DBS clearance, please provide your DBS certificate number:**	**001746096848**	
	If residing outside of the UK, please detail the type of clearance and/or provide certificate number.	Please provide details of the type of clearance, including any identification information such as a certificate number	
6.5	**Additional guidance:** ▪ If participants are aged 16 or under, you will need two separate information sheets, consent forms, and debrief forms (one for the participant, and one for their parent/guardian). ▪ For younger participants, their information sheets, consent form, and debrief form need to be written in age-appropriate language.		

	Section 7 – Other Permissions		
7.1	**Does the research involve other organisations (e.g., a school, charity, workplace, local authority, care home, etc.)?**	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☒
	If yes, please provide their details.	Please provide details of organisation	
	If yes, written permission is needed from such organisations (i.e., if they are helping you with recruitment and/or data collection, if you are collecting data on their premises, or if you are using any material owned by the institution/organisation).	**YES** ☐	

	Please confirm that you have attached written permission as an appendix.	
7.2	**Additional guidance:** ▪ Before the research commences, once your ethics application has been approved, please ensure that you provide the organisation with a copy of the final, approved ethics application or approval letter. Please then prepare a version of the consent form for the organisation themselves to sign. You can adapt it by replacing words such as 'my' or 'I' with 'our organisation' or with the title of the organisation. This organisational consent form must be signed before the research can commence. ▪ If the organisation has their own ethics committee and review process, a SREC application and approval is still required. Ethics approval from SREC can be gained before approval from another research ethics committee is obtained. However, recruitment and data collection are NOT to commence until your research has been approved by the School and other ethics committee/s.	

Section 8 – Declarations		
8.1	**Declaration by student. I confirm that I have discussed the ethics and feasibility of this research proposal with my supervisor:**	**YES** ☒
8.2	**Student's name:** (Typed name acts as a signature)	**Charlotte Watson**
8.3	**Student's number:**	**u2195645**
8.4	**Date:**	**17/11/2023**
Supervisor's declaration of support is given upon their electronic submission of the application		

University of
East London

School of Psychology Ethics Committee

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

For research involving human participants
BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

Reviewer: Please complete sections in blue | **Student:** Please complete/read sections in orange

Details	
Reviewer:	**Lydia Tan**
Supervisor:	**Matthew Jones Chesters**
Student:	**Charlotte Watson**
Course:	**Prof Doc in Clinical Psychology**
Title of proposed study:	**Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care: A Grounded Theory Study**

Checklist (Optional)	YES	NO	N/A
Concerns regarding study aims (e.g., ethically/morally questionable, unsuitable topic area for level of study, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Detailed account of participants, including inclusion and exclusion criteria	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding participants/target sample	☐	☐	☐
Detailed account of recruitment strategy	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding recruitment strategy	☐	☐	☐

All relevant study materials attached (e.g., freely available questionnaires, interview schedules, tests, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Study materials (e.g., questionnaires, tests, etc.) are appropriate for target sample	☐	☐	☐
Clear and detailed outline of data collection	☐	☐	☐
Data collection appropriate for target sample	☐	☐	☐
If deception being used, rationale provided, and appropriate steps followed to communicate study aims at a later point	☐	☐	☐
If data collection is not anonymous, appropriate steps taken at later stages to ensure participant anonymity (e.g., data analysis, dissemination, etc.) – anonymisation, pseudonymisation	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding data storage (e.g., location, type of data, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding data sharing (e.g., who will have access and how)	☐	☐	☐
Concerns regarding data retention (e.g., unspecified length of time, unclear why data will be retained/who will have access/where stored)	☐	☐	☐
If required, General Risk Assessment form attached	☐	☐	☐
Any physical/psychological risks/burdens to participants have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise	☐	☐	☐
Any physical/psychological risks to the researcher have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise	☐	☐	☐
If required, Country-Specific Risk Assessment form attached	☐	☐	☐
If required, a DBS or equivalent certificate number/information provided	☐	☐	☐
If required, permissions from recruiting organisations attached (e.g., school, charity organisation, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
All relevant information included in the participant information sheet (PIS)	☐	☐	☐
Information in the PIS is study specific	☐	☐	☐
Language used in the PIS is appropriate for the target audience	☐	☐	☐
All issues specific to the study are covered in the consent form	☐	☐	☐
Language used in the consent form is appropriate for the target audience	☐	☐	☐

All necessary information included in the participant debrief sheet	☐	☐	☐
Language used in the debrief sheet is appropriate for the target audience	☐	☐	☐
Study advertisement included	☐	☐	☐
Content of study advertisement is appropriate (e.g., researcher's personal contact details are not shared, appropriate language/visual material used, etc.)	☐	☐	☐

Decision options	
APPROVED	Ethics approval for the above-named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice), to the date it is submitted for assessment.

Decision on the above-named proposed research study
Please indicate the decision: APPROVED

Minor amendments
Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

Major amendments
Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

Assessment of risk to researcher		
Has an adequate risk assessment been offered in the application form?	**YES** ☒	**NO** ☐
	If no, please request resubmission with an <u>adequate risk assessment.</u>	
If the proposed research could expose the <u>researcher</u> to any kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard, please rate the degree of risk:		
HIGH	**Please do not approve a high-risk application. Travel to countries/provinces/areas deemed to be high risk should not be permitted and an application not be approved on this basis. If unsure, please refer to the Chair of Ethics.**	☐
MEDIUM	**Approve but include appropriate recommendations in the below box.**	☐
LOW	**Approve and if necessary, include any recommendations in the below box.**	☒
Reviewer recommendations in relation to risk (if any):	**Please insert any recommendations**	

Reviewer's signature	
Reviewer: **(Typed name to act as signature)**	**Lydia Tan**
Date:	**30/11/2023**

This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Ethics Committee

RESEARCHER PLEASE NOTE

For the researcher and participants involved in the above-named study to be covered by UEL's Insurance, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

For a copy of UEL's Personal Accident & Travel Insurance Policy, please see the Ethics Folder in the Psychology Noticeboard.

Confirmation of minor amendments (Student to complete)	
I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data	
Student name: (Typed name to act as signature)	Please type your full name
Student number:	Please type your student number
Date:	**Click or tap to enter a date**
Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed if minor amendments to your ethics application are required	

Part C: Ethics Amendments Approval

University of
East London

School of Psychology Ethics Committee

REQUEST FOR AMENDMENT TO AN ETHICS APPLICATION

For BSc, MSc/MA and taught Professional Doctorate students

Please complete this form if you are requesting approval for proposed amendment(s) to an ethics application that has been approved by the School of Psychology

Note that approval must be given for significant change to research procedure that impact on ethical protocol. If you are not sure as to whether your proposed amendment warrants approval, consult your supervisor or contact Dr Trishna Patel (Chair of School Ethics Committee).

How to complete and submit the request

1	Complete the request form electronically.
2	Type your name in the 'student's signature' section (page 2).
3	When submitting this request form, ensure that all necessary documents are attached (see below).
4	Using your UEL email address, email the completed request form along with associated documents to Dr Trishna Patel: t.patel@uel.ac.uk
5	Your request form will be returned to you via your UEL email address with the reviewer's decision box completed. Keep a copy of the approval to submit with your dissertation.
6	Recruitment and data collection are **not** to commence until your proposed amendment has been approved.

Required documents

A copy of your previously approved ethics application with proposed amendment(s) added with track changes.	YES ☒
Copies of updated documents that may relate to your proposed amendment(s). For example, an updated recruitment notice, updated participant information sheet, updated consent form, etc.	YES ☒
A copy of the approval of your initial ethics application.	YES ☒

Details

Name of applicant:	**Charlotte Watson**
Programme of study:	**Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology**
Title of research:	**Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care: A Grounded Theory Study**
Name of supervisor:	**Dr Navya Anand and Dr Matthew Jones Chesters**

Proposed amendment(s)

Briefly outline the nature of your proposed amendment(s) and associated rationale(s) in the boxes below

Proposed amendment	Rationale
Follow-up draft questionnaire questions (see Appendix G).	Agreed in initial ethics application that the follow-up questionnaire questions will be submitted later via amendments as the questions are developed from the focus group.
Questionnaire to be emailed to participants and asked to complete via a word document.	The demographic questionnaire was completed this way and therefore the method of using word is used for consistency.
Proposed amendment	Rationale for proposed amendment
Proposed amendment	Rationale for proposed amendment

Confirmation

	YES	NO
Is your supervisor aware of your proposed amendment(s) and have they agreed to these changes?	☒	☐

Student's signature

Student: (Typed name to act as signature)	**Charlotte Watson**
Date:	**15/03/2024**

Reviewer's decision

Amendment(s) approved:	YES ☒	NO ☐
Comments:		
Reviewer: (Typed name to act as signature)	Trishna Patel	
Date:	18/03/2024	

Appendix I: Participant Materials

Part A: Focus Groups

Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet
Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care
Contact person: Charlotte Watson
Email: u2195645@uel.ac.uk

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part or not, please carefully read through the following information which outlines what your participation would involve. Feel free to talk with others about the study (e.g., friends, family, etc.) before making your decision. If anything is unclear or you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on the above email.

Who am I?
My name is Charlotte Watson. I am a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology at the University of East London (UEL) and am studying for a Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. As part of my studies, I am conducting the research that you are being invited to participate in.

What is the purpose of the research?
I am conducting research into exploring the research-practice gap which exists in foster care. The aim of the study is to speak with professionals working in foster care about their experience of supporting foster carers and to hear about their ideas about why some of the national recommendations are not put into practice. It is hoped that at the end of the study, I will be able to develop an explanation for the research-practice gap within foster care. It is also hoped that the findings from this study will identify future recommendations which can be used to improve support for foster carers and the wellbeing of the children in their care.

Why have I been invited to take part?
To address the study aims, I am inviting professionals working in fostering services in England to take part in my research.

To be eligible to participate in this study, I ask that you read the following inclusion and exclusion criteria carefully. If you have any questions about your suitability to participate in this research, please contact me using the email address listed at the bottom of this form.

Inclusion Criteria:
- You are currently working in a fostering service as a supervising social worker, a social worker, a team, or service manager. This includes both local authority and independent fostering services.
- Working in England as fostering is a devolved issue in the UK.
- Access to Microsoft Teams, with a working camera and microphone.

Exclusion Criteria:
- If you cannot communicate in English without the use of an interpreter.
- You are currently in your role as a trainee, for example a social work apprentice, or role involves supporting only kinship carers.

Do I have to take part?
It is entirely up to you whether you take part or not, participation is voluntary.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to take part?
If you agree to take part, you will be asked to attend a focus group with up to five other individuals working in fostering services across England. Prior to attending the focus group, you will be asked to complete a brief form to capture some information about yourself, this will include your job role and details about your personal characteristics (age, gender, and ethnicity).

The focus group will be like having an informal chat, with the researcher providing several questions relating to your experience of supporting foster carers and working within foster care. Your allocation to a focus group will be related to your role.

Focus groups will be taking place on Microsoft Teams and will last no longer than two hours, a break will be available. The focus group will be recorded using Microsoft Teams which will produce both an audio file and a written transcription of what we talk about.

If you consent to being contacted again by the researcher after the focus group for follow-up questions, you will be sent a brief questionnaire to complete. This will be sent within two months of your attendance to the focus group. This is optional.

Can I change my mind?
Yes, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw without explanation, disadvantage, or consequence. If you would like to withdraw from participating in the focus group, you can do so by leaving the MS Teams meeting or contacting the researcher prior to attending. If you withdraw, your data will not be used as part of the research.

Separately, you can also request to withdraw your data from being used even after you have taken part in the study (the focus group), provided that this request is made within three weeks of the data being collected (after which point the data analysis will begin, and withdrawal will not be possible).

Are there any disadvantages to taking part?
I do not anticipate any disadvantages or risks for participating in this study. I appreciate that you are taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in this research. It is hoped that your participation in the study will provide insights which can support the understanding of the research-practice gap within foster care.

It is understandable that there may be a worry about engaging in the study due to expressing views relating to personal experiences of working in foster care whilst still being in your role and position. Your information will be kept confidential, and any identifying features will not be included within the study to protect your anonymity. Prior to attending the focus group, all participants will have agreed to maintaining the confidentiality of the focus group discussion. At the start of the focus group the researcher will ask participants to respect the privacy of those attending the session and not repeat what is said outside of the group.

Whether you complete the focus group or not you will have access to the debrief sheet which contains signposting information to external support and advice services relating to fostering practice and wellbeing support. You can also contact the researcher or the wider research team to discuss any concerns you have.

How will the information I provide be kept secure and confidential?
In this research study we will have access to the following information about you: your name, age, identified gender, ethnicity, job role, and email address.

We will also have the information you discuss in the focus group including your experience of working in fostering. This will be saved as an audio recording and in the form of an anonymised transcript. People who do not need to know who you are will not be able to see your name or contact details. Your data will have a code number instead. We will keep all information about you safe and secure. Once I have finished the study, we will keep some of the data so we can check the results. I will write the study in a way that no-one can work out that you took part in the study.

For the purposes of data protection, the University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University processes this information under the 'public task 'condition contained in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Where the University processes particularly sensitive data (known as 'special category data 'in the GDPR), it does so

because the processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information about how the University processes personal data please see www.uel.ac.uk/about/about-uel/governance/information-assurance/dataprotection

What will happen to the results of the research?
The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publicly available on UEL's online Repository, Research Institute Psychology. Findings may also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, clinicians, public, etc.) through journal articles, conference presentations, talks, magazine articles, blogs. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally.

You will be given the option to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed for which relevant contact details will need to be provided.

Anonymised research data will be securely stored by Dr Matthew Jones Chesters for a maximum of 3 years, following which all data will be deleted.

Who has reviewed the research?
My research has been approved by the School of Psychology Ethics Committee. This means that the Committee's evaluation of this ethics application has been guided by the standards of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?
If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me via email: u2195645@uel.ac.uk.
If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact either:
Research supervisor: Dr Matthew Jones Chesters
School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,
Email: m.h.jones-chesters@uel.ac.uk
or
Chair of School Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel
School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk
Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Consent Form

Consent to Partcipate in a Research Study
Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care
Contact person: Charlotte Watson
Email: u2195645@uel.ac.uk

	Please initial
I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet dated XX/XX/XXXX for the above study and that I have been given a copy to keep.	
I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time, without explanation or disadvantage.	
I understand that if I withdraw during the study, my data will not be used.	
I understand that I have three weeks from the date of the focus group I attended to withdraw my data from the study.	
I understand that the focus group will be recorded on Microsoft Teams.	
I understand that the discussion of the focus group is confidential.	
I understand that my personal information and data, including audio recordings and transcriptions, from the research will be securely stored and remain confidential. Only the research team will have access to this information, for which I give my permission.	
It has been explained to me what will happen to the data once the research has been completed.	

I understand that short, anonymised quotes from my responses in the focus group may be used in material such as conference presentations, reports, articles in academic journals resulting from the study and that these will not personally identify me.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	
OPTIONAL: I would like to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed and am willing for the researcher to contact me using the details I have provided for this to be sent to.	
OPTIONAL: I agree to be contacted by the researcher after attending the focus group using the contact details I have provided already to the researcher if follow-up questions are required. I understand I will be contacted within two months of the focus group which I attended.	

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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Participant's Signature

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Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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Researcher's Signature

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Date

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Participant Debrief Sheet

Participant Debrief Sheet
Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care

Thank you for participating in my research study on exploring a research-practice gap in foster care. This document offers information that may be relevant in light of you having now taken part.

Brief Description of the Study

Nationally, there are ongoing challenges of recruiting and retaining foster carers (Ofsted, 2023). There is also a growing demand for more foster placements as the number of children coming into care increases (Competition and Markets Authority, 2022). There is a depth of research and recommendations which have been published about foster carers 'needs and experiences. However, foster carers still report that their needs remain unmet in supporting the children in their care (The Fostering Network, 2021; Ott et al., 2023). This can be considered what is known as a research-practice gap; what is found in research is then not put into day-to-day practice.

Currently there is little evidence or explanations for why foster carers 'needs are not supported in practice. Professionals working in foster care have expertise and knowledge which can support our understanding and potential solutions to the problem of the research-practice gap. Your participation in this study is an opportunity to contribute to the evidence-base and provide recommendations which can be relevant to foster care practices.

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To achieve the study's purpose, the first phase of this study has involved, including journals, government policies, legislations, and reviews. The second phase is to speak with professionals working in foster care about their experience of supporting foster carers. I am especially interested in hearing about professionals' ideas about why national recommendations are not put into practice. It is hoped that at the end of the study, I will be able to develop an explanation for the research-practice gap within

foster care. It is also hoped that the findings from this study will identify future recommendations which can be used to improve support for foster carers and the wellbeing of the children in their care.

How will my data be managed?

The University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. More detailed information is available in the Participant Information Sheet, which you received when you agreed to take part in the research.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publicly available on UEL's online Repository. Findings may also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, clinicians, public, etc.) through journal articles, conference presentations, talks, magazine articles, blogs. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally.

You will be given the option to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed for which relevant contact details will need to be provided.

Anonymised research data will be securely stored by Dr Matthew Jones Chesters for a maximum of 3 years, following which all data will be deleted.

What if I have been affected by taking part?

It is not anticipated that you will be affected by taking part in the research, and all reasonable steps have been taken to minimise any strong emotional responses. Nevertheless, it is possible that your participation – or its after-effects – may be challenging or uncomfortable in some way. If you are affected in any of those ways, you may find the following resources/services helpful in relation to obtaining information and support.

For practice advice relating to Fostering, I recommend contacting the following organizations:

CoramBAAF – Adoption, Fostering and Kinship

Website: https://corambaaf.org.uk/

Telephone: 02075 200 300

CoramBAAF members can contact the CoramBAAF Advice Line on 0300 222 5775 (Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm)

The Fostering Network

Website: https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information

Helpline for members: **01384 889 549**

For support and advice relating to your wellbeing, I recommend contacting the following organizations:

Mind
Website: https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/
Telephone: 0300 123 3393

NHS Mental Health Service
Website: https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/

The Samaritans
Website: https://www.samaritans.org/
Telephone: 116 123

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?
If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me, Charlotte Watson via email: u2195645@uel.ac.uk.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact either:

Research supervisor: Dr Matthew Jones Chesters
School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ, Email: m.h.jones-chesters@uel.ac.uk
or
Chair of School Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel
School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ. (Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my study.

Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet
Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care
Contact person: Charlotte Watson
Email: u2195645@uel.ac.uk

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part or not, please carefully read through the following information which outlines what your participation would involve. Feel free to talk with others about the study (e.g., friends, family, etc.) before making your decision. If anything is unclear or you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on the above email.

Who am I?
My name is Charlotte Watson. I am a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology at the University of East London (UEL) and am studying for a Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. As part of my studies, I am conducting the research that you are being invited to participate in.

What is the purpose of the research?
I am conducting research into exploring the research-practice gap which exists in foster care. The aim of the study is to speak with professionals working in foster care about their experience of supporting foster carers and to hear about their ideas about why some of the national recommendations are not put into practice. It is hoped that at the end of the study, I will be able to develop an explanation for the research-practice gap within foster care. It is also hoped that the findings from this study will identify future recommendations which can be used to improve support for foster carers and the wellbeing of the children in their care.

Why have I been invited to take part?
You have been invited to take part in this study as you have already attended a focus group relating to your experience of working in fostering services. You agreed that following this the researcher could contact you again with a brief follow-up questionnaire.

You are eligible for this study as you are working in a fostering service in England as a supervising social worker, a social worker, a team, or service manager. This includes both local authority and independent fostering services. This study is only recruiting England based fostering services as fostering is a devolved issue in the UK.

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you take part or not, participation is voluntary.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to take part?

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire. The researcher will send this to you via the email address you provided. The questionnaire will be follow-up questions developed from the content of the focus group discussion. Following your completion of the questionnaire, you will have completed the study and will be sent a further debrief form.

Can I change my mind?

Yes, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw without explanation, disadvantage, or consequence. If you would like to withdraw from the study in terms of completing the questionnaire, you can do so by exiting the form without completion. If you withdraw, your data will not be used as part of the research.

Separately, you can also request to withdraw your data from being used even after you have taken part in the study, provided that this request is made within three weeks of the data being initially collected (after which point the data analysis will begin, and withdrawal will not be possible).

Are there any disadvantages to taking part?

I do not anticipate any disadvantages or risks for participating in this study. I appreciate that you are taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in this research. It is hoped that your participation in the study will provide insights which can support the understanding of the research-practice gap within foster care.

It is understandable that there may be a worry about engaging in the study due to expressing views relating to personal experiences of working in foster care whilst still being in your role and position. Your information will be kept confidential, and any identifying features will not be included within the study to protect your anonymity.

Whether you complete the focus group or not you will have access to the debrief sheet which contains signposting information to external support and advice services relating to fostering practice and wellbeing support. You can also contact the researcher or the wider research team to discuss any concerns you have.

How will the information I provide be kept secure and confidential?

In this research study we will have access to the following information about you: your name, age, identified gender, ethnicity, job role, and email address.

We will also have the information you discussed in the focus group and shared in the questionnaire relating to your experience of working in fostering. The focus group will be saved as an audio recording and in the form of an anonymised transcript. Your questionnaire will be saved as a word document. People who do not need to know who you are will not be able to see your name or contact details. Your data will have a code number instead. We will keep all information about you safe and secure. Once I have finished the study, we will keep some of the data so we can check the results. I will write the study in a way that no-one can work out that you took part in the study.

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www.uel.ac.uk/about/about-uel/governance/information-assurance/dataprotection

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You will be given the option to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed for which relevant contact details will need to be provided.

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If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact either:

Research supervisor: Dr Matthew Jones Chesters

School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,

Email: m.h.jones-chesters@uel.ac.uk

or

Chair of School Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel

School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.

Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research Study
Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care
Contact person: Charlotte Watson
Email: u2195645@uel.ac.uk

	Please initial
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I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time, without explanation or disadvantage.	
I understand that if I withdraw during the study, my data will not be used.	
I understand that I have three weeks from the date of completing the questionnaire to withdraw my data from the study.	
I understand that my personal information and data from the research will be securely stored and remain confidential. Only the research team will have access to this information, for which I give my permission.	
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I agree to take part in the above study.	

OPTIONAL: I would like to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed and am willing for the researcher to contact me using the details I have provided for this to be sent to.	

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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Participant's Signature

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Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

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Researcher's Signature

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Date

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Participant Debrief Sheet

Participant Debrief
Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care

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Brief Description of the Study
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For practice advice relating to Fostering, I recommend contacting the following organizations:

CoramBAAF – Adoption, Fostering and Kinship
Website: https://corambaaf.org.uk/
Telephone: 02075 200 300
CoramBAAF members can contact the CoramBAAF Advice Line on 0300 222 5775 (Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm)

The Fostering Network
Website: https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information

Helpline for members: **01384 889 549**

For support and advice relating to your wellbeing, I recommend contacting the following organizations:
Mind
Website: https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/
Telephone: 0300 123 3393

NHS Mental Health Service
Website: https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/

The Samaritans
Website: https://www.samaritans.org/
Telephone: 116 123

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?
If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me, Charlotte Watson via email: u2195645@uel.ac.uk.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact either:

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School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,
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Chair of School Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel
School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my study.

UEL Data Management Plan

University of
East London
Pioneering Futures Since 1898

Completed plans <u>must</u> be sent to researchdata@uel.ac.uk for review

If you are bidding for funding from an external body, complete the Data Management Plan required by the funder (if specified).

Research data is defined as information or material captured or created during the course of research, and which underpins, tests, or validates the content of the final research output. The nature of it can vary greatly according to discipline. It is often empirical or statistical, but also includes material such as drafts, prototypes, and multimedia objects that underpin creative or 'non-traditional' outputs. Research data is often digital, but includes a wide range of paper-based and other physical objects.

Administrative Data	
PI/Researcher	Charlotte Watson
PI/Researcher ID (e.g. ORCiD)	0000-0001-9695-1772
PI/Researcher email	U2195645@uel.ac.uk
Research Title	Exploring the Research-Practice Gap in Foster Care: A Grounded Theory Study
Project ID	N/A
Research start date and duration	Research Proposal submitted on 7th November 2022 and accepted on 9th December 2022. To be completed by September 2024. Initial submission deadline for the thesis 20th May 2024.

	This study seeks to explore and understand the research practice gap which currently exists within foster care in England. The study aims to provide a preliminary model using grounded theory to explain the research practice gap within foster care. It is hoped that this model will identify future recommendations which can be used to improve support for foster carers and the wellbeing of the children in their care.
	The proposed research question is: "What impacts on implementing research knowledge into practice within foster care?". To address this question, the study proposes to answer the following sub questions: 1. What research and legislation exists relating to foster carers' needs? 2. Within foster care services, what is in practice to support the needs of foster carers? 3. What are professionals' perspectives on the barriers to implementing research knowledge into practice in foster care?
Research Description	Grounded theory methodology will be used. This entails the analysis of multiple data sources, including documents and qualitative and quantitative data from focus groups and questionnaires. Data will therefore be collected via multiple sources including pre-existing documents available in the public domain, questionnaires using word documents emailed to participants and a selected number of focus groups which are visual & audio recorded via Microsoft Teams. The data will be analysed using grounded theory methodology, documents and questionnaires will be analysed/coded, and focus group will be transcribed and analysed/coded.
	Three recruitment approaches will be used. Firstly, two of the UK's leading fostering support organisations, xxxxx and xxxxx promoted the study and supported recruitment by sharing recruitment materials with their networks. The second source of recruitment was through directly contacting fostering services via their central inbox and requesting the study poster containing recruitment information was cascaded to members of the fostering service. The third approach to recruiting participants was through posting the study's poster on social media outlets (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. New accounts were set up for the purpose of the study. Participants will email the researcher if they are interested in participating. Information sheet and consent forms will then be sent.
Funder	N/A – within UEL DClin Professional Doctorate Programme
Grant Reference Number (Post-award)	
Date of first version (of DMP)	16/02/2023

Date of last update (of DMP)	12/03/2024
Related Policies	[Research Data Management Policy](#) UEL's Data Protection Policy UEL's Data Backup Policy UEL Code of Practice for Research Ethics British Psychology Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct
Does this research follow on from previous research? If so, provide details	No.
Data Collection	
What data will you collect or create?	Data collected from focus groups (mp4.) and questionnaires (word) will collect qualitative data relating to the participants experience of foster care. The number of participants is to be confirmed by theoretical sampling; however, the aim will be to collect data from approximately a minimum of 20 participants who will be recruited via three recruitment methods. Data includes a demographic questionnaire (word), focus groups (no more than 5 visual and audio recorded (mp4) and a follow up word questionnaire relating to focus group findings (word). Microsoft Teams focus groups will between 90 and 120 minutes and questionnaires should take no longer than 20 minutes for the participant to complete. Consent forms and questionnaires will be sent and received via email from the researcher's university account. Personal and Demographic Data Consent forms for focus groups and/or questionnaires will contain personal data, including participants' names and signatures (word doc/pdf). Demographic data (age, gender, ethnicity, job role, geographical location) will be collected to provide context to the focus group via (collect via word doc/pdf and created on excel file.). Personal data will be collected prior to the focus groups on an excel document (2023 (email address, and/or telephone number for the purposes of arranging the interview). Focus Groups Audio-recordings of focus group (mp4) will be created and saved as date_audio_FG1. Focus groups will be recorded using Microsoft Teams. Any identifiable information shared during the focus group will be removed or altered at the time of transcription (e.g., names, job title). Each transcript will be saved as word document (date_Trans_FG1) for analysis. Hard copies may be printed during data analysis. Visual Audio-recordings (mp4) will be deleted once transcription has taken place.

	Questionnaires Questionnaire responses/data will be saved under participant number (word) and then inputted in an excel document (excel) (2024_Follow-UpData) and then moved to a word document for data analysis (2024_FollowUpData_Analysis). All password protected on UEL one drive. Hard copies may be printed during data analysis. Public Documents Data will be collected from public documents saved within a pdf format, which are available within the public domain – government and organisation websites. The documents will be analysed for codes and categories (word doc/pdf). Reflexive Journal – Memo Writing Memo writing is part of grounded theory methodology when coding data so a hand-written reflexive journal will be kept by the researcher.
How will the data be collected or created?	Grounded theory methodology will be used and the use of theorical sampling guides the type of data collected. Data from participants will be collected by focus groups and questionnaires. Participants will be recruited via three methods; each methods requires the participant to contact the researcher via email. Focus Groups Electronic consent forms will be created using a word document and stored in a separate folder on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business. Consent for the focus group will be obtained via email. Participants will be sent a consent form and return a signed copy back to the researcher's UEL email. The returned consent forms will be saved on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business under the file name ConsentForm_Date_PpNo as individual pdf files, each of which will be password-protected within the following folder and file structure: Thesis>Participants>ConsentForms> Demographic data for participants (age, gender, ethnicity, job role, geographical location) will be collected to provide context to the focus group with an additional Word document form saved in a password protected word document (DQ_date_PpNo). This will be collected via email, demographic questionnaire sent to participants and returned by participants through email. This data will then be stored in a password protected execl spreadsheet (2023-2024_Demographics) and saved on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business.Thesis>Analysis&Findings>DemographicQuestionnaires Personal data will be collected prior to the focus group (email address for the purposes of arranging the focus group). An email address will be required to send an MS Teams link for the focus group. This data will be stored in a single password-protected Excel spreadsheet (2023-2024_PpDetails) saved

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on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business. The MS Team link will be sent via the researcher's UEL email address.

Focus groups will be recorded using Microsoft Teams. Any identifiable information shared during the interview will be removed or altered at the time of transcription (e.g., names, job title). Each transcript will be downloaded and saved as an individual Word document (date_Trans_FG1), within the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business, the following folder structure will be used Thesis>Analysis&Findings>FocusGroups Visual and audio-recordings will be deleted once transcription has taken place.

The participants will all be given a participant number and all identifiable information (e.g., names, location) pseudonymised in the transcripts. There will be a document containing a key linking the participant's pseudonym and their identifying information. The key will be saved on the UEL OneDrive in the following folder and file structure: Thesis> Key> Interview pseudonym key.

Follow-up Questionnaires
A second electronic consent form will be created using a word document and stored in a separate folder on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business. Consent to be contacted again was gathered from the first consent form. Consent forms again will be obtained via email. Participants will be sent a consent form and return a signed copy back to the researcher's UEL email. The returned consent forms will be saved on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business under the file name ConsentForm2_Date_PpNo as individual pdf files, each of which will be password-protected within the following folder and file structure: Thesis>Participants>ConsentForms>

The questionnaire data will be collected for up to 20 participants via a word document, emailed to participants and returned via email. Questionnaire responses/data will be saved under participant number (word) and then inputted in an excel document (excel) (2024_Follow-UpData) and then moved to a word document for data analysis (2024_FollowUpData_Analysis). All password protected on UEL one drive under Thesis>Analysis&Findings>Follow-UpQuestionnaires. Hard copies may be printed during data analysis.

Public Documents
Data will be collected from public documents saved within a pdf format (date_title_source_version) on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business, which are available within the public domain – government and organisation websites. The documents will be analysed for codes and categories. A word document for each document will be created for emerging codes and themes (date_title_source_codes). The following folder and file structure: Thesis> Public Documents>Coding.

	Reflexive Journal – Memo Writing Memo writing will be created by the researcher by hand during the data collection and analysis stage. This will contain no identifiable participant information and will be stored in a locked cabinet, accessed only by the researcher.
Documentation and Metadata	
What documentation and metadata will accompany the data?	The below documents will be produced using word processing software and saved as Word documents (.docx) or pdf files (.pdf). These documents will be kept on the UEL OneDrive in the following folder structure Thesis>Materials Study advertising materials (e.g., study description/poster) List of abbreviations/acronyms used in file names Pseudonym key Demographic questionnaire Researcher's reflexive/memo log Focus Groups - Participant information sheet - Consent form - Debrief sheet - Focus group schedule Follow-up Questionnaires - Participant information sheet - Consent form - Questionnaire - Debrief sheet Public Documents - Government and organisation websites - Word document to record documents included - Coding word documents
Ethics and Intellectual Property	
Identify any ethical issues and how these will be managed	Recruitment will not commence until the study has received UEL Ethics approval. During recruitment, a description of the study will be advertised, and an information sheet will be given to potential participants. The study information sheet will be given again prior to participation in the focus group or follow-up questionnaire. Written consent will be gained and documented, and participants will be debriefed following their participation. Participants will have the right to withdraw from the research during participation as well as prior to data analysis, the date of which will be provided to the participants (3 weeks from completion of participating). Participants will be informed that the pseudonymised data may be retained for

	three years by the researcher's supervisor on UEL's secure OneDrive for Business should the researcher wish to publish the research. Details of the researcher will also be available on the information sheet should participants have any additional questions or should they wish to withdraw from the study. If a participant withdraws from the study, their data will be removed and confidentially destroyed. The focus groups will be recorded on Microsoft Teams, UEL's secure platform for online interaction. Following this, the recording and transcript will be transferred to UEL's encrypted cloud storage One Drive for Business. Data will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act. The visual and audio will be deleted once the transcripts have been completed. The transcripts will only be created by the researcher and accessible to the researcher and the researcher's supervisor. To ensure confidentiality all identifiable data will be pseudonymised. There will be a document containing a key linking the participant's pseudonym (allocated number) and their identifying information to ensure that the correct data is withdrawn if the participant chooses to no longer participate. There may be sensitive data obtained during the focus group and via email when participants send consent forms to the researcher's UEL email. Therefore, at the point of transcription the information will be pseudonymised in compliance with GDPR guidance the researcher will only use the data for the purposes it was obtained. The data will only be retained for as long as needed for the research and stored within the EU on the UEL OneDrive for Business. No direct identifying information will be collected. Indirect demographic identifying information will be managed by using techniques including aggregating or reducing the precision of a variable (recording age range rather than DOB) and generalising the meaning of a detailed free-text variables.
Identify any copyright and Intellectual Property Rights issues and how these will be managed	No known copyright or Intellectual Property Rights issues. No copyrighted materials are planned to be used within the study. Documents used for analysis are already within the public domain.
Storage and Backup	
How will the data be stored and backed up during the research?	Documents (word and pdf) and Excel sheets will be stored on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business. Data will be saved and organised using folders and subfolders on UEL OneDrive. A consistent procedure for file naming will be followed, including the date, title, and version number of each file. UEL's OneDrive for Business is only accessible via the researcher's username and password.

	The completed consent form documents (pdf) will be stored in a separate place away from the identifiable data, in a separate password protected file in OneDrive for business.
	For focus group each pseudonymised transcripts will be stored in a password protected word file separate from the identifiable recording data. The list of identifiers (pseudonyms) will be stored separately on the UEL OneDrive Business.
	For follow-up questionnaires, each questionnaire will be named with an allocated participant number and saved under this name and stored with a password protection.
	Data will also be backed up on a password protected hard-drive only accessible to the researcher. Hard drive will be stored in a locked cabinet.
How will you manage access and security?	Pseudonymised data (transcripts or questionnaires) will be stored separately from data that could reidentify someone (e.g., recordings of interview or personal data). They will be stored in separate files on the researcher's UEL OneDrive for Business which is secure and encrypted.
	Security will also be ensured by password protecting all documents and storing the data and meta data on UEL's OneDrive for Business which is secure and encrypted. The researcher will only share pseudonymised data (e.g., pseudonymised interview transcripts and questionnaires) with the research supervisor(s) and examiners. Data sharing with the research supervisor(s) will take place via UEL OneDrive (using OneDrive secure links) or UEL email.
Data Sharing	
How will you share the data?	The thesis will be publicly accessible via UEL Research Repository. Participants will be required to consent to this prior to participation via the consent form.
	Pseudonymised data underpinning the research, full interview transcripts and/or questionnaires, will not be deposited on the UEL Research Repository. This is to protect participant confidentiality.
	Extracts, quotations, and feedback from participants may be included within the thesis (or any subsequent publications, presentations etc.). This will be carefully monitored for anonymity and any potentially identifiable information will be removed or altered prior to inclusion.

Are any restrictions on data sharing required?	There is no intention or need to share the identifiable data with anyone (namely, MS Teams recordings of the interviews). Only pseudonymised data will be shared with research supervisor(s) and examiners. Only pseudonymised data will be included in the thesis and any subsequent publications, presentations etc.
Selection and Preservation	
Which data are of long-term value and should be retained, shared, and/or preserved?	If Interviews are conduced and MS Teams recordings are used, they will be destroyed once the data has been transcribed and they are no longer needed. The thesis will be stored on UEL's Research Repository. Pseudonymised data (transcripts, questionnaires) and metadata (consent forms, analysis data) will be moved and deleted from the researcher's UEL Business OneDrive by October 2024 as the researcher will no longer have access to UEL storage facilities as their course will have finished. They will be sent to the research supervisor who will store them on their UEL OneDrive for Business for up to 3 years. This is for the case that the thesis may be required to be reviewed for publication. Identifiable data e.g., consent forms will be stored separately from pseudonymised data (e.g., transcripts and questionnaires) and again, will be password protected and be stored in encrypted files for up to 3 years. After 3 years, all the consent forms, pseudonymised data and all meta data will be deleted. Participants will be informed that consent forms and pseudonymised data will be kept by the research supervisor for up to 3 years.
What is the long-term preservation plan for the data?	The pseudonymised coded transcripts and/or questionnaires will be retained for 3 years post-examination, after this the data will be deleted. During this time, the data will be stored safely and securely on the researcher's supervisor UEL OneDrive for Business.
Responsibilities and Resources	
Who will be responsible for data management?	Charlotte Watson (PI/Researcher) Navya Anand (Research Supervisor) Matthew Jones Chesters (Director of Studies) The researcher will collect, store, analysis and organise the research data. The research supervisor will be responsible for retaining pseudonymised data once the researcher has left UEL and deleting this data once the retention period has elapsed.

What resources will you require to deliver your plan?	A Laptop Access to Microsoft Teams Microsoft Office software – word, excel UEL email account UEL OneDrive for Business Memo journal Locked cabinet to store memo journal and any printed documents for coding.
Review	
	Please send your plan to researchdata@uel.ac.uk **We will review within 5 working days and request further information or amendments as required before signing**
Date: 12/03/2023	Reviewer name: Joshua Fallon Assistant Librarian RDM

Appendix K: Example Coding Extract

Below is an extract taken from the transcription of focus group 1 and shows examples of initial and focused coding.

Researcher: … how much is within your training is included about being a supervising social worker or recruiting social worker and assessing social worker for foster carer, is that part of your training or is that mainly when you then go into a fostering team? [Participants nodding]	Priorities and values in children's social care Expertise and knowledge of fostering	**Values and agendas in Children's Social Care** **Availability and accessibility to resources**
Tiley: No, I mean when I was training, I felt like a lot of the emphasis was on, (.) you know, the front door, like child protection (.). Section 47's like that kinda those services rather than fostering or looked after children. I feel like that's something that's more (.) I felt was more considered like a specialism because it's not. I think. I think we had like one lecture on looked after children, but it wasn't even about supervising social workers or anything like I didn't even like when I when I had my placement. In a in a not the job I'm in now, but when I did my final placement, it final placement which was in fostering team. (.) I didn't even know that. That the foster carer had their own social worker until like till like till I got there, and I was like oh so and I just I didn't realise that they had two different social workers. That was until I got there but I mean. I learned very quickly what the role is and what what we do, what what we do erm. But yeah. I just don't really remember learning much about, at all about fostering. I think it's something that's kind of like neglected in social work. I feel like it's a very neglected part of social work, and I think it's. [Participant Pauline nodding]	Priority is on front door services: child-focused Feeling fostering is specialism Little time allocated Not important Reality check Gap in knowledge Processes in fostering Knowledge through experience Learning required Neglected aspect of social work Not the priority or top agenda Agreement – a shared experience Area of controversy, unvoiced. Feeling controversial. Undervalued	**Values and agendas in Children's Social Care** **Uniqueness of fostering** **Values and agendas in Children's Social Care** **Availability and accessibility to resources** **Values and agendas in Children's Social Care** **Status, power, and hierarchy**

(.) I'm gonna be a bit controversial here, and I'm gonna say that I feel that it's. (.) I think people look at supervising social workers and they don't see it as a very like I feel like sometimes social work can be very hierarchal in the sense of the roles or what team that you're in. I don't know if that's the experience. That's kind of the impressions that I have had that. That fostering is kind of like the graveyard of social work, and it's like where people go to retire. It's like not as stressful. [Ruth and Pauline nodding and smiling]. It's, but I don't think people realise that. The job is really stressful because in essence we are working with adults and working with adults is very difficult, especially if you have, I mean, I'm assuming in IFA's, you don't work with kinship carers in my in probably in K's team and my team, we do work with kinship carers unless there's a separate team for kinship in in your local authority, but working with adults is equally as difficult as working with children. So I think sometimes. (.) I think we as a profession have stereotypes or opinions on different areas of social work. I think I've steered the conversation in a different way, but that's my views so far as being the social worker that it can be a bit tribal in that sense.	Hierarchy and status within children's services Graveyard of social work: not a lot to do Myths and beliefs of fostering Misunderstood Feeling stressed Juggling the many demands and needs, it's a challenge Variation in fostering practices and provisions Equally challenging and difficult Stereotypes and beliefs of social work: subjective experience Consideration for not speaking for everyone Tribal and hierarchical	**Values and beliefs** **Assumptions of fostering** **Availability and accessibility to resources** **Variations in practice** **Values and agendas in Children's Social Care** **Status, power, and hierarchy**

Appendix L: Excerpt Memos

Part A: Following Initial Analysis of The Fostering Service Regulation 2011

After reading the Fostering Service Regulation 2011, I was left wondering about the history of foster care and when fostering became regulated. From the perspective of theoretical sampling, it seems important to go back a step and explore some of the initial ideas surrounding the role of a foster carer. For example, 'parenting' and 'family life', as well as the 'suitability to be a foster parent' and the concept of someone with 'integrity and good character'. I was left wanting to contextualise myself to the roots of foster care and some of the social norms and discourses which they were founded on. I am mindful that this pull to explore social norms and discourses of fostering may also be influenced by current teaching and a personal professional development session.

Part B: Following Focus Group 4

After today's focus group, I recognised feeling frustrated with the system and the treatment of fostering social workers. The participants reflected on being negative and 'a moaning Murtle'. I felt the weight of their grievances and sensed they were burnt out. I noticed how this made me want to hold the hope that things could be better, and that I needed to, well the research, needed to enact some sort of change in what felt a hopeless and crumbling system.

I was also struck by the parallel processes experienced by fostering social workers and foster carers. The apparent lack of value and respect was overt today and highlighted the rippling effect that this has throughout the system, from the top down. Values felt an overarching theme today and how fostering is not prioritised but is expected to 'plug the gaps' and go above and beyond their role without compensation, recognition, or appreciation.

Out of the four focus groups, this was the one I experienced the most emotions. I wondered if this was because it was potentially the last focus group I would conduct and that I was holding the experiences of the participants and had the weight of communicating this. I also felt a sense of importance and value for holding these spaces and reflected on the experience of fostering professionals being offered what could be potentially considered an independent space in which their voices could be

listened to, and their experiences heard. This made me consider recommendations for practice and how to support the retention of the workforce. Research cannot be implemented into practice for foster carers if there isn't the social care workforce.

Part C: Following Follow-up Questionnaire Analysis

I was pleased that the follow-up questionnaires supported the theory construction, whilst being mindful that this questionnaire, and subsequently the model and theory of the research-practice gap, cannot entirely summarise the experiences of all participants. I wondered whether I had been able to encapsulate the experiences shared in the focus groups and found myself returning to my initial memos following each focus group. I also considered the explanations as to why some participants had given additional comments whilst others had not. I considered how this could have linked to time, reflecting on barriers to engaging in this follow-up. […]

Appendix M: Diagramming

Figure 7 is an example of how diagramming was used to support the developing theory.

Figure 7

The Structure of Fostering within Children's Social Care