Interviews with former child care officers form the basis of this article. I had previously interviewed people who were adopted or fostered and who grew up between the Wars1 and I was interested in the people who worked professionally with children in public care during the period of the specialisation of welfare provision. In this article I will look solely at the experience of child care workers in the community.

The history usually given of the relationship between welfare agencies and the children and families in their area is concerned either with the onward sweep of legislation, or with people who changed ways of thinking. There are also the personal histories of children and families involved with child care agencies. The significance of oral history is that what it was like to work in those agencies and with those families can be told only by former child care officers and there are few still alive who were working in the immediate post war period.

**INTRODUCTION**

The passing of the Children Act 1948 was heavily influenced by what was learned during the period of wartime evacuation. Heywood describes how ‘the extraordinary strength, tenacity and satisfaction found in the family group’ was not ‘accepted …as a social concept …until the wartime disruptions between 1939 and 1945 demonstrated …that the family still preferred to cling together as a fundamental unit in the face of every obstacle.’2
The experience of working with evacuated children during the Second World War of the child psychiatrists and psychotherapists Donald Winnicott and John Bowlby and the psychiatrist Hilda Lewis and reformers such as Richard Titmuss and Clare Britton (later Winnicott) crystallised attitudes towards children separated from their parents and influenced subsequent legislation. Bowlby’s war time experience emphasised for him how important it is for child development that there are close family relationships.

The way in which the Children Act, 1948 came into being is illustrative of the importance of individuals in changing ways in which children separated from their parents were cared for. Marjory Allen, a titled pacifist with political connections, learned about the poverty of the family life of many evacuated children and became interested in all children separated from their parents and lobbied for change. In the pamphlet ‘Whose Children’ she asked that children should have ‘the right to appeal to a public body …if they are in difficulty or in need of help of any kind.’ The wisdom of these ideas was reinforced by the death of Dennis O’Neill in a foster home in January, 1945. The Inquiry into his death, the Curtis Report, 1946, was the foundation for the Children Act, 1948.

The Act came into force on 1 November 1948. The Curtis Committee had recommended that there should be ‘one local authority committee (the Children’s Committee) to be overseen by one central government ministry (the Home Office)’. Each Children’s Committee was responsible for a Children’s Department, whose function was to provide for children in public care and to give help and support to them in their own homes. At the head of each Children’s Department was the
Children’s Officer who was responsible to the Children’s Committee. Below the
Children’s Officer were Area Children’s Officers, Senior Child Care Officers and
Child Care Officers.

Children’s Departments existed until 1972 when they ‘were amalgamated into the
social services departments (SSDs) in England and Wales and the social work
departments (SWDs) in Scotland.’ To that momentous change the child care
officer became a ‘generic social worker,’ expected to work with all of the previously
separate separate client groups.

To-day work in child care is integral to social care. Fieldwork – that is work with
parents and children in the community (as opposed to residential work with children
in children’s homes) – is done by social workers with academic and practical training.
In contrast with medical social work for example, community based child care was a
late entrant to professional social work training. The first four courses leading to the
Letter of Recognition in Child Care were set up by the Children Act, 1948. Training
for residential child care came even later.

Children separated from their parents because of parental illness or bereavement may
be considered in the same way as people affected by physical illness. Children who
need to be looked after (in the definition of the Children Act, 1989) for other reasons
are in a different category. It may be thought that they need to be cared for because of
some inadequacy in their parents, who are expected to care for their children. If they
do not and until post war reconstruction in this country, children were thought to be
to better off without them, and were placed in institutions to enable them to grow up
independently.9

The Association of Child Care Officers (ACCO) was founded in 1949 and came to an
end in 1970, when its membership (of nearly three thousand10) was absorbed by the
British Association of Social Workers. ACCO published Child Care News monthly
and Accord quarterly. During the working life of the child care officer, issues and
policy were discussed in these periodicals. In Spring, 1962 Accord included a paper
on how best to publicise the work of a Children’s Department.11 Research into child
care was recognised as a priority from the early years.12 Adoption issues were aired in
Accord. In 1964 Humphrey13 discussed the perennial issues of choosing adopters who
would manage their task well, and whether to accept applicants who had birth
children.

The question of contact between children in public care and their birth families has
been contested since the period of the child care officer, and a variety of comments in
the interviews indicate that different child care officers and different Children’s
Departments viewed it in disparate ways. Since the 1990s the trend has been towards
‘openness’ for all children separated from their parents. This has two meanings. One,
that children should be told gradually and in an age appropriate way all the
information there is to know about the family they were born into; and two, that
contact between children and that family should be maintained. There was a heated
debate about the pros and cons of ‘openness’ in Child Care News in 1965, following a
review of The Family and Individual Development by Donald Winnicott14 in which he
said ‘if I were a child care officer, as soon as a child came into my care I would immediately want to collect every scrap of information that could be found about the child’s life up to the present moment’.

The forum for live debate amongst the ACCO membership was the Annual Conference. Training was regularly on the agenda as in 1965 when Clare Winnicott addressed the Conference. In view of compulsory registration for social workers since April, 2005, it is interesting to note that the 1961 conference suggested this would be a good idea for child care officers. The debate had begun in 1956 when a writer in Accord wrote a blistering attack on the idea. He asked whether child care was a profession like medicine or the law. If it was not, did this make for a class distinction between child care officers and doctors?

Pamela Clough was a child care officer in Devon in 1949.

You have to remember that there was no formal training and they just grabbed at anyone who had any form of social work training … I was an almoner [now medical social worker] by training. I didn’t like the idea of the National Health Service, I thought I’d get out of that, and had there been child care before I would have gone into it. But as it was I went into it in the beginning of forty-nine in Devonshire … I was the only … social worker in the whole of North Devon. And there were still a lot of people who were called ‘residual evacuees’ about. No one knew where they came from. I mean their parents might have been killed … no one knew. But there were dozens of them … they became the foster children of the people with whom they’d been billeted …
Some of them were very badly placed. And some of them were very well placed. Some were happy and some were unhappy … I mean I don’t think there’d been any thought [speaker’s emphasis] in placing. I can’t remember what the people who placed them were called during the War. They were individuals, officers, they were employed by the local authority. They then came into the child care service … Devon’s a large county and I think there were four to the county.¹⁷

**SIGNIFICANT PERSONALITIES IN CHILD CARE**

The history of child care is also the history of individuals and their contribution to policy and practice. This can be seen in the eighteenth century in the work of Thomas Coram, whose dream of rescuing children became The Foundling Hospital.¹⁸ It can be seen in the nineteenth century in reformers such as Dr Barnardo, Thomas Stephenson (who founded the National Children’s Home) and Edward and Robert Rudolf (who founded the Waifs and Strays Society, now the Children’s Society).¹⁹ The twentieth century also produced people with far reaching significance in the ‘golden age of child care’²⁰ (Holman, 2001). This was a period when the Children’s Officer for each Children’s Department was able to decide the way in which the Department worked. It was the case that a number of Children’s Officers were also significant in national child care policy change, and exerted huge influence on the lives and careers of people interviewed who worked in their Departments. One such Children’s Officer was Barbara Kahan who became the Children’s Officer for Oxfordshire in 1951 and was a ‘Champion for Children.’²¹
Barbara Kahan was determined that policy and practice should reflect that it is in children’s best interests to stay with their own families. She was adamant that children and young people who had offended should be thought about and planned for in the same way as children and young people who were in care for other reasons: and that responding to obvious problems was a lesser strategy than prevention.22

Barbara Kahan knew that children in public care need understanding and consideration, and life in a substitute family if they could not live with their own. She recognised that residential care for children could be either positive or abusive.

Margaret Wilson went to work in Oxfordshire in 1958. In response to a question about where the children she was working with were living she said

Barbara Kahan had a policy … that no child should go to an approved school which is … a previous secure unit and so you had children all over the country in training homes and convents and places …Some of those training homes were OK. Some of them were awful, very rigid, but some of them were very good.23

When asked how decisions were made about whether a child should be placed in a foster home or a children’s home, Margaret Wilson said

… well it was largely on the child care officer’s say-so. You had to get it past Barbara Kahan. When I went there [to Oxfordshire] first of all, it was a very small department it expanded over the five years [that she was there] immensely. But it was a very small department and she was the sort of person
who has her finger on every damn thing, so that you could hardly move without her knowing. But, in all fairness, if you made the decision, she would agree to it.24

Another significant person was Sylvia Watson, the Children’s Officer for Hertfordshire. Mary Pendennis began work there as a child care officer in 1952, after training and working as a teacher. In 1959 she was awarded a Distinction in the Social Science Certificate at the London School of Economics.

Sylvia Watson said

…you may replace a home but you will have this great desire to know where you come from and who you are …a lot of time was spent in tracing who children were, who their parents were. We reunited quite a number. Often that meant just getting them to meet each other. Often it was mothers meeting illegitimate children: they could not keep them but, with a bit of help, they could have them home for a visit …To know in many cases, that they really had been loved but it had been impossible for mothers to care was a great comfort to the young people.25

Another Children’s Officer who played a pivotal role in Alison Fulton’s life and career was Elizabeth Harvey in Kent. Being her secretary influenced Alison to become a child care officer. She said
...because she was the Children’s Officer, children who had been in care would write to her and say they wanted information about their backgrounds ... so old files were dug up from the archives ... I became interested in that. I think the one thing that really worried me at that time was when you looked at the old files the number of social workers or child care officers then that people had had was incredible ... it wasn’t like that while I think I was there because staff did tend to stay but in the past it seemed to me that there had been a rapid turnover but then ... the children had been born during the Second World war ... so maybe it wasn’t surprising.

So then I thought ... ‘I could do more than just being a secretary’ so I thought ‘ ... I’d better go and get trained.’

**THE SAMPLE**

I interviewed nineteen people. During the late 1960s I taught on a training course for child care officers during the period of transition from Children’s Departments to Social Services Departments. A former colleague had kept in touch with a number of her ex-students one of whom was inspired by ‘Friends Re-United’ to find others. I interviewed my former colleague, the ‘searcher’ and a number of fellow students. I also interviewed Keith Bilton who had been the Secretary of the Association of Child Care Officers followed by a distinguished career in child care, and other members of the Social Work History Network.
From my time teaching child care students I have a number of friends with long experience in the field. I was able to interview them and other former child care officers known to them. Colleagues at Fostering Network were helpful in putting me in touch with more people. Others were found by snowballing from my teaching and work connections.

Of the nineteen people interviewed, fifteen were women and four were men. They were between the middle to late sixties and the late eighties. Between them they spanned the era of the child care officer between 1948 and 1972. Six women had come into child care in the late 1940s or early 1950s. They were involved either in generic social work in the latter part of their careers and/or had moved into management or teaching. The majority of the others continued as generic social workers. Some had a rapid rise up the ladder because they were the only qualified social workers in their generic teams.

The interviews followed a life story pattern and were tape-recorded and transcribed. I was told how they had become child care officers, about training and education and about the day-to-day work. Because I have an interest in fostering and adoption I concentrated on these aspects of the work, including how much involvement each person had with policy in these areas. In this article I will discuss what it was like to work in Children’s Departments with particular reference to fostering.
WHAT DID THE CHILD CARE OFFICER DO? THE FRAMEWORK

Section 12 of the Children Act, 1948 states ‘Where a child is in the care of a Local Authority it shall be the duty of that Authority to exercise their powers in respect of him so as to further his best interests and to offer him opportunity for the proper development of his character and abilities.’ Children’s Departments had to cope with the legacy of the disparate local government and voluntary organisations which had managed the care of children until 1948.

Each child care officer was given responsibility for a number of children - the ‘caseload.’ Each officer was supervised by a Senior Child Care Officer, and the frequency and content of contacts with children were carefully monitored. The caseload consisted of files, which concerned children living at home, children in short- or long-term foster homes, children in residential establishments and infants who might be placed for adoption. A further task for many child care officers was to recruit and assess the suitability, of potential foster parents and adopters. The work was hard both physically and emotionally and sometimes the requirements of the job did not match up with the learning of the child care officer during training. For example Robert Wilson described how

… it was a complete shock from the training … that I’d done … for if I can give an example at Christmas time loads and loads of presents were given in and we had to go round and give people [children in families known to the department] presents now I’d been brought through the psychodynamic system which said that people don’t have … poverty here, we have relationship problems [/laughs] and I was there to sort out relationship problems … it’s quite interesting to me
as an aside that I think there has been a full circle now … and I think poverty is about the most important thing that people are up against. But in those days the reverse was true. The professional attitude was … not worried about money … although people actually occasionally left their children virtually on the doorstep because they had no food for them.

What we now call ‘child protection’ was part of the child care officers’ role. The Children Act 1948 emphasised the prevention of neglect, cruelty and danger in regard to all children although the term ‘child protection’ referred specifically to the supervision of children in private foster homes.

It was not until the late 1940s that there was a definition for a child who was injured deliberately - the ‘battered baby.’ Since then different definitions have been used, for example ‘non-accidental injury’ or ‘child abuse’ in the 1970s. During the 1980s the term ‘child abuse’ was broadened to include sexual as well as physical abuse and ‘child protection’ is now used for both. It must have been the case that the people interviewed, were involved in situations which would today be thought of as ‘child protection’ but it was not named as part of their task.
Angela Barnes talked about a child who had been placed for adoption.

… I had a lad called Colin who came into care at the age of six weeks his parents were teenagers and he [the father] was in the army … and Colin was injured by either his mother or his father and nobody really knew which possibly the father I think who had a fairly short fuse … but they were both teenagers at the time … something like seventeen and eighteen.

And Colin … had a burn on his hand and a burn on his tongue which was a big sort of lump on his tongue which he’s still got … and I think the burn on his hand was probably a cigarette burn … and he came into care … and was placed in a children’s home.30

It was also the child care officer’s role to try to keep parents and children together. When they had to be apart, the child care officer provided continuity between the parents and children’s homes or foster homes. It did not become part of a social worker’s responsibility until after the Children Act, 1989 to ensure that a child could contribute to decisions about important aspects of life, for example their education or contact with parents.

Boarding out (now called fostering) was managed in the nineteenth century under the Poor Law and by voluntary societies such as Dr Barnardo’s and ‘was not only an attempt … to bring up the children within the community, instead of within specialised institutions, but an acknowledgement by the community at large of a collective responsibility for the children of the state.’31 The Children Act, 1948 made
the state responsible for all boarded out children. ‘Fostering (was) the preferred method of child care’ for children living away from their parents. Child care officers were responsible, for recruiting and supporting foster parents and for choosing foster homes for children. Another task was work with so-called unmarried mothers, the placing of infants for adoption and the recruitment and support of adopters. Terry Gavin explained that

… we did the whole lot from a pregnant usually a single mother … coming our way and saying ‘I want the child to be adopted’ or having discussions … about that right the way through to when the child was adopted making the placement initially in a foster home … as a matter of policy we approved prospective adopters as foster parents and therefore we tried to avoid [the child] having a second move so we placed the child initially as a foster child.33

Because children in foster homes or residential establishments could be placed far away from their home areas, child care officers had to travel to their regular visits sometimes for long distances. They got about on foot, on bicycles or on public transport. Some lucky ones had cars, sometimes provided by their employer. As Pamela Clough said when talking about taking children from their homes to foster homes in a rural area ‘You had a car … but the car wouldn’t go across the fields. Pick up a lot of heavy children who were being sick all the time …’34
Lesley Wilton explained the difficulties

…I can remember going up to … a big poultry farm … and the nearest you could get was really quite a long way and you had to … walk up the hill lovely lady.

Well you see you would have to take the bike on the train or on the bus and things so it wasn’t practical or I would have done.\textsuperscript{35}

THE CASELOAD

The Children Act, 1948 was concerned that children in public care should be cared for where possible in foster families rather than in children’s homes. In Leicestershire in 1953 the average caseload was seventy\textsuperscript{36} and this was thought to be too many.

‘Accord’\textsuperscript{37} for Winter 1959-1960 mentions approvingly that the Children’s Officer for Leicestershire reported that in the previous ten years the number of admissions to temporary care had trebled while ‘care and protection cases’ had dwindled to only a few a year. Between 1957 and 1959 in Hertfordshire there was an increase of forty-two per cent in placements with short-term foster parents and an increase of eleven per cent in long-term placements.\textsuperscript{38}

This change put an increasing burden on child care officers and the Children’s Officer for Leicestershire wrote in her Annual Report for 1959 that ‘Too heavy a case-load of children already in care may well mean that a Child Care Officer does not have time for work with the parents in order to prevent children leaving home, or in order to get them back in the shortest possible time.’\textsuperscript{39}
Kevin Biltmore was a child care student in Oxford in the early 1960s, where as he pointed out conditions were difficult: ‘… the average working week for a child care officer was fifty-two-and-a-half hours … And we did work … more than we were actually paid for quite a lot.’ He became a child care officer in Somerset in 1964 where ‘… this caseload on my desk … had about forty names on it which were … children in care or, families … who we called problem families with whom one thought the conversations one was having … were something called family casework’. During the same period Alison Fulton’s caseload was ‘about thirty children who were in care’.

Margaret Wilson began residential work with Barnardos in 1946 and later worked in Family Service Units (FSUs) where she became enthusiastic about family casework. FSUs were concerned with what were known as ‘problem families’ which meant in the words of Bowlby families who ‘ … exhibit a number of social problems, among which persistent child neglect is prominent, and which do not respond to ordinary measures of social aid’. ‘Casework’ was defined by Bowers as ‘ … an art in which knowledge of the science of human relations and skill in relationship are used to mobilise capacities in the individual and resources in the community appropriate for better adjustment between the client and all or any part of his total environment’. Timms discusses the ambiguities in the term ‘family casework’ and confusion between practitioners and families about its meaning. He suggests that the definition comes from ‘The idea of service to the family unit and the encouragement of “good” or “healthy” family life [which] provides a point of entry into the family and the beginnings of an agency programme that can be presented to the community’.

When Margaret Wilson became a child care officer her caseload included ‘about fifty children in care’ and because of her role in FSU she

… liked families, I … kept myself two families to work with. I wasn’t really supposed to work with families because there was a family caseworker whose job was to do that.

… I think I was reasonably good at contact with parents because my orientation was the family … but it wasn’t considered very important. And if I pursued contact with parents … people did say ‘ … you can write off these parents’ … with little regard for the child’s needs … parents were written off much more at that period.46

Pamela Clough saw this differently. This difference of opinion demonstrates not only disparate attitudes in different areas, which reflected the views of the Children’s Officers. The quotations also show the scope individual child care officers had to pursue what they thought was the best course for the children for whom they were responsible.

…there was a lot of searching parents didn’t get lost in the same way as they used. We practically always knew where they were and it was just a matter of working with them rather than finding them … you … never lost them. Never allowed them to forget they had children.47
ACCOUNTABILITY

The child care officer’s day was busy. Each child had to be visited every six weeks and the child care officer had to write a report on each visit. It was necessary that time was accounted for and that actions taken or thought about were recorded. There was considerable resistance to what were seen as petty controls. After he visited a foster home Robert Webb48 ‘… was presented with reports that I had to answer in three words the answer to this, this, this, this all the way down the page … I was expecting to … abide by the Boarding Out Regulations [1955] and the Children Act [1948] but not to be … constrained by bits of paper which told me … I must fill in this form and fill in this form.’

Barbara Kahan expected her child care officers to

… fill in a time sheet every week about what time you started work when you finished work when you weren’t doing work about when you went to the loo … it was awful. I can tell you it was dreadful … practically every five minutes of the day was accounted for … we had to hand them in every week … we were told originally it was a time and motion study … you had to fill in how much time you were travelling. I mean every … half hour it was less than that it was a quarter of an hour … was accounted for … so she knew how much time her staff … were spending on travelling how much on writing reports how much on actual face-to-face contact with clients … 49
Sandra Deane also worked in Oxfordshire where in addition to the time sheet a mileage sheet had to be filled in ‘… exactly where you’d been what you’d been doing how many miles OK you’d got to fill in a mileage sheet to claim your mileage back … and what [my supervisor] used to say to me was “why did it take you so long to get from there to there?”’50

Time sheets were a feature of work at the Foundling Hospital. Emma Marriott who began work there in 1951 said ‘… we had such things as time sheets and if it was noted that … you hadn’t done the required number of visits or you were over visiting … we used to have a monthly review with our senior officer of every case that you’d handled in that month. And every case had to be reviewed … the file had to be available and up-to-date for your senior and that had to be read …’51

Following the inception of Social Services Departments, Alison Fulton was working in a county area where she was a member of the Adoption Panel. This is a group of people representing a variety of areas of expertise on adoption. Today a great deal of written information is presented to Adoption Panels. Alice said ‘of course the reports that you did in those days for the adoption Panel were nothing like the reports they are now … the reports were only two pages long … sometimes a bit longer …’52

This was similar to the situation described by Mary Pendennis in Hertfordshire where child care officers were required to write a short report on prospective foster parents. She described how ‘… once you placed a child in a foster home there were the regulations that you must visit … within a month and within every six weeks and send
in reports and you had to keep your reports up-to-date and you had to write a three-monthly review covering the whole range of the child and the parents and foster parents.\textsuperscript{53}

The chief tensions in the Children’s Departments surrounded receiving children into care – whether to try to support them within their families or whether to remove them temporarily or permanently. The Departments as with Social Services Departments now, could be damned if they did and damned if they did not remove children from their parents. It was essential that child care officers were seen to record their actions and their thoughts and that their supervisors were aware of what they were doing so that appropriate decisions were made. Since child care officers worked almost always on their own they had a great degree of latitude in what they did, and the supervisor depended on the veracity of what he or she was told. The same was true of Mental Welfare Officers for example, but because of greater public concern in regard to children and families as opposed to the mentally ill, child care officers were subject to more bureaucratic procedures.

**BOARDING OUT OR FOSTERING**

The Curtis Committee, whose Report led to the introduction of the Children Act, 1948, found

\[\ldots\text{many establishments under both local authority and voluntary management in which children were being brought up by unimaginative methods, without opportunity for developing their full capabilities and with very little brightness or interest in their surroundings} \ldots\text{The child in these Homes was not recognised}\]
as an individual with his own rights and possessions, his own life to live and his own contribution to offer. He was merely one of a large crowd, eating, playing and sleeping with the rest, without any place or possession of his own or any quiet room to which he could retreat.54

The Children Act, 1948 laid upon Children’s Departments the responsibility to find more appropriate homes for children in public care, and child care officers were very much involved in searching for appropriate foster homes.

Margaret Wilson said that

Barbara Kahan kept a very tight hold on things. I remember wanting to place a child with a member of the Red Devils team … and she thought this was too dangerous he might get killed. So I produced all sorts of statistics to show that … he was more likely to get killed walking across the road than being a Red Devil …you had to convince her but usually you could get it past her if you were strategic enough.55

There was resistance to the work of the child care officer from staff in residential nurseries and children’s homes who understood no doubt correctly, that the new regime would limit their role. Pamela Clough remembers that they would not allow her to speak to children alone:
…what you were trying to do was board out from the Children’s homes. You were just told that the children’s homes were … old Poor Assistance institutions – and some of them were very …Dickensian … the buildings were all right. The people who ran them were Dickensian and the regime was Dickensian.56

Mary Pendennis described how in Hertfordshire in the early 1950s work began with children in residential homes and nurseries:

…the Children’s Officers were picking up all the … children’s homes that … had been run in all sort of ways with large numbers of children… placed there by the … equivalent of the Assistance Board [Poor Law] … children who were destitute or unable to be cared for … so there were a certain number of nurseries and children’s homes which were taken over by a Children’s Department with a large population of children just there without any investigation as to why they were there or what they were doing …

The … boarding out started right away … I don’t think the Children’s Department took over any foster homes I don’t think they existed. This was the new gospel that children shouldn’t remain in children’s homes if they were suitable so there was a great … scheme to find foster homes and foster parents and … to board children out … I mean people had memories of evacuees being placed but … as far as I can remember … Sylvia Watson … was all for finding
foster homes and … sorting out children who really need not be in residential care. I can’t remember when Bowlby produced his *Child Care and the Growth of Love* you see that made a tremendous impetus …

Foster homes were found in a variety of ways. In Devon Pamela Clough remembered that:

You advertised in the local papers and by word of mouth, through organisations like the churches any sort of organisation that was going. Not so much doctors we didn’t think they were very good, or health visitors … when you’re vetting foster parents you’re asked for medical references always – I remember one health visitor saying they would be quite unsuitable as a foster home because they had the milk bottle on the table! You see what a standard I’m talking about.

You were really looking for someone warm and cuddly. And thinking about what happens nowadays or latterly one didn’t go into their backgrounds nearly as much as happens now.

I can’t remember exactly what they got paid but I think they got something like £1/7/6 a week for a baby. And then you got a quarterly clothing allowance and then special allowances which you had to go to the committee for like a bicycle … and … the Committee would grant that or not.
When she arrived in Oxfordshire Margaret Wilson quickly became someone who decided who could be a foster parent:

…I went there as an ordinary child care officer but within three months I was an area officer because … the area officer moved up so I just moved up …you got a network … [she was geographically or ‘patch’ based on a housing estate] my first foster home was a lady called Mrs. Jones and by the time I finished I had two of her sisters and her mother were fostering and all her various friends … and so you had a … good network of people.59

Emma Marriott’s child care education was different from that of the others. She came from South Africa where child care was part of the work of the national Child Welfare Department. By contrast with Pamela Clough in Devon she said foster parents who took children for the Foundling Hospital, were often recruited by family doctors:

… there must have been … between sixty and eighty foster homes within … quite a small radius.60

When the Hospital needed new foster parents Emma Marriott followed a similar pattern to Margaret Wilson:
It was … children following in their parents’ footsteps – older married children saying … ‘I was brought up as so-and-so and I would be happy to offer a home’… I don’t think we used anything particularly unusual. By word of mouth was probably in those early days the safest and the one that we followed … … advertising, articles in the local press … and right from the start we worked fairly closely … with … local authorities … many of them hadn’t been able to get their foster care going … and were … having applications coming in which they would … pass to us. And that was … a sheer question of good will at the time …

And house-to-house visit. I mean we weren’t above saying ‘Golly we need something’ and knocking on a door and saying ‘do you know anybody’? or ‘are you interested? We’d be quite interested to hear from you if you do’.61

The people interviewed spoke animatedly about their experience of fostering and about the foster families they knew well. The tensions about whether or not to receive children into care included tensions about the right families to place them in. As has been shown, in different Children’s Departments and amongst different child care officers there was a range of views about this. The autonomy which was much prized by child care officers, led to their battling for families they personally approved of to be approved by the higher echelons of the Children’s Departments. In some cases there was resistance to the movement of children out of children’s homes from their staff, and this made life more difficult for the child care officers not to mention the children.
CONCLUSION

The era of the child care officer may seem far away in view of the multiple reorganisations of departments and changes of role for social workers which have happened since then. The current move towards specialisation may be seen to vindicate the argument for separate strands in social work practice. The greater volume of paper produced today to assist decision making, for example in the choice of foster parents, is a major difference from the past, and is heavily influenced by child protection concerns. But there is a danger that clear thinking about child care issues may become less possible, given current government targets for Social Services Departments.

Although earlier practice may seem to have provided fewer safeguards, it is evident that child care officers considered carefully potential foster parents and the relationships between them and their foster children. It is also the case that ideas which seemed new in the late twentieth century such as ensuring continued contact between children in the care system and their parents, were thought about fifty years ago. These points amongst others show that there is much to learn from workers in the child care field during the period 1948-72.
References


9. In regard to residential child care the position is different. It might be thought that anyone would know how to care for a child without education or training, so that people could work in residential child care without qualifications. The status of all residential care remains low as compared with field social work.


17. Interview with Pamela Clough, former child care officer; recorded by Barbara Prynn, 21 August, 1996.


23. Interview with Margaret Wilson, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 22 July 1996.

24. Interview with Margaret Wilson, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 22 July 1996.


26. Interview with Alison Fulton, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 1 February, 2002.


30. Interview with Angela Barnes, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 1 February, 2002.


32. Packman, 1975, p. 34.

33. Interview with Terry Gavin, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 18 June, 2002.

34. Interview with Pamela Clough, former child care officer; recorded by Barbara Prynn, 21 August, 1996.

35. Interview with Lesley Wilton, former child care officer; recorded by Barbara Prynn, 26 March 2003.


40. Interview with Kevin Biltmore, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 22 March 2002.

41. Interview with Kevin Biltmore, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 22 March 2002.

42. Interview with Alison Fulton, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 1 February, 2002.


46. Interview with Margaret Wilson, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 22 July 1996.

47. Interview with Pamela Clough, former child care officer; recorded by Barbara Prynn, 21 August, 1996.


49. Interview with Alison Fulton, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 1 February, 2002.

50. Interview with Sandra Deane, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 8 March 2002.

51. Interview with Emma Marriott, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 3 August 1996.

52. Interview with Alison Fulton, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 1 February, 2002.

53. Interview with Mary Pendennis, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 25 June, 1996.


55. Interview with Margaret Wilson, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 22 July 1996.
56. Interview with Pamela Clough, former child care officer; recorded by Barbara Prynn, 21 August, 1996.

57. Interview with Mary Pendennis, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 25 June, 1996.

58. Interview with Pamela Clough, former child care officer; recorded by Barbara Prynn, 21 August, 1996.

59. Interview with Margaret Wilson, former child care officer; recorded by Barbara Prynn, 22 July, 1996.

60. Interview with Emma Marriott, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 3 August 1996.

61. Interview with Emma Marriott, former child care officer, recorded by Barbara Prynn, 3 August 1996.

(The names of all the people interviewed have been changed for this article).

(6,770 words)