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Supervising a family or a service? Social worker approaches to foster care supervision in six Swedish authorities

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ABSTRACT

In many countries, local supervision is the main activity to control foster care. In Sweden, the legislation stipulates that foster parents have a supervising social worker (SSW) and the foster child an assigned social worker (CSW). This article describes and analyses how child welfare authorities organize and social workers handle the supervision of foster care. The study is based on data (policy documents and 18 individual/group interviews with 43 managers/social workers) collected from six Swedish child welfare authorities. Analytically, the study assumes that the position of foster care between the private and the public spheres paves the way for different ideas regarding how to conduct supervision that can be broadly based on trust or control vis-à-vis foster homes. The findings show that supervision is differentiated and varies more between foster parents and children than between authorities. Supervision approaches are identified that can be analysed as being more or less trust-based (discreet and affirming) or control-based (compensating and interfering) towards foster parents and children, but overall trust-based approaches dominate. The approaches imply different levels of involvement in care and vary regarding emphasis on the private and the public aspects of fostering. The discussion focuses in particular on the potential impact of different supervision approaches on the foster care service.

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Introduction

When a child is placed in foster care, child welfare authorities have the responsibility to secure care quality. In most countries, local authorities are responsible for supervising foster care, a responsibility that comes with important expectations (Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014). In Sweden, authorities are obliged to visit care environments on a regular basis and to talk to the child, ensure the wellbeing of children, and monitor foster parents (NBHW 2020). At the local level, supervision is conducted by frontline social workers who interact with foster parents and children.

The last few decades have seen an increased reliance on supervision in child welfare policy. Supervision is seen as a critical part of detecting poor care, which has become relevant following national investigations revealing historical failures to protect children from maltreatment while wards of the state (Sköld and Markkola 2020). Furthermore, supervision is more generally regarded as central for improving quality (Lundström et al. 2021). In Sweden, policy proposes that authorities intervene when care quality shortcomings are identified (SBU 2017) and evaluate the client outcomes (Vårdanalys 2018). In a recent governmental inquiry, local supervision is described as critical to secure foster care quality (dir. 2021:84).

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Although supervision is expected to solve several anticipated problems, how to actually supervise foster care is not evident. Foster care is a hybrid service situated between the public and the private spheres (cf. De Wilde et al. 2019; Kirton 2013; Schoefield et al. 2013). On the one hand, fostering is a public assignment, foster homes are expected to cooperate with social services regarding the upbringing of a child and to open their private homes to the authorities. On the other, compared with more ‘professional’ services such as residential care, foster care is encompassed by less formal requirements, is not paid work and takes place in the homes of private families. The latter means that the design of interfering controls and the quality standards that should be employed to evaluate care are not evident. Overall, there is limited knowledge regarding how supervision policy translates into practice, and international studies request research from different contexts that explore the perspectives of frontline workers (Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014).

The organization of supervision differs between countries; in Sweden, legislation has for the past decade stipulated that foster parents have one social worker and the foster child another (Sallnäs and Wiklund 2015). In many countries, the roles are combined, but this division has counterparts in, for example, the UK (see Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014). In Sweden, the reason behind this change was to ensure the detection of maltreatment and that children’s needs are met (SOU 2011). This means that a child’s position as a service user is more prominent, but also mirrors the complexity of supervising care. However, there is a lack of research that analyses both the supervision activities of the foster parents’ social worker and the child’s social worker.

This article presents findings from a study conducted in six local child welfare authorities (referred to as LAs) in Sweden. Previous research uses various concepts to describe supervision, for example, monitoring, inspection, control, and evaluation (Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014; Pålsson 2018). In this study, *supervision* is used to denote activities aimed at controlling and/or attempting to impact foster care. In this broad sense, supervision can include the support and/or requirements placed on foster parents as well as activities related to social workers’ contacts with children. In accordance with the established terminology (Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014), the foster parents’ social worker is labelled *supervising social worker (SSW)* and the child’s social worker *children’s social worker (CSW)*.

According to theory on audit and monitoring, public authorities’ relations with service providers can be more or less based on trust or control (Benish, Halevy, and Spiro 2018; Munro 2011; Power 1999). Trust is essential for all relations where one agent executes a task on behalf of another agent, but in the last few decades there have been signs of a greater mistrust of child welfare providers. Audit activities such as inspection and supervision tend to be reinforced in order to restore trust (Pålsson 2018). An analytical distinction made in the article is that supervision can be more or less trust-based (trusting that foster parents provide adequate care) or control-based (controlling that foster parents fulfil formal tasks) and that the way supervision is performed influences the potential impact of supervision. The article aims to describe and analyse how child welfare authorities organize and social workers handle the supervision. The following research questions are posed: What supervision approaches are used by SSWs and CSWs? To what extent do the approaches reflect trust or control-based supervision?

The article begins with a description of the Swedish context of foster care and supervision. Thereafter, literature on foster care supervision is reviewed, and the theoretical framework delineated. After a method section, the results follow where different approaches to supervision are identified that vary in terms of whether they reflect trust or control towards foster homes. The discussion summarizes the findings, places them in a wider context and discusses the repercussions of different supervision approaches on the foster care service.

Foster care and supervision in Sweden

In Sweden, foster care is preferred over residential care when out-of-home care is considered. As of 1 November 2020, about two-thirds of around 20,000¹ children were placed in foster care (NBHW

2021a). Policy states that out-of-home care should be temporary and national adoptions are rare, but there is a political will to increase custody transfers to ensure stability (Wissö and Johansson 2018). Foster care is a non-professionalized task, as laypeople are reimbursed for taking care of children, but in practice the term foster care accommodates various types of foster homes. Besides 'traditional' foster homes (placements in ordinary families previously unknown to the child), there are homes for emergency placements, kinship care as well as 'reinforced' foster care (i.e. additional support for services and treatment) (Pålsson, Lundström, and Sallnäs 2022). Over the last decade, it has become common for local authorities to buy 'places' in foster families from independent foster care agencies (usually private for-profit companies) that often market themselves as providers of additional support (Fridell Lif, unpublished manuscript).

Supervision in Sweden is decentralized to the LAs. The regulations state that the supervision of foster parents should include a care plan that stipulates a child's need for schooling, healthcare, and contacts with relatives, etc., and that LAs provide foster parents with appropriate education and support (SOSFS 2012, 11; NBHW 2020). In addition, most municipalities provide nationally-produced education materials (covering basic information about foster care) (Pålsson, Lundström, and Sallnäs 2022). As regards supervision targeting the child, the child should be assigned a personal social worker. The Social Services Act (Chapter 6, Section 7 b, SoL) states that LAs should regularly monitor the child's wellbeing by conducting home visits and personal interviews. Every six months, a placement must be reconsidered by the local child welfare committee.

Literature on foster care supervision

Knowledge about how supervision is conducted in different contexts is relatively sparse (Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014). Overall, it appears that structured supervision programmes are rare, existing services are seldom evaluated (SBU 2017) and research shows local variations regarding the content of supervision (Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014). If foster care is procured, the provision of support can be outsourced to independent foster care agencies. Often, supervision strategies are adjusted to individual foster homes but may be more intensive at the beginning of a placement and depend on the complexity of a child's needs (Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014; Tregeagle et al. 2011). The actual impact of supervision is not clear, but we know that most foster parents and children value support (e.g. NBHW 2021b; McLeod 2010; Ridley et al. 2016), and efficient supervision has been hypothesized as potentially mitigating disruptions (Austerberry et al. 2013; Fulcher and McGladdery 2011).

Again, there is limited research that analyses both the activities of SSWs and CSWs in cases where the functions are divided. Studies on SSWs have characterized their roles as filled with tension. The tasks are diverse and include providing support, placing requirements, evaluating care, and facilitating communication between parties (Brown, Gerrits, and Andersson 2014). In particular, it appears challenging to unify opinions of stakeholders affected by a placement (e.g. children, foster parents, and biological parents) and to balance establishing relationships with foster parents with ensuring that policy is complied with (Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014; Brown et al. 2017). The SSWs may have different opinions concerning whether foster parents should be regarded as colleagues (Kirton, Beecham, and Ogilvie 2007), but they often emphasize the task of providing emotional support rather than exerting control (e.g. Jaggard 2018).

Surprisingly, research on the activities of CSWs (or corresponding role) is scant. Although many countries require social workers to have contact with children and secure their wellbeing, there is limited knowledge about how they conduct supervision and what approaches they use (e.g. Backe-Hansen et al., 2019; Hultman and Wissö 2021). We know that children tend to desire contact and follow-up (Fylkenes et al. 2021), but social workers may have difficulties overcoming their administrative role and forming relationships (Lindahl and Bruhn 2018; McLeod 2010; Winter 2010). In Sweden, a survey shows that most LAs have a CSW responsible for one child (Sallnäs and Wiklund

2015), but at the same time that many children rarely meet their social worker (IVO 2017; NBHW 2021b).

In sum, despite the central function of supervision, there is a lack of Nordic research that explores how supervision is performed. In particular, there is a lack of studies that take a broader view of supervision and include both the work of SSWs and CSWs.

Theoretical framework – supervising a service between the private and public spheres

The article relies on theory that assumes that the relationship between public authorities and service providers can be broadly based on trust or control (cf. Lundström et al. 2021; Power 1999; Munro 2011). Supervision per se is a controlling activity as it concerns executing authority, but trust is essential for all relationships where one agent delegates tasks to another agent. The division between trust and control should thus not be regarded as dichotomous, and how it is balanced can vary. With more trust-based supervision, social workers rely on the competence of foster carers and their supervision strategy tends largely to be not to intervene (cf. Munro 2011). With control-based supervision, there is instead an underlying mistrust in the competence of foster carers to care for children adequately and thus more control (e.g. unannounced visits, training, requirements, etc.) is deemed necessary. The role of SSWs and CSWs may differ when it comes to how trust and control are balanced. You would expect the supervision of SSWs to be more trusting (as support is often pronounced), and supervision of CSWs to be more controlling (as safeguarding children's needs is often pronounced).

In line with the theory on auditing, the article assumes that supervision has a potentially formative impact on foster care by controlling certain care aspects (cf. Power 1999), but that there is room for different ideas regarding how quality should be evaluated. In particular, supervision is complicated by the fact that foster care is a service between the private and the public spheres (cf. Schoefield et al. 2013; De Wilde et al. 2019; Kirton 2013). Supervision can differ depending on whether social workers respect foster homes as autonomous families or treat foster care as a service. With a traditional view, foster care should allow children to experience 'ordinary' family life. Supervision is likely to involve few formal control elements and mainly concern encouraging foster parents to treat their children as part of the family. If you instead approach foster care as a service, there is more control in relation to foster parents and a greater focus on the foster parents fulfilling formal tasks, including receiving visits from local authorities, following care plans, and being subject to evaluation. This may also include requiring foster parents to undergo mandatory training and expecting that they provide psychosocial treatment (cf. Wilson and Evetts 2006; De Wilde et al. 2019). Further, following an enhanced child rights perspective, supervision may involve monitoring children's participation in care (Lundström et al. 2021). Supervision divided between the SSW and CSW may increase the complexity, as their supervision may focus on different aspects of care. Although there may be no opposition to the supervision of foster parents and children, the loyalties of the SSWs and CSWs may diverge if foster parents and children have different interests. In sum, the approach used by social workers arguably influences the formative impact of supervision on care.

Material and methods

This article is based on case studies of six LAs in three counties/city districts in Sweden. The research project includes reviewing documents and interviewing managers, social workers, foster parents, and foster children, however, the material of this article consists of local policy documents and interviews with managers and social workers. The project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (ref. 2019-06010).

The LAs studied vary in size and location to ensure a variation of local conditions potentially important for supervision. For example, there may be geographical differences in foster care supply

and needs of foster children that affect supervision. Also, the size of an authority may allow different possibilities for support and foster parent training. Initially, two counties and one city in eastern Sweden were selected, each including eight to thirteen local child welfare authorities. In these counties and the city, six local child welfare authorities (two each) of different sizes were selected. The number of inhabitants of the municipalities/city districts ranged between 11,000 to 128,000.

In each LA, the following data were collected: a) supervision guidelines and b) interviews with the unit managers and social workers responsible for supervision. All respondents were given information about the research and gave their consent to participate. The interviews with managers were conducted individually or in pairs. The SSWs and CSWs were interviewed individually (in small authorities with few employees) or interviewed in a group (in large authorities with more employees). In total, 18 interviews (43 participants) were conducted. Due to COVID-19 restrictions at the time of the data collection, most of the interviews (16 out of 18) were conducted by video. **Table 1** gives an overview of the interview material.

The interviews took between 1 and 1.5 hours and were recorded. The digital format of most of the interviews functioned surprisingly well and did not appear to have a negative effect on the quality. The interviews were semi-structured (Silverman 2013) and used a protocol that covered questions about the supervision policies and practices. The manager interviews focused mainly on the local organization and policies. The interviews with the SSWs and CSWs focused on how they conducted their supervision, the content of the supervision, care aspects that were evaluated, and whether supervision of foster homes/children differed. Also, the protocol included questions about their views on their role and impact. The rationale behind conducting group interviews with social workers was to be able to better determine whether LAs had distinctive ways of conducting supervision. The advantage of group interviews is that they allow several voices to be heard and that the participants can react to each other's statements (ibid.). While the disadvantage is that individual opinions may be suppressed in the group format, which the author tried to come to terms with by leading the discussion and giving the floor.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analytical method entailed reading the documents and transcriptions to obtain an overall idea of the material. For this article, the focus was on descriptions the SSWs and CSWs provided concerning how they perform supervision. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012). Passages from the documents and interviews that related to descriptions of the frequency and content of supervision were coded. Thereafter, the interviews with social workers were analysed by coding statements relating to their position and action vis-à-vis foster parents and children. One finding was that the work of and approaches used by SSWs and CSWs differed to some extent, and thus these interviews were

Table 1. Interview material of the study, divided into local authorities.

	Interviews with managers	Interviews with SSWs	Interviews with CSWs	
LA 1 (county 1)	1 interview with 1 manager	1 group interview with 6 SSWs	1 group interview with 4 CSWs	
LA 2 (county 1)	1 interview with 1 manager	1 interview with 1 SSW	2 individual interviews with 2 CSWs	
LA 3 (city district)	1 interview with 2 managers	1 group interview with 3 SSWs/CSWs*	-	
LA 4 (city district)	2 individual interviews with 2 managers	1 interview with 3 SSWs	1 group interview with 4 CSWs	
LA 5 (county 2)	1 group interview with 2 managers	1 group interview with 4 SSWs	1 group interview with 5 CSWs	
LA 6 (county 2)	1 individual interview with 1 manager	1 group interview with 2 SSWs/CSWs**	-	
<i>Total interviews</i>	7 interviews with 9 managers	6 interviews with 19 SSWs	5 interviews with 15 CSWs	18 interviews with 43 managers/social workers

*Social workers in LA 3 functioned as both a SSW and CSW, and hence only one interview was conducted.

**The SSWs and the CSWs were interviewed in tandem, according to their preference.

analysed separately. The interviews were read several times and the codes of the different ways SSWs and CSWs related to supervision were refined. Four 'approaches', spanning from passive to proactive, were established and these were informed by analytical considerations concerning whether they expressed 'trust' and 'control' and regarded foster homes primarily as private families or a public service. As a qualitative case study of six Swedish LAs, the study analyses how authorities of different sizes and in geographical locations deal with supervision and identifies approaches that are used by social workers (both SSWs and CSWs). Whether the analysis is valid in other national contexts must be corroborated by further studies.

Results

The results identify supervision approaches that can be analysed as more or less trust-based (*discreet* and *affirming*) or control-based (*compensating* and *interfering*). All approaches were represented in the supervision of the SSWs and CSWs and open up for different formative impacts. Typically, an approach is adapted to individual foster parents and the perceived needs of children, but may not necessarily be planned. The findings show greater differences between the supervision of individual foster homes than between LAs (some differences between LAs have been identified and these will be pinpointed where relevant). In other words, the same social worker may use different approaches in relation to different foster homes.

Trust-based supervision

Discreet approaches

The first type of more trust-based supervision approaches that emerges from the analysis can be labelled *discreet*. Fostering is mainly viewed as a private task. Supervision takes a passive role in relation to foster parents and children, and there are no direct attempts to impact care.

The discreet approach of SSWs: do not disturb well-functioning foster homes. Among SSWs, a discreet approach is identified in thoughts about not disturbing foster homes. Given that foster parents are perceived as average adults, social workers place their trust in them and see no need to interfere. According to the interviews, the approach tends to be activated when a placement seems to function well (typically long-lasting placements or kinship care), when foster parents do not seek support and some SSWs state that it is not urgent to supervise certain homes. However, this more passive supervision is sometimes also used when authorities hire private companies to provide support. With a discreet approach, the SSWs' interactions with foster parents are restricted to a minimum. In a group interview, when SSWs discuss what the foster parents would like them to do and how they sometimes adapt to foster parents, the discreet approach towards certain foster homes is illustrated:

SSW 2: I have a foster home that we've worked with for a very long time, it's a well-functioning foster home, nothing is really a problem. It consists of two stable adults and a child that has lived there for many years. We often discuss transferring custody; that they could take on that responsibility. But they don't want to. They want us within reach in case problems arise, so for them we're a form of support. So, it varies a lot. With these placements in kinship care, they just want to be left alone. (Group interview SSW, LA1)

The discreet approach of CSWs: allowing children to experience ordinary family life. Among CSWs, the analysis also identifies a discreet approach where certain children receive the minimum number of visits required by local policy, and where there is no contact in between. For the CSWs, the discreet approach becomes relevant when a placement is conceived as well-functioning, the child has no specific needs and the foster parents manage contact with the biological parents, the school, etc. According to the CSWs, there may be several reasons for this including the child's

expressed desire to avoid contact, which is mostly relevant for adolescents. The approach can also be based on the perception that contact agitates the child, and CSWs may avoid interfering to enable a child to experience ordinary family life. Overall, the discreet approach results in the CSWs having a peripheral role in the child's life. The following group discussion in LA 6 exemplifies that a discreet approach is sometimes used:

Researcher: How often to you see the children?

CSW 1: At least every third month.

CSW 2: Usually more often.

CSW 1: It depends. Some more often . . .

Researcher: How does it vary?

CSW 1: We have one foster home, and here we're talking about a specific girl that's highly functioning. She likes her foster home a lot, she gets along with her parents. We don't need to meet. At all. It just works. Everything works. It all clicks, like gears fitting into place. It's unnecessary to go there and bother them. As long as they know they can contact us if there's anything they need. (Interview with CSW, LA 6)

In sum, a discreet approach includes the idea that for certain foster homes it is best to be autonomous in relation to the authorities. This is believed to allow a child to experience an ordinary family life. The predicament of children is relatively unknown to the authorities and there is no apparent impact of supervision on care.

Affirming approaches

The second type of more trust-based approach identified can be categorized as *affirming*. Here, supervision concerns providing moral support to foster parents and children, and there are few controlling elements. As with the discreet approach, foster care is mainly viewed as a private task.

The affirming approach of SSWs: moral support to ordinary families. In all LAs, the supervision of SSWs is generally loosely structured, and managers emphasize that their role is often to provide advice and emotional support. With an affirming approach, foster families are viewed as average families that should not be controlled but who at times need support. The approach may involve regular and sometimes weekly contacts with certain foster parents, and is based on the view that caring for foster children can be a challenge and that foster parents need affirmation. It is not about providing structured support but about being accessible and showing an understanding. The supervision is linked to the expressed needs of foster parents and may involve advice regarding their interaction with the biological parents, school, or the healthcare system. All authorities have activities relating to this approach. However, LA 6 appears to adopt it most actively, as they are accessible also during weekends. The following excerpt from a group interview with SSWs in LA 3 exemplifies the affirming approach:

Researcher: What's your role vis-à-vis the foster parents?

SSW 1: I think it's about listening, helping them believe what so much of the research tells us – that being a stable foster home is enough. // . . . // Being a warm place, having routines in places, providing good food, being stimulating. Many foster homes almost have a desire to become professional and we have to make them understand that they just need to be themselves.

SSW 2: I agree with what you're saying // . . . // They also need to feel comfortable so that they can say what they want. They can call us and say "This child is driving me crazy." They should feel that it's alright and not be afraid of doing so.

SSW 3: I feel that we're often a sounding board. Thoughts and questions . . . "Can we look at it this way instead?" . . . discuss events from everyday life. (Group interview SSW, LA 3)

The affirming approach of CSWs: a speaking partner for children in difficult life situations.

Among the CSWs, the affirming approach is identified when the supervision is described as being primarily of the caring kind. The CSWs in their statements expressing this approach often consider it important to have close contact with the children and to function as a person who they may turn to if they experience personal problems. There is no particular focus on, for example, controlling any adherence to care plans. Contact with the child is often more frequent than the minimum 2–4 visits per year, since between physical meetings there may be contact by telephone or email. For older children, personal communication is described as the main method, but for younger children, communication is usually reliant on statements from adults in the child's network (foster parents, biological parents, and preschool teachers). An example of an affirming approach among CSWs is found in the following passage from a group discussion in LA 3:

Researcher: What role do you think you play in the children's lives?

CSW: If we take the cases that I've worked with here. It's to somehow be a representative of the child in their existential situation. Not living with your parents is a life theme and so to somehow take that and make the most of it . . . // . . . // In a way, you're an extra parent for the child. You have to try to be as open and sensitive as possible and hear the child and create a relationship and do it in an as inviting a manner as possible for this particular child (Group interview CSW, LA 3)

In sum, affirming approaches can be linked to a view of foster homes as ordinary families which should not be overly controlled. Instead, supervision is about providing moral support based on the expressed needs of the foster parents and the children.

Control-based supervision

Compensating approaches

The analysis also identifies more control-based supervision approaches. The first type is the *compensating* approach. An underlying idea is that fostering requires certain knowledge and that foster parents, in order to be able to really meet the needs of children, must be trained where they fall short. With this approach, the public aspect of fostering is accentuated.

The compensating approach of SSWs: structured interventions targeting foster parents. Among the SSWs, the compensating approach is a more proactive version of the affirming approach as it involves structured support, and it thus views foster care as a service that includes certain 'professional' elements (cf. Wilson and Evetts 2006; De Wilde et al. 2019). According to the interviews with SSWs, foster parents subjected to this approach are often those who are less experienced or have difficulties coping with a child's behaviour. The compensating approach may involve structured supervision targeting foster parents' attitudes (e.g. the relationship with the biological parents) as well as courses (e.g. regarding psychiatric diagnoses in children). Furthermore, it may include offering in-home services targeting foster parents (e.g. family supportive interventions). The LAs differ regarding the extent of structured support, but supply tends to be greater in larger authorities. Representatives of LA 5, which offers counselling groups, assume that foster parents need knowledge about 'attachment theory' and 'trauma':

SSW 1: The thing that is fundamental and that we emphasise is attachment and trauma-informed care . . . knowing a lot about attachment theory together with being able to show empathy and to mentalise.

SSW 2: We need to see that the foster parents are able to mentalise and feel empathy for these children. Our training has focused on this and been based on these key concepts from the National Board of Health and Welfare, so that's what we emphasise since that's what's important . . . (Group interview SSW, LA 5)

The compensating approach of CSWs: coordinating a formal service. Regarding CSWs, a compensating approach is visible in that their supervision focuses on coordinating the

professional system surrounding the child. Typically, this approach involves close contact with the child's network (e.g. foster parents, biological parents, school staff), which is said to be in the best interests of the child. Some CSWs explain that they for certain children attend meetings with school and healthcare professionals to ensure that the child gains the necessary support. LA 3, LA 4, and LA 5 have in-house interventions that can provide additional school support. The approach is often relevant at the beginning of a placement but may also be used for children with complex needs, foster parents with little experience, and in cases of difficult relationships between foster parents and biological parents. The compensating approach also often entails considering the will of several parties regarding the support children should receive. This is discussed by certain CSWs in LA 4, where they were prompted to describe how they relate to their supervisory role:

CSW1: We always have multiple stakeholders to consider. There's a child, a parent, sometimes two parents And then we have at least one foster parent. Sometimes we have a couple of psychologists that have opinions. The school may have opinions . . . There are so many people who make comments . . . I'd say it's rare that they agree, usually they have different opinions. So, there's a lot of negotiating between them until they are satisfied or are at least able to reach a compromise everyone can accept. (Group interview CSW, LA 4)

With a compensating approach, supervision accentuates the formal aspect of fostering. This approach is more geared towards actively affecting the care content than the former approaches, and uses training and coordination as a means of professionalizing foster care. However, the interventions are usually voluntary, which means that the approach is not used universally.

Interfering approaches

Lastly, the analysis identifies a more control-based supervision approach that can be categorized as *interfering*. Shortcomings in foster care are not primarily resolved through training but by imposing requirements. Here, fostering is mainly viewed as a service that should live up to certain standards.

The interfering approach of SSWs: controlling that foster parents adhere to certain standards.

With this approach, foster homes should expect frequent controls and may be required to provide reports explaining, for example, how a child is doing at school, the child's leisure activities and social relationships. For SSWs, the approach appears to mainly be used for foster homes that avoid contact or have perceived quality problems. However, none of the LAs uses assessment instruments or evaluates care systematically. Four LAs (LA 1, LA 2, LA 3, and LA 4) have guidelines stipulating that foster homes may be subject to unannounced visits, but according to the interviews these visits are extremely rare. This approach is not the most prominent one, but LA 2 has work content that can be considered as interfering since the social workers collect monthly reports from foster parents and require them to participate in structured supervision. Answering the question of whether supervision should entail requirements, the SSW in LA 2 explains that it is important to require that foster homes live up to standards:

SSW: It's important that we make demands of the foster home . . . they have also been given an assignment from the Social Services. It's a tough responsibility and some things just have to work. Foster care isn't just sitting out the time. I tend to be more in favour of making certain demands. For those who take that negatively . . . that makes me sceptical of them. Most say "that's great . . . okay, so do we have a template to follow . . . what questions should we be working with" (Interview with SSW, LA 2)

The interfering approach of CSWs: securing children's participation in care. The supervision approach of CSWs identified as being interfering is mainly about securing the child's participation in care. With an interfering approach, supervision involves more than providing moral support to children. Here, the CSWs are responsive to a child's wishes by acting if a child is discontented with the care and by demanding that the care is aligned with the child's preferences. For example, there are CSWs who explain that they require foster parents to take the child to leisure activities, allow more computer time, revise bedtimes, or adapt to

how the child prefers to meet the biological family. The approach is more easily realized when children are communicative. However, the interviews show that there may be difficulties if a child's will deviates too much from the will of the foster parents and other parties. For example, the child's desire to change a placement might not be perceived as beneficial. As a response to the question of how they interpret their supervisory role, CSWs in LA 1 emphasize that they primarily see themselves as advocates of the child:

CSW1: When it comes to everyday things in the foster home, I feel that our role is a lot about being a voice for the child and expressing things that the child may want . . . how things should work in the foster home they live in . . . Raise questions and say “how should we think about this?”, “Can you do something that will make it better for the child?”

CSW2: At the follow-up meeting, you have a personal discussion with the child ahead of the meeting and ask “what do you feel we need to talk about with the foster home?” It can be different things, both major and minor, that you then help the child to present at the meeting. In that way, you can find a compromise. It can be anything from a weekly allowance to when they should go to bed or have contact with friends. (Group interview CSW, LA 1)

The *interfering* approach emphasizes the public task of fostering. Foster families are rather treated as contractors who have certain formal duties, but at the same time the approach does not appear to be the most prevalent one in practice.

Discussion

When a child is placed in foster care, the main way of monitoring the care is supervisory activities conducted by frontline social workers. The importance of supervision is increasingly emphasized in policy and there are expectations that it contributes to the quality of care (Cosis Brown, Gerrits, and Andersson 2014; Lundström et al. 2021). Based on case studies of six Swedish local authorities, the aim of the article has been to describe and analyse how the authorities organize and how social workers handle the supervision of foster care. Analytically, the study is informed by theory that assumes that supervision can be based on trust or control to a greater or lesser extent, and that the ambiguity of the foster care service between the public and private spheres implicates that there is room for different professional ideas regarding the performance of supervision.

The results show that supervision is differentiated in practice and varies more between individual foster parents and children than between local authorities. A variety of approaches are identified at the social worker level. The approaches have been analysed as being trust or control-based and span from the discreet (respecting foster families as autonomous), affirming (providing moral support), compensating (structured training and aid) to interfering (setting requirements to improve quality). The approaches imply significantly different types of involvement in day-to-day care and pave the way for different formative impacts on care.

Supervision is in itself an act of control as it is about exercising authority, but the performance can to a varying extent express more or less control or trust vis-à-vis the foster homes. The study demonstrates that the balance between trust and control is often decided on a case-by-case basis, but an overall impression gained in the study is that supervision is relatively infrequent and may be identified as trust-based rather than control-based. In other words, supervision mainly offers support based on the expressed needs of foster parents and children, and only applies to control measures to a limited extent. There are certain local differences, but in general the controlling elements of supervision are limited as unannounced visits are rare, additional training is optional, care plans tend to lack precise standards, and systematic follow-up is limited. This stands in contrast with Swedish policies that propose a greater use of control measures (Lundström et al. 2021), for example, that children's needs are systematically followed up (Vårdanalys 2018; SBU 2017). The findings correspond with international research showing difficulties ensuring that policy is

complied with and that trusting foster parents and giving moral support are prioritized (Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014; Brown et al. 2017; Jaggar 2018). Theoretically, this can be understood based on the fact that foster care is a complicated object for supervision situated between the private and public spheres, and where there is ambivalence regarding what the foster care task includes and what requirements are reasonable to place on private families (cf. Schoefield et al. 2013; De Wilde et al. 2019; Sköld and Markkola 2020; Kirton 2013). Thus, there is a hesitance to treat foster care as a service that should be controlled via precise quality standards. However, the lack of requirements may also have practical implications. In Sweden, as in many countries, there is a shortage of foster homes in many regions (Pålsson, Lundström, and Sallnäs 2022) and therefore it may seem unreasonable to be too meticulous. In a wider policy perspective, it is important to note that there are other potential means than supervision to enhance quality and trust in foster care, such as improved foster parent recruitment procedures.

Further, the approaches imply significantly different levels of involvement in care, from the discreet to the interfering. The fact that supervision has multiple manifestations echoes findings from Anglo-Saxon research (cf. Brown, Gerrits, and Andersson 2014). Certainly, foster care is a heterogenous service where foster parents and children have individual needs, but different approaches also mean that the potentially formative impact (cf. Power 1999) of supervision varies. Hence, supervision has different repercussions on the predicament of children. The trust-based approaches (the *discreet* and the *affirming*) are compliant with foster parents and there are no active strategies from social workers to alter the foster care content. There is trust that the foster homes provide adequate care and that the children themselves take initiative to share potential problems, otherwise a child's actual situation will remain rather unknown to the authorities. Other more control-based approaches (the *compensating* and the *interfering*), which are slightly less common in practice, intervene more as social workers meddle in the service and strive to impact how foster parents relate to children's needs. Thus, the potential impact on the foster care service is more apparent. Such approaches mean that the public nature of the service is accentuated, perhaps at the expense of the traditional view that foster care should primarily allow children to experience ordinary family life.

A novelty of the study is the inclusion of the supervision of foster parents' social workers (supervising social workers/SSWs) and children's social worker (CSWs), a division of responsibility prevalent in several contexts (Cosis Brown, Sebba, and Luke 2014). This division is expected to ensure that children's needs are met and to detect maltreatment. Arguably, we would expect the supervision of CSWs to be more controlling than the supervision of SSWs, as an important task is to ensure that children's needs are met. However, the findings show that CSWs, just like SSWs, may in practice have limited insight into the care provided, and thus the existence of a CSW may not necessarily ensure that the authorities have credible knowledge about a child's situation. This corresponds with prior Swedish studies showing that many children rarely meet their social worker (IVO 2017; NBHW 2021b). Related to this, the findings highlight potential conflicts in the supervision approaches of the SSWs and CSWs as they may focus on different dimensions of foster care. In particular, trust-based approaches focusing on moral support provided to foster parents may conflict with control-based approaches emphasizing children's participation. For example, it is not certain that backing foster parents' opinions of what is best for a child is always in harmony with advocacy for children (cf. Brown, Gerrits, and Andersson 2014).

To conclude, this study reveals the difficulties of conducting control-based supervision of a service situated between the private and the public spheres. Supervision is mainly differentiated and approaches vary significantly in terms of emphasizing foster care as a private family or a public service. For social work practice, it is critical to reflect on the ability of different approaches to impact the foster care content and to ensure that approaches used suit the needs of individual children.

Note

1. The exact figures are uncertain due to double counting in the national statistics.

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