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Supporting the Ordinary Family: Finding the Organisational Space for Foster Care Support

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Abstract

Communicating with foster carers and providing them with adequate financial support and assistance has been identified as important in the recruitment of new foster carers. In Sweden, such support can be provided by local authorities, private agencies, or public intermediary organisations formed through inter-municipal cooperation. Through interviews with inter-municipal organisations, local authorities, and foster carers, this article examines the costs associated with fostering and the types of support foster carers value. It also explores how the involvement of a third actor—an inter-municipal organisation—impacts these costs and the support provided. The findings show that foster carers seek to avoid financial loss due to fostering and attribute different meanings to various forms of financial support, which may help them to negotiate additional compensation. Moreover, some relationships linked to the fostering role are perceived as burdens or costs, requiring support to manage. As a third actor, inter-municipal organisations provide foster carers with assistance in managing the costs associated with the fostering role.

Keywords

foster care; inter-municipal cooperation; triadic relationships; support; costs; money; Sweden

1. Introduction

In Sweden, support to foster carers can be provided by local authorities, private agencies, or public intermediary organisations formed through inter-municipal cooperation. The following quote is derived from the operations manager at Gemensam Familjehemsorganisation (GFO):

> We cannot compete with money. But at GFO we can compete by ensuring they [foster carers] receive good basic training, that they receive further education, that we organise them, and that they get to

> meet. The municipalities should subsequently support the placement, and we will step in if needed. That is our business idea. (Gustafsson & Sköld, 2021, p. 32)

GFO is a Swedish inter-municipal public cooperative organisation responsible for the recruitment, training, and certain aspects of support of foster carers in six municipalities. The manager observed that, in the competitive landscape of foster carer recruitment, it is not only financial incentives but also non-financial forms of support that constitute valuable resources.

Successfully recruiting enough foster carers remains an ongoing challenge in many countries (Reimer, 2021). The interest in becoming a foster carer is limited amongst the general public. A survey conducted among a sample of the Swedish population aged 25–64 indicated that fewer than one percent reported being "very likely" to apply to become foster carers in the future, while fewer than eight percent stated that it was "rather likely" (Lind et al., 2024).

In Sweden, foster care is a hybrid between work, family life, and voluntary work (Lind et al., 2025a). Due to legal restrictions, foster care cannot be classified as paid employment; rather, it is considered an assignment for which foster carers receive financial support. This support typically includes a reward, reimbursement for child-related expenses, and, sometimes, compensation for loss of income. According to the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR, 2024), which provides recommendations regarding financial support, the monthly remuneration for long-term foster carers should range between 1,050 EUR and 1,600 EUR, following a 3.5% increase implemented in 2024. Caring for more than one child entails higher financial compensation, and long-term foster carers are typically also employed in either full-time or part-time positions outside the household. In comparison, the average monthly salary for a childcare worker, such as those employed in preschools in Sweden, is approximately 2,500 EUR (SCB, 2023).

Although fostering is not a professional occupation, foster carers are expected to possess specific skills, undergo training, and update these throughout the placement. These demands differ significantly from common perceptions of family life. Yet, most foster families are expected to be "ordinary families" offering a new home to a child in need (Pålsson, 2024).

Since the current foster-care system was introduced in the 1980s, the profile of foster children has changed. Children now enter care at older ages and often present more complex emotional, behavioural, and developmental challenges (Sköld et al., 2014; Vårdanalys, 2016). Additional state requirements have also been introduced, including the appointment of a designated child social worker and expectations around maintaining relationships with biological families. Foster carers are also assigned a separate caseworker (SNBHW, 2023). As a result, carers must manage multiple relationships throughout the fostering experience, relationships that may be time-consuming and disruptive to family dynamics. These relational demands can entail costs that "ordinary families" may be reluctant to take on without adequate support (Lind et al., 2025b).

Although Sweden is internationally recognised for its strong public welfare model, significant changes in out-of-home care provision have occurred over the past few decades, making it a particularly relevant case for welfare research. Reforms in the 1980s promoting privately delivered but publicly funded care facilitated the expansion of private actors within the welfare sector. While legislation aimed to position private care

merely as complementary to public services, it eased the entry of private companies (Lundström et al., 2018) and, today, comparative Nordic studies show that residential care in Sweden is among the most privatised in the region (Shanks et al., 2021). Similarly, in foster care, recent research indicates that 90% of municipalities outsource some or all placements to private agencies (also referred to as independent foster-care agencies) (Fridell Lif, 2023).

Following these changes in the 1980s, municipalities began collaborating to deliver public child-welfare services (Wiklund, 2011, p. 126). In foster care, municipalities with populations ranging from a few thousand to well over 100,000 cooperate to strengthen their ability to compete with private agencies, improve service quality, and reduce costs. Several inter-municipal organisations have been established to recruit and assess in-house foster carers and, in some cases, provide training and support. These publicly governed organisations are funded through fees from participating municipalities (Hällqvist, 2025). While each municipality's local authority retains formal responsibility for children in its care, operational tasks, such as recruitment and support, may be delegated to either private agencies or these public inter-municipal organisations.

Moving beyond the conventional dyadic relationship between caseworkers and foster carers, a further layer of complexity arises through the involvement of such a third actor. The introduction of new relational dynamics may involve additional costs or support (Gustafsson & Sköld, 2021) associated with the fostering role. Unlike when hiring private agencies, municipalities are often required to pay for inter-municipal services regardless of how much they use them (Hällqvist, 2025), making the arrangement more binding once begun. These factors shape the conditions experienced by foster carers and require both carers and caseworkers to navigate new relational complexities. Despite the growing use of inter-municipal cooperation in Sweden—and its use within child welfare systems in countries such as Belgium (Prins, 2010), Norway (Jacobsen & Kiland, 2017), and the UK (Education Committee, 2025)—the involvement of a third actor to undertake the recruitment, assessment, training, and sometimes support of foster carers on behalf of the responsible body (for example, the local authority) introduces a new relational configuration that remains underexplored.

1.1. Theoretical Foundations: The Costs of Childrearing and Triad Constellations

The theoretical premise of this article is that childrearing entails costs that benefit both the individual children and society at large. However, these costs are not always visible, as childrearing typically occurs within the private sphere, outside the domain of the market economy. These costs depend upon how a society's economy is constructed: for instance, how the working time of adult carers is valued, the standards set by the state for safeguarding children's wellbeing, and the personal preferences of carers (Folbre, 2008). Consequently, the types of resources valued by foster carers constitute an important dimension of the costs associated with foster care. Equally significant are the requirements for safeguarding children's wellbeing that are valued by social services.

The support provided by local authorities to foster carers takes various forms, both financial and in terms of assistance. However, the values and meanings attributed to these support measures are socially and culturally constructed (Zelizer, 1997) and may be interpreted differently by foster carers and social workers. Money and intimate relationships, such as those between family members, are often perceived as belonging to separate spheres, with money viewed as potentially corrupting personal ties. Zelizer (2005), however,

challenges this notion, demonstrating that monetary values are, in fact, an inseparable aspect of intimate relationships. Financial and other resources are used to express social ties and symbolic values. In this article, the analysis is broadened to include various types of costs, not only financial, and to explore how these costs necessitate different kinds of resources within foster care.

Both financial support and practical assistance require resources to be made available to foster carers, and these may be provided by various constellations of actors. The constellation relevant to this article is the "triad," comprising (a) the foster carer(s), (b) the local authority caseworker, and (c) a social worker from an inter-municipal organisation. Our interest in this triad derives from Simmel's (1950/1964) sociological analysis, in which he explores the transformation from a dyad to a triad, the distinct roles each actor (or "element," as Simmel calls them) may assume, and the variations that may emerge within triadic relationships.

Simmel (1950/1964) argues that each actor within a triad inevitably functions as an intermediary between the other two, either facilitating unity or contributing to division in their relationship. This implies that the third actor—for example, the social worker from the inter-municipal organisation—may function as a support, strengthening the relationship and assisting in resolving conflicts between the other two actors (the foster carer and the caseworker), or may disrupt the relationship. The triad may reduce some costs of fostering for foster carers, while simultaneously imposing or highlighting new costs.

1.2. Aim and Questions

This article seeks to explore the costs of fostering and how inter-municipal organisations may affect foster carer satisfaction through the nature and quality of the support provided by a third actor.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- What types of costs are associated with fostering and what forms of support may compensate for these costs?
- In what ways does the involvement of a third actor, an inter-municipal organisation, impact the costs and support within fostering assignments?

2. Support Offered to Foster Carers in Theory and Previous Research

2.1. Financial Support

Whether or not fostering is recognised as a formal occupation varies across countries, as do the types of support available to foster carers (Reimer, 2021). A longstanding debate in the recruitment of foster carers concerns the tension between professionalism and altruism, which is closely tied to the issue of financial support. Foster carers typically receive some financial support for their role. The literature employs various terms to describe this financial aspect, including "financial reward" (Baginsky et al., 2017; Colton et al., 2008; Kirton, 2007, 2013), "financial compensation" (Reimer, 2021), "financial support" (Colton et al., 2008; Hanson & Jacobs, 2007; Randle et al., 2018), and "remuneration/payment" (Kirton, 2007). These terms may encompass different components of the fostering arrangement. In this article, we adopt the broad term financial support, to refer to the various forms of compensation that foster carers in Sweden may receive (SNBHW, 2023).

To understand the different types of financial support that foster carers may require and/or be offered, it is essential to consider the meanings attached to these forms of support. Zelizer (1997) demonstrates how people classify and organise money based on moral, relational, and cultural factors, assigning different meanings and uses to it. This perspective is particularly relevant to the financial support provided to foster carers, which is categorised as addressing various types of expenses, even though the monetary form remains the same.

As the expectations placed on foster carers increase, so too do their expectations of support and the aspects that they value may change (Wilson & Evetts, 2006). In some countries, including Sweden, the financial aspects of fostering have become an increasingly important factor in the recruitment of foster carers (Baginsky et al., 2017; Berrick et al., 2011; Pålsson et al., 2022), even though financial considerations in fostering have long been a topic of discussion (Sköld et al., 2014). Changes in family and working life have altered how time is valued, and having sufficient time to foster is now regarded as a crucial factor in becoming a foster carer (Lind et al., 2025a), which may be compensated through financial support.

While national regulations generally establish foster families' basic rights to support, the actual support provided can differ significantly between local authorities and other public and private actors. Consequently, the support that foster carers receive is often highly dependent upon the specific actor responsible for delivering it (Swedish Government, 2023).

2.2. Assistance Support

In addition to financial support, foster carers typically receive other forms of assistance to manage the new relationships that the fostering task entails. This may include emotional, educational, and practical support.

Research has shown that both the type and quality of support provided significantly influence foster carers' overall satisfaction (see Randle et al., 2018). Recent studies in Sweden on prospective foster carers have revealed that one of the primary deterrents to becoming a foster carer is uncertainty about whether adequate support will be provided by the local authorities responsible for foster care (Lind et al., 2025b). Similar findings have been reported in an international review of foster care within the EU, which identified the provision of adequate support and high levels of satisfaction among current foster carers—who may serve as advocates for fostering—as key components of effective recruitment strategies (Reimer, 2021). Despite this awareness, several studies have found that not all foster carers receive the support they deem necessary, an issue highlighted by both foster carers themselves (Cosis Brown et al., 2014; Pålsson, 2023) and social workers (Brown et al., 2017; Cosis Brown et al., 2014). This lack of adequate support may help to explain the concerns raised by families who are considering becoming foster carers.

It has also been found that some of the needs described by foster carers are difficult for caseworkers to meet, often due to budgetary constraints and high workloads (Brown et al., 2017; Randle et al., 2018). The relationship between foster carers and caseworkers is particularly important, with carers placing high value on caseworkers who are reliable and accessible, especially during placement crises (Cosis Brown et al., 2014). However, previous research has also highlighted that caseworkers cannot be expected to manage all aspects of support alone. This reveals a potential need for resources beyond what local caseworkers can provide, particularly in situations involving challenges with foster carer performance or when efforts are

required to rebuild trust and collaboration in the relationship between the carer and caseworker (Brown et al., 2017).

In summary, existing research has shown that, if given appropriate financial support and assistance, a larger number of families may be willing to take on fostering roles. The central challenge lies in establishing an organisational framework capable of effectively delivering and sustaining this support.

2.3. The Question of Organisational Space for Support

Some comparisons have been made regarding foster carers' and social workers' satisfaction with the support provided by different actors and constellations of actors (Fridell Lif, 2025a, 2025b; Kirton et al., 2007a). However, there is little research exploring inter-municipal organisations. A few evaluations have shown that foster carers are generally satisfied with the support, training, and contact provided by cooperative organisations (Gustafsson & Sköld, 2021; Löfstrand, 2009). However, in Gustafsson and Sköld's (2021) evaluation, most of the interviewed carers were critical of the contact with local authorities, and the support received—or not received—from them after beginning to foster.

Caseworkers report mixed levels of satisfaction when using private agencies as intermediaries. Local authorities often seek to avoid them due to high costs and concerns about quality (Fridell Lif, 2025b). In contrast, foster carers with experience of private agencies tend to express more positive views, particularly valuing the agency's role as a buffer between themselves and the supervising local authority. This is especially true of experienced carers, who prefer limited contact with the authorities (Fridell Lif, 2025a). In the UK, where similar comparisons have been made, carers have also noted advantages, including better emotional and practical support, feeling valued as part of the team, and greater satisfaction with financial arrangements (Kirton et al., 2007a, 2007b).

3. Methodology

This article presents a case study of seven inter-municipal foster care organisations in Sweden. Six were interviewed during 2022–2023 (Hällqvist, 2025) and one, GFO, in Västernorrland, in 2024. These organisations are responsible for recruiting, assessing, training, and further assisting long-term foster carers on behalf of participating municipalities. Typically, once a placement is made, responsibility for maintaining contact and support is transferred to a municipal local authority caseworker, although carers can still reach out to the organisation when needed. Some organisations, such as GFO in Västernorrland, also recruit and support contracted emergency foster carers directly.

Data was collected by the first author through semi-structured interviews with 13 social workers/caseworkers from eight municipalities who were currently, or had previously been, involved in one of these inter-municipal organisations, and 14 who were employed within such organisations. The interviews explored organisational aspects, success factors, challenges in inter-municipal cooperation, and the types of support offered to foster carers, along with their needs.

The study also includes semi-structured interviews with nine foster families recruited by GFO in Västernorrland. All were long-term carers, with two having experience as both long-term and emergency foster carers. Seven

homes consisted of two carers (a woman and a man), while two were run by single female carers. One male carer participated in an interview together with his partner, while the remaining interviews were conducted individually with the female carers in the foster homes. Seven of the interviewed foster families had cared for one or two children, while the two also serving as emergency carers had cared for eight or more. Foster carers were asked questions such as: What expectations do you have of the organisation? What expectations do you have of the local authority? What kinds of support does a foster carer need? What support have you received as a foster carer, both from the organisation and from the local authority?

All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, except one, which was held over the telephone due to technical issues. Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised by removing identifying details such as names and other personal information. Participants gave informed consent for the non-anonymisation of the names of the organisations and municipalities involved. Ethical approval for components involving sensitive personal data was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2021–06940-01).

This article employs thematic analysis as its method of inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). The interviews were transcribed and reviewed to gain an initial understanding. The full dataset was then coded, with a particular focus on sections addressing the types of support available to foster carers and how these may help them to manage their responsibilities. While the interview questions were informed by existing categories in the literature, the coding aimed to move beyond these predefined frameworks. A latent approach was adopted, emphasising what foster carers expressed as valuable or burdensome within the various forms of support offered.

Codes included terms such as availability, feeling valued, intermediary support, support from local authorities, support after negotiating, feeling used, and 24/7 jobs. Ultimately, four themes were identified:

1. Financial costs and financial support
2. Negotiation of the financial value of the foster care assignment
3. Costs of unavailability versus accessible support
4. Relational costs and relational support

Data extracts identified during coding and theme development were then analysed in relation to the research questions and relevant literature.

3.1. Limitations

The foster carers in this study are not a representative selection of carers recruited by inter-municipal organisations. However, they formed a diverse group in terms of their views on fostering, the organisation, and local authorities, enabling an analysis of both similarities and differences in how the organisation is perceived. Among the nine foster homes, two had ceased fostering due to conflicts and a perceived lack of support. The remaining seven, mostly new to fostering and having cared for only one or two children, described their experiences as relatively problem-free. The predominance of positive views may reflect this sample, as more experienced carers might have faced greater challenges and expressed a stronger need for support.

4. Results

The analysis identifies various types of costs, alongside forms of financial support and assistance that may help to offset them. Furthermore, it explores what the triadic relationship between the foster carer, caseworker, and organisation entails in terms of both support and associated costs.

The analysis is structured around the four themes listed above. The results are discussed in a concluding section, including an account of implications for practice.

4.1. Financial Costs and Financial Support

The majority of foster carers emphasised that they should not incur financial losses as a result of becoming or being foster carers. Most participants in the study discussed various forms of financial support that they felt they required. Although all these forms of support were financial in nature, the foster families associated them with distinct purposes and sentiments, for example, a financial reward that conveys appreciation of their role; reimbursement for expenses, acknowledging the costs of welcoming a new child into the household and building new relationships; and compensation for lost income, recognising that attending meetings or training sessions would otherwise impose a financial burden on the family.

Most of the foster carers described the reward for being a foster carer as relatively fair, provided they receive the correct amount according to SALAR's recommendations and the difficulty of the placement. They also emphasised that the role should not be about making money. However, several noted that, if you were to consider the fact that foster carers perform care work 24/7 and the emotional and practical demands it entails, the pay would be quite low:

> If you were to see it as a job, it would be a job with an extremely low salary because it's not an eight-hour-a-day job, it's 24 hours, and there's a lot that comes with it. I know there are placements that work very well, but there are also placements where I tiptoe around the biological parents and have to handle the crash landing after each visit. If you look at it in relation to what it costs,…no one is willing to go from their full-time salary to a lower amount and work more. Yes, you might not have a placement for two months, you get an income and do nothing, but you're on standby, you can't travel far, you can't do anything, and then they wonder why they can't find people. No, because it takes a toll on your energy and strength. (Contracted emergency and long-term foster carer 3)

In the above quote, the foster carer stresses that the cost in time, and therefore money, quickly adds up. This includes the relational labour, such as building and maintaining contact with biological parents, which represents an additional, often overlooked, cost. This involves not only emotional investment but also time-consuming coordination and communication. Finally, the requirement to remain on standby imposes a cost on personal autonomy, as it restricts carers' ability to engage freely in other activities.

The following quote illustrates how foster carers value receiving recognition for this care work, which can be meaningfully expressed through a financial reward, even though they stress that their motivation for taking on the role is not primarily financial:

> If you're going to work so hard, you must first of all get a little more for it, even if you absolutely don't do it for the money, because then, then I might as well, if it was money I was interested in, then I would have stayed in my job. That's not why I did it, it wasn't for the money, but it was everything around the child that was so hard, and then of course it affected my own family. (Long-term foster carer 2)

Another type of financial support identified in the interviews was reimbursement for expenses incurred when foster carers needed to purchase items for the child. One foster carer described a negative experience with this form of support, explaining that the compensation did not accurately reflect the actual costs of the necessary purchases:

> Well, he didn't have clothes or shoes, and we didn't know we would have to pay out of pocket….The day before he moved in, we received 4,000 SEK [360 EUR], and we had to set up a room and buy clothes, shoes, and various pieces of equipment he would need….I also called about it when he arrived…[and told them] this is a loss for us right now. And how do we know the money will come?...Like a desk, and do they know how much a pair of trainers costs? (Long-term foster carer 6)

Another foster carer had a different experience in relation to compensation for expenses from the local authority, finding no problem with receiving this before the purchase was made:

> It was no problem at all; I didn't even have to pay out of pocket. I said that I'd found this and that, asked if it was reasonable, and they thought it was reasonable and then transferred the money. (Long-term foster carer 5)

Besides the discussion regarding the fostering reward and compensation for expenses, the social workers at both organisations and the local authorities have noticed an increasing discussion about loss of income:

> It's the eternal debate about loss of income, so to speak. It was probably the first time I encountered it, but it's becoming more common today in foster care, if someone is to take on the assignment. In the past, it wasn't an issue; it didn't exist, it was just expenses. (Familjehemscentrum i Norr Organisation)

Foster carers' experiences of receiving financial support—and their level of satisfaction with that support—varied across the study. Two participants said that the lack of compensation for lost income hindered their ability to fulfil their roles, particularly in relation to participating in training. Attending such training sessions without financial compensation would result in a loss of income, placing an additional burden on the family's finances:

> It was like this: When I was supposed to attend it [the basic training], my foster child was so sick all the time that I couldn't leave. And then, when you don't have any [children], when you're not a foster family [in between placements], you don't get compensation for it. And then it felt difficult to spend a lot of unpaid days on it. (Long-term foster carer 10)

Other foster carers said that they wished they had received financial compensation that would have allowed them more time:

> Because the thing is that it's so natural if you were to receive a baby, then you're at home for one or two years with the child….But when you take in a child who isn't little, who has great needs, that is, time. It's something that I would have liked to have talked about….Can you say yes, but we want to take time off work for six months, to at least be able to pick up this child earlier from preschool…so that you get more time. (Long-term foster carer 6)

4.2. Negotiating the Financial Value of the Foster Carer Assignment

Social workers at both the inter-municipal organisations and the local authorities perceived financial support as something that has become increasingly important when recruiting new foster carers. One social worker said: "The [topic of] compensation has increased more and more. The families know their value, so to speak."

Local authorities were sometimes described as willing to meet foster carers' requests; however, in other cases, they declined to do so, often viewing the requested financial support as excessive—regardless of the carers' qualifications. In such instances, the inability to meet foster carers' demands was frequently attributed to a lack of available financial resources. Within a triad of inter-municipal cooperation, one foster carer's request can be presented to several municipalities for negotiation:

> Then sometimes there are those who turn to us right away and say, "yes, we're a good family home but we want 1500 SEK [135 EUR] a day" or "we want 1000 SEK [90 EUR] a day," and sometimes we have an assignment, a child with greater needs….Then we check with the municipalities—we have this family, but they want this compensation; are you in any way prepared to move on with this family for that compensation? Then we can pass it on. (Familjepoolen Organisation)

Several foster carers also reported successfully securing compensation, for example, for lost income, after negotiating with local authorities and presenting a case for additional financial support. In these discussions, they often emphasised the importance of spending time with the child as a central part of their argument:

> We've been able to take time off a few times because he [the child] has had difficulty being at preschool, especially during holidays and such. So, we've negotiated, you could say, to be able to take time off with him for his sake. When the after-school programme and preschool have been closed for holidays or training days, we've managed to get time off. (Long-term foster carer 8)

When the financial support is perceived as insufficient relative to the demands of the role, foster carers may feel exploited by the system, prompting a need for negotiation:

> Then she says a sum to me, "this is what you get." Oh, okay, you don't know, but then when you understand what the assignment entails; we felt, at least, we felt used from a round-the-clock perspective. So, then I called and said it, we won't sign this. (Long-term foster carer 6)

Several social workers from both inter-municipal organisations and affiliated municipalities described the organisations as advocating for foster carers, particularly regarding financial support and the costs associated with fostering. They noted that the organisations often represent foster carers with local authorities, emphasising the value of certain forms of financial support. However, views differ

across organisations and local authorities, reflecting varying perspectives on the organisation's role as an intermediary:

> You have to account for a loss of income. Eh, by this much, I [the social worker at the organisation] recommend this and that. Then you could represent the [foster families'] case, but I couldn't make decisions. (Familjehemscentrum i Norr Organisation)

A caseworker from a municipality that withdrew from the cooperation described the triad relationship that included the inter-municipal organisation as problematic, particularly regarding the discussions around financial support:

> As I mentioned earlier, one issue has been that they [the personnel at the local authorities] felt [the organisation] sided with the foster families, which wasn't their role. That wasn't part of the agreement. This puts us in a difficult position because, just like when we [the local authorities] place children in residential care or with consultant support [private agency], we have discussions about compensation. We end up in the same situation here, where we would also have to have a discussion with the foster families connected to the inter-municipal organisation, which is what we wanted to avoid. (Local authority that has exited the inter-municipal organisation Familjehemscentrum Jämtland)

A social worker from an inter-municipal organisation noted that issues around financial support can cause frustration among foster families, underscoring the need for the organisation to intervene:

> We [the organisation] took over the [financial] agreements with the foster families this year, and we know from the municipalities that finances are an important issue for foster families….If there's stress in a municipality and discussions need to be held about finances or perhaps a bit more compensation for costs, and you can't reach your caseworker, it breeds frustration. I believe that having a clear agreement that's received and processed every month helps everyone. That's a clear benefit, I think. (Dalsland Organisation)

In this case, the representative from the organisation emphasised the importance of financial support for foster carers and argued that they can offer this support more effectively because they are not as stressed as the local authorities.

To conclude the first two themes—financial costs and support, and the negotiation of the assignment's value—the foster carers reported varied experiences regarding both their need for financial support and the adequacy of the financial support received. Nevertheless, most of the foster carers ascribed meanings to different types of costs and expenses associated with their fostering role in ways that helped them to justify and negotiate the financial support they believed necessary.

4.3. Costs of Unavailability vs Accessible Support

Several foster carers highlighted the importance of accessibility and the potential consequences when support is lacking. In this context, accessibility refers to having someone available to answer calls, proactively reach out, and listen attentively. When another actor, such as an inter-municipal organisation, is involved, foster carers

are not solely dependent upon local authorities. In the following example, the carer is not entirely reliant upon the local authority caseworker, who is often described as unavailable, but can instead turn to the organisation. This third actor offers a sense of security when the local authority is inaccessible:

> I can imagine that many people may be quite lost in things. Where to turn and such, but if you have GFO…I think most things will work out. Because if you only have the caseworker at the local authority, then you're much more on your own…and what you need is that they listen to you, and I felt that they [the organisation] always did. It was kind of the salvation that you could always call there. That, you know, they're always available. It's an on-call system, that there's always a hotline to call, and if there was no one [to] answer on the weekend, they [would] call up quickly….It creates a sense of security, and they were good at creating that security. (Contracted emergency and long-term foster carer 2)

In the following example, the foster carer had been transferred to the local authority, and the organisation was no longer sharing responsibility for support. As a result, the carer had become dependent upon the local authority's availability, and its absence was experienced as a loss and, hence, a cost:

> And of course, as long as they [the caseworker at the local authority] didn't hear anything from us, they didn't take the time just to call and ask: "Is everything okay?" But they assumed it was fine. And it was too, but of course it was still hard….It would have been good if that person had just called sometimes…but I have full understanding of their work situation, and especially then, in the summer….[That's why] we're so super happy with GFO, [which] felt so super professional in every way, and maybe not as happy with the municipality [local authority]. It feels like GFO, they had time for this, time for their [foster carers] who they work with, and you may not experience that as much in the municipality. (Long-term foster carer 7)

This view of inter-municipal organisations is echoed in how one such organisation described its role: as a supportive actor that alleviates stress for both local authorities and foster carers by being available when the authorities are not:

> A foster family might call and say: "I can't reach the person in [the local authority]." It doesn't have to be about money; it could be about something else. I can check it out and get back to you [the foster carer], which provides a level of service that reduces stress for both foster families and caseworkers. We're not supposed to do their job, but we can help ease the burden a bit. (Dalsland Organisation)

Several social workers from both inter-municipal organisations and local authorities noted that the former generally have greater resources to ensure accessibility. Representatives from smaller municipalities highlighted that these organisations often have back-up staff available, an advantage not always found within local authority structures:

> Well, I'm thinking it's positive for them that there's a social worker [at the organisation], I mean, when we only had one, if that person was on sick leave, there was no caseworker, and that also affects the child if the foster carers don't get the support they need. So, the social worker group [at the organisation] can compensate for each other and take over for each other, so I'm thinking that's good for the children…and the [foster carers] get access to more training, which we couldn't offer when we only had one person here. (Local authority part of Familjehemscentrum Jämtland Organisation)

4.4. Relational Costs and Relational Support

Beyond the relationship with the child, fostering involves managing multiple connections, such as with biological parents, other foster carers, caseworkers at local authorities, and social workers within the cooperative organisation. Some of these relationships were perceived as burdens or costs, while others offered support and, in some cases, compensated for challenges in the fostering assignment.

Foster carers who expressed dissatisfaction with their caseworker or the conditions under which they fostered particularly valued the organisation's support. In such instances, the inter-municipal organisation played a key role as an intermediary, assisting carers in managing relationships and facilitating communication with local authorities:

> If you don't agree with the municipality [placing the child], that is, if you don't have a good dialogue, it will be as if GFO can become like an intermediary in communication or whatever it may be that causes it to go wrong. (Long-term foster carer 3)

One foster carer explained that the organisation had played a pivotal role in the couple's decision to continue fostering at all:

> Well, I didn't get along with many caseworkers….I can say that thanks to [the organisation], I was able to continue for so long….It was at [the organisation], especially [name], who was responsible for us, she was the one who investigated us and so on, and I don't know how many times I called [her] and said: "I think I'm going crazy, what is this?" and she was a great support. (Contracted emergency and long-term foster carer 2)

Some foster carers also expressed a preference for receiving assistance support from the organisation rather than from local authorities, as they perceived the organisation to have a different role in which they were more attuned to and focused on the needs of foster carers:

> We were just left to a local authority that comes with a list of demands. This is what you're expected to do, and we're just people who are supposed to be a normal family. But the task requires so much more than that….And I would rather have that help from [the organisation] than from social services…because they [the local authority] also only have the child's interests in mind, do you understand what I mean? They have a child they need to find a home for, and I feel like a real complainer; that's how the communication becomes. It's not like: "Here we are, and we're going to help a child."…We end up feeling like we're just complaining, that we can't handle it. We don't get the emotional support we need….There's no overall picture of how the family is doing now that the child lives with us, because now we're a new family. They focus on the child, but [the organisation] knows us. (Long-term foster carer 6)

Conversely, some foster carers reported not needing support from the organisation, because they were satisfied with the support provided by their local authority caseworker. For these carers, the organisation was primarily seen as an "umbrella," or central contact point, that maintained communication during periods without active placements. Even among those expressing a minimal need for support, many still found reassurance in the organisation's availability, which contributed to a sense of security:

> First, I turn to their [the children's] social worker, second, to our [caseworker at the local authority], and third, to [the organisation]. I think I've called [the organisation] once during these four years the girls have been with us, and that one time I was so angry I thought I was going to die, but that's the only time….I don't really have any expectations, but I know that [the organisation] is there. (Long-term foster carer 3)

Several organisations noted challenges when a third actor conducts the initial assessment and builds positive relations with foster carers, only for the local authority caseworker to later assume responsibility. This shift can position the caseworker as an intruder in an already established relationship:

> The downside is that we do these investigations and get to know the families pretty well. We have a pretty good picture of what we think are their strengths and what might be weaknesses and what might become difficult for them during an assignment…what we might need to think about when it comes to supporting them and such….So that's the downside. That it's not the ones who've investigated and got to know the family who then provide the [main] support. (Familjehemscentrum Jämtland Organisation)

> We establish our relationship, but then this relationship gets interrupted [when] the caseworkers [at the local authority] take over and, of course, as a foster home, maybe it's not optimal, maybe they want to have the same social worker the whole time. (Familjepoolen organisation)

Several foster carers viewed the presence of caseworkers from various local authorities during their initial training as a positive aspect. One carer noted that having their future caseworker involved in the training helped to establish a relationship that could later be built upon when selecting their assignment, making the triad relationship smoother:

> It was four whole days that we were at that basic training, and there were two caseworkers from the local authority in the municipality, from which we've now received a placement….They were newly hired and needed to take the basic training, and one of the caseworkers, he's our caseworker now…he [knows] us since we met at the training and we [know] him, and we knew about him when the child was presented to us. We felt it was kind of nice that we'd met the caseworker and felt that this was a good person, like a good person to collaborate with, and so that maybe determined, or maybe didn't determine, but it was a plus. (Long-term foster carer 7)

The foster carers in this study are part of an inter-municipal organisation that offers mentorship from experienced carers. While mentors are sometimes seen as valuable sources of support, they are occasionally perceived as unfamiliar contacts and that it requires effort to build positive relations with them. Rather than someone providing immediate support, the mentor may be viewed as another relationship to cultivate. The mentor's intended role is to provide assistance support. However, one carer described the mentor as a burden, simply another new relationship demanding time and energy:

> We've felt that we've had a great mentor. There's nothing wrong with her, and we've had good conversations. But we've almost felt like it's become sort of a burden more than support because it's another meeting that needs to be booked in…and it was a whole new person for us, this mentor, and I think it would have been better if someone from GFO had kept being our contact and sort of been there as a sounding board at the beginning. (Long-term foster carer 7)

To conclude the final two themes, foster carers must manage various relationships, some centred on the child, and others supporting the fostering process. Most notably, these themes highlight the triadic relationship between the foster carer, the local authority caseworker, and the organisational social worker. Interviewees described this third actor as both a resource and a potential source of tension. Both carers and social workers stressed that insufficient support places a burden on carers, with the third actor's role becoming most visible when dissatisfaction arises, such as limited availability or strained interactions with the local authority.

5. Concluding Discussion

In this article, we have explored the types of costs that are associated with fostering and what support may compensate for these costs. Furthermore, we have addressed how the involvement of a third actor, in the form of a public inter-municipal organisation, impacts costs and support within fostering assignments. The costs incurred by foster carers, as well as the types of support they seek in order to mitigate these costs, vary depending upon the perceived needs of the child in their care. Nevertheless, certain categories of costs and support recur across cases.

From the perspective of social workers, there is a growing perception that foster carers are increasingly focused on financial compensation. In contrast, and consistent with previous research (Colton et al., 2008), foster families tend to emphasise the costs that financial support is intended to cover, particularly the value of their time commitment and the expenses associated with placements. While some public professionals stated that public authorities cannot compete financially, it is also evident that foster carers frequently negotiate the financial aspects of their role, and by attributing specific meanings to these expenses, they justify the need for additional financial support.

A longstanding debate within foster care (Colton et al., 2008) and care work more broadly (Folbre, 2008; Zelizer, 2005) concerns the tension between altruism and financial remuneration. The prevailing norm suggests that intimate relationships and acts of care should not be intertwined with monetary considerations, which may explain why foster carers stress that they are not driven by financial gain. However, the interviews reveal that fostering often involves responsibilities that extend beyond those of an "ordinary family." The ability to financially sustain oneself while caring for a foster child inevitably incurs costs that require compensation (Zelizer, 2005), some of which may be underestimated due to their intangible nature (Folbre, 2008).

The interviews illuminate what Folbre (2008) refers to as invisible costs; in this context, stemming from relationships that foster carers find challenging to navigate due to conflict and limited availability. One frequently discussed relational dynamic involves both dyadic and triadic interactions among the foster carer, the local authority caseworker, and the inter-municipal organisation's social worker, as well as various configurations of these roles. The interviews reveal multiple layers of negotiation between these different actors, and the significance of availability and meaningful relationships between foster carers and caseworkers/social workers is strongly emphasised. Echoing findings from previous research, there is a persistent desire for someone who genuinely values and supports the foster family (Reimer, 2021).

The triadic structure further enables foster carers to voice their claims for reimbursement and reward, not only to a single municipality but to several, while also serving a mediating function between the carer and

the local authority. When the relationship with the local authority caseworker is strained, the organisation is often perceived as effective in mitigating these challenges. It does so by compensating for the shortcomings of, for example, an unavailable caseworker. It becomes evident that the organisation frequently sees itself as a mediator and acts accordingly as it assists foster carers in negotiations and communication with caseworkers. However, this support is not without complications, as foster carers are not the only stakeholders relying upon the organisation within the triadic relationship.

Simmel (1950/1964) argues that a third actor in a triadic relationship may act as an impartial mediator, provided they are trusted by both parties. However, if the mediator is perceived as biased, they risk losing legitimacy. While the organisation's advocacy for foster carers may help in securing necessary support, it can also undermine trust between the organisation and the local authority caseworker. This may lead to perceptions of partiality—for example, as the interviews suggest, being seen as "on the foster carer's side"—which in turn generates dissatisfaction among local authority caseworkers. This tension is evident in the interviews with the caseworkers, several of whom described the organisation's advocacy role as burdensome for the caseworker.

5.1. Implications for Practice

Conflicts between foster carers and caseworkers regarding various aspects of fostering are likely to occur, as their roles often involve divergent perspectives (Cosis Brown et al., 2014). This suggests that an intermediary may be beneficial, particularly in complex cases or when relationships are strained. This study shows that inter-municipal organisations can effectively fulfil this role and help to offset the costs associated with relational complexities, especially in smaller municipalities where limited staffing may intensify tensions. However, the findings also indicate that intermediaries are not always welcomed and may, at times, complicate relationships between foster carers and local authorities. This reflects similar dynamics observed within private foster care agencies, which are sometimes viewed as buffers, an arrangement that may be more or less appreciated depending upon the interests of the actors involved (Fridell Lif, 2025a, 2025b).

An inter-municipal organisation that operates independently of local authorities can assume various roles that foster carers perceive positively, potentially increasing their satisfaction. Such an external entity may offer additional support and advocacy, encouraging carers to remain in their roles for longer, an outcome that benefits children in need of stable placements. However, depending upon how the organisation defines its role and how it is perceived by local authority caseworkers, tensions may arise within the triadic relationship, and these require careful management. It is worth considering whether such organisations should function as compensatory mechanisms for shortcomings within municipal systems similar to what has been observed with private foster-care agencies (Fridell Lif, 2025b). However, child welfare authorities have long expressed concerns about limited time and resources to adequately support foster carers. This raises the question of whether delegating certain responsibilities to organisations outside local authorities might be a viable strategy to ensure that these tasks receive the attention they require, and to address the costs associated with relational and structural gaps.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, supporting data is not openly available.

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