



Kinship

**Submission to the Department for Education's
consultations on the *Stable Homes: Built on Love*
strategy and Children's Social Care National
Framework and Dashboard**

May 2023

Our approach to this consultation

Kinship's response below is based on our extensive organisational experience directly supporting thousands of kinship families for more than twenty years through our co-designed and evidence-informed programmes, advice line, national Peer-to-Peer Support Programme, our 11,000-strong Kinship Community, and our growing network of kinship carer campaigners who are mobilising locally and nationally to secure transformational and long overdue change for kinship carers. We also draw on our own significant evidence base, comprising of robust research, evaluations and survey evidence, bolstered by references to other academic and research sources where relevant and appropriate.

Kinship carers are at the heart of all that we do. To include additional valuable insights within this response, we have included verbatim quotes and commentary directly from a range of kinship carers gathered during eight individual informal discussions about the strategy. We intentionally focused these discussions on areas we felt were under-explored (i.e. embedding a 'family first' culture and measuring progress for kinship care nationally) given the extent of existing evidence and insight Kinship and kinship carers have already shared with the Department on key elements of kinship family support through our surveys, reports and engagement events, for example. We hope the inclusion of these contributions – analysed and shared thematically where possible – offer additional insights more likely to be gathered through supportive and constructive discussion than more constrained written responses.

Further detail on our response to the Government's *Stable Homes, Built on Love* strategy and National Children's Social Care Framework and Dashboard, and what we think should happen next, can be found online on our kinship care policy tracker: <https://kinship.org.uk/kinship-care-policy-tracker/>

It's vital that the views and expertise generously shared by kinship carers across the country are recognised and heard as part of this consultation. Following publication of the Government's children's social care implementation strategy and consultation, we produced comprehensive guidance to support kinship carers to respond individually to the key questions in the consultation around kinship care, and organised an instructional webinar attended by more than 100 kinship carers to assist with this process. In addition, we coordinated a consultation session between a diverse group of kinship carers and the Kinship and the Alternatives to Care team at the Department for Education to contribute to key questions included within the consultation itself.

Children's social care strategy: Stable Homes, Built on Love

Overall, to what extent do you agree these six pillars are the right ones on which to base our reforms for children's social care?

We are pleased to see “unlocking the potential of family networks” included as a specific pillar within the new National Children's Social Care Framework. This recognition of wider family networks and of kinship care as a distinct and valuable element within children's social care, and the celebration of its positive impact for children and society, marks a step change from previous Government rhetoric and action which has focused almost exclusively on fostering and adoption. After decades of being overlooked and marginalised, the value of this acknowledgement by Government of kinship families' challenges and strengths is new and welcome.

“The strategy is looking at a wide range of things, and kinship seems to have a priority which I'm glad to see.”

Family friend and special guardian

In your view, how can we make a success of embedding a “family first” culture?

The ambition to deliver and embed a ‘family first’ culture within children's social care is welcome to ensure that wider family networks are appropriately and meaningfully involved in decisions made about a child's life. Many kinship carers do not experience this at present. In Kinship's 2019 annual survey, more than half of kinship carers told us they'd taken on their role in a crisis situation with no notice at all¹; many are pressured into making life-changing decisions with very little support or advice at a moment's notice.

Below we have outlined some of the key principles shared by kinship carers around how a ‘family first’ culture can be embedded successfully within local authority policy and practice, as well as some key considerations for the Government's planned work in this area (including the delivery of a ‘Families First for Children’ Pathfinder and a pilot of Family Network Support Packages).

Balancing state involvement and private family life

A crucial element to successful social work practice in kinship care contexts and to embedding a positive ‘family first’ culture is recognising the unique nature of kinship care and the additional complexities and tensions which arise from the balancing appropriate local authority involvement with respect for families' own decision-making processes.

In our conversations with kinship carers, some welcomed an alternative vision of their kinship care journeys in which there had been earlier dialogue opened by children's services or others to better involve and support them at the very beginning. In particular, the school was seen as a key potential partner in helping to facilitate links between families and local authority support given their often trusted and respected role in family life and wider communities.

“At the minute I don't think there is a family first culture. The situation we were in – it got sprung on us, and previously there were no conversations whatsoever even though he was on a plan already... There were no conversations with any other family member until crisis point. For me there was no family first.”

¹ Grandparents Plus (2019) [Kinship Care State of the Nation Survey 2019](#)

Aunt and special guardian

"There were issues picked up at school before I got involved... He was just given to me. School were aware, but there was nothing linking the school and social services together... I think there's that gap."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"One of the things I've found is that I've not always been included in things. So to be able to have contact with the wider family earlier is a brilliant thing."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"With social services getting involved at the offset – I think that's important, somewhat."

Aunt and special guardian

"It's involving me at the early stages. I'm having to force my way in and ask about things that at the time were new to me. It's navigating it all by myself."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"Actually getting everybody together would be a great idea. It certainly didn't happen in my situation. There were interventions by social services but then they went away for a while. They were waiting for a crisis, and they got a crisis eventually. Even afterwards, there still wasn't the intervention. I got involved – I wasn't asked to get involved. It was never suggested that we all start talking about what should happen. Even when I started pushing to get involved, it was 10 months before anything happened."

Grandparent and special guardian

"You need a professional and a trained facilitator and to just get people talking about it [kinship care options]."

Grandparent and special guardian

"There could be something around the school having that link a bit tighter, even if there wasn't yet an emergency... the school being able to say 'we can now contact blah at social services to say you're now looking after your grandson, he's living with you'. So there's something that connects me and they know it's happening, even if it's an informal arrangement, so we're on their radar."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

However, despite broad support for a 'family first' culture, all highlighted the importance of acknowledging the differing and often changing needs and desires of kinship families alongside where and how social work support is most welcome. Agency was key; implementing a 'family first' culture had to be done in partnership with families and in a way which gave some ownership and control to those involved.

"I wouldn't have wanted them sticking their nose in the whole time but there were a lot of things I did want, and a lot of questions I needed answers to."

Grandparent and special guardian

"The fact that they've allowed it to be an evolving, gentle relationship rather than it needing to be really formal helped her [kinship child] an awful lot because then she was in charge of information about her life. I understand it's not easy, but when it's a formal thing, the child involved doesn't have that choice. And that would be fine if they weren't then looked at in

any different way, but that's often not the case. It was important for me she had control over that and who she shared her home situation with."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"Sometimes you want the help but you don't want to get caught up in all of that [children's services involvement]."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"I was calling just to get guidance and there was nothing there, nobody there. It was just 'this is up to you now'... even if sometimes people wouldn't want social services involved because it might be intrusive, it would be nice to know there's someone there if you need them."

Aunt and special guardian

"I've taken the line of 'no we don't need that involvement' although we have had CAMHS involvement down the line and that was needed. It's not that I've been resistant to having help, but have been a little wary but also mainly thinking 'no we'll just get on and do our own thing'."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

There is a significant opportunity within the Pathfinder and pilots work to explore this key aspect of practice in more detail. This must seek to understand how to balance requirements for assessment and ongoing formal oversight from local authorities whilst respecting the unique nature of kinship care and its position straddling state intervention and private family life. Kinship carers should be involved in co-designing how to do this well, and in ways which reduce unnecessary, stigmatising and invasive practice.

Building relationships with trust, honesty and transparency

As outlined by Professor Joan Hunt in her exploration of kinship care social work practice, "skill and time are needed to establish a relationship of mutual trust, explore complex family history and dynamics and take the prospective carer on the 'reflective journey' which will often be required."² Crucial ingredients for a successful 'family first' culture outlined consistently by carers were trust, honesty and transparency; only when there was mutual respect and positive relationships between social work teams and kinship carers would wider family networks feel empowered and supported to be involved earlier.

"It's being able to have good communication so everyone's clear about what they're offering, so social services can be completely transparent about what they do."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"Kinship carers need to know that they're [children's services] there and they can have access to help when they need it. It's about building that trust and it's about relationships, and having people that are really dedicated to the work. Sometimes people just go through the motions and they're not connecting, they're not listening to what you're saying."

Aunt and special guardian

"The key thing is being approachable... There's a huge cultural shift needed... I've worked as a youth worker in the same borough and have been involved in schools, and I just said to them [children's services] 'you do a rubbish PR job' because most people in the borough will not know about the good work that's done and just see you as social services 'oh my god, no'. It's

² Hunt, J. (2021) [Practising in kinship care: The perspectives of specialist social workers](#)

a big barrier. There's probably loads of people in my borough and elsewhere who just aren't accessing that help."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

The existence of positive relationships between families and practitioners can be modulated by a number of factors. A successful 'family first' culture is one which recognises and directly addresses how aspects of personal and community identity might make the involvement of local authority services and professionalised social work more challenging, particularly in the context of ethnicity and cultural background. Given the legacy of distrust which can exist in particular families and communities, the voluntary sector can often be better placed to reach and engage kinship carers and broker stronger relationships with local authority professionals; an evaluation of Kinship Connected demonstrated how project worker involvement and support from Kinship had helped to establish improved relationships to the benefit of families and practitioners.³

"There's also another layer when you're talking about certain communities like the African Caribbean community particularly. There's an added layer of suspicion that they're [children's services] going to whip the kids away and all of those things."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"There's something about representation from a social services perspective so there's people who look like us. And having some understanding of the culture. There will be different layers, values, systems which might be different. It's about understanding those."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

In our conversations, many carers highlighted their own negative experiences of early involvement with children's services and particularly the intrusive nature of assessments and early family social work. Many saw their experiences as illustrating a culture where support was offered on the terms of the local authority rather than that of the family who were stepping up to support a child in need. Carers articulated the need for a different approach which respected their family life, privacy and routines, and more appropriately considered feelings of judgement which impacted on many.

This reflects the lack of an approach attuned to kinship families that instead directs and limits professionals to deliver social work support through systems designed with other alternative care arrangements in mind. It also aligns with what our extensive engagement with kinship carers and social work practitioners, and accompanying research evidence, tells us about how the assessment of potential kinship carers typically presents more significant and complex challenges than of mainstream foster carers or adopters due to negative attitudes towards children's services, difficulties acknowledging risk or the validity of concerns about family members, or uncertainty around the nature of the task they are proposing to undertake.⁴

"It's doing it in a way without feeling that you're being judged and that whole thing around invading your privacy and the intrusiveness of that. I've been dragging my feet actually – I was thinking about getting an SGO and I've decided not to go down that route because of how intrusive that is."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"The assessment process is really, really intense and it does get to a point where it really stresses you out. When your life's changed so much anyway, it's just an added stress. And I had to cut contact at the same time. It was just really, really intense."

³ Starks, L. & Whitley, J. (2020) [An evaluation of Kinship Connected for Grandparents Plus: Final report](#). Starks Consulting Ltd with Ecorys.

⁴ Hunt, J. (2021)

Aunt and special guardian

"I understand why they need to do it. People do need assessing if they're going to place a child there. I feel they could be less invasive."

Grandparent and special guardian

"I had visits weekly, two hours at a time, and sometimes my children were here as well and it was over tea time. There was no consideration for the time of the day. It was just 'we're going to come now'. So it was a very hectic time."

Aunt and special guardian

Working alongside families

A 'family first' culture must be one which acknowledges and respects the expertise held by kinship carers, and works alongside them supportively to come to decisions. Many of those we spoke to had experienced early social work support which had failed to recognise the valuable insights and strength of knowledge on offer from the very people due to take on a kinship caring role, their contributions having been – deliberately or otherwise – ignored.

"To me, 'family first' means that the family is seen as the primary source of useful information and insight."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"I let the social worker know and it was just brushed off... It's more that they need to listen more and respect the wishes of the kinship carer."

Aunt and special guardian

"Sometimes, the whole system can seem very professionalised and its people who have got qualifications – and obviously experience in this area – but this ignores the fact that every child involved is an individual. It's not a sausage factory. You can't just put them through a process. You need a process, but one you can flex and tailor to the needs of that child and the wider family. There's no one size fits all."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

Kinship care doesn't happen in a vacuum, and those who have grown up in kinship care recognise the impact this has had not just for them but too for wider family dynamics and for those other relatives within the home environment.⁵ Carers with their own birth children also recognised that taking on the role has significant impacts for their whole family and this should be appropriately considered by children's services; a successful 'family first' culture involved consideration of the entire family unit.

"When you say 'family first' I automatically think about my family here at home."

Aunt and special guardian

"When he came here, they didn't consider anybody in my household or the impact on anyone here... I just think the social workers didn't think about that either. They didn't think about my children at all. It wasn't until I verbally told them 'look, this is not happening'. It felt that nobody would listen until you had a crisis moment and really put your foot down."

Aunt and special guardian

"I've got two kids of my own already. It was just like 'as long as X is fine, it doesn't matter about anybody else'."

⁵ Wellard, S. et al (2017) [Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood](#)

Aunt and special guardian

In your view, what would be the most helpful forms of support that could be provided to a family network, to enable them to step in to provide care for a child?

Kinship is very supportive of the decision to deliver a dedicated kinship care strategy which finally gives kinship care the focused policy attention it deserves. For too long, kinship care has been seen as an 'add on' to policies and services designed with other families in mind, and so there is a significant opportunity for the forthcoming kinship care strategy to ensure all kinship families get the support they need and deserve.

Our response to this question below outlines key areas of support which should be offered to kinship families and recommendations for Government action, but the 'golden thread' which runs through any effective support offer is that it is unique and bespoke for kinship families. It isn't sufficient to simply reproduce or pivot other services designed for foster or adoptive families, nor take a 'pick and mix' approach to selecting certain elements deemed most needed; kinship families need a bespoke and comprehensive combination of support co-designed to recognise and address their own specific needs, experiences and strengths.

Information, advice and training

Access to clear information and advice for prospective kinship carers as early as possible is essential. Many kinship carers are left to navigate complex family justice and other systems without appropriate guidance tailored to their situations, preventing them from making fully informed decisions about what is best for their family. In our most recent annual survey, more than 7 in 10 kinship carers told us they didn't receive any information about being a kinship carer from the local authority before or shortly after their child moved in, and only 2 in 10 kinship carers received any preparation support before or shortly after their child moved in.⁶

The Government's plan to invest significantly in a new national offer of training and support for kinship carers is therefore very welcome. This new offer must be co-designed alongside kinship families to ensure it recognises their unique needs and strengths, including establishing exactly what should be in scope for delivery and how this should take place to be of most value, and particularly given concerns raised by kinship carers around this being accessible and relevant. This package of support should include areas which we know kinship carers regularly want additional support with based on our existing experience delivering Kinship Compass⁷ and Kinship Ready⁸, including but not limited to managing contact with birth parents, practical and emotional support, peer support, and bespoke preparatory training.

"To make 'family first' work families need information. There is a real lack of info on trauma, available resources, who does what."

Family friend and special guardian

"Because we don't get the support that adoptive parents or foster parents get, anything I knew was based on my own research. It would've been good to have somebody there, just so you know there was somebody to call on."

⁶ Kinship (2022a) [The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022](#)

⁷ Kinship (2023) [Kinship Compass](#) [Accessed 10 May 2023]

⁸ Kinship (2023) [Kinship Ready](#) [Accessed 10 May 2023]

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"We need to know what is available. We didn't know what to ask for. It shouldn't be on the family to ask questions and probe. Information and advice needs to be forthcoming."

Family friend and special guardian

"I was worried something was going to happen to them and I wanted basic paediatric first aid training. I wasn't looking for very much but they were terrified of having anything to do with me."

Grandparent and special guardian

"It's great there's the opportunity to have these things now, but so far in now – will it benefit me and will it benefit him? I'm not sure. I don't know. And I don't mean to sound ungrateful but it's a bit late in. It will probably be good for new SGOs, for new carers, but even with that, I just think 'where do you get the time?'. If you're working full time and caring for the child too, how are you going to fit that in?"

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

Legal aid and legal advice

In particular, it is crucial that this extends to independent legal advice covered by access to legal aid. It is welcome that the Government has recently extended eligibility to legal aid for those pursuing special guardianship orders in private family law⁹, but this does not go far enough to ensure all prospective and current kinship carers get the information and financial support they need to navigate the family justice system and secure their family arrangement. This is particularly crucial given recent evidence highlighting the significant overlap with public law cases and local authority involvement within private law cases.¹⁰

"A special guardianship order is the cheapest for local authorities so it's often presented as the only option, when in reality there are many options that might be better suited to different families. There's a need for impartial information and legal advice."

Family friend and special guardian

"I've been given the order from a court with all the assessments. It's been deemed I'm the right person to be looking after my nephew. They've gone constantly to the schools to check. There's never been a negative thing in any way shape or form. Even Cafcass has said this is the best place for him, he's thriving, blah blah blah – but it just goes on and on and on.... It's as though I'm on trial and it doesn't make any sense whatsoever. It makes no sense... I've gone through this whole thing and now I'm going back and trying my best to keep as sane as possible. But if it has an effect on me then obviously it has an effect on the child I'm meant to be helping have a good healthy life too."

Grandparent and special guardian

The Government should introduce further legal aid extensions which unlock independent legal advice for all prospective kinship carers considering a legal order, help wider family networks pursue the right legal order for them in either public or private proceedings, and protect existing kinship carers from costly litigation if they are taken back to court at a later date. This entitlement should be

⁹ Ministry of Justice (1 May 2023) [Family members taking on vulnerable children to receive better legal support](#) [Accessed 10 May 23]

¹⁰ Cusworth, L. et al (2023) [Uncovering private family law: Exploring applications that involve non-parents](#). Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

non-means tested to ensure all kinship carers can make the best possible decisions in the interests of children and are not pushed into financial insecurity.

Financial support

Many kinship carers find themselves with very little local authority support once the child has been placed with them or has come into their care. Kinship's 2022 annual survey, *The Cost of Loving*, found that nearly 8 in 10 carers felt they did not get the support they needed from their local authority in order to meet the needs of their kinship child.¹¹

"I had written down on the support plan to contact the post-adoption department. That in itself, being told to contact post-adoption – that's nothing to do with guardianship. And I think as well as how it sounds, it's how they see it too. They'll only see you if they have to but they're not really anything to do with you. We're done with you – move on."

Grandparent and special guardian

"We didn't know that social services are meant to step back after the order is finalised. They just disappeared with no notice."

Family friend and special guardian

"It was tumbleweed. It took 10 months after years, and then nothing happened. 3 children came to live with me, and then they just left."

Grandparent and special guardian

"It's important they are involved. In my situation, there was a social worker assigned to X. As soon as he was handed to me, they were gone."

Aunt and special guardian

"The social worker visited once. It was very much a superficial visit, more an observation, which was hard for me because he's living with me now. What exactly was the purpose of it? Maybe the second visit didn't take place because she [social worker] left after six weeks."

Grandparent and special guardian

"The level of support was to begin with nothing, absolutely nothing. They were like 'right, you're going to have to quit your job, and you need to do contact three times a week'."

Aunt and special guardian

Financial support in particular must be an essential component of any package delivered to wider family networks who step in to provide care for a child. The Government's planned shift towards much earlier involvement of and funded support for kinship carers prior to a legal order being made and without the child having to become 'looked after' is welcome, particularly as support for informal kinship carers is often poor or non-existent.

According to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, the kind of support offered via Family Network Plans (now Family Network Support Packages) could include significant and intensive efforts which respond flexibly to fund different families' needs, including "providing funding to make adaptations to a relative's home through to compensating someone for reduced working hours".¹² This level of intensive support must be realised within the delivery of the Pathfinder and pilots in order to properly evidence how early support can deliver better experiences and outcomes for families, and establish more effective spending practices for local authorities. Embedding a 'family

¹¹ Kinship (2022a)

¹² MacAlister, J. (2022) [The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report](#)

first' culture will be particularly difficult if local authorities are unable to make a strong and intensive offer of support for wider family and friends who may take on a kinship caring role.

Kinship carers who have taken steps towards permanence through securing a special guardianship order or child arrangements order also require the security that is provided by a statutory entitlement to ongoing financial support. 44% of kinship carers who responded to our 2022 financial allowances survey told us they could not pay all their household bills, and 26% were struggling to afford food for their families.¹³ The *Stable Homes, Built on Love* strategy already recognises the elevated exposure of kinship families to poverty and financial insecurity and how the provision of financial support for carers "often makes good financial sense for local authorities, kinship carers and, ultimately, for children and their outcomes".

"I had to quit my job and there was no consideration for my own children. I had a crisis point myself. I said 'look, I've lost all this money, all this wage, and it's impacting on my own children as well' and they didn't seem to take that into consideration until I had to have a meltdown with a social worker for them to listen. It shouldn't have had to get to that point."

Aunt and special guardian

As such, the Government should confirm within the kinship care strategy a commitment to introducing a standard national financial allowance as described within its children's social care implementation strategy. This allowance should be equivalent to the national minimum fostering allowance and non-means tested, and should come with additional funding for local authorities to accompany delivery. It's also important that carers with a legal order aren't 'locked out' of potential support through a Family Network Support Package if their assessed needs determine this is the only way to offer the level of support required and where there is a risk the child would otherwise go into care.

Paid employment leave

Nearly half of kinship carers told us they had to give up work in order to care for their child.¹⁴ A period of paid leave not only allows carers to better support children and give them the time they need to settle into their new family environment, but also contributes to establishing financial stability for kinship families and prevents carers from having to leave the labour market unnecessarily.

"When X came to me it was on a day of crisis and there was no information given to me. It was just 'you're going to have to quit your job, off you go'. Well what do I do now? I've got no income now."

Aunt and special guardian

The Government should commit to introducing kinship care leave on a par with adoption leave within the kinship care strategy before the end of the year. Introducing care leave would align extremely well with wider Government initiatives to support people with parental and caring responsibilities to remain in the workplace when they would like to, including the 'day one' right to request flexible working and the introduction of leave entitlements for other specific groups as specified in the 2023 Spring Budget.¹⁵

We would also welcome the Government showing leadership in this space, including by introducing measures to support kinship carers in the civil service such as paid kinship care leave. Doing this in

¹³ Kinship (2022b) [Kinship care: Financial Allowances Survey 2022](#)

¹⁴ Kinship (2022a)

¹⁵ HM Treasury (2023) [Spring Budget 2023](#)

addition to moving forward plans to introduce statutory support for kinship carers in the workplace would send a strong signal about the Government's commitment to recognising and valuing kinship carers and levelling up support for them to enable them to remain in the labour market.

Pilots of Family Network Support Packages should include testing of how local authorities can support kinship carers with navigating changes to their employment, such as compensating for lost hours at work and helping with securing more flexible working arrangements. This will be particularly important for informal kinship carers who do not have a legal order securing their family arrangement and may not benefit directly from future statutory entitlements to paid leave.

Support for children in kinship care

Kinship carers regularly highlight the lack of support available to their children. In order for a family network to successfully step in and provide care for a child, it is crucial that they have confidence the child is too going to receive the emotional and practical support they need across education, health and other areas of their life. In our conversations, carers highlighted the disparity in status, rights and entitlements between children in kinship care and other children despite their similar experiences and adversities, and the challenges this brings for family life.

"I hate to use foster care but we haven't got anything else to compare with, and we know it doesn't always work, but it's the only way you can think of it with that comparison. In what world is that fair?"

Grandparent, previously with residence order

"We need that package to acknowledge that there's this enormous group of children who people should know about, professionals should know about."

Grandparent and special guardian

"They've never treated them in the same way they would've done if they were in the care system, but they come with the same baggage and the same experiences."

Grandparent and special guardian

"They have to bring this package altogether and make it what these children are entitled to and it's got to be regardless of order..."

Grandparent, previously with residence order

"Both of my kinship children need extra support but they don't receive it as we moved local authorities. It's been a battle to obtain what they're entitled to."

Family friend and special guardian

"They've been good schools but they haven't taken into account the situation of the children. Three children came under difficult situations and the schools knew that. We made them aware."

Grandparent and special guardian

"The contact was more around birth mum than around X. I don't think his feelings or him waiting there were taken into consideration whatsoever. It was just like 'well we've got to do these assessments so you need to go'. What about the child? It should be centred around the child but I felt it was centred around birth mum."

Aunt and special guardian

The Government should close the gap between children in kinship care and those in local authority care by ensuring they are eligible for the same support in education, including extending eligibility

for support from the Virtual School and designed teacher and for Pupil Premium Plus, and amending the Schools Admissions Code guidance to include priority status for children living in all forms of kinship care.

Whilst the evidence suggests that many children in kinship care would benefit from improved access to support across health and education, the complex routes in and through kinship care – and the impact this has on children's identity and families' relationships with the local authority and other services – demands a different approach to provision and oversight as with other groups. Specific attention should be paid to how best to support contact and its emotional impacts; although enduring family relationships can be one of the best things about kinship care, contact with parents can also be experienced as challenging, uncertain and potentially damaging for children and young people growing up in kinship care.¹⁶

The Government should explore the case for developing a bespoke version of the Adoption Support Fund that is designed specifically with all kinds of kinship families in mind, recognising the unique nature of kinship care and respecting the different approaches often needed between adoptive and kinship families. This is true too in terms of pathways to accessing the support itself; a delivery model designed around structures that exist for one group won't necessarily work effectively for another. This is important given previous evaluations of the Adoption Support Fund which has found lower levels of awareness and effectiveness amongst special guardians in receipt of support than for adoptive parents.¹⁷ The Review of the Adoption Support Fund COVID-19 Scheme also suggested that "SGO families may need a different approach, particularly to marketing support for them".¹⁸

To what extent are you supportive of the working definition of kinship care?

Neither supportive or opposed

We must see greater recognition given to kinship families, established both in terms of specific additional legal rights and entitlements for kinship carers and their children, as well as improved awareness and understanding of kinship care across public services and wider society. These two elements together are crucial to delivering the change which kinship families need, and many of those we spoke to agreed.

"Until they give a status to the child so that schools and universities and doctors and hospitals know what it is, and that it comes with whatever package they're deciding that follows the child. Whichever way you look at it, if you're supporting the child you're supporting the carer, and if you're supporting the carer you're supporting the child. If the status is attached to the child along with improved access to mental health services, therapeutic counselling."

Grandparent, previously with residence order

"For me, it's been tricky at times because it's an informal arrangement. I found some authorities were fine, like the school and the GP. You don't have to have a special bit of paper because I don't have parental responsibility... but it's been quite tricky to navigate. They need an understanding of the many different faces of kinship care and the kind of constraints that kinship carers are under."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

¹⁶ Wellard, S. et al (2017)

¹⁷ Department for Education (2022) [Evaluation of the Adoption Support Fund 2018 to 2022: summary](#)

¹⁸ Department for Education (2021) [Review of the adoption support fund COVID-19 scheme](#)

"As a kinship carer you're often thrown into it, you have to immediately go into it and you're scrambling to make sense of things because it changes your life. There are so many changes you're going through, and it's helpful to feel as though you don't have to explain things over again."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

Our evidence suggests that the needs and experiences of kinship families of all types – regardless of the presence of a legal order or lack thereof – are more similar than they are different, with shared experiences, challenges and strengths that do not neatly create distinct categories based on formalised versus informal arrangements or special guardianship versus other legal orders.¹⁹ Evidence from the family justice system has also demonstrated the overlapping and messy picture of family experiences and local authority involvement which undermines the idea of private and public law routes representing discretely different cases.²⁰ In our conversations, kinship carers also supported efforts which targeted support towards all kinship families.

"They need to look at it holistically. I can understand they would then need to treat people differently but look at the whole and then after that see if there are any natural groupings rather than assume so in the first place. Obviously, all kinship carers have similar needs; it's just their circumstances are different."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"All kinship carers need support across a range of things like financial, emotional etc. Just depending on the type of carer they are and the type of order they may or may not have – most of the time that doesn't make too much of a difference really. We're all going through the same things."

Aunt and special guardian

"When they are putting things in place it's for SGOs and they forget there are other people."

Grandparent, formerly with residence order

It's therefore welcome that the working definition pulls together different types of kinship care arrangements already understood but not clearly defined as 'kinship care' in other legislation and guidance, and builds on this to also include those missing or excluded from existing categories. For example, a proposed 'friend or family member' category explicitly covers relatives such as great aunts, great uncles and cousins who wouldn't be included within the existing definition of 'close family member' within the Children Act 1989. This is important and welcome – 11% of kinship carers who completed our 2022 annual survey would not be seen as 'close family members' for example.²¹

However, it is unclear what the intended use would be for the working definition of kinship care and therefore what difference it would make for kinship families today. Given the existing complexity of kinship care arrangements, any definition must be accompanied by a clear understanding of how and where it will be used to better support kinship families.

Instead, the Government's strategy speaks to likely restricting certain aspects of support – such as financial allowances and kinship care leave – to kinship carers with a special guardianship order or child arrangements order. As such, the practical value of a new definition of kinship care – even if inclusive of more kinship carers than those captured within current legislation – is questionable if it is not directly tied to improved support. There is a risk that, in pursuit of actionable specificity, a new

¹⁹ Kinship (2022c) [Out of the Shadows: a vision for kinship care in England](#)

²⁰ Cusworth, L. et al (2023)

²¹ Kinship (2022a)

definition establishes new or further hierarchies in which groups of kinship carers have eligibility for particular entitlements, and prevents those who may have accessed flexible support earlier from being able to do so. The Government should provide clarity in its kinship care strategy about how any definition would be used and what support it would unlock, particularly for kinship carers in more informal or private family arrangements.

Efforts to promote greater understanding of kinship families and ensure their rights and challenges are recognised within policymaking and public service delivery are welcome. To that end, any definition should be simple to understand and as inclusive of all types of kinship care as possible, and its introduction should be accompanied by an ambitious plan from Government to raise awareness of kinship care amongst key professionals who work with kinship families in health, education and other settings. This will support kinship carers to understand their rights and entitlements, and ensure professionals are more attuned to kinship families' needs and able to deliver tailored support and signposting. This is where the introduction and use of a new definition of kinship care is likely to be most effective.

In your opinion, how can we ensure the delivery of reform is successful?

Financial and workforce stability for all local authorities

The radical recalibration of services, practices and culture cannot be delivered successfully without greater financial and workforce stability. The Government should ensure all local authorities, including those not participating in the Pathfinder or pilots, have the funding they need to deliver their statutory duties and so that all children and families are supported as they need to be. Beyond the strategy, substantial additional investment must be secured within the next Spending Review period and accompanying parliamentary time secured to deliver legislative change. This will help to ensure the scale and ambition of reform can truly be realised in the long term; an approach which continues to deliver discrete pilots and slowly scale up tests of innovative practice is insufficient to deliver the transformative system change required for kinship families.

In our informal conversations with kinship carers too, some too highlighted concerns that the new direction articulated by the strategy and Framework would not be realised without appropriate investment.

"Everything for kinship families in the consultation is great, but without investment and the money behind it, it isn't going to work."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"This is the area that has not been recognised or noticed or supported in any shape or form, and now there's a bit of recognition, it still seems that there's a lot of funding being pumped there [fostering] and it seems a bit of an imbalance."

Grandparent and special guardian

"If we had the funding... then the whole system could work well. That was a frustration a bit with the consultation. Yes, all these things are really great, but unless you've got the money that you're putting behind it, you're not going to be able to enact anything that would make a significant difference."

Family friend and special guardian

Stronger accountability measures and structures

Some kinship carers were worried about placing additional requests on local authorities without appropriate mechanisms to ensure they will be delivered, particularly given their experiences of

having to battle to get what they and their children deserve. Effective accountability structures are critical to delivering successful reform, but the existing patchwork of guidance and discretionary provision has led to a postcode lottery of often poor and sometimes even unlawful support for kinship carers.²²

"Culture change needs to be non-negotiable, not open to interpretation. There should be national standards so that everyone knows what to expect."

Family friend and special guardian

"All the different LAs make their own rules up based on guidelines. The Government need to set the rules solid and then the LAs have to follow them rather than make up their own rules around these guidelines."

Grandparent, previously with residence order

"The allowances are completely different. I'm talking in excess of £100 a week different. She's a single parent. I just don't know how they possibly get away with it. They've means tested her because she didn't know to ask for non means tested and they've taken a load of things out of it. It absolutely blows my mind how they can get away with it."

Aunt and special guardian

"We need less should, could, consider... and more 'do'. Local authorities have an opt out. Will this be the same again after a kinship strategy? Local authorities think about budget first and children second."

Family friend and special guardian

Ofsted has a critical role to play as a significant accountability lever for local authority practice and performance. The Government should support Ofsted to significantly enhance the attention paid to kinship care practice and support within its inspections. Ofsted should also undertake a thematic review of its inspection reports to support this work. It should consider establishing a separate judgement for kinship care within its inspection framework for local authority children's services, similar to the recent (re)introduction of this for care leavers.

Urgent interim steps to support today's kinship families

We share the concerns of many kinship carers that reform would take too long to make an impact on kinship families today given the urgency of many families' situations. This is evidenced in our recent survey where 36% of kinship carers not getting the support they needed said they were worried they might have to stop caring for their child in the future.²³ Whilst significant new legislative force is needed, there's a key opportunity with the kinship care strategy to build the necessary momentum ahead of future legislative change which will both support current practice and ensure the best possible environment before any new duties become active.

"What happens between now and then? We are working towards something, but what about before any legislation is introduced?"

Family friend and special guardian

"What are you doing as a department to ensure that LAs get their ducks in a row and give them a heads up as to what is coming for kinship families? Services are failing. The risk is that they will take their foot off the pedal with the excuse they know changes are coming."

²² Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (2018) [Firm foundations: complaints about council support and advice for special guardians](#)

²³ Kinship (2022a)

Family friend and special guardian

It's therefore welcome that the Government's strategy is clear that they "do not want local authorities and partners to feel the need to wait for permission to act now" and they should "feel confident to pursue approaches and ways of working that we know are the right ones" ahead of any future legislative change, such as the provision of financial allowances for kinship carers. There is substantial existing leading practice around kinship care and supporting kinship families with a strong evidence base for effectiveness which should be replicated elsewhere. For example, Kinship Connected – which delivers intensive 1:1 support and facilitated peer support groups in partnership with local authorities – has been proven to deliver reduced isolation and financial concerns and improved relationships and confidence for kinship carers.²⁴

However, local authorities will need additional support to be able to do this well, and the Government should consider all available non-legislative powers it has to both encourage good and challenge poor policy and practice. For example, at a minimum interim step, the Government should mandate that all local authorities have an up-to-date, accessible and lawful policy on the provision of financial and other support for all kinship carers. Existing evidence from Kinship on the provision of financial support for special guardians is clear that delivering a non-means tested allowance until the child reaches at least 18 makes sense and delivers good outcomes for families and for the local authority.²⁵ This would help to reduce the unacceptable levels of variation and poor practice in financial support for special guardians and kinship carers, and ensure kinship carers in each local authority had a firm understanding of their rights and other support available to them, and could hold their local authorities to account more effectively.

The Government should also work with local authorities to ensure kinship carers can access the emergency financial support they need right now, particularly as the cost of living crisis continues to have a significant impact on families across the country. Existing special guardianship guidance is very clear that "financial issues should not be the sole reason for a special guardianship arrangement failing to survive".²⁶ The Government should consider additional targeted funding for kinship families and others supported by children's social care services, particularly where there is an identified risk to permanence or of family breakdown.

²⁴ Kinship (2023) [Kinship Connected](#) [Accessed 10 May 2023]

²⁵ Kinship (2022d) [Developing Good Practice in Financially Supporting Special Guardians: a guide for local authorities](#)

²⁶ Department for Education (2017) [Special guardianship guidance](#)

Children's social care national framework and dashboard

Outcome 2: children and young people are supported by their family network

Are there any other ways leaders and practitioners should work towards this outcome which are not specified in the National Framework?

To best ensure that children and young people are supported by their family network, it is crucial that leaders and practitioners have a strong and nuanced understanding about the unique nature of kinship care and how it differs from other areas of practice in children's social care.

Kinship care involves navigating complex family dynamics and the often antagonistic relationships which can act to both strengthen and inhibit stability and a sense of belonging for children at different times of their lives. Kinship carers told us that part of this was also recognising the complicated lives of families and the mixed feelings of loyalty as well as frustration or anger which come alongside the circumstances which often lead to children entering kinship care. Leaders and practitioners must not only see challenges or weaknesses within kinship families which need to be solved or managed through good social work support, but also support and enhance their unique strengths and qualities which allow children to thrive and flourish.

"It's understanding intrinsically what's the difference between being a kinship carer and being a foster carer or adopting. Just the whole way of thinking, the whole way you're perceived as well."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"It's hard in the fact that sometimes the reason you're looking after a child is because something has gone wrong in the family somewhere or with someone in your family, and that's a really tricky minefield to navigate.... I don't talk to lots of people about it – my close friends know but I don't go round telling everyone because there's a loyalty to other people in my family. It's quite tricky. Kinship has lots of complications. It could also be that you've been bereaved. I think kinship carers might have more complex needs than foster carers or adopters because of the different situations which have brought about the situation in the first place."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"We need standards, not just in management speak but to understand what this actually means for a person accessing a service. 'I will know that I have achieved this standard when a kinship carer says x, y, z' – not a tick box exercise but an ongoing conversation."

Family friend and special guardian

The proposed Practice Guides which will accompany each Framework outcome should be built on existing research and evidence in supporting kinship carers, such as work commissioned by the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board including 'Key elements of a special guardianship support service'²⁷ and 'Developing good practice in financially supporting special guardians'.²⁸ They should also address some of the challenges highlighted by specialist social workers who practice in kinship care, especially given its unique mix of skills and knowledge which draw from elements of both child protection and mainstream fostering practice.²⁹ This includes improving social

²⁷ Kinship (2020) [Key elements of a special guardianship support service](#) [Accessed 10 May 2023]

²⁸ Kinship (2022d)

²⁹ Hunt, J. (2021)

workers' delivery of high-quality support plans tailored to the unique needs of each child, and in offering advice or help with parental contact – this can be particularly difficult for kinship families to navigate given existing very complex and challenging family relationships and especially in the context of adversarial court processes.

Finally, building on the cross-Framework principle of anti-discriminatory practice, leaders and practitioners should ensure that this is understood within the specific kinship care context. This is important given the evidence on racial disparities in kinship care, and particularly the overrepresentation of children from Black and minoritized ethnic backgrounds in informal kinship care arrangements.³⁰ A nuanced and respectful understanding of different cultural models of parenting and understandings of family is crucial. Kinship has recently launched a new research project with the Rees Centre, supported by the KPMG Foundation, to deepen our understanding about the experiences of Black and Asian kinship families to generate further evidence and improve support and services for these kinship families.³¹

Would you recommend any other existing indicators or evidence to support learning around this outcome?

It is clear that the proposed number and quality of Dashboard Indicators is significantly limited by the lack of available and robust data on kinship care arrangements. The Government should work closely with the sector and organisations such as What Works for Early Intervention & Children's Social Care to identify gaps in statutory and wider data collection and publication, and confirm plans to improve this within its data strategy to be published by the end of 2023. It should also commit to delivering timely analysis of the 2021 Census data to produce an updated estimate of the number of children living in kinship care, and utilise other means of data collection available within Government (e.g. the School Census). The new children's social care data and digital expert forum must include individuals with expertise around kinship care.

Regardless, it is important that Initial Dashboard Indicators do not push the system towards increasing the number and/or proportion of all children unable to live with their parents into kinship care before accompanying reforms to financial and other support for all kinship carers have been introduced. To do so would be dangerous and not in children's best interests. We urge the Government to make additional commitments to support for special guardians and other groups of kinship carers in the forthcoming kinship care strategy, and only seek to include Dashboard Indicators which incentivise the placing of more children into kinship care once we are confident these different legal arrangements are well-supported by policy and practice.

Stability can be one 'marker' of a positive kinship arrangement, but alone it does not tell us everything we need to know about whether it is or was 'successful'. Measures of stability in other areas of children's social care also don't always align neatly within kinship care contexts. For example, children may move within the family network (e.g. to live with siblings rather than grandparents), and 'placement breakdown' likely doesn't mark the complete termination of adult relationships as it might in a foster care context.

"That [stability] doesn't measure that huge grey area where families are stressed up to their eyeballs but they're still clinging on there. It doesn't mean that all's well, it just means that

³⁰ What Works for Children's Social Care (2022) [Understanding formal kinship care arrangements in England](#)

³¹ Kinship (6 April 2023) [Kinship launches major new research on the experiences of kinship families from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, supported by the KPMG Foundation](#) [Accessed 10 May 23]

some people are more resilient and are just fighting through. They need to balance it with the qualitative stuff and speak to people about their experiences."

Grandparent and special guardian

In particular, kinship carers within our conversations wanted to encourage future measures of kinship reform success or broader evaluation to include as much dialogue directly with kinship families as possible to understand how reforms were being experienced by families themselves. Numerical indicators were seen as 'signals' to help aid understanding but broadly insufficient at giving a helpful picture about why a particular element of support or practice reform was (or wasn't) making a difference.

"In terms of measuring, you need to talk to the families. You need to directly speak to them... It's about having those conversations and being heard so it's not just 'oh we've got this in place, tick off that box' because sometimes I feel like you can tick things off because on paper it looks like you've achieved it, but there might be things missing under that. It's having those conversations with the kinship carers – what worked, what didn't, what could be better? It's those personal conversations that need to be had."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"We need to ensure that local authorities aren't marking their own homework. There needs to be user involvement."

Family friend and special guardian

"I don't think I got asked at any point how I was feeling. I was just expected to get on with it."

Aunt and special guardian

"If you're not careful, you get so bogged down by the numbers. And the numbers tell you something, yes... you can have as many statistics as you like about how many have broken down or how many have been a success... but in order to evaluate it properly you need to drill down into why this one was successful or why this one broke down. You can't assume – it might be nothing to do with the support they got. There's so many variables."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

"Evaluation mustn't be a stick that people are beaten with where they have to come up with results in six months' time. Sometimes things take a while to start getting results. It needs to be done with people who really understand. Evaluation needs to be ongoing. Not 'do this' and then 9 or 12 months in – evaluate. Because when you have an ongoing evaluation, you can tweak it as you go."

Grandparent and informal kinship carer

About Kinship

Kinship is the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We offer kinship carers financial, legal, practical, and emotional support and understanding from the moment they need it, for as long as they need it. Our expert advice, information, and guidance help with complicated and stressful decisions that so many kinship families must make. We are always there to support them through difficult times and celebrate the good.

Kinship carers are strong and determined. Together, they are powerful. We help them build communities of support and action by connecting families locally and across England and Wales. We are at the heart of kinship networks, partnering with and influencing service providers, local and national government, and other organisations.

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