

Forced Out

delivering equality for
kinship carers in the
workplace

Sam Turner

June 2023



“Kinship carers are not recognised within the workplace in the same way as maternity or adoption, employers fail to recognise the impact on individuals and families who take on the role of kinship carer and how time is needed to make relevant adjustments... Kinship care is undervalued in all aspects of society from employment to Local Authority support. As family members we are just expected to be grateful to give up our hopes and dreams for our future and live in poverty to raise the children of our relatives.”

Special guardian, aged 55-64

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Foreword

Dr Lucy Peake, Chief Executive

Kinship has stood shoulder to shoulder with kinship families for more than two decades, leading the development of pioneering new programmes and services to help kinship carers and their children thrive, and campaigning alongside them to push for the changes they want to see.

Whilst kinship care has been on a remarkable journey over the past twelve months, our focus on highlighting the issues facing kinship carers in employment isn't new.

Our very first annual survey in 2009 explored how many grandparents were giving up work or reducing their hours when they became the main carer for their grandchildren. In 2012, we published *'Giving up the day job? Kinship Carers and Employment'* which provided a picture of the employment status of kinship carers and explored the link between dropping out of the labour market and taking on this caring role, and made a number of policy recommendations including a new paid leave entitlement for kinship carers. Our 2017 submission to the Work and Pensions Committee's inquiry into support for carers shared the views and perspectives of kinship carers and called for parity with adoption leave and greater awareness and support from employers. Most recently, our 2022 annual survey report – *The Cost of Loving* – found that nearly half of kinship carers were forced to give up work at some point to care for their children and demonstrated the scale of underemployment for kinship carers of working age.

Whilst our strong evidence has helped us make a robust case for change, subsequent action from Government, local authorities and employers has been stubbornly slow. *Forced Out* represents our renewed push for change, revealing new understanding about kinship carers' difficult experiences in the workplace and the devastating consequences for kinship families and the state. Too many kinship carers continue to be forced out of the labour market unnecessarily and often permanently. Thousands each year are unjustly robbed of a period of stability where they can be free of constant worries about financial hardship, and where they have the time to settle children into their new home after they have experienced significant trauma, separation and loss.

2023 must be the year this changes for kinship families.

At the time of writing, more than 12,600 people have supported Kinship's **#ValueOurLove** campaign by signing our online petition and contacting their MP, urging them to value the love that kinship carers provide for more than 162,000 children across England and Wales. The campaign calls for the Government to equalise the support provided between kinship families and foster and adoptive families, including the provision of paid employment leave for kinship carers on a par with adoption leave.

Since launching in October 2022, the **#ValueOurLove** campaign has helped to push the UK Government on the commitments it is making to kinship families in England following the recommendations of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. In February 2023, the Government published its children's social care implementation strategy – *Stable Homes, Built on Love* – which marked a step change in how the Government spoke about kinship care and prioritised support for kinship carers and their children. It made a number of new commitments to kinship families called for by our **#ValueOurLove** campaign, including a dedicated kinship care strategy and greater access to support and training for kinship carers.

We are now expecting the Government to publish this dedicated kinship care strategy by the end of 2023. This report marks our renewed call to the Government to include within this forthcoming strategy specific commitments to support kinship carers in the workplace, including legislating to introduce a new statutory entitlement to kinship care leave and pay.

But the change kinship carers need won't happen just with the writing of new legislation or guidance. As the report identifies, employers and others have a significant role to play too – and they don't need to wait to act. I am proud that we have our own Kinship Care Leave policy at Kinship which offers all kinship carer employees the same paid leave benefits as those who adopt. Now we want to see others step up and make the same offer to their employees too.

That's why I'm excited that Kinship has been developing a Kinship Friendly Employers scheme since last year to encourage and support employers across England and Wales to start making positive changes in their organisations today. This aims to ensure that kinship carers can access fair, flexible and funded support and establish positive workplace cultures which understand and respect their kinship carer employees. Having developed a successful fostering friendly employment scheme earlier in my career, I came to Kinship with the ambition to deliver something similar for kinship carers. Earlier this year, we brought together a number of employers including KPMG, John Lewis, Atkins Global, Card Factory and the Office of the Children's Commissioner to explore how kinship friendly policies could operate in different workplaces, and I look forward to seeing how Kinship can continue to lead the way in working alongside many more employers in the future.

I hope that, in the next two decades, we'll see a completely different picture for kinship families – one where new employment rights enshrined in legislation, proper financial support from local authorities, and supportive employers committed to their kinship carer employees jointly deliver what kinship carers and their children need and deserve.

June 2023

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report explores the views and experiences of kinship carers around employment, based on a survey of more than 500 kinship carers.

Currently, kinship carers do not have any specific entitlements at work. Last year, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England recommended that kinship leave - equivalent to adoption leave - be provided to special guardians and kinship carers with a child arrangements order where the child would otherwise be in care. The UK Government's children's social care implementation strategy, published in February 2023, said it would "explore possible additional workplace entitlements" for this group of carers, and plans to publish a dedicated kinship care strategy by the end of 2023.

Key findings

1. Employment support for kinship carers from employers and local authorities is typically poor or non-existent.

68% of kinship carers said their employer didn't offer support to kinship carers. Many experience stigmatising attitudes and a lack of understanding about the nature of kinship care, but even where there is goodwill and efforts made by individual managers and HR teams, the lack of specific statutory entitlements for kinship carers is significantly limiting the support they can receive. Alongside this, only 23% of kinship carers were offered help by their local authority. Too many kinship carers are explicitly told to give up or reduce work by the local authority in order to take on the care of a child, and then left without sufficient financial and other support to help them cope with the resultant impact this has on their families.

2. The result is significant and often permanent unemployment and underemployment for kinship carers.

More than 4 in 10 (41%) kinship carers told us they had to leave work permanently and a further 45% were forced to reduce their working hours after they became a kinship carer. Poor employment support is driving kinship carers out of the labour market permanently and a lack of suitably flexible working options is preventing many from continuing in and returning to work as they would like to. As kinship carers are disproportionately women, this is likely to be exacerbating existing gendered dynamics and inequalities in terms of employment and earnings.

3. This loss of employment is leading to devastating consequences for kinship families.

More than one-third of kinship carers experienced an income drop of more than 50% after they stepped up to take on the care of a child. The result of forced withdrawal from employment is often significant financial hardship and poverty for kinship families. Kinship carers told us that losing their jobs often led to poor health and wellbeing, a loss of identity and relationships, and reduced stability for their children.

4. It also comes at significant cost to the state.






28% of kinship carers had to claim benefits due to changes in their employment status after they took on their caring role. This creates significant and long-term impacts for the public purse. Kinship carers, prior to taking on the care of a child, are overrepresented in the healthcare, education and social care sectors. As such, the lack of employment support for kinship carers and their subsequent withdrawal from the labour market is likely to be exacerbating significant workforce crises within our hospitals, schools and communities.

5. To help change this, kinship carers want to see a right to paid leave and greater access to flexible working arrangements from employers who understand kinship care.

More than half of kinship carers said a right to paid leave on a par with adoption leave and pay would have prevented them from leaving work or changing their employment status. Kinship carers want time to settle and bond with children who have experienced trauma, separation and loss, without the intense worry which arises from unemployment and financial insecurity. They also want to see more flexible working options which consider their caring responsibilities, and greater employer understanding about the unique nature of kinship care.

Recommendations

For more detail, please see the full 'Recommendations' section (page 50).

-  1. The Government should introduce a right to paid kinship care leave for all kinship carers.
-  2. The Government should ensure that its planned Pathfinder and pilot activity includes elements of employment support for kinship families.
-  3. The Government should introduce a mandatory financial allowance for kinship carers.
-  4. Local authorities should provide better employment advice and support to kinship families.
-  5. Employers should introduce kinship friendly employment policies and seek to improve their understanding of kinship care.

Introduction

This report explores the views and experiences of kinship carers around employment, including the support kinship carers received from their local authority and employer, the impact that poor employment support has for kinship families, and what support kinship carers would like to see. It demonstrates that a lack of workplace support for kinship carers, coupled with poor financial, practical and emotional support more broadly for kinship families, is unnecessarily pushing kinship carers out the labour market and creating devastating consequences for families and significant costs for the state. It makes a series of recommendations to Government, local authorities and employers to improve the support offered to kinship carers around employment. In particular, it encourages the Government to commit to introducing a right to kinship care leave on a par with adoption leave for all kinship carers within its forthcoming kinship care strategy and asks employers to adopt kinship friendly employment policies.

About kinship care

Kinship care is when a child lives all or most of the time with a relative or friend who isn't their parent, usually because their parents aren't able to care for them. That relative or friend is called a kinship carer. Many kinship carers are grandparents, but they are also siblings, aunts, uncles, family friends and others with a close connection to the child. There are more than 162,000 children growing up in kinship care across England and Wales.¹

Kinship care is most commonly an informal arrangement made privately with a child's parents. In such arrangements, kinship carers will not have parental responsibility for the child. Formalised kinship care arrangements include those secured through a legal order made by a family court such as a special guardianship order (SGO) or child arrangements order (CAO) which grant the kinship carer(s) parental responsibility, as well as kinship foster care (often known as 'family and friends foster care') where a child is placed by the local authority and is therefore considered 'looked after' by children's services. Families may find their arrangement changes over time with their circumstances. The support available to kinship carers and their children is often dependent on the type of arrangement they have.

For more information about kinship care, please visit the Kinship website at kinship.org.uk

Legal and policy context

Kinship carers do not currently have any specific entitlements at work. However, they may be able to take advantage of other entitlements available in the workplace, particularly those established to support parents and others with caring responsibilities. This often depends on the type of kinship care arrangement in place.²

¹ Wijedasa (2017)

² For more information on time off work for kinship carers, please visit <https://compass.kinship.org.uk/advice-and-information/time-off-work-for-kinship-carers/>

Some kinship carers will be eligible for unpaid **parental leave**. To be eligible, carers must be an employee, have or expect to have parental responsibility for a child under 18, and have worked for their employer for at least one year. Therefore, this leave is only available to those with a legal order which has granted parental responsibility, such as a special guardianship order or child arrangements order; kinship foster carers and informal kinship carers are ineligible. Eligible kinship carers can take up to 4 weeks per year and 18 weeks in total of parental leave per child. 21 days' notice must be given and employees must inform their employers when the leave is to start and finish; this can be extremely challenging for kinship carers given the often unplanned beginnings to their arrangements.

All kinship carers, regardless of legal order or lack thereof, are eligible to take **Time Off for Dependents**. This allows all employees, regardless of how long they've been employed, to take time off in an emergency situation (e.g. if their child is ill or injured, or if childcare arrangements have fallen through).

Kinship carers also have the option to request **flexible working** from their employer. This could be to reduce working hours, change start and finish times, move to remote working or a compressed hours schedule, or other things. Anyone can make an informal request, but employees with 26 weeks of service have a statutory right to make a flexible working request. Employers are only able to refuse requests for good business reasons. If approved, changes are permanent. As such, formal flexible working requests are most appropriate for kinship carers caring long-term for a child in a situation where they are able to detail exactly what flexible working arrangements are required.

Employees who adopt a child (as well as foster parents approved for adoption and parents who have a child through surrogacy) may be eligible for **adoption pay and leave**. Similar to maternity leave, this provides adopters with the entitlement to take 52 weeks of leave and the right to return to their job after this. During this time, employment rights are protected. When a couple adopt, one person receives adoption leave and the other may be eligible for paternity leave and pay, although they may also choose to use the shared parental leave scheme. Statutory Adoption Pay is paid in the same way as wages for up to 39 weeks, providing 90% of average weekly earnings for the adopter in the first six weeks, and then the same or £172.48 (whichever is lower) for the next 33 weeks. Statutory guidance is clear that special guardians and kinship carers are not eligible for adoption pay and leave.

In May 2022, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England recommended that "all special guardians and kinship carers with a Child Arrangement Order should be given kinship leave, which matches the entitlement given to adopters".³ It also recommended that new 'Family Network Plans' were developed to support wider family networks at an earlier stage to care for children and avoid them entering local authority care, and that these should be used to intensively support kinship carers

3 MacAlister (2022)

by providing funding for things like "compensating some for reduced working hours".

In February 2023, responding to the recommendations, in its children's social care implementation strategy – *Stable Homes, Built on Love* – the Government said it would "explore possible additional workplace entitlements... for kinship carers with SGOs and CAOs" and also suggested that "businesses can ask themselves whether they have employment policies in place to support kinship carers". It also committed to investing £45 million in a 'Families First for Children' Pathfinder and developing a separate series of pilots to test out 'Family Network Support Packages' (a renamed version of 'Family Network Plans' as recommended by the Independent Review) to flexibly fund and support family-led alternatives to care. The Government is expected to detail further funded commitments for kinship families in its dedicated kinship care strategy, to be published by the end of 2023.

Beyond children's social care, the Government has taken steps to support greater numbers of people with parental and caring responsibilities to remain in the workplace when they would like to. In the 2023 Spring Budget, it committed to reform the statutory framework for flexible working to provide employees with a 'day one' right to request their job be done flexibly and to launch a call for evidence to understand more about less-formalised types of flexibility in the workplace.⁴ The 2023 Spring Budget also increased tax relief on pensions to encourage workers aged over 50 to extend their working lives, and expanded childcare support to target the estimated 435,000 people in England caring for a child under 3 who are economically inactive due to their caring responsibilities. On 24 May 2023, the Carer's Leave Bill – brought forward by Wendy Chamberlain MP – gained Royal Assent and became the Carer's Leave Act, entitling unpaid carers to one week of unpaid leave a year. The Government is also backing additional Private Members' Bills that provide parents with greater protections against redundancy and parents of children receiving neo-natal care with paid statutory leave.

Methodology

This report is based on the responses from an online survey of kinship carers, developed using Form Assembly and live from 6 February to 27 February 2023. The survey was promoted initially only to a targeted group of kinship carers who had responded to relevant questions around employment within our 2022 annual survey, but following very strong interest and positive feedback from this group, the survey was then also promoted more widely to Kinship's full kinship carer Community and through our social media channels. Given the lower scale of promotion compared to our previous financial allowances and annual surveys – which have recently received around 1500 responses – this survey received a total of 509 responses from kinship carers across England and Wales. Respondents were free to choose which questions they wanted to answer. Where included within the responses in the 'Key findings and discussion' section, the number following the letter n reflects the number of respondents who chose to respond to that particular question.

⁴ HM Treasury (2023)

KINSHIP FORCED OUT

Most questions required respondents to select individual or multiple fixed options, but some were free text questions which were analysed thematically; verbatim responses from survey respondents are shared anonymously and unedited below, with the type of kinship carer and their age band noted for context.

Any case studies included come from kinship carers supported by Kinship and/or who are involved in our policy, participation, volunteering and campaigning activity. All are shared with full permission. Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

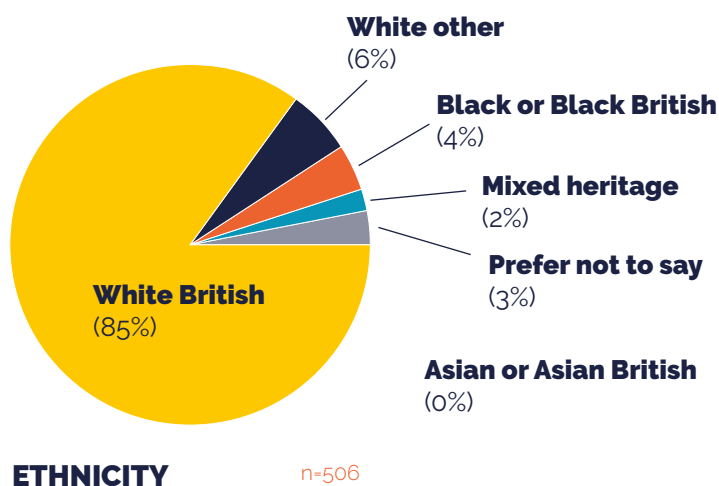
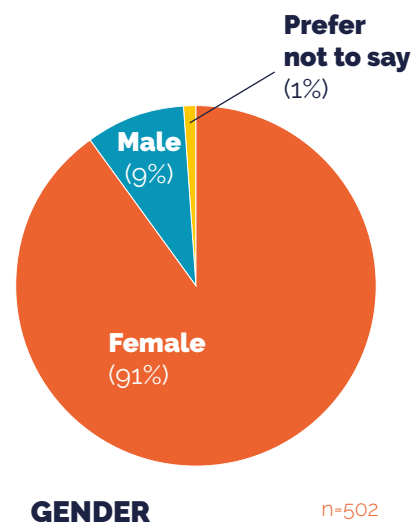
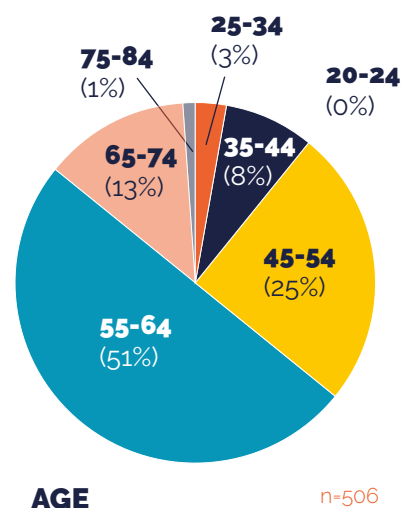
Key findings and discussion

About the kinship carers

Age, gender and ethnicity

91% of respondents were female, 65% were aged 55 or over, and 85% were White British. This is broadly consistent with previous Kinship surveys and aligns with what we know about kinship carers typically being older women, most commonly grandparents.⁵ Although a lack of good employment support can impact on all kinship carers regardless of age or gender, this is likely to exacerbate some of the existing challenges faced by older women in particular. The lifetime financial losses associated with both the cumulative impact of the gender pay gap and previous time spent out of the labour market (and without pension contributions) if raising their own children will likely intensify financial challenges when they become a kinship carer, and ageist attitudes will make it more difficult for them to re-enter the workforce at an older age. Women's increasing retirement age means more kinship carers in the future will be of working age, but the circumstances of taking on a kinship caring role means they're significantly less able to remain in the labour market.

However, the ethnicity profile of our survey respondents does not reflect what we would expect for the kinship carer population given what we know about the higher prevalence of kinship care within children from Black and minority ethnic groups.⁶ Whilst the overrepresentation of white kinship carers within our survey respondents is likely to be at least partially a function of the overrepresentation of carers in formalised kinship family arrangements (i.e. those secured by a legal order), this misalignment is important context when interpreting the results and key findings.



Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

⁵ Wijedasa (2015)
⁶ Ibid

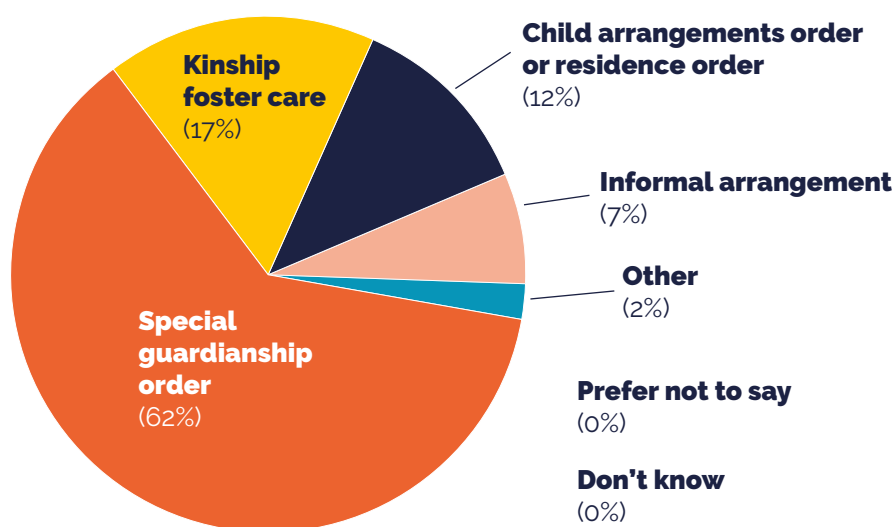
KINSHIP FORCED OUT

Given evidence which demonstrates the continued impact and scale of systemic racism and discrimination within the labour market⁷, it is likely that the ethnicity of kinship carers has significant consequences for their experiences and outcomes in employment when they take on the role and beyond. Therefore, the cases studies and analysis included within this report, whilst amplifying a diverse range of views and experiences, do not reflect a representative sample of all kinship carers. As part of Kinship's study exploring the experiences of kinship carers from Black and Asian communities⁸, we aim to utilise the findings to bolster our understanding of the experiences of these carers in employment and seek to deliver future surveys which better reach and hear from the entire diversity of the kinship carer population.

Type of kinship family arrangement

The vast majority of kinship carers – at the time of the period of employment referred to in their responses to the survey questions – already had or were working towards a formalised kinship care arrangement (i.e. where a legal order is present securing the family arrangement). Most commonly this was a special guardianship order, the vast majority of these (90%) being made through the public law route following care proceedings and the remaining (10%) being made privately. Kinship carers with informal family arrangements where no legal order was present made up only 7% of respondents, despite our understanding from research evidence that this is the largest group of kinship carers.⁹

Our survey sample is biased towards kinship carers who receive support and are aware of our services, and given the way that support from central government, local authorities and other organisations (including employers) is more likely to be restricted or available to those with formalised kinship arrangements, this is also reflected in the survey cohort; the findings are therefore likely to present a more positive picture of kinship carers' experiences than is representative of the overall population.



ARRANGEMENT

n=509

⁷ TUC (2022)
⁸ Kinship (2023)
⁹ Wijedasa (2015)

Where kinship carers work

**Kinship carers are overrepresented in the healthcare, education and social care sectors.**

When completing the survey, respondents were able to select multiple options to most accurately reflect their current or previous sector of employment. However, the vast majority only selected one option. This allowed us to compare with national industry employment data and understand the relative under- and over- representation of kinship carers within particular sectors.

	SECTOR (top 5)	%
	Healthcare	24%
	Teacher training and education	17%
	Retail	12%
	Social care	9%
	Public services and administration	8%

n=474

Excluding even those who did select multiple sectors, nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents told us they currently or previously worked in healthcare and a further 9% in social care; combined this is a significantly larger proportion than that of the entire UK workforce working in 'human health and social work activities' (13%).¹⁰ Even with the considerable overrepresentation of female respondents in our survey – consistent with previous surveys of kinship carers – the proportion is still higher than would be expected given 21% of working women are employed in 'human health and social work activities'. Similarly, whilst 10% of the whole UK workforce (and 16% workforce when looking at women only) are employed in education, 17% of kinship carers told us they worked in teacher training or education.

Responses to our survey therefore clearly indicate that kinship carers are overrepresented in key, largely public sector, areas of the labour market such as health, education and social care. Whilst the reasons for this are complex and will likely involve the interaction of multiple factors such as age, gender, location and others, the result is markedly disproportionate participation in particular areas of the labour market. These are also sectors currently experiencing significant workforce challenges; there are an estimated 165,000 vacancies in adult social care¹¹ on any given day across the UK (the highest since records began in 2012/13) and a record high vacancy rate for NHS nurses at 11.8% of the total workforce (increasing most recently by 21% year on year)¹², and teacher vacancies posted by schools were 93% higher in the academic year up to February 2023 than at the same point in the year before the start of the pandemic¹³.

¹⁰ ONS (2023)

¹¹ Skills for Care (2022)

¹² NHS Digital (2022)

¹³ NFER (2023)

As such, the lack of employment support for kinship carers – which often ultimately leads to their full or partial withdrawal from the labour market – is also disproportionately impacting on key sectors already facing record breaking vacancy rates. By investing in greater statutory and employer support for kinship carers, we can be confident we are supporting a cohort already more likely to be economically vulnerable and living in deprivation than parents in the general population¹⁴ to remain in employment when they want to, and these efforts are also likely to address specific workforce gaps in the NHS, in our schools, and in our communities.

"I hadn't long qualified as a nurse, and needed more experience, so feel my confidence was massively impacted by the lack of support. I now don't feel able to return to this line of work and felt very let down that the NHS didn't support me."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"I retired early and my partner went part time. We both had senior jobs in NHS."

Kinship foster carer, aged 55-64

"I took early retirement as a headteacher when this all started."

Special guardian, aged 65-74

"I had a full time contract and due to the amount of meetings with social workers, care teams, school and supervising contact with parents I reduced my hours initially to part time. This still caused problems due to rotas being issued 6 weeks ahead and still clashed with meetings I needed to attend. I felt I had no other choice than to leave the permanent contract and instead work in a zero hour contract on the Nurse Bank contract so I could manage my own rota... They [employer] said in meetings that they would support me but in reality when I needed to swap a shift or try and use holiday they said I was leaving the ward short so the request could not be met... We now have to move house again due to the relationship break down and I am needing to rely on benefits to top up my wage."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"Had started teacher training, had a 5 year plan in place, all gone."

Kinship foster carer, aged 55-64

¹⁴ Hunt (2020)

Case study: Julia

Julia, aged 68, lives in Littlehampton, West Sussex. She cares for her three granddaughters alongside her husband.

"I really enjoyed my job as a manager for a NHS medical practice and didn't want to give it up, but I was told by social services that I had to if we were going to take care of our grandchildren, who were obviously our priority.

Our income plummeted after that as I was forced to go on benefits. I'd worked hard for my job. I went from being a cleaner to a manager role where I was hiring and training and managing a big budget. I'd went to university as a mature student and got a diploma. So it was massive hit in every respect to give it up.

If I'd had the chance to have paid leave and have the time to be with the children when they first arrived then it would have been better for all of us and I could have gone back to work. Our lives would have been much better as we would have had a bigger income.

I am now on a local authority working group trying to make them understand what kinship carers really need - things like paid leave the same as adopters and birth parents, so they can keep their jobs and have time bonding with the children."

Kinship carers' experiences with their employers

Informing their employer

n=503



88% of kinship carers told their employer about becoming a kinship carer.

The vast majority of respondents told their employer about becoming a kinship carer, but a significant minority (12%) did not disclose this information. Although we did not ask about the reasons for this, it is telling that a higher proportion of informal kinship carers (26%) did not share this information with their employer, suggesting that they may have been less sure about whether or not they would be eligible for workplace support or worried about needing some kind of formalised evidence of their new caring responsibilities, particularly given their lack of parental responsibility.

It's also likely that feelings of stigma influenced carers' decisions of whether or not to inform their employer and seek support or guidance. In our 2020 annual survey, two-thirds of kinship carers told us they felt people made negative judgements about them.¹⁵ Previous Kinship surveys have also highlighted that kinship carers feel they are treated rudely, differently or discriminated against by professionals and people in their communities because of their role.¹⁶ For many kinship carers, complex family dynamics and parallel feelings of shame and loyalty will make discussing their situations challenging even with trusted friends and experienced professionals; these difficulties will be heightened when speaking with colleagues where relationships may often be less developed and where professional hierarchies and worries about job security or performance will influence the decision being made.

¹⁵ Grandparents Plus (2020)

¹⁶ Grandparents Plus (2014)

"They do help where they can however that stigma is there because I'm the aunty and not mother I'm treat [sic] differently."

Informal kinship carer, aged 35-44

"I didn't tell anybody as that would have led to me having to explain."

Special guardian, aged 65-74

"My manager didn't ask me much at all about my kinship role. I didn't really want to tell her much about my daughter and her difficulties so I never really talked about my situation."

Informal kinship carer, aged 55-64

As part of any efforts to improve statutory and other employer-led support for kinship carers in the workplace, it's therefore vital that these are accompanied by an ambitious plan to raise awareness of kinship care and address the stigma which many kinship families experience. Government, local authorities, wider public services and employers can all play their part in boosting awareness and understanding of kinship families, and ensuring that kinship carers feel more comfortable speaking with their employers about the support which might be available when they take on the role. This would also help employers to deliver the right kind of support at the right time which recognises the unique challenges which arise for new kinship carers, and how their experiences differ to others with new parental or caring responsibilities.

n=439



Only 11% of kinship carers were asked by their employer to provide proof that they were a kinship carer.

Of those who did submit proof, 44% provided a letter from the local authority and 40% provided a copy of their legal order from the family court.

It's likely that this figure is low given the lack of statutory and employer support available for kinship carers and therefore the absence of any fixed requirements to offer evidence to the employer as is the case for other parental and adoption leave and pay. As described further below in the 'Employer support' section, the majority of kinship carers were reliant on good personal relationships with their managers in order to make a case for workplace support, and where this was granted, proof will likely have been seen as unnecessary. As such, the lack of proof requested by employers of a kinship carer's status is likely more reflective of a lack of support available than the absence of a specific evidentiary need.

"I was at the beginning stages of becoming a Kinship Carer so I had no written proof but my employer was very understanding and took my word for it."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"All my line managers have been incredibly supportive and continued after SGO. I can do condensed hours, work from home flexi hours etc. Never asked for any proof of meetings etc. Respect and trust to and from management."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

KINSHIP FORCED OUT

In addition, the low numbers requesting proof is also likely to reflect the experiences of many who responded to our survey who did not make any formalised requests for support, often because they weren't aware of support being available or because initial discussions with line managers had gone poorly and they lacked any confidence of securing additional support to a level where evidence might be required.

"Did not try, it would have been pointless."

Special guardian, aged 65-74

"Didn't get a chance with HR or line management they just let me go."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

Employer support

n=497



68% of kinship carers said their employer didn't offer support to kinship carers.

In addition, a further 18% said they didn't know, meaning only 14% of respondents said they were aware of available support from their employer when they became a kinship carer.

Where this was available, kinship carers shared that this was predominantly flexible working, but a minority also said they had agreed a defined period of paid or unpaid leave and others were able to take advantage of extended compassionate leave or ad hoc leave for appointments, for example. Many spoke of negotiating new working patterns and late starts/early finishes in order to attend meetings with social workers, court dates or other fixed appointments.

A small minority told us about very positive employer interactions where their employer – albeit initially uncertain about or unfamiliar with the situation – was able to step up as they needed them to and deliver flexible and tailored support, in some occasions matching the level of statutory support available to new parents and adopters. In many cases, it was the kinship carer themselves who led this change, doing the work to teach their employer about kinship care, the disparity in support compared to others with parental and caring responsibilities, and sharing their views and recommendations not only to support their own situation but that of other potential kinship carer employees in the future.

"I feel so lucky with my experience although it was often stressful and uncertain. I honestly do not know what I would have done if my employer did not match their adoption leave provision. There is honestly no way I could have taken on a deeply traumatised 2 year old without time, a secure job, and enough money to provide them a safe and joyful life. It would have been difficult but without paid leave from work I would have had to have had said no to the SGO, which would have broken me. Thankfully, I was able to spend a whole year with my nephew, developing a secure attachment, learning how to be a therapeutic parent, and help him heal from his trauma. Now he is a different child completely, and I feel ready to return to work safe in the knowledge that he is settled into nursery and his new life."

Special guardian, aged 35-44

"I was the most senior staff member within the company. My employer has supported me from the beginning of my journey. We have discussed kinship care in depth. They have allowed me to change all our policies/handbooks which now give kinship carers the same rights as adopted parents."

Kinship foster carer, aged 55-64

"My experience was mostly positive, I was given the option of going on sabbatical for 1yr, adoption payments for 6months and was able to apply to work part time school hours only. The only negative was the adoption payments were only for 6 months."

Special guardian, aged 65-74

"I had a very good relationship with line manager and team leader who supported me totally. The HR dept have advised on all my options and worked out the pension and implications in the changes for my working hours. We had 3 or 4 meetings as a group to talk about options and phased return."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"I was incredibly lucky that my headteacher gave lots of support. I literally called her one morning and said I wouldn't be in because we now had GS [grandson] living with us. I told them I didn't know how long it would be for what was going on, I told her the story as best, I understood it, and I was incredibly lucky that she was prepared to stand beside me and make sure they gave me all the support and help they could and held my job open while I took nine months at massively reduced hours (going from 40+ to 10 hours a week) with no schedule just when I could fit them in. I am now back at that job, but doing a 4 day week, instead of my contracted five all with the care and support of my headteacher and staff team."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

Case study: Stacy

Stacy, aged 33, lives in Durham. She took on the care of her niece five years ago and is now a special guardian.

"At the time I was single, working and had never planned to have children. I wanted to be a fun auntie, but that went out the window as I wanted my niece to remain in the family where she was loved, otherwise she would be placed in the care system, and no-one wanted that. I took her home from hospital as a new-born baby in just the clothes she was in. I had no time to prepare to look after her as it all happened so suddenly.

Fortunately, even though my employer had no formal kinship leave process, I felt really supported by my them and especially my line manager who went above and beyond to help me when I became a kinship carer.

They enabled me to work flexibly and from home on reduced duties, so I could deal with having a new born baby. Essentially it was hybrid working before hybrid working was a thing and that made a huge difference and enabled me to keep my career and care for my baby niece.

It would be great if the Government introduced legislation so that all employers revised their HR policies so that kinship carers receive the same paid leave and flexible working as adopters and parents. Often kinship carers like myself have no warning and end up taking care of a baby when their parent can no longer look after them with no notice, so you're totally unprepared and need time to get things set up and spend time with them at home."

Some kinship carers spoke of broadly supportive environments and line managers who tried their best to offer accommodations and flex around their new caring responsibilities, but who were often limited by organisational policies or working conditions which prevented them from being able to deliver the level of support the carers needed.

"My line manager and HR were both very sympathetic and tried to be as helpful and accommodating as possible and as much as company policy allowed."

Informal kinship carer, aged 25-34

"HR are amazing the company is amazing and supportive but having to use holidays or unpaid leave for appointments that are needed for the child is unfair it is not my fault I still need to work but have to see social workers court appearances and appointments that are needed for the child."

Informal kinship carer, aged 35-44

"They were understanding but I worked for a small independent restaurant so they couldn't really support me."

Carer with a child arrangements or residence order, aged 35-44

"As supportive as they could be within policies and their limited ability to understand due to no experience of such situation."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"I had to take unpaid leave. My immediate managers were fantastic but the company has no provision for SGO and hr would not recognise it as either maternity or adoption"

Special guardian, aged 45-54

However, even with the most understanding employer, carers' requests were typically left unfulfilled due to the lack of any statutory support in place for this group. Compared to policies well-established for parents and adopters, employers regularly found themselves in unfamiliar territory and kinship carers with no legal recourse to further support. This was even more difficult for informal kinship carers without parental responsibility. Many carers spoke of eventually exhausting any available goodwill from their employers and the lack of any specific rights or entitlements for kinship carers ultimately preventing them from remaining in employment. HR teams were unlikely to be familiar with kinship care situations and typically very inflexible despite the case made by carers about the similarity of their circumstances to other groups.

"With the LOs [little ones] being returned to me so suddenly I had little time to prepare. I received no support or given time off to prepare for the return of the LOs and my request for Family Leave was turned down as my circumstances didn't fit the adoption model. I am now trying to apply for flexible working."

Kinship foster carer, aged 55-64

"My manager at work was amazing. She kept my job open for a year but I was unable to pay for the childcare at £170/week. My Teaching Assistant wage would not cover it and the LA refused. My employer was great it's the government that need to change things."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"HR were not open to engage and I was made to feel grateful that they had granted me 3 months sabbatical. I tried to campaign for them to change their stance on this and grant new SGOs the same rights as new adoptive parents, but they just reeled off government guidelines and had no intention of driving equality in the area despite heavily pushing a DE&I culture within the organisation."

Special guardian, aged 35-44

"My line manager had adopted her children so had a bit of an idea of what was needed. Unfortunately our NHS Trust was only able to offer 4 days when the child came to live with me and following that 2 days of carers leave per annum after that."

Informal kinship carer, aged 45-54

"My employers were absolutely fantastic, and very flexible and understanding. But they can only work in the framework of what the government say we're entitled to."

Special guardian, aged 35-44

"They didn't care. I spoke to ACAS and they said there was no legal need for them to pay me adoption leave, but they could if they wanted to. HR didn't care when I told them that information. They basically said that legally I could take unpaid leave and that was my only option."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"I didn't have legal guardianship so I couldn't apply for parental leave."

Informal kinship carer, aged 45-54

"I would just like to state that my employer did the best that she could with the resources she had. Without government legislation, supporting and instructing employers to offer Kinship Carers paid leave, there is only so much they can do."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"I approached HR they quoted policy for adoption which was leave for 12 months at 90% pay. But SGO wasn't in policy so they offered to pay for 1 month leave and 2 weeks transition time too."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

Despite many of the more positive examples shared above however, a significant number of respondents spoke of both receiving very little in the way of support and also of challenging and uncooperative managers and HR teams who simply weren't willing to make any adjustments to support them when they took on the care of a child. In many cases, this was driven by a lack of understanding of the nature of kinship care, demonstrating the importance of boosting awareness in the workplace (see 'Informing their employer' above). Sometimes employers would be initially sympathetic but kinship carers found quite quickly that promised flexibility or support would not materialise and a stronger line was taken about continuing with 'business as usual'.

"They did not understand as I am JUST a grandmother and kinship care should not have impacted my work."

Carer with a child arrangements or residence order, aged 45-54

"There was no acknowledgment of the impact this was having on me emotionally or financially. I did not know what to ask or even that I had any rights. I was expected to take any time off as annual leave and any time caring for my grandchild's sickness as my own sick."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"I told my duty manager that I now had my 2 granddaughters aged 14 months and 2 & 1/2 who had been brought to me the night before with no chance of them being returned to their mother (my daughter) and that meant I was unable to work my regular shift pattern of 3am - 11am and his reply was "get a childminder ! ?"

Carer with a child arrangements or residence order, aged 45-54

"Although at first my manager at the time was sympathetic at first eventually gave me a time scale to decide what I was going to do either reducing my hours permanently or continuing to work full time. As a service that worked with vulnerable children and families, I felt that there was very little understanding about my situation at the time. I also felt very unsupported and let down."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"HR basically saw me as being a problem. They never gave any allowance for what we were going through mentally and emotionally. They only saw I was performing as well as I used to looking after an 8-week-old baby while working full time."

Carer with a child arrangements or residence order, aged 55-64

"The organisation I worked for were very dismissive of the needs of kinship carers. There wasn't any flexibility for start / finishing times to accommodate doing the school run etc. My line manager told me I had to decide between taking on the child or my job."

Informal kinship carer, aged 55-64

"My manager was not supportive at all. When I was struggling with everything and often got upset at work, at one point she gave me the number for social services off google and told me to put the children in care and I needed to think if it was really what I wanted."

Special guardian, aged 25-34

"I first had to take a lower paid role as I was told I was not giving enough to the senior role I was in. I was given the option to "put the kids in care" if you can't manage your role or take a less "stressful, less senior role."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

Case study: Rachel

Rachel, aged 56 and from South London, took care of her nephew as a baby in 2017 when his parents were no longer able to care for him. At the time, she had a managerial job and had been working for her employer for more than six years.

"Our HR department said they'd never come across a situation like mine before and they hadn't heard of kinship care. They said any support would need to be discretionary and I would need to speak to my line manager, who was really intrusive and asked lots of personal questions about my nephew's mum and dad. I remember a look of disgust on his face when I told him why he had come into my care. There was no understanding or empathy, instead I felt judged and stigmatised just for being a family member.

My HR department said as it wasn't adoption or maternity leave, they had nothing in their policies to support me and that they couldn't set a precedent. I only had 3 weeks to get things ready before my nephew arrived but as I was working full-time, I had no real time to prepare.

conts

Case study: Rachel *contd.*

Around the same time, I had two colleagues who were becoming parents, one received full maternity leave entitlement and the other received adoption leave. I felt I was being treated completely differently. I felt judged and looked down on as though I was an awful person. This was hurtful, more so with the length of time I had been there; they knew me. Where there was a celebration of the other children [joining a family], mine had to take place in silence.

Every child should have the same start in life but my nephew wasn't allowed to have time with me to settle in, even though I was his 5th placement. I had just 6 weeks off to bond with him but I was busy looking for nurseries and child minders at a time which should have been about his emotional needs. It was horrible and stressful, especially knowing that the days I had before returning to work were fast disappearing. That lack of time together had an impact on my nephew and he has attachment issues now which he's having therapy for. I wished I could have stayed at home with him in the first important months. I believe he would have been more secure.

During that short time off, my line manager contacted me, tried to get me back to work early and wouldn't let me take any more unpaid leave. Work was never the same to me after I took care of my nephew. I used to dread going into work but I had a mortgage to pay. I left that job the following year in May 2018. I left because I felt unsupported. Kinship carers are being forced out of their jobs and on to benefits because of the lack of support.

The way I was treated was awful and it still feels raw. I don't want this to happen to other kinship carers. I feel strongly that kinship carers should get the same statutory entitlements such as paid leave as adopters and birth parents do. Why should I be singled out as not being the same, not worthy of the same support? All children should have the same basic rights to help start them off in life.

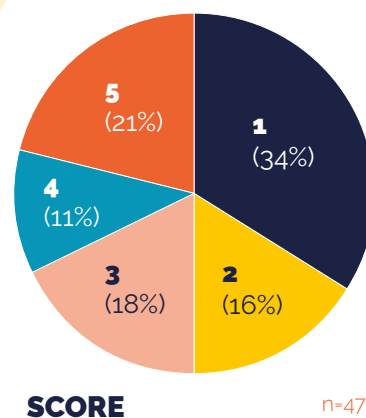
100 per cent think employers should do more to help carers by offering flexible working. In my new job I have flexible working and my boss is amazing. Now I can drop my nephew at school and pick him up and make up the hours by working earlier or later. Having that understanding has made a huge difference."



More than one-third (34%) of kinship carers scored their employer only 1/5 (poor) for the support they received.

In contrast, around 1 in 5 kinship carers (21%) scored their employer a 5/5 (excellent); comments from these respondents typically echoed earlier quotes which praised their employers for trying their best in a legal framework which didn't guarantee them many workplace rights or entitlements to support.

Some large employers (e.g. supermarkets, banks, NHS) were mentioned multiple times by survey respondents which provides a limited sample to support our understanding about which employers may already be offering high-quality, tailored support



for kinship carers as part of wider family friendly policies, and which employers have much further to go. However, these ratings highlight not only the unfair variation between employers but the wildly varying support within them as well. This mirrors how different kinship carers supported by the same local authority can experience completely different levels of support from children's services to one another. Although only the largest employers (i.e. NHS) illustrated this within our survey, which received scores right across the spectrum from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), it demonstrates the lack of consistency and equality for kinship carers, and the absence of clear organisation-wide policy and practice for kinship carer employees.

This illustrates the need for employers to lead by example and take further action to support kinship carers in their workforces, particularly as any future statutory rights for kinship carers will take some time to be enacted in legislation and come into force. Indeed, the Government's own children's social care strategy suggests they "do not want local authorities and partners to feel the need to wait for permission to act now" and that "businesses can ask themselves whether they have employment policies in place to support kinship carers".¹⁷

That's why last year Kinship began to develop a Kinship Friendly Employers initiative to encourage and support organisations across England and Wales to ensure that any kinship carer employees can access fair, flexible and funded support within a positive workplace culture which understands and respects their needs. This was rooted in our experience as an employer; 20% of Kinship's current staff team are either kinship carers themselves or grew up in kinship care, and our Kinship Care Leave policy supports staff members to take up to 52 weeks' leave from work, paid at the same rate as Statutory Adoption Pay, irrespective of whether a legal order is in place.¹⁸

Earlier this year, we hosted a series of roundtables with employers across a range of sectors including KPMG, John Lewis, Atkins Global, Card Factory and the Office of the Children's Commissioner, as well as kinship carers and other experts, to explore how kinship friendly policies could operate in different workplaces. We're grateful to all of the organisations and individuals who have generously contributed their time and expertise to support the development of our Kinship Friendly Employers scheme which will launch later this year. We look forward to working closely alongside many other employers throughout this year and beyond as Kinship continues to lead the way in fostering positive workplace support for kinship carers.

"Last year, I carried out my independent Family Review, to explore what modern family life looks like today. One of the things I heard from the children, kinship carers and charities that I spoke to as part of my review, was the crucial role that carers play in children's lives. I heard how kinship carers often step in at times of crisis to care for children in their wider family network and provide children with the love and stability they need to thrive.

That's why it is so important we create an environment in which kinship carers are given the recognition and support that they need. I have already called for greater practical and financial support for these carers, and as Children's Commissioner, I will be developing my own policy to support kinship carers in my office, with the aim of becoming a kinship friendly employer."

**Dame Rachel de Souza,
Children's Commissioner
for England**

¹⁷ Department for Education (2023)

¹⁸ To view Kinship's full kinship care leave policy for staff, please visit <https://kinship.org.uk/kinship-care-leave-policy-2/>

Case study: Katie

Katie, aged 34, lives in Bradford and is a special guardian for her three-year-old niece.

"I had been in my new HR role less than one month when I had to take care of my niece during lockdown as her mother was no longer able to look after her.

Being so new at work, I worried that I was already being a burden. I told my manager I didn't know what the next weeks or months would look like. He was really understanding and said you're working from home and if you need to flex your hours to look after your niece, do that.

I was given immediate trust and told that as long as the work got done everything was fine. That made a massive difference to me. Flexible working meant I could be there for my eight-month-old niece, and be present in those early months helping her to settle in with me and my partner Mark in her new home.

We were able to get a routine to fit in with her needs and our family. If I hadn't had that flexibility, it wouldn't have worked, as kinship carers have to attend a lot of short-notice social worker meetings and unannounced visits. If my boss hadn't been supportive, I would have been at risk of either losing my niece, or having to give up my job, my career and my identity. I've been building a career in HR for 15 years and it would have all been for nothing.

We were already on a reduced income as Mark was furloughed, so there was a lot of financial stress on me. From a physical and wellbeing perspective I was really tired through the lack of sleep, and I suffered with my mental health due to the stress. I think that if I'd had statutory paid leave, it would have given me the time to completely focus on my niece, without worrying about our finances so much. It would have made a big difference.

I work at Card Factory and asked our company to offer kinship carers like me paid leave in the future. They are an inclusive family friendly employer, and they didn't hesitate to extend paid leave to kinship carers and approved it last June – in fact it's enhanced leave.

There's no reason why kinship carers shouldn't have parity with adopters or birth parents when it comes to paid leave. We exist as a business to help people celebrate life moments. I'm proud to get this change through and really happy our business wants to do the right thing which will hopefully influence other businesses to do the same.

We have had our first application for paid leave from a colleague who has just become a kinship carer which I'm delighted to say has been agreed."

Kinship carers' experiences with their local authority

Being asked to leave employment

n=505



16% of kinship carers were told to stop working by their local authority, and a further 13% were told to reduce their hours, in order to take on the role.

Through our advice and support services and our research, we commonly hear from kinship carers who feel pressured by children's services to give up work or make other decisions they think aren't in the best interests of their family. Often, this comes as a threat or warning – made explicitly or tacitly – that the child will likely otherwise be taken into care or adopted if they do not comply. Indeed, some carers report feeling as though they have been used to keep children out of the care system and then abandoned when they needed help.¹⁹ Kinship carers are often not permitted the agency in which to make a decision for themselves about how they can best meet the needs of their child, and their own perspectives and views are discarded in determining whether or not they feel able to remain in employment whilst providing the care a child needs.

"Children's Services gave me no choice. Unequivocally stated I was to give up work if I undertook my grandson's care or he would go to a foster placement."

Carer with a child arrangements or residence order, aged 65-74

"Wasn't given a choice. Social Services said child would be put in care system."

Carer with a child arrangements or residence order, aged 55-64

"I was informed that I had to fit work around the child, who at the time was in nursery from 9-12.15pm. If I couldn't do this I would not be in a supporting position for the child and wouldn't be able to kinship foster, the social worker's words."

Kinship foster carer, aged 45-54

"Was told to stop working immediately by Social Worker... They IHR/line manager were fair, but at the end of the day, I wasn't given an option by social services."

Special guardian, aged 65-74

"After we agreed to have them on a temporary basis the local authority didn't really give us much choice going forward as they said the children would be put into care and would probably be put up for adoption if we did not agree to have them, it felt like emotional blackmail at the time."

Carer with a child arrangements or residence order, aged 45-54

"1st Social worker said I would have to leave job...2nd and 3rd said reduce hours."

Special guardian, aged 45-64

¹⁹ McGrath (2022)

Case study: Wendy

Wendy, aged 70, lives near Eastbourne and is a special guardian for her two grandchildren.

"I would have stayed in employment if I was able to take paid leave and work flexibly and part-time. But I wasn't given those options. I was told I had to quit my job by social services and my earnings dropped from £500 to £100 per week. If I'd been able to keep my job the children and myself would have had better lives.

It's only fair that kinship carers like myself have the same rights as adopters and birth parents as we're all raising the children we love. Kinship carers often step up in times of crisis to make sure their children don't go into the care system. We need that time off work to settle them in and for the children to get used to their new home."

Local authority support

n=505



Only 23% of kinship carers were offered help by their local authority.

Less than a quarter of respondents told us they were offered help by their local authority to navigate issues with employment when they took on the role. Respondents shared examples of the kind of financial and other support they received, such as a weekly financial allowance, emergency 'start-up' financial support, help with other specific costs such as childcare, nursery fees and transport, signposting to peer support and advice services, and ongoing social worker support to help with contact, for example.

Responses to our survey demonstrate the wildly unequal and unfair variations in support offered to different types of kinship carer, primarily but not consistently dependent on the presence of a legal order securing their family arrangement. Those who were special guardians or pursuing a special guardianship order at the time – particularly through public law with local authority involvement – and those who were kinship foster carers reported above-average levels of local authority support compared to the survey respondents as a whole. Only 5% of carers with or working towards a child arrangements order or residence order and not a single informal kinship carer responding to the survey reported receiving any local authority support.

However, even when this support was provided, it was often insufficient to meet the needs of the child and families still ended up in extremely challenging financial circumstances. Carers reported that financial allowances were typically extended or provided without means testing only up until the point of a special guardianship order being granted (i.e. whilst they were a kinship foster carer) and not thereafter despite the family's needs and requirements seeing no change, leaving many in financial insecurity after this point. Rarely were these allowances sufficient on their own to cover the cost of living, piling in comparison to even fairly low earnings made previously through employment, and especially not

with the additional costs that come with raising someone else's child unexpectedly. Carers often had to battle to get support and found promises weren't kept or were delayed unnecessarily.

"Remaining employed felt like it was a less favourable option by the placing Local Authority but the reality is that the minimal fostering allowances paid are for the benefit of the child and in today's economic climate, it is often impossible for kinship carers to give up work. On one hand, we must be financially stable enough to have LO [little one] placed with us but then it is the LA's [local authority's] preference that one carer is at home as much as possible. The two are simply opposing views and either financial assistance must be increased, or there must be an acceptance by LAs that providing carers can continue to meet and prioritise LOs needs, employment should be viewed positively."

Kinship foster carer, aged 25-34

"The whole thing is a postcode lottery, some LAs provide non means testing financial support, some have a no detriment policy for former foster carers moving to SGO. I have had to become a foster carer to look after my niece when there is not one person in the LA nor the IRO believe that she needs to be in the system or in care. This is not in my niece's "best interests" she does not need nor will want to be different to her friends and peers by being in a system that she does not need to be in. It costs the system and the LAs far more to keep a child in care unnecessarily than to agree to put the support in place."

Kinship foster carer, aged 55-64

"I was promised by the local authority a £500 pound one off payment to buy things he would need bed draws etc however we never received this."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"After an awful lot of insisting they came up with a financial package had to fight for it though I was taking in 3 very young children."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"As a Kinship Carer, the Local Authority wanted to offer me less than half the amount of money that Foster Carers get each week for looking after a child, even though I had to give up my job to care for my niece and still had bills to pay just like everyone else. However, thanks to the guardian and a very good solicitor, I ended up receiving over double the rate they were originally offering for the duration of 2 years and then they reduced it to less than half again... "

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"I didn't get any support at the start. It weren't till I said I can't afford to keep my grandson. I had done my saving and had to take a loan out. They then started to give me 50 pounds a week, till I got guardianship of my grandson. Also they paid 4 hours a week nursery so I could have a break. That also stopped when I got special guardianship."

Special guardian, aged 35-44

"We were unemployed and told couldn't work as needed to be on hand 24/7. We were given means tested SGO allowance and a social worker for 6 months with the first lo [little one]. When the 2nd lo came along we weren't given any allowance and no support. This was from the same local authority so 2 completely different experiences."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

Kinship has gathered substantial evidence on the financial circumstances of kinship carers and the support they receive through previous surveys. Our 2022 annual survey report – *The Cost of Loving* – found that nearly 8 in 10 kinship carers weren't getting the local authority support they needed to meet their child's needs, and more than one-third of these carers were worried about being able to continue caring for their child as a result.²⁰ Our *2022 Financial Allowances Survey* also found that, even before the cost of living crisis began to accelerate over the winter, 44% of kinship carers were struggling to pay all their households bills and more than one-quarter (26%) couldn't always afford food for their families.²¹ Around 6 in 10 enquiries to our advice line from kinship carers include an element around financial worries.

In its recent children's social care implementation strategy – *Stable Homes, Built on Love* – the Government committed to "explore the case for mandating" a financial allowance for special guardians and kinship carers with a child arrangements order in every local authority in England.²² It's vital that the Government's forthcoming kinship care strategy makes a firm commitment to introducing a consistent non means tested financial allowance equivalent to that received by foster carers to close this gap and ensure kinship carers who need it see a guarantee of ongoing financial support. It's also vital that planned reforms to supporting family networks earlier through family network support packages and other means are rolled out with sufficient funding, speed and scope as soon as possible to make a difference for informal kinship carers in particular.²³ In Wales, the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee has recommended the Welsh Government explores the support needs of kinship carers further and highlights the discrepancy in financial allowances seen between kinship and unrelated foster carers.²⁴

In both nations, we must see further and faster efforts to tackle levels of poverty and financial insecurity amongst kinship carers. But crucially, the provision of consistent and tailored financial support should be part of a comprehensive package provided by the local authority in addition to specific support around employment, including a statutory right to kinship care leave on a par with adoption leave and other workplace entitlements. This isn't an either/or situation; as we have seen clearly in the responses to our survey, neither the delivery of an allowance nor a strong offer of paid employment leave alone is enough to equalise support between kinship carers and others and deliver the stability and security which children need.

²⁰ Kinship (2022a)

²¹ Kinship (2022b)

²² Department for Education (2023)

²³ For more information on the Government's children's social care implementation strategy, our verdict and what we'd like to see prioritised within the forthcoming kinship care strategy, please visit Kinship's kinship care policy tracker at <https://kinship.org.uk/kinship-care-policy-tracker/>.

²⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee (2023)

For a very small number of kinship carers who responded to our survey, the support they received from the local authority was excellent. However, the very existence of this exemplary support demonstrates the extraordinary variation in what kinship carers might expect to receive based on where they happen to live and the child's journey into kinship care, rather than on their family's needs. It highlights the difference which good joint local authority and employer support can deliver for kinship families, ensuring children have a positive start to their new home lives and kinship carers have the peace of mind and stability they need to provide high-quality care during a time of intense stress and upheaval.

"[I received] - 15 hours of free childcare - Initially fostering allowance until SGO granted, plus some emergency funds to tide us over - Lost earnings for 6 months - matching my current salary - Settling in grant (£500)... Our support package agreed with the LA with the SGO also included an SGO allowance, money to cover contact costs, and my nephew's extra curricular activities. This has meant that we have had positive regular contact doing fun activities, holidays etc, and my nephew has fully settled into his new life, settled into nursery, and made amazing progress catching up to his peers in many areas."

Special guardian, aged 35-44

"[I received] everything I needed at any time. Outstanding."

Special guardian, aged 65-74

"It is without any doubt the most challenging thing my wife and I have faced so far in our life. We are nearly three years in and there have been times when we were just about surviving and we are only just beginning to have moments when we feel more like our old selves. We have been blessed with a supportive employer and excellent support from all levels of the social services and from school."

Kinship foster carer, aged 45-54

The impact of poor employment support on kinship families

Unemployed and underemployed

n=438



86% of kinship carers told us they had to leave work permanently or reduce their hours after they took on their caring role due to a lack of employment support.

As a result of insufficient support in the workplace, more than 4 in 10 (41%) kinship carers told us they had to leave work permanently and further 45% were forced to reduce their working hours. This reflects the findings from our 2022 report – *The Cost of Loving* – which found that only 2 in 5 kinship carers were in some form of employment despite closer to 4 in 5 being of working age.

Whilst some carers will choose to change their employment of their own accord when they deem it in the best interests of their family and feel empowered to make that choice for themselves, the majority of those who responded to our survey expressed frustration, anger, and deep sadness at being forced to give up work or change their employment status in another way, and spoke about the detrimental impact this had for them and their families.

Of those who left work permanently, some attempted to continue as before or with modifications to their working patterns but soon found their situation untenable, often due to the needs of the child and paucity of support, and particularly where there were identified social, emotional and behavioural issues or other special educational needs or disabilities present which required additional caring capacity. Carers often found that new additional responsibilities were in conflict with the demands of their existing professional roles, such as late nights and a lack of sleep which made fulfilling their duties challenging, or nursery or school timings which clashed with their fixed shift patterns.

Some left almost immediately after finding little flexibility from their employers at crisis point and so handed in their notice or had their employment terminated due to poor performance or continued absence. Others took voluntary redundancy or early retirement where available, despite previous plans to continue working for many years into the future. Some intended to return to employment but found the demands of their kinship caring role to be too challenging to do so.

25% of respondents said that they had to change their employment status in some other way, either in addition to or instead of reducing their hours. This typically involved things like changing jobs or employers – often taking lower-paid roles or positions with fewer responsibilities – as well as switching to remote or hybrid working, taking a sabbatical or period of unpaid leave before returning to their former working pattern, or completely changing their working patterns or style of employment (e.g. switching to agency or freelance equivalents from permanent employee roles held previously).

"Due to Kinship Carers not having the same rights as Adoptive Parents, legally I wasn't entitled to paid leave, maternity or adoptive leave which is what lead me to leave my job."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"I tried to continue for 4 years but I was in a very stressful job responsible amongst other things for safeguarding in a secondary school I have now been signed off work for 6 months due to stress and anxiety."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"I had to change the hours I worked from 12 hour shifts as my old employer couldn't reduce my hours to a shorter day so I had to change employment to a job that worked around child care/ school times."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"My boss refused to reduce my hours to be able to collect the children from school and finally had my contract terminated."

Kinship foster carer, 35-44

"I worked full time which made it impossible to carry-on as I had 2 children aged 1 and 2 ,I reduced my hours so I could take them to nursery, but social care at the time would not help with child care cost, at the time the children were still in care of the local council, so I had a 6 month career break from work, but the needs of the children made my decision to leave work altogether."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"Reduced hours then took a year off work as couldn't cope. Then I took early retirement."

Special guardian, aged 65-74

"I had to give my career as it was too much with a new child to look after especially with additional needs. I had to take a dinner lady job with shorter hours."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

Financial hardship

n=365



More than one-third (34%) of kinship carers experienced an income drop of more than 50% after they became a kinship carer.

In addition, of those who told us about a change to their income, a further 42% saw an income drop of up to 50%, meaning more than three-quarters of kinship carers saw a reduction in their income after taking on the care of a child.

19% saw their income stay the same, and a very small proportion – 5% - saw their income increase. The comments left by respondents suggest

this latter group included those where a partner or someone else in the household had been able to reduce their hours or stop working in order to take on caring responsibilities, as well as those who were previously retired but had chosen to re-enter the labour market when they became a kinship carer given concerns about being able to continue caring for the child into the future with insufficient pension funds and increased spending.

Financial insecurity and the strain on family life associated with this was the most common impact highlighted by kinship carers of having had to give up work or reduce their hours. Many carers spoke of coming from a place of relative financial security but almost immediately finding themselves struggling to cope with the sudden increase in costs associated with unexpectedly taking on the care of a child, whereas for others this exacerbated an already precarious financial position and they found themselves in considerable debt and plunged into poverty. Some carers expressed particular concerns about not just the present financial situation for their families but too for the future, and worried about how their minimal pension contributions through employment and savings established a bleak financial outlook for the future when they retired. Comments shared by kinship carers also spoke of having to sell property and/or seek social housing in order to accommodate additional children into the home and to keep them within their home area.

For kinship carers experiencing financial hardship, they often commented on the negative impact this had for their children, including missed opportunities to travel or go on days out, to take part in extra-curricular activities and hobbies, or to spend time with friends and others; these are all the things which kinship families want to be able to provide for their children to help them grow, heal and thrive in childhood, but often feel unable to as all of their available income goes to everyday living costs such as accommodation, bills and food.

"It's no exaggeration to say that being a kinship carer has been disastrous for our finances. We've been caring for the children at our home full time for 5 years, but before that we spent 4 years heavily supporting my daughter to look after the children in her home. We were 49 and 50 years old when the youngest grandchild was born, with a relatively small pension pot. My wife has poor health and has a limited ability to work and limited stamina to look after the children. This means that a lot of the burden was on me to help her which is why I lost my job. Before the children were born, I had a good job in a charity and my wife was childminding school-aged children and also tutoring in the evenings. This has all stopped. We cannot pay off our mortgage, have used up all our savings and taken all our pension draw downs. We have a few thousand pounds left, then have no idea what we are all going to live off. We are exhausted and very worried about the future."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"I have essentially lost my job and income. I was the main earner so this has affected our finances greatly. We are currently awaiting our panel date as we have had to become foster carers for our grandson. Due to the amount of meetings and short notice given, it is currently impossible for me to start a new job, even part time, as a new employer will not be happy to grant me time off to attend instant meetings, medical appointments, training etc."

Kinship foster carer, aged 45-54

"Financially £500 first day at court to pay solicitor. £650 per month for nursery. Child's bedroom suite cot and high chair, child's passport. Paying all expenses for contact and all new clothes nappies etc as hers were taking away to foster carers with her siblings."

Carer with a child arrangements or residence order, aged 55-64

"It has had a huge impact on our family. We have lost my wage so are therefore approx £2000 a month worse off. This has impacted on our own biological children. We cannot afford days out, holidays, meals out etc, the nice things we used to do has a family. We had to take a loan out to purchase a larger family car because we had become a family of six not five."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"I lost my full monthly income. I had my own 2 children to look after too it put us in real financial hardship. I explained to the social worker that by not giving me support they were potentially going to make my 2 children children in need? the best they could do was the fostering allowance fee (£100 a week) which was not sorted until about 2 months in and a one off emergency payment of £200 to cover the bills I had to miss due to having no wage. These payments did not in no way come close to the wage I had lost. This put me under a huge amount of stress at a time. I just wanted to help and this put my own household in to financial hardship which had a knock on effect on my own children due to limited spending."

Kinship foster carer, aged 25-34

"Financially, lower earnings for past 14 years than otherwise would be the situation and therefore lower pension contributions too for the future."

Kinship foster carer, aged 55-64

The lack of employment support, coupled with patchy provision of insufficient financial support from the local authority, is clearly and unnecessarily pushing kinship carers into poverty and preventing them from being able to pull themselves out. Our 2022 annual survey of kinship carers found that nearly half had given up work at some point to care for their child and 7 in 10 had been forced to spend their savings and pension pots, and that in the past year alone 6 in 10 had borrowed money, taken out a short-term loan or used credit cards for everyday purchases.²⁵ As argued

²⁵ Kinship (2022a)

earlier in this report, kinship carers need both sufficient and consistent financial support from the local authority as well as additional rights and support in the workplace in order to create the best possible home environment for children to thrive.

Reliance on state benefits

n=481



28% of kinship carers had to claim benefits as a result of taking on their caring role.

Many kinship carers who left work permanently were forced to claim benefits as well as those who reduced their working hours enough that they were eligible for additional state support to top up their earnings from employment. Sometimes, they were explicitly advised by the local authority to do so in order to provide full-time care for the child, leaving carers with very little other choice but to accept a significant loss of income and the associated financial challenges; the Universal Credit system currently leaves 90% of low-income households unable to afford essentials and disproportionately penalises households with multiple children.²⁶

Those who were pushed into claiming Universal Credit or other benefits also spoke about the lack of understanding those at the job centre and claimant rules had around the challenges for kinship carers, and a sense of feeling 'trapped in the system' due the absence of working opportunities which flexed around their caring responsibilities coupled with the dearth of support from employers and local authorities.

"I worked in an industry that involved working nights my family had to rearrange their lifestyle to help make sure I could carry on working that side of my job role , forward on 10yrs and I'm currently looking for employment and finding it extremely difficult as the majority of employers want you to be flexible when you can't but you try telling the job centre that you can't be flexible cause you can't just leave your child with anyone as she has separation issues they do not understand and constantly threaten to sanction my benefits."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"Universal credit try to press you to finding more employment or better paid job, when you are struggling emotionally with grief following death of (in my case) daughter, trying to support the other daughter's sons and wider family as they navigated grief, and to provide the love, physical and financial care, support and stability for the 2 grandchildren that needed to be totally cared for. Informal arrangement because the children had no history of LA intervention and it is deemed the children are at no risk whilst with me. The worry is constant that if I lose my job say through shop closing or not being able to afford to employ me any longer - I would be having to go on courses and find employment that may not allow me to continue to provide level of care children need."

Informal kinship carer, aged 55-64

²⁶ The Trussell Trust & Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023)

KINSHIP FORCED OUT

"As a family our income halved, which meant that we were placed in financial hardship having to rely on benefits that fail to provide an adequate standard of living, the children miss out on life opportunities as there is no money left for activities, holiday or days out."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"Our lives have changed beyond recognition we are both in our 60s and had great plans for our retirement we were financially secure we now claim universal credit to top our money up."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

Pushing kinship carers into claiming Universal Credit unnecessarily creates substantial additional costs for the state. This is a completely avoidable outcome; by providing financial and employment support for kinship carers when they take on the role, we can give families the financial security they need during a period of uncertainty and the time to settle children into their new home. Crucially too however, we can ensure they aren't forced into permanently leaving the labour market after being advised to rely on the welfare system at significant additional cost to the public purse by the very state services intended to support them.

Case study: Natalie

Natalie, aged 33, lives in Bradford with her partner. They took on the care of her nephew in 2022 when he was only 10 weeks old, and now care for him under a special guardianship order. Natalie and her partner also have two children of their own.

"It was an emergency situation when I took care of my nephew. I had been working as a teaching assistant and was looking forward to going back to work in September, as I'd been offered a 2-year contract. I explained to the school about my nephew and, although they were very empathetic, they were unable to offer me any paid leave.

Social services said I had to manage contact with my nephew and his parent four times a week and I very much felt that if I couldn't do that he would be taken from me. I was in fight or flight mode. Without paid leave and in a state of high anxiety, I was forced to quit my job and go on benefits.

I could only think one day to the next trying to get through the care proceedings. I think it was four weeks later that I thought 'oh my gosh, I've lost my income'. I didn't realise then it would be a permanent arrangement and had to start going into my savings.

It was an absolute nightmare of a time. Paid parental leave would have made a massive difference to us all because I could have gone back to work after things had settled down. It would have meant a lot less stress for us all. I would have been happier, instead of panicking about the future and my nephew and I would have had time to bond and get to know each other without having to worry about money.

It's massively unfair that kinship carers are not entitled to the same statutory entitlement such as paid leave and flexible working as adopters and birth parents. There's no difference between us. I'm raising a family member's child who would otherwise have gone into the care system.

When I had maternity leave with my children, I had the chance to come up for air and relax during that time with them. But with my nephew, I went from being an independent woman in work to being on benefits and using my savings and having sleepless nights. That's why I want to study to become a social worker so I can help make change happen with the experience I have."

Poor health and wellbeing

For a significant number of kinship carers, the stress and worry which came from losing their jobs and accompanying financial issues had major implications for their physical and mental health, and that of others in their household too. For those who continued to work in some capacity, the cumulative impact of juggling their new caring role with work responsibilities sometimes meant having to take long-term sick leave.

Kinship carers are typically older and in worse health than any other group raising children²⁷ and so many found that their ability to manage their health conditions deteriorated and their overall health and wellbeing worsened due to the lack of support. Our 2022 report, *The Cost of Loving*, found that 44% of kinship carers had a long-term health condition or disability.²⁸

²⁷ Selwyn et al (2013)

²⁸ Kinship (2022a)

KINSHIP FORCED OUT

A typical experience of many carers who responded to our survey was an early forced exit from the labour market due to a lack of workplace support, followed by significant personal challenges with health and wellbeing exacerbated by their kinship caring role, and then years later finding themselves unable to re-enter employment after a long absence and as an older worker due to poor health and a lack of suitable opportunities.

"As a result of all the stress of worrying about losing my job, lack of money and looking after 2 children who were very emotionally distressed I missed the warning signs and unfortunately suffered a heart attack. I had to return to work before I was fully recovered due to only receiving SSP and was given no support on my return to work."

Carer with child arrangements or residence order, aged 55-64

"I was so stressed out and overwhelmed by having a troubled teenager at my age that I ended up on anxiety medication and had to give up work."

Informal kinship carer, aged 45-54

"Also there's been no emotional support for us, I feel that this was so important especially after the SGO was granted, so it has taken its toll on myself as I now suffer from depression at times. Mainly due to the financial situation but also my ongoing health issues that are only getting worse as I get older."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"I was exhausted all of the time trying to manage claiming benefits, finding a nursery and juggling work commitments together with managing my child's trauma and my mental health."

Special guardian, aged 65-74

"I was emotionally and mentally exhausted. Not only did I have my 2 week old grandson. I also had my 3 year old grandson (his dad has him) three times a week. My daughter had a drug and alcohol addiction. So I got a lot of abuse from her. Trying to keep myself together for my grandsons was hard but I had to do it. As I wasn't going to lose them to the care system. So, I gave up everything to care for them and got into debt. But I would do it all again if I had to."

Special guardian, aged 35-44

"I am isolated, dealing with two teenage girls and there [sic] growing issues, no support from family who I gave up my life for, feeling like I made a huge mistake, impacted my health greatly, depression, awaiting diagnosis for Parkinson's/dystonia and on a long waiting list to be seen, lack of motivation... No real support from social services for me, just the girls, but nothing helpful for any of us."

Informal kinship carer, aged 55-64

Loss of identity and relationships

In a number of different ways, kinship carers told us about how leaving work impacted on their own 'sense of self' and their relationships with others. This included their professional identity and career aspirations; some were forced to give up future dreams and planned courses of education or training. Work wasn't just about earning a living but often gave kinship carers a sense of purpose and belonging, as well as vital connections with colleagues and friends, and many found this aspect of their life stripped away entirely when they were forced to leave the workplace.

We hear consistently from kinship carers too that taking on a child often leaves them feeling isolated and lonely as the friendships they once had fall away and they feel disconnected from their 'former lives.' Many also mourn the loss of what their relationship with the child could have been, as taking on a kinship caring roles forces them to step into the role of parent to the exclusion of being a grandparent, cousin or sibling, for example. The financial strain and associated stress often leads to broken relationships in the household, and kinship carers also commonly navigate complex and hostile family dynamics at the same time, exacerbated by adversarial court processes and challenging contact arrangements.

"I lost my job. My role, my identity. I felt broken. Torn between supporting my daughter and her children. Of course I took the children. 2 years after I took them on I finally got support from the special guardianship people. I lost my sense of self and who I had been to who I now was becoming. I had felt respected in my role at work and lived for it, I felt lost and bereft after I was told to make the choice between the boys and my job... I went on to have a breakdown, I recovered but taking on grandchildren and fighting the system that is there supposedly to help you, took its toll."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"Complete change from having adults in the house to having adults and a toddler. Back to sleepless nights, early mornings, no personal time, having to plan outings as not all our previous social scene allowed children. We lost the spontaneity as a couple to come and go as we pleased. Some of our friends drifted as they couldn't cope with us having to alter our life to fit a toddler into it. Job / careers type had to be changed to accommodate, which impacted on the financial ability of what I could earn hence a drop in lifestyle we had previously worked hard to achieve. Our emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing has been impacted. In the early days we were not only trying to cope with the loss and grief of losing our daughter but trying to protect and provide a loving home for her only son [sic] who was just a toddler who had lost his mummy and didn't understand where she had gone. We are no longer grandparents but have become parents again, we will never have that special bond grandparents and grandchildren have which is very different to that of parent and child."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"Led to loss of self-esteem and financial security, diminishing of world to just myself and children, loss of relationship with my own children and time to have one with them. Perpetual and on-going fights with antiquated, unresponsive, judgemental, non-supportive health and educational and social work systems to get support for children and self. Continuously safe-guarding due to threats to myself and children from birth mum's partners leading to high levels of stress and anxiety. Relationship breakdown and so single-parenting."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"We have no support from family or friends so feel very isolated to as we are not able to take part in activities that others our age do. We now don't fit in with the parents of our children's friends as they are much younger or our own generation so again this feels very isolating to both of us... The children now don't have us as grandparents as we are filling the role of their parents, we have lost our grandchildren and they have lost us as their grandparents, which make both of us sad."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"My life changed from being a senior professional who worked many hours due to the nature of my work. I lived alone and enjoyed my time away from work socialising with my friends and catching up with family. Overnight I became a parent again to a baby who relied on me for everything. I became a fighter in order to identify/gain support for his specific needs. A nurse to look after his physical needs. A psychologist to support his mental health and a legal expert to get what support he was entitled to. I reduced my working hours only to replace these hours with parental responsibilities again."

Kinship foster carer, 55-64

"Before getting the children I was going to go to college to study to become a social worker, this had to be put to the back burner once the children arrived. There wasn't enough time in the day to do it all. Now because criteria for college has changed its now impossible to go to college on the basis I'm on now. So I don't see any hope in ever returning to work in the future which isn't a good role model for the children."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"We have the SGO in place now and our GS [grandson] is at nursery four days a week. This allows me to keep working although at the moment the entirety of my wages goes to pay nursery fees, but I do this because it is keeping a job open that I love, and which if I had not been so fortunate in my employers attitude I would have lost and then when he starts school I would be without the job that I love without any income and without the social and emotional support that it provides."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"If I'm honest at my age (almost 70) I should retire (I'm tired now) but need the money with two grandchildren now... The courses and peer support groups are useful for gaining understanding but again take more of my time. If I could give up work I could try and maintain some of my own friendships and hobbies."

Kinship foster carer, aged 65–74

Reduced stability for children

The other most common impact highlighted by kinship carers was the cumulative impact of all of the above on their children and family life more broadly. Although our previous research has demonstrated how kinship carers shield their children from financial hardship and emotional distress often caused by having to leave work, and the protective factor their love and sacrifice provides²⁹, there is inevitably a knock-on impact for the child.

Specifically, carers spoke about how the lack of paid leave and other workplace support often prevented them from being able to spend crucial time with their child to help them settle in to their new home. Given the trauma, separation and loss experienced by children who come into kinship care, and the much higher prevalence of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties present in this cohort³⁰, having quality time to develop relationships, attachment and new routines with their primary kinship caregiver is essential. Many spoke of very little understanding from employers and others about this and how the unique nature of kinship care meant a very different experience to other parents in the workplace.

Instead, kinship carers typically spent the time either working where they needed to in order to afford to pay the bills, or were forced to leave work or reduce hours to try and create this time but in the knowledge this significantly impacted their financial situations; kinship carers are often caught in a catch-22 situation given the competing demands their new role and the lack of support available. The absence of a right to paid leave isn't just detrimental to kinship families because it might plunge them into poverty; it also robs children, many of whom having experienced significant trauma, the time and space they need with their new primary caregiver to heal, build crucial bonds, and settle into their new family lives.

"Having no extra time off made it really hard to balance childcare and work. Especially as our child needed a lot of extra attention in the first few months. This meant anytime not at work was spent with them trying to help them adjust, spend quality time together, making sure their complex emotional needs were being met etc. So we had next to no time to decompress ourselves. We also still didn't feel like we gave them as much time and attention as they really needed, but we also couldn't afford to drop our hours due to the extra costs of having a child."

Informal kinship carer, aged 25–34

²⁹ Kinship (2022a, 2022b)

³⁰ Hunt (2020)

"If I'd (or my husband/both) had paid leave we would have built a far more secure attachment in the early days. After 14 years attachment is still a huge problem to the point of the placement nearly breaking down in summer 2022."

Kinship foster carer, aged 55-64

"I took 7 months unpaid leave as our lo [little one] was placed as an emergency & I knew I needed to focus on helping her develop a secure attachment after so many traumas & disruptions... 7 months no pay."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"I had to resign my employment No choice in the matter as I had 4 children to look after, I was concerned putting the children into childcare provisions, while I continued to work as my employers would not let me do part time work. The children already suffered from attachment issues and by me arranging childcare while I worked would just did not sit comfortable with all of us."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"Financially hard as we took on teenage twins, our housing situation was tight to accommodate and required beds etc, it was emotional as the children were sad and unsettled. My niece suffered from mental health issues."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

The employment support that kinship carers need

A statutory right to kinship care leave

n=433



More than half of kinship carers said a right to paid leave would have prevented them from leaving work or changing their employment status.

53% of kinship carers said that they would have been able to sustain their existing working arrangement if a statutory right to paid leave, equivalent to adoption leave and pay, had been available to them at the time.

However, 47% said this would not have made a difference for them. Whilst this may seem lower than would be expected, this likely reflects the extremely demanding and lifechanging nature of kinship care and highlights that a range of different employment support options are needed to best support kinship carers in the workplace. It's also possible that, for many, their experience suggests that some kind of change to their employment status would have been required eventually regardless of the level of support offered initially. Whilst paid leave may have guaranteed them and their family the stability and financial security they needed at the time, keeping their employment options open and empowering them to make a decision in the best interests of their family, it would have also given them the agency and steadiness they needed to change jobs, reduce their hours or move to a completely different working pattern.

Whilst we know that the offer of kinship care leave equivalent to that of maternity or adoption leave would prevent a significant and permanent loss of employees from the labour market, this isn't the only stated aim or resultant impact of this policy. Kinship carers who did receive kinship care leave, or wish they had, spoke about the range of positive things it did or would enable them to do and the impact this did or would have for their family. The unfairness present in the discrepancy of paid leave entitlements between adoptive parents and kinship carers is stark and nonsensical given the similarity of the role they step up to do, and especially given the additional complexities and challenges associated with kinship care situations.

"A year of paid leave would have given me chance to settle and bond with a traumatised child and to work out how to continue in work. I just had no time for anything."

Kinship foster carer, aged 25-34

"We should have some level of government legislation were we can have paid leave to sort our kinship children and our lives out. We deserve to be recognised and helped our world has just been turned upside down."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"It should be same as adoption leave, the children have the same needs? It's hard being older and a senior clinician but still working part time because of LO's [little one's] needs."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"I feel that I was very lucky to have such a supportive Director. However, I was doing night time feeds etc and having to get our lo [little one] ready for nursery and be in work - after a 40 minute drive - by gam. Parents on maternity/adoption leave wouldn't have to work, and would have had more time to bond with the baby (or child). It was a very stressful period for me and my husband and there was no support or direction for my employer."

Special guardian, aged 55-64

Case study: Sarah

Sarah, aged 65, and her husband from East London became special guardians in 2017 to their three grandchildren – now aged 12, 10 and 6.

"Although grandparents, we had little contact with our grandchildren before they came to live with us, so they didn't really know us when they were placed in our care. Like a lot of other Special Guardians, we were faced with having to make a life changing emotional decision at break-neck speed and without proper advice and guidance about becoming legal guardians for our grandchildren. The whole experience was very stressful and left everyone in the family traumatised, especially the children.

conts.

Case study: Sarah *contd.*

Instead of planning our retirement, we found ourselves caring for a very small baby, a 3 and a 5-year-old. I'll never forget how frightened the children were when all this happened to them, and what we all really needed was time to bond properly so that we could reassure them, but when I asked my employer for time off I was told I could only take unpaid leave.

As we had a mortgage to pay, I couldn't afford to take unpaid leave so asked for flexible hours to fit around school and nursery drop-offs and pick-ups but was told my request did not meet 'the business need' and so my husband, who was self-employed, ended up turning away work so that he could take the children to school and nursery every day as these were based in a different borough to where we live. Our income halved overnight. There was nothing in statutory law to help me and the added financial outlay hugely affected our family finances, so we were existing day by day.

We also had to fit in getting the children to contact visits as well as medical and other appointments that had been pre-arranged by social services before the Special Guardianship Order was awarded. I was routinely late at work and just couldn't make up the hours and I ended up having money deducted from my salary just before Christmas, when it was needed most.

What the children needed was our reassuring presence around them in those early days, but there was nothing in statutory employment law to offer an employee like me paid time off work to help settle them into our family, so paid time off wasn't an option my employer had to consider. At the time, everything seemed hopeless, and I felt there was a lack of human compassion in a moment of crisis, and I found it very upsetting.

Being able to access paid time off work when the children came into our care could have provided us with the space when we needed to help the children settle and reassure them everything was going to be ok.

Employers don't understand kinship families and the needs of children in these situations, and they need clear guidance to enable them to apply flexibility in emergency situations. Unless there is a statutory requirement for them to do so, employers won't be under any duty to offer paid time off work to employees who find themselves in this kind of family crisis. The Government needs to introduce paid leave for kinship carers on par with the paid leave given to birth parents and adoptive parents. It's clearly understood that birth and adoptive parents need time to welcome, bond and put in place all the things that make a child feel secure, so I don't understand why, when kinship families are often in crisis, the needs of the children are not better supported in the same way.

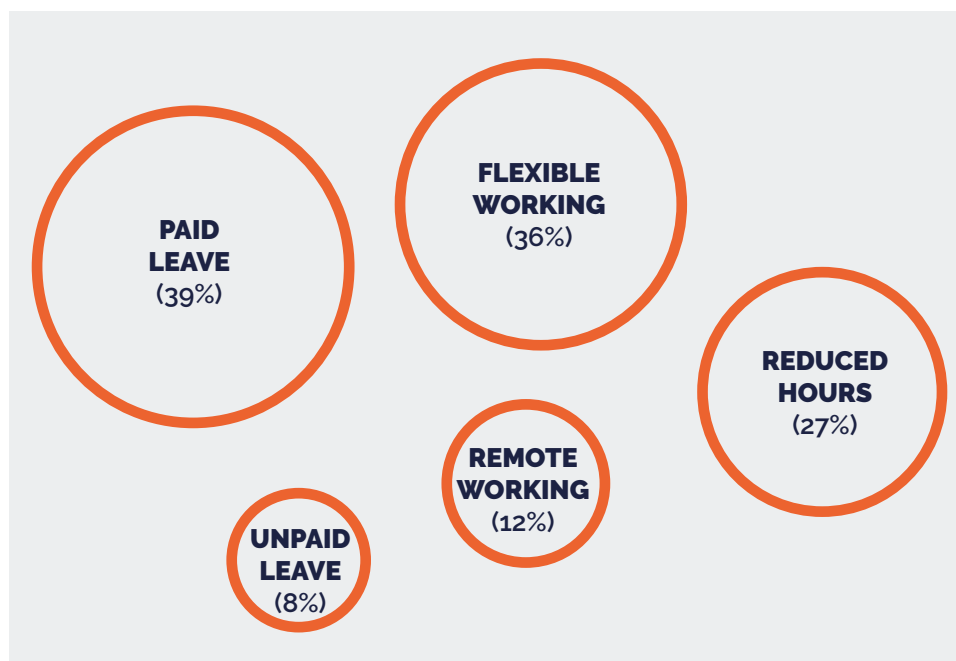
Luckily for me, after about a year a new Manager was appointed who viewed flexible family friendly working differently, so I have been able to continue working for the same employer that I had when our grandchildren came into our care six years ago. That flexibility has made a huge difference, especially as the children have special needs and need a lot of support. Being able to work around appointments by working early mornings and late evenings to make up my hours has been a real lifeline for us.

If we had received statutory paid leave of 9 or 12 months, we would have had time to take a step back to breathe and come to terms with what had happened to our family and be immediately available to meet the needs of three traumatised little children in those early days. We can't get that time back now, and it's sad that so many of the difficulties the children have faced could have been lessened if we had only been able to take paid leave to properly support them when they first came to us."

Other employment support



Kinship carers most commonly said that **paid leave** and **flexible working** were the things they needed most from their employer.



When asked what support they needed when they became a kinship carer, nearly 4 in 10 (39%) said paid leave and 36% said flexible working. 27% said reduced hours. A smaller proportion of respondents – 12% and 8% respectively – said remote working and unpaid leave would have been helpful for them.

As above, comments from kinship carers highlighted the difference which paid leave, clearly enshrined as a right in legislation, would provide for them and their families. In addition, many spoke of the need for greater flexibility from employers to better support them to balance their kinship caring role whilst continuing to earn to support their family; it is clear that the lack of opportunities which offer true flexibility for kinship carers is preventing many from being able to re-join the labour market when they would like to. Whilst ongoing efforts from Government, employers and others to enable and promote greater flexible working and family friendly policies is welcome, the abrupt and often chaotic nature of kinship care often means that even greater flexibility is needed in terms of expectations around working patterns or location, for example.

However, kinship carers also shared a wide range of suggestions for additional support which would be beneficial from employers, local authorities, the Government and others. These included matching existing rights granted to parents and others with parental responsibility for those kinship carers who do not have this (i.e. kinship foster carers and informal

kinship carers) as well as wider improvements to the support which kinship families receive including consistent and ongoing financial support, better educational support for children at school or college, and improved access to the Adoption Support Fund and other therapeutic support for both carers and children.

"Remaining employed and caring for a LO [little one] can be done but we need legislation to level up our rights, provide paid time off for settling in/transition periods, and protected unpaid leave similar to parental leave entitlement."

Kinship foster carer, aged 35-44

"My boss was fantastic, offered paid leave without batting an eyelid. And flexible and remote working. Honestly I feel very blessed in that regard and it has made a tremendous difference to our capacity to care for our granddaughter."

Kinship foster carer, aged 55-64

"If there was a universal right to paid leave this would make things so much easier for anyone becoming a kinship carer allowing you to focus fully on the welfare of the child coming into your care."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"Paid leave and reducing my hours would have allowed the children to settle in and us as a family have job security/money. Also being given the same rights as parents in situations where I was needed to be at home rather than work due to illnesses and meetings would have made things easier as using holidays or having to work back the hours became difficult."

Kinship foster carer, aged 35-44

"It would have been a lot easier if I could have been given time off to take in and get the important things together when I was made a Special Guardian, like paperwork reporting to the different agencies etc, I just found it all over whelming and busy trying to do my daily duties and incorporate the new and all the info that comes with it"

Special guardian, aged 55-64

"Today's job market is harder than ever I need a new job and find you need to be flexible and when you can't the job centre doesn't understand that your child must come first the job has to fit around your child not your child around the job and they want to sanction you because of this. I feel that there isn't enough support in this area."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

"What I have really needed over the years is some respite. Having no respite at all has negative consequences on mental health and you do get burnt out."

Special guardian, aged 45-54

Case study: Sandra

Sandra, aged 58, from Surrey is a special guardian for her three-year-old grandson and works as an Operations Director for a social care company.

"I requested that our company adopted a kinship friendly policy two and a half months after joining the company. I had just become a kinship carer and my company was really good to me, offering flexible hours and time off. It made a huge difference to me being able to continue to stay in work while looking after my grandson, so I wanted to make it formal and ensure that other kinship carers like me could benefit by introducing it into our policies and procedures.

The board signed off my request straight away and now several kinship carers have come forward to take up the new support which includes statutory paid leave, flexible and reduced hours and time off work.

That flexibility and understanding means that carers can stay in work and carry on with their caring responsibilities. There is no reason why they shouldn't receive the same support as adoptive parents, so it's fantastic that we're able to help make a difference at a time in their lives when they need it the most.

I know from first-hand experience that many carers have to step up in a moment of crisis and take care of a family relative's child when that parent can no longer do so. It's a very overwhelming time and one of the things that can help is being given paid time off work and flexible hours to prepare for their kinship child's arrival and settle them into their new home.

It means they also have the chance to go out and buy essentials like cots, beds, nappies and clothes, as often children arrive on a kinship carer's doorstep with nothing but the clothes they're wearing.

Employers, especially in sectors like social care where there are already staff shortages and where workers are expected to work night and day 12-hour shifts need to be flexible to retain their staff.

It's been great to hear the feedback from our colleagues. One employee told me our new policies had changed her life because she felt she would have had to give up work and claim benefits without them and that she would have lost her independence. Another employee said it had enabled him to carry on doing the job he loved because we could be flexible with his hours."

Improved knowledge and understanding of kinship care

In particular, kinship carers also spoke of the need to boost understanding and knowledge of employers and others around what kinship care is, the challenges facing kinship carers, and what good employment support looks like. As explored earlier in the 'Kinship carers' experiences with their employers' section, many who responded to our survey had very poor experiences speaking to their employer about their new caring responsibilities, and often faced stigma, a lack of compassion, and discriminatory attitudes.

Alongside concrete action from Government to introduce new workplace entitlements for kinship carers, improvements to employer practices and

culture could make a significant difference to the common experience of kinship carers. Kinship's Kinship Friendly Employers initiative will support a range of employers to understand how to do this well and deliver the information which employers need to know about kinship carers' experiences, challenges and strengths.

"I have found my employer to be incredibly supportive as a kinship carer. However, I think this is down to the culture of the organisation as there is no guidance that I am aware of on how to assist kinship carers in the workplace. As kinship caring often comes about as a result of a traumatic experience within the family and the children in care often have additional needs, making employers aware of the additional stresses and obligations that kinship carers might be under is important. Guidelines outlining what support employers could offer would also be helpful. Kinship carers save the government millions of pounds. A supportive employer is vital for keeping kinship carers in work and able to continue supporting themselves and their loved ones."

Informal kinship carer, aged 35-44

"I think in big companies such as the NHS there could be more 'care' for those with kinship responsibilities, a one size fits all approach is not helpful or supportive, meaning there are few options available"

Informal kinship carer, aged 55-64

"I needed ... compassion and time to adapt to the situation it's an emotional time, a stressful time and if it's a young baby a tiring time especially if you're older so a boss who listens and gives you time really helps."

Kinship foster carer, aged 55-64

"I would love better training for employers/school/social workers"

Special guardian, aged 65-74

"There needs to be more education to employers about SGOs and their impact on families who take the children and an understanding of the support they need. It needs to be at least equivalent to adoption."

Special guardian, aged 35-44

Recommendations



1) The Government should introduce a right to paid kinship care leave for all kinship carers.

This should at least match the current level on offer to adopters which provides 52 weeks of Statutory Adoption Leave and up to 39 weeks of Statutory Adoption Pay. The Government should commit to this within its forthcoming kinship care strategy, to be published by the end of 2023, and then legislate to introduce this entitlement as soon as possible. The rollout should include additional funding to deliver activity which supports employers and develops greater organisational understanding about kinship carers in the workplace.



2) The Government should ensure that its planned Pathfinder and pilot activity includes elements of employment support for kinship families.

As part of ongoing work to test Family Network Support Packages, the Government should ensure that participating local authorities are supported, encouraged and adequately resourced to deliver high-quality employment support for kinship families, such as compensating for reduced working hours and helping kinship carers to secure more flexible working arrangements.



3) The Government should introduce a mandatory financial allowance for kinship carers.

To ensure that kinship families have the financial stability they need to support their children to heal and thrive, the Government should commit to legislating to introduce a mandatory financial allowance for kinship carers within its forthcoming kinship care strategy and fund local authorities appropriately to deliver this. This should be non-means tested and equivalent to the national minimum fostering allowance. Government should also ensure that kinship carers can access other elements of financial support which can better support family life, such as free childcare.



4) Local authorities should provide better employment advice and support to kinship families.

Too many kinship carers are advised to give up work when a child is placed with them and then left without support to deal with the resultant impact this has on the family's financial circumstances. They should receive high-quality advice at the very beginning of their caring journey

which outlines their options and what is expected of them if they take on the care of a child, as well as signposting to other advice and support services including peer support and training.

Local authorities should work with kinship carers so they can make decisions about employment in the best interests of the child, and ensure that ongoing support is written into support plans which are subsequently adhered to. This should include providing eligible kinship carers with a financial allowance and other forms of financial support where appropriate, as well as tailored guidance and social work support to help them navigate their employment situations.



5) Employers should introduce kinship friendly employment policies and seek to improve their understanding of kinship care.

All employers should consider kinship carers within their family friendly employment policies, and where possible, extend eligibility for enhanced workplace entitlements such as paid leave and flexible working to all types of kinship carer. Policies should specifically speak to kinship carers and recognise their often unique circumstances and how they can best be supported in the workplace. Employers should ensure key staff, such as those working in HR teams, have good awareness of kinship care and that workplace cultures are supportive of their kinship carer colleagues. Kinship stands ready to support employers with this as it develops its Kinship Friendly Employers scheme. As a leading employer, and to demonstrate clear leadership in this space, the Government should commit to becoming a pioneer Kinship Friendly Employer and support other public bodies and agencies to do the same.

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- Tommy's Baby Charity
- Walsall Council
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- The Baroness Drake CBE
- Sarah Cassidy

“We have [the] little one who brings us so much happiness and knowing he’s safe and happy with us makes it all worthwhile and I wouldn’t change things at all. I really hope that kinship carers of the future get better support and more financial assistance to help them when their life is flipped upside down.”

Special guardian, aged 35-44



ABOUT KINSHIP

Kinship is the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We're here for all kinship carers. The grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, other family members and friends who step up to raise children when their parents aren't able to. We want every kinship family to have the recognition, value and support they need and deserve.

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 helps with complicated and stressful decisions that so many kinship families have to make. We're 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're at the heart of kinship networks, partnering with and influencing service providers, local and national government and other organisations. We give everything we have to fight for each family and their rights, changing society until every kinship family is recognised, valued and supported.

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