



Kinship Care: State of the Nation 2017

Grandparents Plus

Charity number 1093975

Introduction

The Kinship Care: State of the Nation Survey

This report is based on a survey of members of the Grandparents Plus Kinship Care Support Network, which includes almost 4,000 kinship carers. The results are based on responses from 671 kinship carers living in England and Wales, making it the largest ever survey of its kind. Carried out in February 2017 using both online and postal questionnaires, the survey explores the experiences of kinship carers, especially the support they receive and identifies significant unmet support needs.

About Grandparents Plus

Grandparents Plus is a national charity (England and Wales) that supports grandparents in their caring roles. Our services and support are focused on supporting grandparents when they face the significant financial, practical and emotional challenges of raising grandchildren full-time as kinship carers, whether they are doing so formally (whatever the legal order) or informally. Our services are also open to other family members who are raising a relative's child. We offer independent advice and support for kinship carers, providing vital financial, practical and emotional support. Bringing together lived experience and research, we are working towards transforming the understanding of, and support for, kinship carers and the children they care for.

Context

Kinship care is the care, nurturing and protection of children who are separated from their parents or whose parents are unable to provide that care or support. Instead this responsibility is taken on by a family member such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, sibling or other connected adult to the child such as godparents or close friends of the family.

The Kinship Care Guide for England, Grandparents Plus

The latest research from the University of Bristol based on census data suggests that around 180,000 children in the United Kingdom are being raised by a family member in kinship care because their parents are unable to look after them.¹ As a group, the children are likely to have experienced trauma and neglect, yet support for them is too often determined by their legal status rather than need. The vast majority of kinship carers are looking after children on an informal arrangement, or a legal order that means they are not entitled to any support unless a child is looked after or previously looked after.

1 This figure comes from Dinithi Wijedasa's analysis of 2011 census data, accessible at <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/kinship/>

At a glance

- 83% of carers surveyed are grandparents, and 85% are of working age. 43% of carers have a disability or long term health condition themselves, and 40% are single carers. Half of the kinship carers have been looking after a kinship child for five years or more.
- The most common reason children were in kinship care was due to parental drug or alcohol abuse (55%). Over half of the children had experienced abuse or neglect.
- 52% of carers say they are caring for a child with special needs.
- 60% of carers have a Special Guardianship Order. 65% of carers get a financial allowance from their local authority, and yet the average income for a kinship household is just £17,316 - well below the national average. 43% say their income is not sufficient to meet the children's needs.
- Kinship carers have significant unmet support needs. 62% of carers say they need more advice and information, and 65% say they need more emotional support. 47% say they aren't getting the financial support they need, including 28% who feel very poorly supported financially.
- Contact with the children's birth parents continues to be a source of major concern for kinship carers. 45% have a court order specifying that the children should have contact with their parents. 27% felt that contact was harmful or very harmful.
- 42% of carers have been to a support group. 78% say that Grandparents Plus provides essential information and advice.



Part 1: Meet the families

Survey respondents are members of our national support network for kinship carers. As such, they're more likely to be grandparent kinship carers – 83% are grandparents, while research suggests 51% of kinship children in England are living with a grandparent.² Nevertheless the survey reflects a wide range of kinship care experiences, with different legal arrangements, financial situations and support histories all represented.

About the carers

- 85% are working age: 75% are aged 45-64; 15% are 65 and over.
- 91% are women.
- 60% are married/living with a partner; 40% are single carers.
- 43% say they have a disability or long-term health condition.
- 59% of kinship carers in our survey are raising one child, 26% are raising two children, 15% are raising three or more children.
- Half of the kinship carers who responded to our survey had been looking after a kinship child for five years or more, a third (33%) for 2-4 years, 17% for less than two years.
- 30% have multiple caring responsibilities – they are also helping to look after a disabled or elderly relative or friend

About the children in kinship care

Our survey suggests that children have experienced a range of adversities prior to coming into kinship care:

- 55% had experienced parental drug or alcohol misuse.

- 52% had experienced abuse and neglect.
- 34% had been in a home where there was domestic abuse.
- 10% were brought up by relatives after a parent died.

It also finds that children have complex needs, with kinship carers reporting that 52% of the children they are caring for have special needs. Of these children, the majority (82%) have emotional or behavioural issues, 36% have a learning difficulty/disability, 28% Autistic spectrum/Asperger's, 14% have chronic health issues, 9% have foetal alcohol syndrome and 7% have a physical disability.

Legal status of the arrangement

By far the biggest proportion of carers had a Special Guardianship Order (60%). Despite the increased likelihood of financial support, many carers spoke negatively about the process of obtaining the order.

'I felt as though social services put a lot of pressure on me in lots of ways so as not to make grandchild a looked after child which in turn saved them money... We have a Special Guardianship Order now and everything has settled but I do feel used by the social care team.'

22% had a Residence Order and 6% had a Child Arrangements Order. As we found in our previous surveys, there is no correlation between the legal order and the needs or experiences of the child.

2 Wjijedasa, D. (2015) The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in the UK (Briefing paper 1): Characteristics of children living with relatives in England (Part 1). University of Bristol

Part 2:

Finance

The survey highlighted a number of challenges that were faced by, and often unique to, kinship carers. This section will focus on the impact of kinship caring on family incomes and carers' ability to work.

Impact on work

- 85% of carers we surveyed were of working age, and 73% were working prior to becoming a kinship carer - 45% gave up work; 23% reduced their hours. 8% were able to change their hours.
- Now they are carers, 30% are in paid work, 21% retired, 11% unemployed and 37% not working due to ill health/caring responsibilities.
- 51% kinship care households have no working adult.
- 81% of carers who gave up work said they did so to meet the needs of the children.
- 21% said they felt pressured to give up work or reduce their hours by children's services, sometimes told that children would be taken in to care or adopted if they did not.

'I was told my grandchild would get 24/7 care with foster carers or adopters and my work hours were too long and a concern.'

Kinship carers also have no equivalent entitlement to Adoption Leave when a child is placed permanently with them. Carers told us that this is particularly challenging when they took on care of newborn or very young children.

'The most difficult aspect of taking on my newborn grandchild was not being entitled to maternity leave. I had to return to work after five weeks' annual leave and put my grandchild in nursery at five weeks old!'

Impact on income

Most carers (85%) were of working age, and becoming a kinship carer led to a significant proportion leaving the labour market with a consequent impact on family income. The average household income for kinship families is £17,316 (compared to the national average £27,200).³ As in other research, this survey found a direct link between kinship care and poverty.⁴

- 83% saw their income fall as a result of taking on the kinship care role.
- 43% say their income is not sufficient to meet children's needs.
- Welfare benefits/tax credits are the main source of income for 40% of kinship families (for 41% it's their own or their partner's job).
- 19% of kinship carers rely on their pension as their main source of income.
- 50% are using savings to cover the costs of raising children.
- 65% are receiving a financial allowance from their local authority.

'Where I ticked 'using savings,' what I actually could have done with was a box that said 'USED savings!' and credit cards maxed out as I went for almost a year without financial support from the local authority.'

Only kinship/family and friends foster carers receive a national minimum allowance to cover the costs of raising someone else's child. For the vast majority of kinship carers, they have no entitlement to financial support - allowances are discretionary and means-tested.

3 Office for National Statistics, available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/nowcastinghouseholdincomeintheuk/financialyearending2017>

4 Wijedasa, D. (2015) The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in the UK (Briefing paper 1): Characteristics of children living with relatives in England (Part 1), University of Bristol

Part 3: Support

The survey reinforces previous research that highlights the paucity of practical, financial and emotional support for kinship carers throughout their carer journey. We asked carers about the support they were currently receiving, and the support they think they need to be able to bring up the children they'd stepped in to care for.

- Only 13%, little more than 1 in 10, said that they are currently receiving the support they need to bring up the children.
- 61% of kinship carers said they did not get the support they needed when children first moved in with them.
- 65% say they need more emotional support.
- 62% say they need more advice, information and practical support.
- Just 30% said they felt respected as a kinship carer.

Local authority support

Financial support

As shown earlier in this report, finance continues to be a key issue for many kinship carers, and the vast majority of kinship carers have no entitlement to an allowance (equivalent to the national minimum fostering allowance) to cover the costs of raising someone else's child. As mentioned, 65% of kinship carers receive a financial allowance from the local authority to help with the costs of raising someone else's child, which is likely to be associated with support for Special Guardians.

There is a growing financial divide among kinship carers - 33% of kinship carers say they get the financial support they need, while a comparable number (28%) say they feel very poorly supported. We might speculate that this division reflects entitlements to financial support for kinship foster carers only, while support for Special Guardians is discretionary, means tested and variable from place to place. A previous Grandparents Plus survey (Kinship Care: State of the Nation, 2016) found that fewer than a third (31%) of kinship carers with other types of legal orders –

Residence Orders or Child Arrangements Orders - receive any financial support from the local authority.

Practical and emotional support

Other forms of support for kinship carers from local authorities is unsurprisingly also patchy and inconsistent, varying from place to place, carer to carer. While access to support is often determined by legal status (depending on whether a child is looked-after or has a Special Guardianship Order), there appears to be no relationship between the needs of children, the legal order and therefore the access to support.

Carers on pre-placement support:

'We were not given any impartial information. We had no idea about what our obligations or rights were during court hearings. We went through the process blind.'

'They should tell you everything you are entitled to and the support that's available. But they tell you nothing.'

Carers on support after the children move in:

'You're "out on your own" and there is no support or help – you are invisible and a non-entity.'

'I feel there is no advice or help at all from the local council once the children are placed with you. They tell you there will be help but once we have the children placed with us we just get pushed aside and forgot about.'

Contact with birth parents

Kinship carers are often expected to manage ongoing contact between children and their parents, and this emerged as an urgent unmet support need. In our survey, 63% of children had contact with their mother and 50% had contact with their father. Almost half of all carers (45%) had a Court Order specifying that the children should have contact with parents, and of these, there were differing views about whether contact was in the best interests of the children.

- 49% of carers were neutral about the benefits of contact with parents
- 27% felt contact was harmful or very harmful
- 23% thought contact was beneficial

It is worth noting that 10% of the carers surveyed felt that contact was very harmful for reasons including:

'Contact is unsupervised and my child is very distressed on handover. But he has to go because of the court order. This I feel is wrong.'

'Parents want contact on their terms and not for the benefit of the children.'

'They undo all the good that has been done.'

It's clear that kinship carers need more support in managing contact between kinship children and their parents.

Support for the children

When asked what kinds of support the children had received, 20% of carers said they had had counselling, 24% said they'd been supported by child and adolescent mental health services but an almost equal proportion (19%) said they hadn't had any support, even though they needed it. Some commented on the difficulty of accessing support:

'Therapeutic services for children are difficult to access without a diagnosis. I have had to pay for therapy and cognitive therapy etc.'

Peer and voluntary sector support

By far the most common source of help (outside of family and friends) were peer support groups, and 42% of kinship carers in the survey have attended one.

'They [social workers] forget the emotional impact it has on us. Thank goodness [support group] is here to pick up the pieces.'

78% of carers also said that Grandparents Plus provides them with essential information and support.

'Amazing Grandparents Plus, I want to shout from the rooftops, a fantastic place that saved my sanity.'

'Grandparents Plus has given me hope.'

What kind of support would carers like?

We asked carers to tell us what kind of support they'd like their local authority to provide.

Their responses suggest two phases on the kinship carer journey when much more advice, information and support is required. Firstly, when they first consider taking on care of the children, prospective kinship carers need advice about their legal options and clear information about the financial support that is available to cover the costs of raising kinship children.

Secondly, kinship carers appear vulnerable when the children move in and any local authority support drops away. Many kinship carers step in to care for children at a point of crisis, with little time to fully prepare for the seismic impact on their lives and the multiple challenges that follow. More support is needed as they come to terms with their situation and the children's needs. Access to peer networks appears to be crucial, and carers want clear information about what support is available locally.

While these support gaps are raised in relation to the local authority, such support might also be available from voluntary organisations or other kinship carers.

Resources and Support from Grandparents Plus

Kinship Carer Support Network - Our support network keeps kinship carers connected and up-to-date on the world of kinship care. [Click here to join our support network today](#)

Local Support Groups - There is a network of friendly local support groups for kinship carers across the country, and these are a great place to meet people who understand what you may be going through. [Click here to search for groups](#)

Relative Experience - Our Relative Experience programme offers tailored support to kinship carers. [Click here for more information](#)

Someone Like Me - Our Someone Like Me service provides telephone peer support for kinship carers and offers the chance to talk to someone who has been in a similar position.

Advice Service - Our advice service provides free comprehensive advice on welfare benefits, financial support, employment, housing and education amongst other topics.

Call 0300 123 7015 or email advice@grandparentsplus.org.uk to access this service.

Recommendations for policy & practice

1. Kinship care should have the same status as other routes to permanence.

Children and young people in kinship care experience similar disadvantages to those who are looked after in the care system but they do not receive equivalent support. While their outcomes are better than for other children in care, they are considerably worse than for young people in the general population. Without additional help, the life chances of some of these young people will remain compromised.⁵

a. Permanent kinship care (ie when children are raised by family and friends carers for more than 28 days where there is court, local authority, or professional evidence that they cannot live with their parents) should have the same status as other permanence arrangements where it is now recognised, for example, that adopted children are likely to continue to need support (including therapeutic help) as they grow up, as their needs change and especially in adolescence.

b. Irrespective of their legal status or the local authority's involvement in the original arrangement, children in kinship care should be entitled to request an assessment of their support needs from the local authority at any time. The local authority should then be required to carry out a thorough assessment of their support needs and set out how these are to be met, by whom, over what time period and the plan reviewed regularly.

2. Advice, information and support when kinship carers are taking on children

Kinship carers need access to free, independent legal advice and representation in order to make informed decisions. They also need access to specialist and non-judgemental independent advice and support, for example from the Grandparents Plus advice service.

Local authorities should provide clear and accessible information about the support that will be available – including financial support – so that prospective kinship carers can make informed decisions. There should be great focus on preparing people for the kinship care role, including information about the kinds of challenges they may meet and services and support available to help them.

a. Assessments need to address a range of issues that are unique to kinship families, including allowing time for prospective kinship carers to consider and fully understand the children's support needs and what their own needs would be as a new family; the challenges of managing ongoing family relationships and contact with birth parents. A realistic assessment of financial and other needs is required so that kinship carers are not pushed into poverty, so reducing their ability to provide optimal care for children.

b. Peer support from other kinship carers arranged by local authorities or voluntary agencies can provide important help at this early stage as well as later, for example the Grandparents Plus Relative Experience kinship care support programme.

5 See Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood, Grandparents Plus, 2017

3. Improving financial, practical and emotional support for kinship carers

Financial support

There needs to be greater clarity and consistency about financial support that is available for kinship carers.

- a. Kinship carers should be entitled to financial support wherever they live, with a national minimum allowance to cover the costs of bringing up a kinship child, equivalent to the fostering allowance.
- b. Kinship carers should be entitled to paid adjustment leave when they step in to raise a kinship child, enabling some to continue in employment if it is in the interests of the child.
- c. Kinship carers should be entitled to the equivalent of Adoption Leave when a child is placed with them permanently, enabling some to continue in employment if it is in the interests of the child.

Practical and emotional support

Local authorities should work proactively with the voluntary sector to offer high quality, accessible and tailored support for kinship carers and their families (including access to specialist advice and peer support) that would greatly improve their wellbeing and ability to provide safe, stable and nurturing homes for children so they achieve the best outcomes possible, help families avoid crisis and reduce the likelihood of future reliance on public services.

- a. Support for children should be based on need, not legal status. Kinship carers need to be able to access support from Children's Services whenever they require it, which may be some years after the child joins their family.
- b. Kinship carers need support from others who understand their situation, especially the complexity of the kinship care role. Specialist voluntary organisations have a key part to play in providing practical and emotional support to kinship carers through helplines (for example the Grandparents Plus advice service), peer support groups and peer-to-peer support (for example the Grandparents Plus Someone Like Me service is delivered by experienced kinship carers). Funding needs to be available to support these services and information about these resources should be made widely available, for example in local authority welcome packs for new kinship carers.

4. There needs to be greater awareness of the situation of young people in kinship care

- a. Kinship care is the main route to permanence for children who cannot live with their parents. Policy developments on permanence should therefore always include kinship care as a key permanence option, since it provides high levels of stability and enduring support into young adulthood.
- b. Ofsted should include family and friends care in their inspections and ensure that they inspect across the different legal dispositions.

- c. Given the lack of basic data about children in kinship care and their progress, local authorities need to collect information about all the arrangements known to them (not just looked after children in kinship foster care but also those on Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangements Orders, including those who were not previously looked after) for publication by central government. It should then be made possible to link this to data collected by schools. This would help to inform the development of national and local policy and the planning of support services for children and young people in kinship care.

- d. Local authorities in England should comply with statutory guidance on family and friends care (DfE, 2011), including having in place a local policy that reflects the needs of local children in kinship care and their families.