



Kinship care state of nation survey 2020

Annual Survey 2020

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the kinship carers who took time out of their busy lives to complete this survey, without them this would not be possible.

Introduction

Kinship care is an essential form of care for children who are unable to live with their parents. Children who are looked after by kinship carers usually benefit from loving, stable homes (Wellard et al 2017). However, many kinship carers face enormous challenges and are often either unsupported or only have access to limited support (Hunt 2018, Harwin et al 2019). At a time when the number of children coming into local authority care is at the highest level for decades, kinship care has the potential to offer alternative care to children who otherwise would be in local authority care. Furthermore, the research evidence suggests outcomes for children in kinship care are generally positive (Wellard et al 2017, Harwin et al 2019). A recent evaluation (currently in publication) of the Grandparents Plus Kinship Connected support programme also identified that support offered to kinship carers can be cost effective for local authorities.

This report is designed to be accessible so it can be read by kinship carers, professionals, academics and policy makers.

About the State of the Nation Survey 2020

Grandparents Plus conduct an annual survey of kinship carers across the UK to help better understand what life is like for them. These surveys build an evidence base that allows us to develop effective support services for kinship carers. They also support us to make recommendations for changes to government policy and help us improve the practice of all professionals working with kinship carers.

This year's survey had two key aims. First was to find out how kinship carers felt the role affected their lives and the lives of the children they look after. Second was to build on the knowledge from the surveys Grandparents Plus conducted over the summer (Grandparents Plus 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) which looked at the impact the Covid-19 had on kinship families.

Method



The survey was promoted widely online between August – September 2020 via social media, through the Grandparents Plus kinship care community and professional network and via partner organisations and the Department for Education in England. In total 561 people responded to the survey from England, Scotland and Wales.

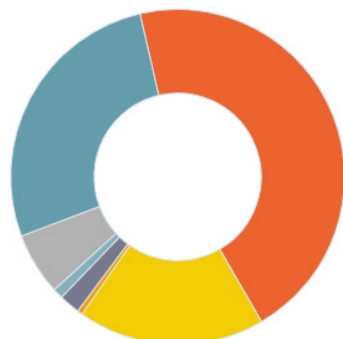
The responses to the survey were analysed using Form Assembly software which allowed us to work out how people responded to the questions and turn these numbers into percentages. Often respondents typed comments along with their answers and we looked for themes across these responses so we could understand in more detail how the issues affected kinship carers lives.

These findings only represent the kinship carers who took part in the survey. It is likely most of the respondents were kinship carers who are part of the Grandparents Plus community and know about the support we offer. There are many kinship carers who were unaware of this survey and their circumstances and experiences may differ to those of the respondents of this study. It is also likely that kinship carers who are in crisis or feeling overwhelmed might not have the capacity to complete a survey.

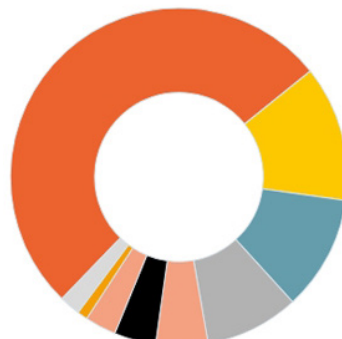
One surprising finding in the demographic section of the survey was the ethnicity of the respondents. Nearly a quarter of respondents identified as 'White other', which is significantly higher than expected and only 3% identified as being 'Black British' which is significantly lower than expected. There is no obvious explanation for these discrepancies. Both findings are out of step with the results of previous years' surveys and should be treated with caution.

About the carers and the children

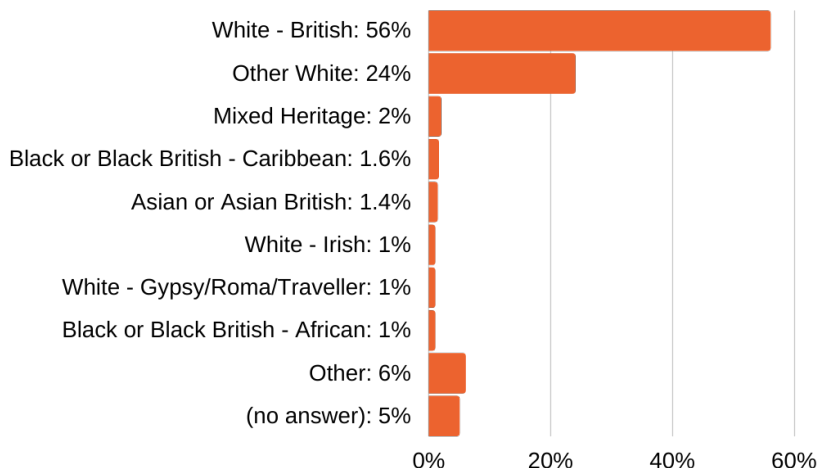
Age of respondent



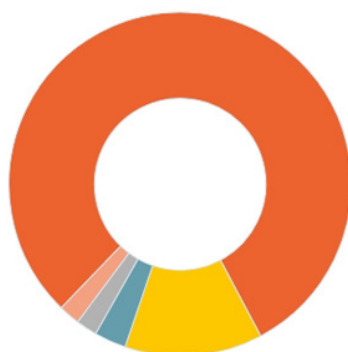
Relationship status



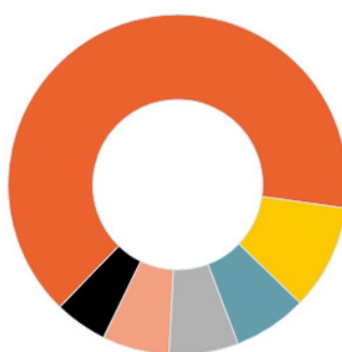
Ethnicity



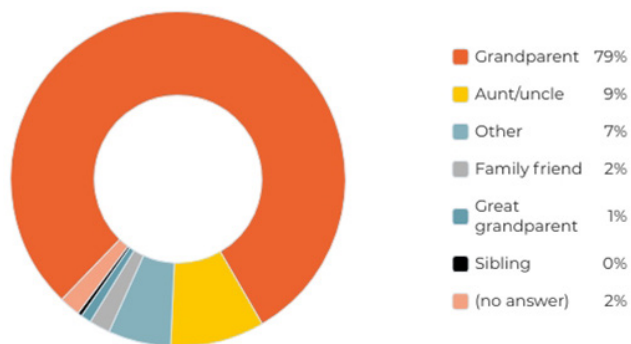
do they have parental responsibility to the children



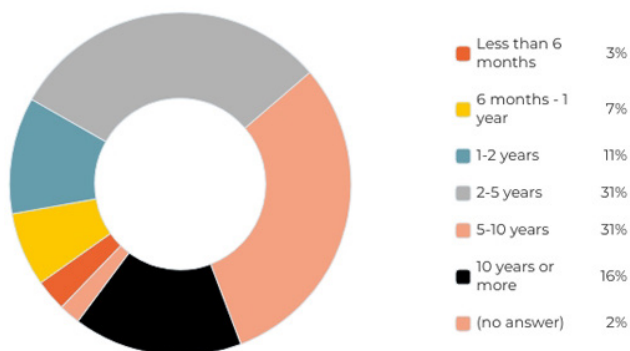
Type of legal order



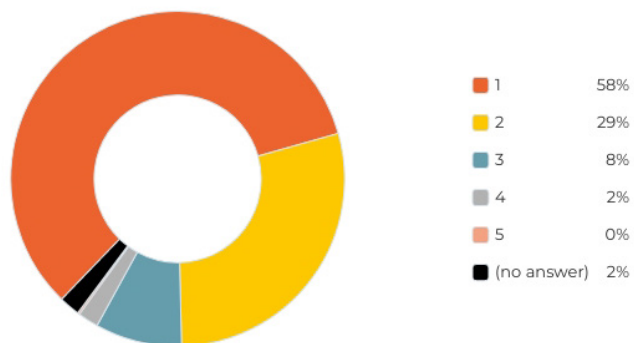
Relationship to the children



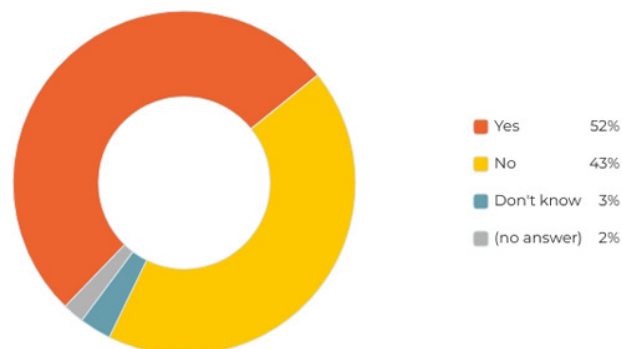
How long they have been a kinship carer



Number of kinship children



Were the children ever looked after by the local authority



Main reason the child was unable to live with their parents:

(respondents were able to select as many reasons as was relevant)

- 46% Neglect
- 45% Parental drug and/or alcohol misuse
- 30% Parent unable to cope
- 24% Domestic violence
- 23% Parental disability or illness
- 17% Abuse
- 8% Parent did not want them/abandonment
- 7% Very young parent
- 6% Death of a parent
- 6% Other
- 5% Difficulties between parent and child
- 4% Parent in prison

Key findings

Kinship carers are dedicated to the children they care for



92% of kinship carers are confident in their ability to parent



“Being able to look after my nephew so he stays within the family who care for him and love him so much. We (the family) have strong family bonds with him since birth. No one else I feel could know or look after him better.”

Kinship carers are dedicated to the children in their care. **92%** see themselves as the child's permanent carer. This is important because previous research has shown that children who do not live with their parents, especially those who have had traumatic experiences, need stability with consistent loving care from someone who is dedicated to them.

Kinship carers are committed to providing the best care they can for their children. While many carers acknowledge the difficulties of raising a child with complex and changing needs, **92%** said they were confident in their ability to parent their child and **95%** believed they were the best person to make decisions for their child.

Most kinship carers were positive about being a kinship care family. **87%** of respondents were proud of their role as a kinship carer. **97%** of carers felt the child had settled well or very well into their family and **91%** felt the child they are raising felt positive or mostly positive about the arrangement. **89%** of carers felt able to talk to the children about their situations.

Children in kinship care need to feel like they belong to a permanent loving family. This survey has highlighted that kinship care can provide that to them. It has also demonstrated that kinship carers have the capacity to talk to the children about their lives, this is important to help children feel positive about themselves and their backgrounds.

Becoming a kinship carer is life changing



82% of kinship carers miss something about their previous, pre-kinship care lives



"(I miss) ...Everything! Freedom, time to myself, money, time with my husband and older kids. I guess I miss my identity as something other than just a mum. My old career. We had plans to enjoy life more as our kids got older... but we're right back to the start again with a 3-year-old. But of course, we wouldn't change that."

The survey responses demonstrated the impact that becoming a kinship carer had on people's lives. Even though kinship carers were overwhelmingly proud of their role, **82%** missed aspects of their previous lives. Many spoke of having to give up work or not seeing other family or friends as much as they used to.

Becoming a kinship carer took a toll on people's relationships with family, friends and work colleagues which left them at risk of becoming isolated. **30%** of carers identified their relationship with their birth children had been negatively or very negatively affected and **34%** said the friendships had been negatively or very negatively impacted by becoming kinship carers. **19%** of carers report that becoming a kinship carer either negatively or very negatively affected their ability to form new relationships. Kinship carers also found it hard to be accepted in the local parenting community with **48%** saying they felt included by other parents.



71% of kinship carers feel people don't understand what kinship care is



“People make a lot of assumptions and say things like “when is he going back to his Mum?” If they only knew the pain we'd been through... to secure permanence within the family for our lovely boy they wouldn't be so insensitive.”

Kinship carers felt becoming a kinship carer had changed how they are seen by their local communities and many felt invisible. Although **89%** of kinship carers felt confident to tell people about their role and **63%** of kinship carers said they felt they were viewed positively by their local communities, a further **71%** of carers felt most people did not understand what kinship care was. They described how people often assumed they are simply looking after the children. Many kinship carers felt stigmatised because of their family situation with **67%** of carers saying they felt people made judgements about their circumstances.

Becoming a kinship carer also affected the respondents' relationships with the children's parents. Previous research has identified that most kinship carers are related to one of the parents (Wijedasa 2017) and often have a previous, often close, relationship with them. In this study, **81%** of respondents reported the parents were having contact with them or the children. Of this group, however, **59%** described the relationship they had with the parents as challenging. Although these relationships could be difficult **44%** of carers are happy or very happy with the contact arrangements and **81%** of carers reported the children felt good or great about contact. This highlighted the complexity of the relationship between the kinship family and the parents which the kinship carers have to manage. It also demonstrated how kinship carers would prioritise the needs of the children over their own relationship difficulties with the parents.

At a time of growing need, kinship carers have been left to manage for themselves

70% found the last few months through the COVID-19 pandemic difficult or very difficult

Research into kinship care consistently identifies kinship carers need additional support (Hunt et al 2018, Harwin et al 2018). However, the provision of support is generally sporadic and insufficient to meet the needs of kinship carers and their children. This year the impact of Covid-19 has made being a kinship carer more difficult and the needs of kinship care families was not evident in the government response to the pandemic which meant kinship carers felt forgotten by decision makers.

The timing of this survey offered an opportunity for kinship carers to reflect on how the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown had affected them and their families. **70%** found being a kinship carer during this time either difficult or very difficult. **51%** reported it had a negative impact on the children they cared for. These findings echo those of the surveys on the impact of Covid-19 on kinship carers that Grandparents Plus carried out over the spring and summer of 2020 which highlighted that the global pandemic made being a kinship carer more challenging. The kinship carers felt Covid-19 had left them in a more vulnerable situation than they were in previously and when were asked if they felt they could cope with another lockdown, **24%** responded they were unsure if they would be able to.

Only 18% believed they were given the overall support they needed from their local authorities to raise the children in their care

Regardless of these additional challenges, most kinship carers said the support they received from their local authorities was inadequate. When talking about the support their received from their local authorities, **80%** reported they did not receive sufficient information and advice, **62%** felt they did not receive adequate financial support and **84%** stated they did not receive the emotional support they needed. Shockingly **82%** of kinship carers said their local authorities were not giving them the overall support they need to raise the children in their care. Considering the difficulties, they face and the commitment they offer to the children, this is an appallingly low figure. Added to this only **50%** of kinship carers felt social workers viewed them positively. This is a potential barrier to carers approaching local authorities for support.



“Working full time in a highly pressured job with two special needs children with no support has seen me close to breaking point”

The lack of support from the state meant kinship carers were turning to other people for help. Respondents instead turned to their families (**64%**), friends (**50%**), schools (**33%**) and Grandparents Plus (**30%**), as well as other services and groups.

Conclusion

A mixed picture



The survey paints a mixed picture of kinship care. Clearly kinship care has the potential to offer children who cannot live with their parents the opportunity of a permanent, loving home with committed carers who are often known to them. This prevents children coming into local authority care.

However, becoming a kinship carer is life changing, and carers have to make difficult decisions and sacrifices. Being a kinship carer is often isolating and can leave people feeling judged and stigmatised. Caring for children as kinship carers is hard. The children have often had difficult early life experiences and their behaviours can be challenging. Kinship carers often have to manage contact between the children and their parents and the relationships they have with the parents can be complicated and challenging. Added to this, the current health crisis due to Covid-19 is magnifying their difficulties.

Unfortunately, despite the dedication of the carers and the challenges they face, the vast majority feel unsupported by their local authorities. The current strain on kinship carers and the chronic lack of support is leaving some questioning whether they can continue in the role. However, if adequate support is provided to kinship families, it will increase the likelihood that many children who would otherwise be in the care system would instead be raised by kinship carers who would provide them with a permanent loving family home.

Recommendations

The findings from this survey highlighted most kinship carers continue to feel they do not receive adequate support from their local authorities. Grandparents Plus is calling for all kinship carers to be adequately supported and recommend the following:

1: A Kinship Care Act

Kinship care must be recognised in law to ensure all kinship carers and the children they care for have access to the support and information they need when they need it.

2: Local authorities must do more to support kinship carers in their areas

This is especially urgent given the impact Covid-19 is having on kinship families. Some local authorities are investing in specialist support for their kinship carers through Grandparents Plus. We would recommend more need to do this.

3: Specialist and independent advice to be universally available to kinship carers

This is to ensure they are made aware of their rights as soon as possible. They need access to free, independent legal advice in order to make informed decisions about the care arrangements they make for the child.

4: Comprehensive support to be universally available to kinship carers

Specific to the needs of every kinship family as soon as they begin looking after the child. This support needs to be offered by specialist professionals with an understanding of kinship care families. Carers should also be able to access peer support in the areas where they live. Grandparents Plus are already working with some local authorities to do this.

5: Financial support to be universally available

With a national minimum allowance to cover the costs of bringing up a child in kinship care and exemption from the benefits cap.

6: There needs to be a better understanding of kinship care among professionals and wider society

To ensure kinship carers feel valued for the important role they take on and the sacrifices they make.

7: A greater voice for kinship carers

Kinship carers' experiences should be at the heart of all decisions made about them. Their experiences should also be a foundation for any services offered to them.

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About Grandparents Plus

Who we are

Grandparents Plus is the kinship care charity. We give kinship care families life-changing information, advice and support when they have nowhere else to turn. We are here for them from the beginning - to help them navigate a complex system, and for as long as they need us.

Kinship Care Network

Our free network keeps kinship carers connected and up-to-date on the world of kinship care.

Advice Service

Our advice service provides free and independent advice on welfare benefits, financial support, employment, housing and education amongst other topics.

0300 123 7015

advice@grandparentsplus.org.uk

Someone Like Me

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

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.

Professionals Network

Our network of over 500 professionals who all have an interest in kinship care.

Kinship Response

Since the lockdown began, Grandparents Plus has been surveying kinship carers' concerns and have developed Kinship Response – an agency membership service that regional adoption agencies, and local authorities that aren't in a regional adoption agency, can commission through the Adoption Support Fund, to support special guardians in their areas.

Kinship Ready

One-day preparation workshops, designed specifically to support special guardians when they first begin their journey, they can be commissioned by the local authority.

Kinship Connected

Our Kinship Connected programme, available for commission by local authorities, offers tailored support to kinship carers.

Kinship Active

A pilot programme in Teesside for kinship families that encourages physical activity and better health and well-being.



Grandparents Plus is the kinship care charity. We support relatives and friends who step in to raise children who aren't able to live with their parents. We strive for a society in which kinship carers and the children they care for are recognised, valued and supported. We give kinship care families life-changing information, advice and support when they have nowhere else to turn. We are here for them from the beginning - to help them navigate a complex system, and for as long as they need us. We reduce isolation by connecting kinship carers via our friendly online community and support groups and we fight for kinship carers to be recognised and valued for the vital role they play in children's lives and society – and for that to be underpinned by legislation, policy and practice.



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