

Out of the Shadows

A vision for kinship care in England

March 2022



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Foreword



For too long, kinship care has been rendered invisible. Not enough attention has been paid to supporting the family and friends who step up in times of crisis to raise tens of thousands of children. These carers turn their lives upside down to put children first, offering them love and

stability when the alternative is often the care system. But kinship carers and the children they care for are largely hidden, their unique experiences, needs and strengths unknown.

It is twenty years since Kinship was established (we were known as Grandparents Plus until 2021). Over these twenty years, more and more kinship carers have come together to support each other, to raise awareness and to fight fearlessly for recognition and support.

Is 2022 the year that we will see the seismic shifts they need and deserve?

The signs are positive.

Kinship care is finally being understood as a hidden but invaluable resource by local and national government. Policy makers, local authority leaders and legal professionals are encouraging kinship care. Pioneers – in the voluntary sector and in local authorities – are starting to develop new services that are designed for kinship care families' unique circumstances. Professionals and the public are beginning to recognise and celebrate kinship carers and their children.

In particular, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England, chaired by Josh MacAlister, offers an enormous opportunity to transform how we support kinship children and their families. The Review has listened to the views and experiences of kinship families and those who support them and has already argued that

kinship care must be prioritised and supported. This report aims to inform the Review's thinking and recommendations to create the kinship care system we so desperately need.

We need to do this right for the kinship families of tomorrow. But we also need to deliver urgent change for the kinship families of today.

It's just over a year since we changed our name to Kinship to better reflect our commitment to our mission to ensure that kinship carers and the children they care for get the support and recognition they need. Following on from this, I'm delighted to share what we think needs to change now, and how to create a future fit for kinship care. This is informed by the research evidence, insights from Kinship's extensive service delivery experience, and direct consultation with kinship carers and those who support them.

I would like to extend special thanks to Helen Donohoe and Paul McGrath who have led on writing this report, and to Professor Elaine Farmer for her invaluable input. The report is informed by consultations with kinship carers, including our Kinship Carer Advisory Group, kinship carer campaigners in the North East, and our own staff whose experience as kinship carers enriches all our work. I'd particularly like to thank our frontline advice and programmes teams and those across Kinship who have contributed evidence, experience and insight at every stage.

It's time for kinship care to come out of the shadows, because properly supported, it is a much better option for most children who would otherwise grow up in care. Together, let's turn the spotlight towards kinship care and build a system that's fit for families and fit for the future.

Dr Lucy Peake
Chief Executive
Kinship

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It makes sense to invest in kinship care. Kinship carers - family members or friends who care for a child when their parents are unable to - look after some of the most vulnerable children in society, usually preventing them from entering the care system. In England and Wales, there are currently estimated to be over 162,400 children in kinship care¹, nearly double the 88,115 children in local authority care.^{2,3} Well-supported kinship care leads to better outcomes for children and reduces pressure on children's social care.⁴

Most kinship carers take on the role at a time of crisis. They take on the full financial cost of the child, usually without any financial support. They take on the responsibility for every aspect of the child's wellbeing and development. Children in kinship care have often had difficult experiences which can lead to them displaying their distress in behaviours that can be hard to manage. Even so, kinship carers make sure the children's emotional, behavioural, health and educational needs are met, again usually without help or support.⁵

The impact of being a kinship carer on people's lives is huge. Although kinship care can happen to anyone, kinship carers are more likely to be experiencing disadvantage in their lives. For example, when compared to parents or other cohorts of carers like foster carers, kinship carers are more likely to be older, in poorer health, living in poverty and deprivation, living in insecure accommodation, and be in low paid employment or unemployed. Kinship care is also far more prevalent in Black and minority ethnic communities.⁶

Kinship carers have to cope with the emotional impact of the family crisis which resulted in the

children moving into their care, as well as any assessment and court processes they may have to go through. Kinship carers not only have to parent the child, they also have to make sure the child understands the reasons they cannot live with their parents and has a safe relationship with them, which can involve managing complicated contact arrangements. Kinship carers also often find the role can make them isolated as their family and friends move on with their lives and they find it hard to fit in with other parents.⁷

One key message from both research and kinship carers themselves is that the support available to them is inadequate. There is no clear national strategy on how kinship carers should be supported. Currently, support is based on the legal status of the child rather than their level of need. For example, some local authorities are beginning to offer better support to special guardians, but informal kinship carers still struggle to receive any support. However, there are also still many local authorities that offer very little support to kinship carers regardless of the child's legal status. Kinship carers are being pushed into poverty, having to choose between feeding themselves or the children. They are left alone to raise children with complex needs with no support.

Despite all these challenges, kinship carers fight to provide children with loving and stable homes for as long as they need. However, many are now at breaking point. If the children were not living with their kinship families, most would be in local authority care. This would overwhelm the already stretched children's social care system. It would also have an adverse impact on children. When compared to children in local authority care, children in kinship care are more likely to

¹ Wijedasa, D. (2017) Children growing up in the care of relatives in the UK. Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, University of Bristol. Policy Report 18.

² Department for Education (2021) Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2020 to 2021.

³ Stats Wales (2021) Children Looked After, available at: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After>

⁴ Hunt (2020) Two Decades of UK Research on Kinship Care: An Overview, London: Family Rights Group.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wijedasa, D. (2015) The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in the UK: Characteristics of children living with relatives in England: Part I, University of Bristol, Bristol.

⁷ Hunt (2020).



have stability, better health, development and educational outcomes, and better relationships with their families.^{8,9}

The case to invest in kinship care is strong. Not only do children have better experiences and outcomes, but kinship families who receive support are less likely to fall into crisis and are more likely to stay together.¹⁰ Furthermore, recent economic analysis has found that for every £1 local authorities invest in kinship care, there is a return of £1.20 - a 20% return on investment.¹¹ It costs local authorities more to deal with the fallout of not supporting kinship families properly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current system where the support a kinship family receives is determined by the legal status of the child and where they live rather than on their needs is unfair and leaves some of the most vulnerable families without help. There is a clear case for improving support for all kinship carers, regardless of the child's legal status or where they live.

The report's recommendations are split into two phases: changes that need to happen now to alleviate the pressure on kinship families; and strategic changes needed to develop a kinship care system that is fit for purpose for the future.

CHANGES NEEDED NOW	
Financial support	All kinship carers should receive the financial support they need, including a non-means tested financial allowance that matches the current minimum fostering allowance. They should also be entitled to kinship care leave (on a par with adoption leave) when the child first moves into their care.
Information and advice	All kinship families should have access to independent information and advice, including free legal advice, from the point they are considering becoming kinship carers. Access to this information and advice should be available for as long as the family needs.
Practical and emotional support for kinship carers and their children – including peer support	All kinship families should have access to all the support they need. This support should include health, education, and therapeutic support for the children. It should also include: preparation and training; practical, emotional, and therapeutic support; peer support; and support with contact for the carers.

⁸ Sacker, A., Murray, E., Lacey, R. and Maughan, B. (2021) The lifelong health and wellbeing trajectories of people who have been in care: Findings from the Looked-after Children Grown up Project, London: Nuffield Foundation.

⁹ Hunt (2020).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Nicol Economics (2020) Kinship Care: The Opportunity A Report by Nicol Economics for Grandparents Plus. London: Grandparents Plus.

A FUTURE FIT FOR KINSHIP CARE	
Robust research and data collection	Data and research is needed to know how many kinship families there are, their demographics, and what their level of need is. More research is needed to help understand the best ways to support kinship families. This will enable the development of evidence-based support services.
Legal rights for all kinship carers	Kinship carers have very few legal rights. All kinship carers should have the legal right to: legal aid for any legal proceedings for the child; a role in legal proceedings; and the support they need.
Kinship care aware policy making and public service delivery at national and local levels of government	All decisions that affect children and families at both a national and local level should specifically take into consideration the needs of kinship families. All public services that have direct contact with kinship families should have policies in place explaining how their services are able to meet their needs.
An ambitious plan to raise awareness of kinship care	More must be done to raise awareness of kinship care among the professionals who work with them and among society more generally.
Workforce development	Every local authority should have specialist kinship care teams with specially trained practitioners. All professionals from other agencies who work with kinship carers should have a basic level of training on kinship care. To achieve this, relevant qualifying programmes should cover kinship care and there should be continuing professional development courses on kinship care for professionals working directly with kinship families.

We are at a crossroads. Kinship care is finally being recognised as an important part of the children's social care system. It offers a positive alternative for children who cannot live with their parents to live with people they know and love. However, without the right support, planning, and investment, kinship care will continue to be the poor relation of foster care and adoption.

Well-supported kinship care works. The recommendations in this report will improve the circumstances and outcomes for kinship families now and build a system that works for kinship families and reduces pressure on children's social care into the future. This will lead to more children being able to live in stable homes with people they know and love.

We are at a crossroads. Kinship care is finally being recognised as an important part of the children's social care system.

INTRODUCTION

It makes sense to invest in kinship care. Through it, hundreds of thousands of children who cannot live with their parents remain part of their family, staying connected to their brothers and sisters, their heritage and identity. The alternative for most of these children would be growing up in the care system. Kinship care presents another way. An alternative with love, continuity, stability, and a positive start in life.

However, for kinship carers this too often comes at a huge personal cost. Many fall into poverty, sacrifice their careers or retirement, lose friends, and are left to face the challenges of raising vulnerable children, who have often suffered trauma and loss, alone and with little or no support.

In England and Wales, the kinship care system, such that exists, is little more than a creaky, disjointed, and underfunded hope for the best. It is estimated that there are over 162,400¹² children living in kinship care in England and Wales,¹³ although this is believed to be an underestimate. That is close to double the 88,115 children in local authority care in England and Wales.^{14, 15} Kinship care is also a key route out of the care system. In the year ending 31 March 2021 in England, 3,800 children left care to the permanence of a special guardianship order (SGO), which is more than the 2,870 children who left care to adoption and represents the third year in a row this has been the case.¹⁶ The scale is huge, and the numbers are growing. But while some local authorities provide

a basic level of kinship care support, most kinship carers are left high and dry, trying to survive day to day with little or no support.

When compared to the care system, kinship care leads to better outcomes for children. For example, most children in kinship care experience a stable family home, they remain with the same carer as they grow up, they have positive relationships with their carers, and have better physical and mental health than children in local authority care.¹⁷ Furthermore according to the findings of a large longitudinal study:

- 24% of children in kinship care achieved NVQ level 3 or higher (compared to 20% in foster care and 14% in residential care).
- 69% of children in kinship care achieved employment (compared to 59% in foster care and 48% in residential care).¹⁸

Kinship care can also lead to benefits for the state. When comparing the financial cost of a child in well-supported kinship care to those in local authority care, it is clear that greater use of kinship care would lead to huge savings for local authorities over time. Data from Alma Economics (2021)¹⁹ indicates that the average annual cost of a child (0-18) who needs a social worker is £27,900, while it is £72,500 for a looked after child. If we take the annual cost of a fair kinship carer allowance (based on the current minimum fostering

¹² The data on kinship care are inadequate and it is extremely difficult to make comparisons across the whole of the UK. For this reason, the data on the extent of kinship care focuses on either England or England and Wales.

¹³ Wijedasa (2017).

¹⁴ Department for Education (2021).

¹⁵ Stats Wales (2021).

¹⁶ Department for Education (2021).

¹⁷ Wellard, S., Meakings, S., Farmer, E. and Hunt, J. (2017) Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood. London: Grandparents Plus.

¹⁸ Sacker et al (2021).

¹⁹ Alma Economics (2021) Paying the Price. The social and financial cost of children's social care. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

allowance) to be £8,895,²⁰ this is a great deal less than is paid for a looked after child. Even if we consider that some children in kinship care may also need a social worker, the annual cost for them would be only £36,795. However, most children in kinship care will not need long term social work support and most families can thrive when support is offered through early help services and the voluntary sector. Furthermore, a recent economic analysis of kinship care found that for every 10,000 children who are diverted from local authority care into well-supported kinship care, the state saves £370 million.^{21, 22}



²⁰ According to Nicol Economics (2020), current Department for Education's recommended weekly rates for foster carers for 2020-21 - weighted by the age of all looked after children and the location (London, Rest of the South-East and Rest of England) - equals a weekly rate of £171 or an annual cost of £8,895.

²¹ Starks, L. and Whitley, J. (2020) An Evaluation of Kinship Connected for Grandparents Plus. London: Grandparents Plus.

²² Nicol Economics (2020).

Kinship care is when a child lives full-time or most of the time with a relative or friend who is not their parent, usually because their parents are not able to care for them. That relative or friend is called a 'kinship carer', and it is estimated that around half of kinship carers are grandparents, but many other relatives including older siblings, aunts, uncles, as well as family friends can also be kinship carers.

There are lots of different types of kinship care, and currently there are disparities in the level of help given to each. Kinship care includes children who may be:

✓ Living in an **informal arrangement** made by their parents.

Informal kinship care is where a person is looking after a child who is closely related to them, but they have not been granted parental responsibility for them through the courts and the child is not 'looked after' by the local authority.

Informal arrangements are made between the child's parents (or someone else who has parental responsibility for them) and the kinship carer without the local authority requesting the child lives with the kinship carer.

✓ On a **child arrangements order**.

A child arrangements order is a legal order where the court decides either where a child will live or who a child can spend time with and for how long. This report will be discussing the first kind (previously known as a residence order), which establishes who the child will live with because this is a common way for kinship carers to gain legal security for the child.

The person named in a child arrangements order shares parental responsibility for the child with the parents and can make most important decisions about the child in partnership with the parents. It lasts until the child turns 18 unless the order is ended by the court.

✓ On a **special guardianship order**.

A special guardianship order (often known as an SGO) is a permanent legal order where the court appoints a carer – usually a relative – as the 'special guardian' of a child until they turn 18. The special guardian then shares parental responsibility for the child with the parents, although they can make nearly all decisions about the child independently, if necessary.

✓ 'Looked after' by the local authority and placed with **kinship foster carers**.

Kinship foster care is when a friend or family member becomes an official foster carer for a child. This is different to other forms of kinship care as the child is then considered 'looked after', and the carer will not have parental responsibility since this is with the local authority.

There are two main ways in which a child can become 'looked after' by the local authority – either with their parent's agreement or because they are subject to a care order made by the court.

If the local authority asks kinship carers to look after a child because the parents are unable to, they should become kinship foster carers. but quite often this is not the case.

The Kinship Care Guide for England is essential reading for anyone interested in kinship care and contains everything you need to know about being a kinship carer, how the different legal orders work, and what support is available.²³

²³ Lawson, D. and Raine, J. (2018) *The Kinship Care Guide for England: Third edition*. London: Grandparents Plus.

Kinship care is not a life choice; it is a reaction to circumstances.

Kinship care can happen to anyone. Across society, people from all walks of life can find themselves looking after the child of a family member or a friend because their parents are unable to. However, although anyone - young or old, rich or poor - can be asked to step up to become a kinship carer, it disproportionately affects the most disadvantaged people in society²⁴ and it is far more prevalent in Black and minority ethnic communities.²⁵ When it happens, the impact of the role is lifechanging.

Kinship care is not a life choice; it is a reaction to circumstances. There are a lot of reasons why children need to be raised by kinship carers. For example, a child's parents might have died, or they may be unable to care for them because of the impact of drug or alcohol misuse, poor mental health, or domestic violence. In the majority of kinship families, the children will have experienced abuse and/or neglect in their parents' care.

Kinship carers are asked frequently to take on the care of the children in an emergency²⁶, and at that point their lives change irreversibly. Many kinship carers never intended to raise any more children. They are often grandparents who were looking forward to a child-free life and retirement, or they are siblings and aunts and uncles who have relationships, plans to have their own children, are in education or developing their careers or other aspects of their lives. Some kinship carers have their own young families, all of whom are affected

by the decision to take on the care of children who need a loving family home.²⁷ However, at Kinship our experience is that kinship carers bring up the children because they love them and are committed to providing them with a safe and stable home for as long as they need. In a Kinship survey of 1,651 kinship carers, 96% said they expect the children to live with them permanently.²⁸ This demonstrates the role kinship care has in providing permanence to children who need it.

Kinship care families are not a traditional family type. Their experiences and circumstances are different to those of most other families. Kinship families are usually created because of a child's parents' difficulties and people may assume that the kinship carer as a relative has played some part in these problems. This means that kinship carers and the children they care for often face stigma, isolation and discrimination.^{29, 30}

The impact of kinship care on the lives of the children needing care, their kinship carers, the other children in the family home, the parents, and the wider family is huge. When kinship carers agree to care for a child, they usually take on full financial responsibility for the child as well as responsibility for their emotional and behavioural development, their health and education, the contact they have with their parents and wider family, and their understanding of their place in the world. These issues are often a lot more complex for children in kinship care than they are for children who live with their parents.³¹

Despite the complexity of the kinship care role, the support provided is often non-existent and what is available is usually inadequate. The vast majority of kinship carers say they don't get the help they need when they take on the caring role. According to Grandparent Plus' annual survey in 2019:

- 95% said they had had no preparation for the role.

²⁴ Wijedasa, D. (2015).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Grandparents Plus (2019) State of the Nation Survey 2019. London: Grandparents Plus

²⁷ Kinship (2021b) State of the Nation Survey 2021. London: Kinship.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Grandparents Plus (2014) Disadvantage, Discrimination and Resilience: The Lives of Kinship Families. London: Grandparents Plus.

³⁰ Farmer E., Selwyn J. and Meakings S. (2013) "Other children say you're not normal because you don't live with your parents'. Children's Views of Living with Informal Kinship Carers: social networks, stigma and attachment to carers', Child and Family Social Work, Volume 18, Issue 1, pp.25-34.

³¹ Wellard et al (2017).

- 84% said they didn't get the advice and information they needed when they took on the role.
- 90% hadn't been told by their local authority where they could access peer support.³²

There is no welcome pack for kinship carers to help them understand their rights and responsibilities. The health and education professionals they meet commonly do not understand the role and are unable to offer them advice or support³³ and the carers feel exhausted having to constantly retell their story. A significant proportion of kinship carers are struggling financially; Kinship's survey of financial allowances in 2021 found that:

- 82% of kinship carers worried about their financial circumstances in the preceding year.
- 36% of kinship carers did not receive financial support to raise the children.
- Of those who did receive an allowance, 76% did not receive enough to allow them to meet the needs of the children.³⁴

When kinship carers do fall into crisis, the support they need for themselves and their children is often not there. It is common for kinship carers to have to manage extremely complex and sometimes high-risk situations alone.³⁵

Kinship carers desperately deserve acknowledgement and the right help and support from the moment their new life starts.

Given that kinship care has long been neglected, the development of a bespoke kinship care system backed by an enduring, properly resourced cross-government strategy is essential.

However, some changes cannot wait. Right now, today, there are thousands of kinship carers and their children who are struggling just to get by. Many are close to breaking point and others are just about coping on love and determination alone. However, love and determination will not pay the bills and ensure that children are warm and

fed. Love and determination will not ensure that children receive the therapy they need or support them to have safe contact with their parents. In a survey of 1,139 kinship carers by Grandparents Plus,³⁶ 32% said fulfilling the caring role without support was so detrimental to their mental and physical health that they were worried about their ability to keep caring for the children. Should these carers no longer be able to care for their children, this would mean an estimated 64,000 children would be likely to go into local authority care. There is a risk in doing nothing. It is not an option.

This report is in two sections. The first section details the changes that are urgently needed to ensure kinship carers and the children they care for receive the support they desperately need. The second section considers what is needed to develop a long-term strategy to build a kinship care system that values kinship families and provides the full range of support that will enable them to thrive.

High quality support should be available to ALL kinship carers.

The current system of support for kinship carers is fundamentally flawed. It has developed in a way that often fails those who are most in need. Currently, access to support is usually based on the legal status of the child and where they live. This means that special guardians are considerably more likely to receive support than those caring informally. Also, carers who live in a local authority which is investing in kinship care services are more likely to receive support than those who do not.

This unfairness is not right, and it has to stop. ALL kinship carers should have access to the same high-quality support, regardless of the legal status of the children or where they live.

³² Grandparents Plus (2019).

³³ Wellard et al (2017).

³⁴ Kinship (2021a) Survey of Financial Allowances Received by Kinship Carers in England and Wales. London: Kinship.

³⁵ Hunt (2020).

³⁶ Grandparents Plus (2018) Kinship Care: State of the Nation 2018. London: Grandparents Plus.

CHANGES NEEDED NOW

Kinship carers who are already caring for children need support urgently. They and their children have been neglected for too long. Three immediate priorities are set out based on research evidence, insights from Kinship's extensive service delivery experience, and consultations with kinship carers and the professionals working with them.

- 1 Financial support
- 2 Information and advice
- 3 Practical and emotional support for kinship carers and their children – including peer support

1. FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The system for providing financial allowances to kinship families is perversely based on the legal status of the child and where they live rather than on their level of need.³⁷ Kinship recommends bringing an end to this lottery of financial support through:

- a) Providing all kinship carers with immediate financial support to help a child settle in.
- b) Providing all kinship carers with a universal, standard, non means tested allowance that matches the current national minimum fostering allowance (which is £134 per week for the year from April 2021 to April 2022) until the child reaches 18.
- c) Introducing kinship care leave (ensuring parity with adoption leave).

So, you're caring for a long time for children with significant needs, and the social worker's response is 'love trumps everything', but it doesn't trump being poor now and it doesn't trump being poor in old age.

Kinship carer, anonymous.³⁸

Poverty and kinship care are inextricably linked. According to the 2011 census, kinship care was more prevalent in deprived areas and 76% of children in kinship care were living in a deprived household.³⁹ In their large study, Selwyn et al (2013) found very few kinship carers had sufficient income to meet the minimum standard of living in the UK.⁴⁰

Despite being in debt, the authorities stopped my allowances again, saying that my children have no extra needs, although one child has Ehlers-Danlos syndrome with gastric issues. I believe the placement will now fail.

Kinship carer, anonymous.

More recently, Kinship's 2021 financial allowances survey found that 82% of kinship carers had worried about money over the previous year. Kinship carers who face poverty struggle to provide the basics and often have to make sacrifices themselves.⁴¹ At Kinship we often hear from carers who have to choose between heating their homes or feeding their children and from carers who go without food themselves so that their children can eat. In Kinship's 2021 annual survey of 1,651 kinship carers, 13% relied on foodbanks to feed their families. Research has

Kinship's 2021 financial allowances survey found that 82% of kinship carers had worried about money over the previous year.

³⁷ Kinship (2021a).

³⁸ Unless otherwise stated, all quotes in this report are taken directly from kinship carers supported by Kinship. Quotes are attributed to named persons where consent has been given to do so, but are otherwise included either anonymously or with changed names to protect the identity of carers and their children.

³⁹ Wijedasa (2015).

⁴⁰ Selwyn, J. Farmer, E., Meakings, S. and Vaisey, P. (2013) The Poor Relations? Children and Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out. University of Bristol / Buttle UK.

⁴¹ Kinship (2021a); Kinship (2021b).

shown that when kinship carers are overwhelmed with the stress of poverty, it makes it harder for them to meet the emotional, behavioural, and developmental needs of the children.^{42, 43}

Kinship's advice service dealt with more than 3,500 enquiries in 2021, of which 64% were about financial concerns. It is highly likely the situation will get worse as the predicted cost of living crisis begins to take effect.

Poverty is not the only disadvantage that kinship carers face. They are far more likely than others to be affected by other issues which make it harder to be socially mobile and increase the impact of poverty. For example, when compared with parents and all other carers (including foster carers), they are more likely to:

- Have disabilities and long-term health problems.⁴⁴
- Have lower incomes.⁴⁵
- Be in semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations or unemployed.⁴⁶
- Be living in social rented accommodation.⁴⁷
- Have caring responsibilities for elderly relatives, with many experiencing stress, isolation, and discrimination.^{48, 49}

This poverty is exacerbated by the high costs of caring for children and the need to reduce or give up employment. Around half of kinship carers give up work to take on caring responsibilities.⁵⁰ Consequently, many kinship carers experience a drop in household income at the very time that their household expenditure rises. A survey of carers in 2017 by Grandparents Plus found that 83% saw their income fall as a result of taking on the kinship care role and 40% said that their income was not sufficient to meet the children's needs:

- 40% of kinship carers were reliant on benefits as their main source of income.
- 19% were relying on their pensions.
- 50% were using their life savings.⁵¹

The biggest challenge I faced was financial. I had to take unpaid parental leave and I wasn't entitled to benefits as the children's parents were still claiming. I had lost my salary and I had no money coming in. We were a family of three that became a family of six. For three years, I shared the sofa bed with one of the children.

Aunt and kinship carer to three children, Meyrem Sonerman.

The loss of income and savings as a result of providing kinship care creates serious concerns for kinship carers' future financial security. For example, the loss of employment means that kinship carers are unable to contribute to their pensions for their retirement. This is a gendered issue: 91% of the carers surveyed by Grandparents Plus in 2017 were women and 40% were single carers.⁵² As the retirement age increases, it is likely that the proportion of kinship carers who are of working age will rise.

I'm really aware that I'm going to be living in a really poor old age...there's going to be at least 15 years where I can't pay into a pension.

Kinship carer, anonymous.

To compound this, kinship carers can have their benefits sanctioned if they are unable to return to work activities due to caring for their children.⁵³ Kinship therefore believes that kinship carers should be exempt from benefit sanctions that penalise their unique circumstances, such as those imposed on recipients of Universal Credit.

42 McGrath, P. (to be published) Developing Good Practice in Financially Supporting Special Guardians: A Guide for Local Authorities. London: ASGLB.

43 Farmer, E. and Moyers, S. (2008) Kinship Care: Fostering Effective Family and Friends Placements, London, Jessica Kingsley.

44 Wijedasa (2015); Wijedasa (2017).

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Wellard (2011) "Too old to care? The experiences of older grandparents raising their grandchildren". London: Grandparents Plus.

49 Wellard (2017); Wijedasa (2015); Selwyn et al (2013).

50 Ashley, C. and Braun, D. (2019) The Highs and Lows of Kinship Care: Analysis of a Comprehensive Survey of Kinship Carers, London: Family Rights Group.

51 Grandparents Plus (2017) Kinship Care: State of the Nation 2017. London: Grandparents Plus.

52 Ibid.

53 Ashley and Braun (2019).

I have impoverished myself for these children today, tomorrow, forever.

Kinship carer, Caroline – anonymous, quoted in Grandparents Plus' submission to the Work and Pensions Select Committee's inquiry on support for carers (2017).

Some carers do receive an allowance. However, this is at the discretion of their local authority, is commonly dependant on the legal status of the child, and is often means tested and reviewed annually.

Kinship's 2021 financial allowances survey found that 62% of the 1,948 kinship carers who responded received some form of allowance. That breaks down by legal status of the children as follows:

- 75% with children subject to a special guardianship order received an allowance (average weekly allowance £91.31).
- 32% with children subject to child arrangements order received an allowance (average weekly allowance £92.31).
- 13% of those with an informal arrangement received an allowance (average weekly allowance £18.46).

The allowance was means tested for 71% of families and was subject to annual review for 69%, with 26% of families subsequently receiving a decrease in the amount they received. Furthermore, 76% reported that the allowance they received was not enough to meet the needs of the child.⁵²

76% reported that the allowance they received was not enough to meet the needs of the child.

We were told we would receive a non means tested allowance until children were 18. This was crucial to us accepting them because of our impending retirement. Two years later it became means tested and did not allow us to ringfence savings in preparation for retirement. My partner is retired with no income due to ill health (caused by stress when complaining to LA about this). We are all living on my income, and I am due to retire at the end of this year. We have no savings and are not prepared for it, let alone bringing up two expensive teenagers.

Grandparent and kinship carer, anonymous.

The current statutory guidance on special guardianship already calls for local authorities to create some parity between financial support for special guardians and foster carers and adopters,⁵³ but in practice kinship carers receive significantly less financial support than foster carers. This guidance is inadequate and often interpreted in different ways.⁵⁴ This has created an unacceptable postcode lottery of support, made worse by the variations based on the child's legal status.

I asked to speak to somebody and I said, 'I need some support' and they said no because it was a private arrangement - the children have never been known to Social Services - so therefore 'No, we're not going to help you.'

Grandmother and kinship carer bringing up 12 year old, quoted in Selwyn et al (2013, p38).

Financial support for kinship carers and their children is critical. In the long term, if kinship care is well managed and kinship carers are well supported, money will be saved by diverting children from local authority care.⁵⁵ In the short term, nobody should be living in fear of debt and destitution because they are keeping a family together and giving a child a stable permanent home and the love that they deserve.

Furthermore, unlike adoptive parents, kinship carers currently have no legal right to paid time off from work when they become kinship carers.

⁵² Kinship (2021a).

⁵³ Department for Education (2017) Special guardianship guidance.

⁵⁴ Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (2018) Firm Foundations: Complaints about Council Support and Advice for Special Guardians. Coventry: Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

⁵⁵ Nicol Economics (2020).

Many find they have to negotiate unpaid time off from work at a time of emergency and high emotion especially as unlike for adoptive parents, taking on the kinship care responsibilities is often unplanned, and they have to rely on the good will of their employers.⁵⁶ However, too many carers are forced to leave their employment when they take on a kinship caring role, further compounding their precarious economic situation. This is totally unacceptable. Kinship carers deserve a statutory

right to kinship care leave that is comparable to adoption leave. It is better for carers, for their children and for the economy, that employment opportunities remain open following the change in family circumstances.

My employers were really supportive, but all they could offer me was a year unpaid (leave).

Kinship carer, anonymous.



2. INFORMATION AND ADVICE

Kinship care is not well understood. When people are first required to look after children they often agree to do so through instinct, without knowing what the role entails and what their rights and responsibilities are. To address this Kinship recommends that all kinship carers should have access to:

- a) Independent information and advice.
- b) Information that is clear, accessible, and relevant to the needs of each kinship family and the specific challenges they face.

Access to clear information and advice, including legal advice, for kinship carers is crucial and should be available before their child moves in if possible. The information and advice should cover all aspects relevant to kinship care, including information about the various legal statuses which exist for kinship care and which of these would suit each family best, and the range of financial and other help provided with each legal status. At this point, many carers must navigate the challenging structures and procedures within the welfare system, children's social services and the family courts, which leaves kinship carers vulnerable to being exploited if they do not know their rights.

⁵⁶ Houston, S., Hayes, D., and MacDonald, M. (2018) 'Hearing the Voices of Kinship Foster Carers in Northern Ireland: An Inquiry into Characteristics, Needs and Experiences.' *Family Relationships and Societies*, 7 (2) 227-247.

This could be made manifestly less stressful with clear, compassionate information, advice, and signposting at this first stage. It would also mean kinship carers could argue for the legal status and help that is best for them and the child.

Many kinship carers are left to navigate the benefits system – often for the first time. Benefits advice should be offered proactively to kinship carers when they take on the role.

The need for information and advice does not end once the child is in the kinship carers' care. They continue to need it as they develop into their new role, and in response to the needs of their children as they grow up.

Despite this level of need, there is a lack of accurate information and advice given to kinship carers by their local authorities. For example, Ashley and Braun (2019) found that most carers did not feel they had been given sufficient information to know whether it was the right decision for them to become a kinship carer⁵⁷ and a survey by Grandparents Plus (2019) asked about kinship carers' experiences when their child first moved in and found that:

- 84% of respondents had not received the advice and information they needed when a child moved in and 72% believed they had never received good information and advice.
- Only 10% felt well informed about their options.
- 68% had not been told they could get legal advice.
- Only 29% of kinship carers received funded financial advice.
- 19% paid for their own legal advice.⁵⁸

There are consequences for kinship carers when they do not receive the correct information and advice. For example, one study found that special guardians who did not receive legal advice or social work advice felt disadvantaged and appeared less likely to ask for support later down the line.^{59, 60}

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.

Kinship carer, quoted in Grandparents Plus survey (2017, p6).

It is important that the information and advice provided is independent of local authorities as many carers are resistant to asking officials for help, not least because of fear that children could be removed into care or adopted. Also, this information and advice needs to be provided by organisations with an expertise in kinship care because, as the Local Government Ombudsman found in 2017,⁶¹ special guardians were sometimes given incorrect advice and information by their local authorities.

We're given an order of silence and if we speak out for the children what we are saying is devalued and diminished. I was told by a social worker, 'I hope we've made the right decision placing her with you', after raising concerns about contact, I've asked for help and it's just being used against me so now I just don't say anything.

Family member kinship carer, Cath Hopkins.

The provision of advice and information must be accessible and include standard online or telephone guidance, as well as tailored advice on more complex issues. Kinship's advice service is an example of a specialist, independent advice service for kinship carers that provides free expert advice on a national basis. Such a national model should be supported to ensure consistency.

⁵⁷ Ashley and Braun (2019).

⁵⁸ Grandparents Plus (2019).

⁵⁹ Harwin J, Alrouh B, Golding L, McQuarrie T, Broadhurst K, Cusworth L. (2019a). The contribution of supervision orders and special guardianship to children's lives and family justice. University of Lancaster.

⁶⁰ Harwin, J., Simmonds, J., Broadhurst, K. and Brown, R. (2019b) Special Guardianship: A Review of the English Research Studies. London: Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

⁶¹ Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (2018).

3. PRACTICAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR KINSHIP CARERS AND THEIR CHILDREN – INCLUDING PEER SUPPORT

HELP FOR CHILDREN

Children need help and support from the moment they move in with their kinship carers. The areas where support is needed are:

- a) Help with children and young people's behavioural, emotional difficulties and mental health.
- b) Helping children understand their family circumstances and the contact with their parents.
- c) Help with education.
- d) Help to access and succeed in further and higher education.

Help with children and young people's behavioural and emotional difficulties and mental health

Most children in kinship care have suffered trauma and loss. Their often complex emotional needs can reach into every part of their lives. Many children in kinship care need help to deal with the emotional and psychological impact of their experiences.

Children and young people in kinship care have experienced similar adversities when living with their parents as children who are looked after by local authorities⁶² and it is therefore critical that they receive the right help with their resulting behavioural and emotional difficulties. For example, in Selwyn et al's (2013) study, parental drug or alcohol misuse was a reason for kinship care in as many as 68% of families. For more than a third (37%) domestic abuse was involved, whilst more than a quarter (26%) of children had experienced parental mental illness or parental death. Two thirds of the carers said that the child had been abused and/or neglected, some over a considerable period.⁶³ These experiences can have a significant impact on every aspect of the children's development. They can feel anger and confusion about what had happened to them, and many have feelings of loss or rejection.⁶⁴ The children are more likely to have

developmental issues, behavioural and emotional difficulties, and to have difficulties in making and maintaining healthy relationships. Many kinship carers struggle to manage the difficult behaviours the children they care for display and need skilled advice about how best to manage such behaviour:

We are special guardians for Callum and the last four years have been extremely difficult due to the trauma he has been through in his early life. Callum has social, emotional and mental health problems, he struggles with his anger, trust and has been expelled from mainstream school because of the lack of understanding and empathy for these young people who are troubled through no fault of their own. My husband and I have honestly questioned ourselves many times when things are extremely tough if we can actually continue to care for him. The love we have for Callum and the need to make him feel valued, loved and happy gives us the strength to carry on.

Grandmother and kinship carer, anonymous.

In some circumstances, children can become violent.⁶⁵ Specialist help is often needed in these situations:

She blamed me for taking her away from her mum. She blamed me for taking her away from her sister. And at that point I was being physically assaulted every single day, I was being kicked, punched, nipped, bitten ... I had bruises all over my ... I've been punched in the face at least once a week, I've got ... I mean I've still got quite a lot of scars now, but I've had bruises every single day.

Grandmother and kinship carer, quoted in Holt and Birchall (2020, p4).

It is therefore no surprise that Kinship's 2021 annual survey revealed that 62% of kinship carers believed that the children in their care had long-term physical and mental health needs, 40% of kinship carers reported their children had displayed risk-taking behaviour including self-harming and drug and alcohol misuse, and 26% of carers had

⁶² Farmer, E. (2009) "How do placements in kinship care compare with those in non-kin foster care: placement patterns, progress and outcomes?" Child and Family Social Work, 14, 331-342.

⁶³ Selwyn et al (2013).

⁶⁴ Wellard et al (2017).

⁶⁵ Holt A. and Birchall J. (2020) Investigating experiences of violence towards grandparents in a kinship care context. London, University of Roehampton.



experienced child on carer violence. Similarly, 2011 census analysis also showed that, compared with children growing up with at least one parent, children in relative care were nearly twice as likely to have a long-term health problem or disability that limited their day-to-day activities.⁶⁶ In Selwyn et al's (2013) study, carers completed the widely used Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire about the children they were bringing up. This showed that 34% had very severe emotional and behavioural problems which required treatment and 23% of the children had symptoms of clinical depression and anxiety.⁶⁷

This level of need strengthens the argument that children in kinship care should receive priority access to assessment by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) with specially trained CAMHS practitioners who understand the specific challenges that kinship children and their families face. Treatment should then be

offered where assessed as necessary. In addition, kinship carers need advice and help from social workers or other experts who can support them in their efforts to care for and manage children with these high levels of difficulty. This is particularly important because one study found that fewer than half of the children with serious emotional and behavioural difficulties (on the SDQ measure) had been seen by CAMHS.⁶⁸

There must also be greater therapeutic support for children in kinship care outside of CAMHS. One way to achieve this would be through adaptation of the Adoption Support Fund to be better attuned to the needs of kinship families. A defined Kinship Support Fund should be established and tailored to meet the specific needs of all kinship families, so that both the children and their carers can access appropriate specialist help when they need it. The current access criteria of the Adoption Support Fund requires children in kinship care to

⁶⁶ Wijedasa. (2015).

⁶⁷ Selwyn et al (2013).

⁶⁸ Hunt, J. and Waterhouse, S. (2012) Understanding Family and Friends Care: The Relationship Between Need, Support and Legal Statues, Carers' Experiences. London: Family Rights Group.

be subject to an SGO, child arrangements order or residence order and to have previously been in local authority care. The Fund should be open to all kinship families, with access based on the needs of the child and their family rather than their legal route into kinship care.

It can be more challenging for adolescents to engage in therapeutic support due to the complexities associated with this stage in their development. In a study which focused on adolescents in kinship care and their outcomes in young adulthood⁶⁹, a considerable number of young people did not engage with any counselling or other support that was offered nor did they find it helpful. This shows the importance of flexibility in terms of timing, choice of provider and venue so that young people can access support at a time and in the form that is right for them.

Tailored support for young people in kinship care is under-developed, in comparison with support for young people in care or adopted. In order to develop services and support that meets their needs, there must be a commitment to understanding and responding to their specific experiences through consultation and co-production. A Young Champions project, run by Kinship with funding from BBC Children in Need, is bringing together young people to influence the development of support. Previously, a study of kinship care experienced young people has suggested they may benefit from access to a range of support, including via social media and virtual peer support groups. Some would welcome the opportunity to meet other young people growing up in kinship care or to join a local support group. Some children and young people also need specific, skilled life story support to enable them to make better sense of their lives and move on from their past experiences.⁷⁰

Helping children understand their family circumstances and the contact with their parents

Children in kinship care need support to understand their family situations. It is common for children to not understand why they are living with a relative and not with their parents, and for them to blame either the kinship carer or the social worker.⁷¹ Clear advice and support is needed for kinship carers about what to say to children about this because it can be more difficult for a relative or friend to explain to children why they are not living with their parents than for an unrelated carer, since relatives may have strong feelings about the reasons and even feel responsible for these difficulties.^{72, 73}

In addition, support and advice for kinship carers is important, so that they can help children to cope better with the range of challenges they face. The experiences children have had prior to living in kinship are often harrowing and kinship carers struggle to know how to talk to their children about them. They are often afraid they may say the wrong thing and cause the child more harm.⁷⁴ The carers may also need to support the children to understand issues that include dealing with parents' continuing failure to meet their needs, parental rejection, conflicts of loyalty, complex feelings associated with parental death, and feelings of guilt, self-blame and loss of their siblings.⁷⁵

Children will also need help to make sense of the contact they have with their parents. The research evidence for contact is discussed in depth in the 'help for kinship carers' section. However, what this research does tell us is that positive contact can be beneficial for children and their development whereas inconsistent, challenging, or dangerous contact can cause the children trauma and add to their emotional distress.⁷⁶ Many children will need support to manage their ongoing relationships with their parents. For some this support will need to be from someone other than their kinship carer, especially when their carer has a difficult relationship with their parents. This support should

⁶⁹ Wellard et al (2017).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Farmer and Moyers (2008).

⁷² Crumbley J. and Little R. L. (eds) (1997) *Relatives Raising Children: An Overview of Kinship Care*, Washington, Child Welfare League of America.

⁷³ Farmer and Moyers (2008).

⁷⁴ McGrath, P. (2022) *Grandparents' Experiences of Being a Special Guardian: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. PhD dissertation, University of East Anglia.

⁷⁵ Wellard et al (2017).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

be available when required and should take into consideration the age and views of the child or young person and whether more intensive therapeutic support is needed.

Help with education

A key part of the practical support needed for carers and children is with the child's education. Extra support in this area can help with behavioural problems and emotional well-being, as well as educational attainment.

In a study by Wellard et al (2017), 60% of the young people in kinship care had difficulties in learning. This is similar to the 68% of children in local authority care with these difficulties but is much higher than the 19% of children in the general population. Another factor which can make learning difficult for children in kinship care is that over a third were found to have severe psychological difficulties.⁷⁷ The study found that a third of the young people had done poorly at school (i.e. achieved no GCSE passes at Grade C or above/no passes).

In addition, children in kinship care can report feeling stigmatised because they are not living with their parents. They may prefer to tell their friends that their parents have died rather than saying their parents were unable to bring them up safely.⁷⁸ Furthermore, according to the Kinship annual survey (2020), 38% of children growing up in kinship care had experienced bullying.⁷⁹

Children in kinship families should have access to excellent pastoral care, help from school counsellors and mentors, and additional help with their schoolwork. Schools need to be aware of the vulnerabilities of children in kinship care, for example through being bullied or through displaying their distress through challenging behaviour, and ensure that they are taught and supported in a way that gives them the best opportunity to reach their full academic potential.

In addition, Kinship recommends:

- All children in kinship care have priority admission status.
- All children in kinship care are entitled to Pupil Premium Plus.
- The remit of the virtual school is extended to include all children in kinship care.

Help to access and succeed in further and higher education

Some young people in kinship care are unable to make the most of school or succeed in exams because of the lasting impact of their previous experiences of trauma and their difficult family circumstances. This can also significantly impact on their ability to access and succeed in further education. Given that a fifth of all the young people who started further education in Wellard et al's (2017) study subsequently dropped out, schools and colleges need to identify early on those young people who need additional support and link them to appropriate services.

While provision is made to provide financial help and other support to care leavers who go to higher education (and this is well signposted), it is very unclear to young people in kinship care how they might qualify for such help and/or whether they are eligible. More advice and help is needed to improve this situation, particularly since it is known that many kinship carers live in poverty. The Office for Students, The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), Student Finance England, Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and higher education institutions themselves need to work together to align, clarify and highlight advice to prospective students, so that young people in kinship care can readily see what help financial and otherwise is available for them.

⁷⁷ Wellard et al (2017).

⁷⁸ Farmer et al (2013); Wellard et al (2017).

⁷⁹ Grandparents Plus (2020) Kinship Care: State of the Nation 2020. London: Grandparents Plus.

HELP FOR KINSHIP CARERS

Kinship carers need support from the earliest stage of their journey, including:

- a) Preparation and training for being a kinship carer.
- b) Practical and emotional support.
- c) Peer support.
- d) Access to high quality support plans.
- e) Managing contact with parents.
- f) The need for a break from caring.
- g) Making support accessible.

Kinship's 2021 annual survey found that 39% of kinship carers felt that they had additional needs for which they did not receive support.⁸⁰ Kinship carers have often had very difficult personal experiences and going through assessments can raise deeply painful and distressing issues which they have to work through. There is a strong argument for kinship carers to have priority access to therapeutic support, as they adapt to the often overwhelmingly emotional impact of being a kinship carer and as they deal with the challenges the role can bring.⁸¹

Preparation and training for being a kinship carer

While all foster carers and adopters undertake a lengthy period of preparation prior to having a child placed with them, 95% of kinship carers said they had had no preparation at all.⁸² As discussed previously, most kinship carers have the situation thrust upon them, often in a crisis. Without preparation many kinship carers struggle to understand their children's behaviours and can feel overwhelmed and powerless to help them.⁸³ Further stresses and complexities can come during court proceedings and in the difficult process of establishing contact arrangements with a child's parents.

There are many calls for kinship carers to have specialist preparation and training for their role.^{84, 85, 86} However, at the current time there is no requirement for this preparation to be offered to kinship carers and what is available is usually directed only at special guardians and is often based on courses developed for foster carers and adoptive parents, the content of which is not necessarily useful for kinship carers.

Kinship recommends that all kinship carers should be offered the opportunity to attend a preparation course that is designed specifically for kinship families. Furthermore, all kinship carers should be able to access a range of workshops and other training opportunities, as needed. Workshops could cover topics such as child development, trauma and attachment, and managing contact and family relationships. The national Peer-to-Peer Support Service, funded by the Department for Education and delivered by Kinship, will include tailored online workshops on topics that will be defined with kinship carers.

Preparation of kinship carers is different from the preparation of other types of carers such as foster carers and adopters.

Kinship carers face very different issues, and many have had previous experiences that mean they struggle to trust their local authorities. Therefore, Kinship recommends that preparation workshops should be delivered by local authorities working in partnership with the third sector. A good example of this is Kinship Ready, a preparatory support service for kinship carers that is delivered through remote one-to-one support and advice and online workshops, co-produced and co-delivered by kinship carers who are experts by experience. The workshops are run by Kinship in partnership with local authorities.

⁸⁰ Kinship (2021b).

⁸¹ Selwyn et al (2013).

⁸² Grandparents Plus (2019).

⁸³ Farmer and Moyers (2008).

⁸⁴ Harwin, J. and Simmonds, J. (2019) Special Guardianship: Practitioner Perspectives, London: Nuffield Foundation.

⁸⁵ Public Law Working Group. (2021). Recommendations to Achieve Best Practice in the Child Protection and Family Justice Systems, London: Public Law Working Group.

⁸⁶ Hunt (2021). Practicing in Kinship care: The Perspective of Specialist Social Workers, London: Kinship.

Practical and emotional support

Raising children as a kinship carer can be exhausting and often takes its toll on kinship carers. Not only are kinship carers commonly caring for vulnerable children, they often do so whilst facing their own difficulties. As a group, they are older, poorer and in worse health than any other raising children. One large study found almost three quarters of kinship carers (73%) had longstanding health conditions or disabilities. In addition, the lives of 37% of the carers were restricted by pain and as many as 67% of the carers were found to be clinically depressed.⁸⁷

Similarly, the 2021 Kinship annual survey found that 52% of carer respondents believed they had their own issues which required support, however only 13% received any.⁸⁸ This left 39% not receiving the support they believed they needed. Research has identified that when kinship carers have problems with their health and wellbeing it can limit their ability to care for their children⁸⁹ and impede a child's future health and education outcomes.⁹⁰

Kinship carers often experience high levels of stress in all areas of their lives because of the role.⁹¹ Carers are more likely to be experiencing stress if they have a difficult relationship with the children's parents⁹² or when there are problems with contact⁹³, when the children have additional needs or display challenging behaviours, when there are financial and housing issues, or where there are high levels of children's social care involvement⁹⁴. It is worrying that one study found that without support, the stress levels the kinship carers experience are unlikely to reduce.⁹⁵

Although several of the other recommendations in this report will alleviate some of the stress experienced by kinship carers, many will need support in their own right. Kinship carers often need practical support to help them care for the children and manage their behaviours. Many will need therapeutic support to help them to cope with their own experiences of trauma and to help

Kinship carers often experience high levels of stress in all areas of their lives because of the role.

them to come to terms with their own change in circumstances. Some kinship carers may need more specialist support from adult social care and any Care Act 2014 assessment must take into consideration their kinship care responsibilities when considering their support needs. We recommend that the needs of kinship carers are considered when support is provided for kinship families and that support is provided to ensure they are able to provide a stable and loving family home for the children.

Peer support

Everyone needs friends, people they can rely on and who understand them. Unfortunately, it is common for kinship carers to find friendships fall away when they take on the role (for example, grandparents raising toddlers are generationally out of step, while many carers have less time and



⁸⁷ Selwyn et al (2013).

⁸⁸ Kinship (2021b).

⁸⁹ Selwyn et al (2013); Hunt (2020).

⁹⁰ Wellard et al (2017).

⁹¹ Harwin et al (2019b).

⁹² Wade, J. Sinclair, I. Stuttard, L and Simmonds, J (2014) Investigating Special Guardianship: Experiences, Challenges and Outcomes. Social Policy Research Unit, University of York & British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

⁹³ Harwin et al (2019b).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Hunt and Waterhouse (2012).

money to take part in the activities they'd enjoyed previously), and they can become isolated and lonely. Many kinship carers say they find it hard to talk to friends about their circumstances because people do not understand what it is like to be a kinship carer.⁹⁶

A common request made to Kinship's project workers and advice workers is that kinship carers want to meet others who understand what they are going through. It is usual for kinship carers to feel as if they are the only people in their situation. Without support and signposting, it is extremely difficult for them to know and meet other kinship carers in their area.⁹⁷ Peer support, commonly through support groups, sometimes through mentoring, has been shown to be an important way of reducing isolation and providing emotional support. One benefit of peer support for kinship carers is that they can talk to other carers, many of whom have been through similar circumstances, about their difficulties in an honest way without fear of adverse consequences.⁹⁸

The best way for peer support to be encouraged is through the development of peer-to-peer support groups. For example, peer support is an essential part of the Kinship Connected support programme which helps kinship carers to develop long term supportive networks and friendships. The evaluation of Kinship Connected identified that peer support was of great benefit to kinship carers.⁹⁹

We're all in the same boat and we all know what we're going through...a lot of us relate to our stories, and how our children have been affected...we all understand and try to help each other.

Kinship carer, quoted in Starks and Whitley (2020, p47).

In 2022, Kinship will be delivering a new national Peer-to-Peer Support Service in England, funded by the Department for Education. The Peer-to-Peer

Support Service will include new peer support groups and capacity-building for existing groups through the provision of an e-learning platform with free practical resources, online workshops, as well as a new online peer chat service which will enable kinship carers to connect at times that make sense to them. Currently this service has only been funded for one year with a possible extension for a further year. It is essential that the service receives long-term funding in England and it should be replicated in Wales.

Access to high quality support plans

One way to ensure kinship carers receive the support they need is to ensure they receive high-quality support plans that are followed by professionals. However, few kinship carers receive a support plan and those that do often find they do not guarantee that they will receive the support promised.¹⁰⁰ Common complaints about support plans are that they are rushed and put together at the last minute, they do not offer the support kinship carers felt they needed, and the plans may not be followed by the local authority.¹⁰¹

'The support plan wasn't worth the paper it was written on.'

Kinship carer, quoted in *The First Day of Forever: Becoming a Special Guardian*.¹⁰²

All kinship carers must be entitled to support plans that are specific and tailored to the needs of each individual child, and carers should be made aware that such plans exist and of their importance. The Public Law Working Group has called for improvements in the quality of support plans, a call that Kinship supports.¹⁰³

Managing contact with parents

One of the positives of kinship care is that children can maintain relationships with their parents as well as wider family. However, while this is beneficial for many children, managing this contact can present one of the most profound challenges for kinship carers.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ Selwyn (2013), McGrath (2022).

⁹⁷ Hunt and Waterhouse (2012).

⁹⁸ McGrath (2022).

⁹⁹ Starks and Whitley (2020).

¹⁰⁰ Harwin and Simmonds (2019).

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² *The First Day of Forever: Becoming a Kinship Carer* – a film by the Centre for Child and Family Justice Research at Lancaster University, Grandparents Plus and CoramBAAF (2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNO1sZb5mjC>

¹⁰³ The public law working group (2021).

¹⁰⁴ Wellard et al (2017); Harwin and Simmonds (2019); Hunt (2020).

Large numbers of kinship carers are supporting children to have contact with their parents: Kinship's 2021 annual survey found that 78% of children were having contact with at least one parent.¹⁰⁵ Although contact can be positive for children, it can also be challenging and potentially damaging. For example, Wellard et al (2017) found that during the teenage years, more than half of the kinship carers had serious concerns about the harmful effects of contact with parents on young people. The difficulties that children experienced when they lived with their parents means that contact with parents can be a time of uncertainty, unpredictability and can sometimes even bring back memories of the harm they had experienced. Wellard et al (2017, p7) found that *'persistently difficult contact often involved parents who were unreliable at keeping in touch, frequently let young people down, or who had lifestyles that exposed young people to inappropriate or risky situations'*. Parents' behaviour during contact can vary widely, especially for those who misuse drug and/or alcohol.¹⁰⁶ There is very little support for kinship carers in managing difficult contact, yet it can be much more challenging than contact in foster care, since the parents may resent and undermine the kinship carers to whom they are usually related.¹⁰⁷

Her mum stirs things up against us...for instance Phoebe said to me only yesterday morning 'No wonder mum can't stand you; you never ever stop going on'. I can well imagine that's what mum's been saying...I suppose she has a loyalty to her mum. Her mum puts her pennyworth in about how controlling we are.

Grandparents and kinship carers to a 16 year old, quoted in Selwyn et al (2013).

Whilst only a toddler, after contacts (with parents) he hits me, bites, scratches, pulls hair, wees on the floor or on me. He kicks the

cat and has kicked strangers on the school run. When we have long periods of parents not showing up, he is more settled.

Aunt and kinship carer, anonymous.

Managing contact can be particularly difficult for kinship carers who had personal relationships with the parents.¹⁰⁸ Kinship carers commonly find they are just left to cope with contact, even in the most difficult circumstances. For example, when carers were worried about the welfare of the child and they may have been pitted against each other in adversarial court processes, provoking high levels of hostility, kinship carers are just left to get on with it.¹⁰⁹ A survey by Kinship in 2021 found that two thirds of kinship carers who needed support with contact did not receive it.¹¹⁰ Without the right support with contact there is a greater risk of families falling into crisis and ultimately breaking down.^{111, 112}

All the evidence reinforces the need for social workers or specially trained support workers, who are aware of the specific nature of kinship families, to be available to offer advice or help with parental contact when needed. One programme which could support families with contact issues is Kinship Connected.

The need for a break from caring

Being a kinship carer can be exhausting and take a toll on the health and wellbeing of the carers.¹¹³ It is common for kinship carers to be isolated,^{114, 115} which makes it hard for them to ever have a break from caring, even when they are unwell or exhausted. Kinship's 2021 annual survey found that 24% of carers never got a break from their caring responsibilities.¹¹⁶ Unlike the general assumption that kinship carers can call on extended family networks for help, it has been found that most carers only have small networks of support.¹¹⁷ In one study, 29% of kinship carers doubted they could find anyone to look after the child during the day and 26% overnight. One in five carers said they had no family they could rely on

¹⁰⁵ Kinship (2021b).

¹⁰⁶ Wellard et al (2017).

¹⁰⁷ Selwyn et al (2013).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Kinship. (2021b).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Farmer and Moyers (2008).

¹¹² Hunt (2021).

¹¹³ Selwyn et al (2013).

¹¹⁴ Hunt and Waterhouse (2012).

¹¹⁵ Hunt, J. (2018) 'Grandparents as Substitute Parents in the UK', Contemporary Social Science 13(2), 175-186.

¹¹⁶ Kinship (2021b).

¹¹⁷ Selwyn et al (2013).

Being a kinship carer can be exhausting and take a toll on the health and wellbeing of the carers.

(for anything) and one in six could not count on any friends.¹¹⁸ Even more worrying was that two fifths could not think of someone to look after the child if they were ill.

In Kinship's 2021 annual survey, when carers were asked what type of respite they felt would help, the majority of carers stated that they were able to get a break when their children were at school or at breakfast/after school clubs or holiday clubs during the school holidays. Many carers also suggested that they did not want a break from the children but from life, and having a holiday could help them feel less overwhelmed and better able to cope.¹¹⁹

Kinship recommends that families receive the support necessary to ensure they have a break when they need and that they are supported to develop plans for if they fall ill. Although some kinship carers would benefit from formal respite care, most just want their children to access school full time and have access to after school and breakfast clubs and holiday clubs. Kinship families should also be supported to have a family holiday too.

Making support accessible

It can sometimes be difficult to engage carers with local authority help for many reasons. Often they do not want to ask for help for fear of being judged, which they may think could result in their children not being placed with them or being removed.¹²⁰ Many have also had previous bad experiences with children's services, and it is common for them to feel they had been used to keep the children out of the care system and then abandoned when they needed help.¹²¹ There can also be challenges preventing carers asking for support at an individual level. For example, some social workers



¹¹⁸ Selwyn et al (2013).

¹¹⁹ Kinship (2021b).

¹²⁰ Brown, R., Broadhurst, K., Harwin, J. and Simmonds, J. (2019) *Special Guardianship: International Research on Kinship Care*, London: Nuffield Foundation.

¹²¹ McGrath (2022).

lack the ability to build positive relationships with kinship carers based on mutual trust.¹²² The Kinship annual survey in 2020 found that only 50% of carers believed social workers viewed them positively.¹²³ It is understandably hard for kinship carers to trust and open up to professionals who they feel judged by.

There are some brilliant social workers out there, there are some that have become burnt out (indifferent/ worn down) and there are those who appear to not want to work with kinship carers because it is too much work effort.

Grandparent and kinship carer, John Cooke.

There are also groups of kinship carers who have traditionally suffered from institutional discrimination and oppression, such as those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, who understandably may be less willing to engage with people in positions of authority.

To overcome these barriers, it is important that kinship carers are worked with in a collaborative way. Kinship carers must be seen as experts in their family circumstances and their views should be listened to and acted upon. For example, kinship carers often feel assessments are too focused on risk.¹²⁴ This kind of assessment is often 'done to' families and often results in support that only focuses on reducing this risk. However, if the assessment focuses on the views of the kinship carers and what support they need to enable them to safely care for the children, then the support identified would be much more likely to meet the actual needs of the family.

Furthermore, not all support needs to come from children's social care departments alone. It is important to consider what support may be better provided by the third sector. Voluntary sector organisations can find it easier to support people who may no longer trust people in positions of authority. An example of this kind of support is the Kinship Connected service.

Kinship Connected

Kinship Connected is a programme delivered by Kinship in England and Wales. It is an example of a support service tailored to the needs of kinship carers and is delivered in the community in partnership with local authorities. It includes intensive one-to-one support from a dedicated project worker and peer support. Services like Kinship Connected can make a huge difference. An independent evaluation of the Kinship Connected programme showed that most kinship carers experienced:

- Reduced isolation - enabling them to share experiences, skills and concerns.
- Reduced financial concerns (via help to access financial support from the current benefits system to which they are entitled).
- Increased confidence in their role as a kinship carer.
- Reduced concerns around children's behaviour.
- Improved relationships with other family members, for example the child's parents.¹²⁵

Support programmes of this kind can also save considerable amounts of money as they reduce the need for statutory crisis interventions. A cost benefit analysis of Kinship Connected showed that for every £1 invested there was a return of £1.20, equating to a 20% return on investment.^{126, 127}

Also, many kinship carers would benefit from accessible help being provided in their communities. This support could be offered through universal services, if practitioners received adequate training, and as part of existing initiatives such as the Family Hubs programme.

¹²² Hingley-Jones, H., Allain, L., Gleeson, H. and Bismark, T. (2019) 'Roll Back the Years': A Study of Grandparent Special Guardians' Experiences and Implications for Social Work Policy and Practice in England' Child and Family Social Work 1-10.

¹²³ Grandparents Plus (2020).

¹²⁴ Tarrant, A., Featherstone, B., O'Dell, L. and Fraser, C. (2017) 'You Try to Keep a Brave Face on but Inside you are in Bits': Grandparent Experiences of Engaging with Professionals in Children's Services', Qualitative Social Work, 16(3), 351-366.

¹²⁵ Starks and Whitley (2020).

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ York Consulting (2017) "Evaluation of the Relative Experience Kinship Care Project", York Consulting.

A FUTURE FIT FOR KINSHIP CARE

The structure in place to support kinship care is currently a mishmash of compromises and ill-fitting policies and practices that are wedged uncomfortably into systems designed primarily for fostering and adoption. It has been described as being like a square peg in a round hole,^{128, 129} an afterthought,¹³⁰ and the poor relation in a hierarchy of rights and support.¹³¹

However, with a long-term strategy and the right investment, kinship care could thrive as a place of safety, security and aspiration for children who would otherwise be in the care system. There is the potential for a multitude of positives, including better outcomes for children and considerable savings and returns on investments for local authorities and national government. To achieve this there needs to be a strategic plan to develop kinship care services. Kinship care needs to be a properly resourced, distinct option for achieving permanence for children.

In addition to the immediate measures outlined above, Kinship recommends that the development of a bespoke kinship care system should incorporate these key changes.

- 1 Robust research and data collection.
- 2 Legal rights for all kinship carers.
- 3 Kinship care aware policy making and public service delivery at national and local levels of government.
- 4 An ambitious plan to raise awareness of kinship care.
- 5 Workforce development to provide specialists in kinship care practice in every local authority.

Robust research and data collection

It is little wonder that kinship care is marginalised and misunderstood - because it is hidden. So little data is gathered in relation to it and so little resource is dedicated to understanding it. We simply do not know accurately how many children are in kinship care in this country, what their demographics are, or what their legal statuses are. This makes effective local and national planning and service development and delivery impossible and must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The only data currently recorded and published annually by local authorities is how many children are in *kinship foster care* each year, a status used for a small minority of kinship carers. The only other information recorded is the numbers of children each year who have ceased to be looked after because a special guardianship order (SGO) or child arrangements order (CAO) was made (or who return to care after an order has been made). However, no data are collected on the total number of children in any one year who are on SGOs or CAOs and known to local authorities, even though this is the legal status most widely used for children in kinship care who are known to local authorities. We would not be content to have no information on how many children in each local authority are in foster or residential care. Yet this is the situation for children in kinship care. This disturbing failure allows children in kinship care to remain invisible to planners and policy makers. This is not acceptable in a country in which children's wellbeing should be a paramount consideration in all decision making.¹³²

¹²⁸ Hunt (2021).

¹²⁹ Peake, L (2021), quoted in Special Guardianship: an agenda for change, a film by the Centre for Child and Family Justice Research at Lancaster University, Kinship and CoramBAAF <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eulSHK0fbls&t=1475s>

¹³⁰ Kinship Care Parliamentary Taskforce (2020) First Thought Not Afterthought: Report of the Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care, September 2020.

¹³¹ Selwyn et al (2013).

¹³² The guiding principle of the Children Act 1989 as identified in s.1(1) is that the child's welfare should be the paramount consideration of any decision making about the child.



In addition, we need to better understand the demographics and specific needs of kinship carers and their children. The small amount of data that does exist indicates that 32% of children in kinship care are from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds,¹³³ but overall, they are notably underrepresented in research and so there has been inadequate focus on understanding and responding to their needs. Inequalities within the care system and kinship care based on race and ethnicity are complex. These inequalities affect children before they need alternative care, and once they become adults.¹³⁴ Support services should be designed to make sure they are accessible to all kinship families and this cannot happen until more is known about their demographics and needs.

Although the research base on kinship care is growing, it is still significantly smaller than that on foster care and adoption. There needs to be an increase in funding into research on kinship care. In a recent study, Harwin et al (2019)¹³⁵ suggest the following areas of need for further research:

- Further longitudinal studies to track the outcomes of children brought up in kinship care. (One such study has recently been commissioned by the Department for Education.)

- Children and young people's views and experiences.
- How best to ensure safe and positive contact with birth parents and the wider family.

Kinship recommends that research carried out on kinship care should be specifically focused on this area of care. The practice of adding kinship care to larger research projects into adoption and foster care as an afterthought must stop.

Legal rights for all kinship carers

Kinship carers fulfil a hugely important role for society by caring for some of the most vulnerable children. However, they are often hampered in carrying out this care because of a lack of legal rights. Kinship carers need legal rights which must include equal rights for all kinship carers regardless of the legal order (or lack of) that they have been granted for the child or what part of the country they live in.

All kinship carers should have:

- The right to legal aid, including for legal advice when they are considering becoming a kinship carer.
- The right to a role in legal proceedings where there is potential that they could become a kinship carer.

¹³³ Wijedasa (2015).

¹³⁴ Sacker et al (2021).

¹³⁵ Harwin et al (2019).

- A legal right to all the support they need to successfully fulfil the role.

There is a postcode lottery for kinship carers in relation to legal costs when obtaining a court order, especially those incurred in obtaining an order in private care proceedings. Some local authorities support kinship carers with all their legal fees and others offer no support at all. One study found that many special guardians had to fund their own legal representation.¹³⁶

Another found it cost kinship carers an average of £5,446 to gain a court order for a child with many paying significantly more, and 40% of carers received no support to finance the legal application.¹³⁷ To address this, the Ministry of Justice must expedite and build on plans set out in 2019 to expand the scope of legal aid to include SGOs in private family law¹³⁸ and introduce legal aid for all kinship carers taking long-term responsibility for raising someone else's child. Furthermore, the family justice system should recognise kinship carers in public care proceedings and seek to involve kinship carers in an accessible way, where appropriate.

Due to red tape, we have never received any allowance, had to fund legal costs ourselves for over £9K. We only got £260 plus court fees. We are in debt and will take us a long time to pay it off. We get very little support from the local authority.

Kinship carer, anonymous.

The most relevant statutory framework around kinship care is the *Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities on Family and Friends Care* (2010),¹³⁹ which states that 'children and young people who are unable to live with their parents should receive the support that they and their carers need to safeguard and promote their welfare whether or not they are looked after' (Section 1.2). In a similar vein it notes that support should be based on the needs of the child rather than their legal status but, as this report has clearly evidenced, this guidance

is simply not followed. Clearer legislation which strengthens accountability is needed to ensure kinship families' rights are upheld.

Kinship care aware policy making and public service delivery at national and local levels of government

It is a feature of how much kinship care is currently overlooked that public policy decisions are made with no regard for their impact, intended or otherwise, on kinship families. This includes decisions about education, children's social care departments, housing, and health services at both local and national levels. For example, kinship carers that Kinship works with often come up against blockages in healthcare in relation to issues such as consent or access to records, and kinship carers find it challenging to get a passport for their children.

There is a need for all public services that come into contact with kinship families to have a specific kinship care policy in place which identifies the way each service can specifically meet the needs of kinship families. Furthermore, all staff working in these services should require a basic level of training on kinship care.

Recommendations for most key public services that work with kinship families are contained throughout this report, but housing is a crucial policy area that warrants specific attention.

Housing

Kinship carers need to be considered a priority group for housing. Poor or unsuitable housing can be a significant source of stress for kinship carers.¹⁴⁰ Research suggests that a third or more of kinship carers believe their home to be unsuitable.¹⁴¹ The main issue with housing is over crowding¹⁴² or that housing is privately rented and therefore not secure.¹⁴³ A recent survey by Kinship found 33% of kinship carers had to turn a living area into a bedroom to accommodate the children.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, the costs for adaptations to carers' homes to make them suitable for the children they are caring for should also be covered by the state. Children in kinship care need a secure home to be raised in.

¹³⁶ Bowyer, S., Wilkinson, J., Tapsfield, R., Waters, J. and Ranger, H. (2015) Special Guardianship: Qualitative Case File Analysis. Research Report. London: Research in Practice.

¹³⁷ Ashley and Braun (2019).

¹³⁸ Ministry of Justice (2019) Legal Support: The Way Ahead.

¹³⁹ Department for Education (2010) Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities.

¹⁴⁰ Wade et al (2014).

¹⁴¹ Ashley and Braun (2019); Farmer and Moyers (2008).

¹⁴² Hunt (2018).

¹⁴³ Wijedasa (2015).

¹⁴⁴ Kinship (2021b).

An ambitious plan to raise awareness of kinship care

Kinship families are a non-traditional family type that few people know about and understand. This means that kinship carers can face stigma and discrimination. It is also suspected that the lack of awareness of kinship care means that many kinship carers do not know they are 'kinship carers' and therefore do not seek the advice or support they might need.

In a recent Kinship survey, 67% of kinship carers felt people made negative judgements about them.¹⁴⁵ A previous Grandparents Plus survey (2014) found 43% of kinship carers felt they had been treated rudely, differently, stigmatised or discriminated against by professionals and people in their communities because of their role.¹⁴⁶ This is especially hard as some kinship carers may already feel ashamed at the extent of the parents' difficulties. This can serve to make their situation harder and add to the strain they are under.

Kinship recommends that there should be a strategy to raise awareness of kinship care among key professionals working with kinship families, especially focusing on schools and health services. Professionals will be more attuned to kinship families' needs, and better able to develop tailored support and signpost to specialist charities. This will empower kinship carers to understand more about the role they are fulfilling and get the necessary support for their circumstances. The awareness raising of kinship care also needs to tackle the myths and stereotypes that can surround the role, and the benefits the role brings to children and society must be championed.

Workforce development to provide specialists in kinship care practice in every local authority

Kinship carers often feel misunderstood by the professionals whose role it is to support them and, more worryingly, they can also believe these same professionals do not understand the role they undertake or the complexities of being a kinship family.¹⁴⁷

When dealing with benefit housing, social services and benefit departments, they treat

you as if you're making a big deal and that you should just get on with it. They lack understanding of the complexities of your situation and the stress and anxiety it causes. They fail to see that these children suffer the same anguishes as looked after children. This total disregard from these departments adds to your problems, as you are always in battle with them. The time and energy spent fighting with these departments would be better spent investing into the children.

Grandmother and kinship carer, quoted in Grandparents Plus survey (2014, p15).

Kinship carers and the children they raise should have access to support from dedicated kinship specialists in local authorities who understand the complexity of kinship care and who carry out assessments and offer support. Skills development should take place across the wide range of roles in children's social care and education, from early help to school leaders, and should also be part of the knowledge base of senior professionals.

There will also need to be changes made in the training and development of social workers to provide a more adequate and detailed focus on kinship care. The concept of kinship care as a specialism is beginning to be recognised and supported by research and that should be reflected on the front line.¹⁴⁸

In her 2021 study of social workers with an expertise of kinship care, Joan Hunt found that social workers need a good understanding of the complexities of kinship care as well as having good social work skills to be able to work successfully with kinship families.

I think the assessors need to have quite a lot of empathy and sensitivity. They need to go in recognising what an emotive time it is for families, and to really think about what it means to the families and show that to the families. They need to build up good working relationships with the people they're assessing. They need to have a really good understanding of the implications of kinship care.

Practitioner, anonymous.

¹⁴⁵ Kinship (2020).

¹⁴⁶ Grandparents Plus (2014) Disadvantage, discrimination, resilience: the lives of kinship families. London: Grandparents Plus.

¹⁴⁷ Farmer and Moyers (2008); Grandparents Plus (2014); Harwin et al (2019a).

¹⁴⁸ Hunt (2021).

Therefore, kinship care should be taught on qualifying programmes and focus should be given to developing specialist kinship care teams that should exist on a par with existing looked after children's teams and adoption support teams.¹⁴⁹



The awareness raising of kinship care also needs to tackle the myths and stereotypes that can surround the role, and the benefits the role brings to children and society must be championed.

¹⁴⁹ Steve Walker, former Director of Children's Services for Leeds City Council describes the development of kinship care teams and specialist roles in Special Guardianship: an agenda for change (2021), a film by the Centre for Child and Family Justice Research, Kinship and CoramBAAF <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euISHKofbls&t=1475s>

CONCLUSION

The overarching conclusion to be drawn from this report is the need to acknowledge kinship care as an entity in its own right, a unique form of substitute care requiring policies, systems and practices tailored to its particular constellation of needs, rather than being added on to those developed for other purposes. For far too long kinship care has been the proverbial 'square peg in a round hole.'¹⁵⁰

It makes sense to invest in kinship care. Kinship care offers an opportunity for positive, family-based permanence for thousands of young people who would otherwise be in the care system. Children brought up in kinship care generally have better outcomes than those who enter care, and well-supported kinship care can lead to short and long term savings to the public purse. Young people generally continue to live with their kinship families well past the age of 18, with this continuity and stability being beneficial well into their adult years.^{151, 152}

However, the lack of clear, structured, bespoke support for kinship carers has led to huge human cost and injustices. Kinship carers, who give so much, are being pushed into poverty and to breaking point. Some families are breaking down unnecessarily, causing distress and instability to children, and adding pressure to an already overwhelmed care system.

For too long, the support system for kinship care has stumbled along like the poor relation to fostering and adoption. Now is the time for reform. There are strong reasons to invest in kinship care, and significant risks to the futures of young people, the wellbeing and finances of carers, and the health of the economy if we don't.

We are at a time of opportunity. The important role that kinship care has in the children's social care system has been acknowledged by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.¹⁵³ However, words do not change the lives of kinship families, actions do. Our evidence-based proposals will have a positive impact on kinship families, children's social care, and wider society. Our recommendations for changes that need to happen now will improve the lives of tens of thousands of the most vulnerable families and reduce the pressure on the care system, and our recommendations for the development of a kinship strategy and investment in kinship care will ensure a kinship care system and future fit for all kinship families.

¹⁵⁰ Hunt (2021).

¹⁵¹ Wellard et al (2017).

¹⁵² Kinship (2021b).

¹⁵³ The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2021) The Case for Change. June 2021.

About Kinship

Kinship, formerly known as Grandparents Plus, is the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales.

We're here for all kinship carers – the grandparents and siblings, the aunts, uncles, cousins and family friends who step up to raise children when their parents can't. We'll not rest until the recognition and support is there for every kinship family.

Advice and support

Last year, our advice service provided high-quality, specialist advice to nearly 3,000 kinship carers on issues including welfare benefits, housing, legal orders, financial support, employment, and contact with parents. As a result of the advice we gave, kinship families were able to access over £639,000 in unclaimed benefits and secure over £185,000 in grants to help cover the costs of essentials such as beds and white goods as well as food and energy bills.

We have pioneered the development of evidence-informed support programmes for kinship carers with a focus on peer support. Through Kinship Ready, Kinship Reach and Kinship Connected, we provide kinship carers across the country with a range of workshops and both remote and local 1:1 support led by dedicated Project Workers. Our services are proven to have a positive impact on kinship families, reducing isolation and concerns with children's behaviour, and improving relationships and carers' resilience. Evaluation of our Kinship Connected programme in 2020 found that a 20% return on investment was made by local authorities who invested in this support.

Our other innovative projects, including Kinship Active, Someone Like Me and Kinship Young Champions, continue to provide kinship carers and the children they care for with new opportunities to meet and learn from each other, get the support they need, and make a difference to local and national policy and practice.

In 2022 we are rolling out a new national Peer-to-Peer Support Service, funded by the Department for Education, which will support kinship carers in every local authority in England through a network of peer support groups, an e-learning platform, online chat and free workshops..

Policy, research and campaigns

We are proud to work alongside kinship carers and local authorities to transform support at local and national level. Kinship plays a key role in raising awareness of kinship care and campaigning for policy and practice change, including leading Kinship Care Week each year.

Our annual surveys and research bring the views and experiences of thousands of kinship carers directly to decision makers, and we support and empower kinship carers to become campaigners themselves. Together with our organisational expertise, we support government, local authorities and others to create real and lasting change for kinship families.

We also bring professionals and researchers together through our Professionals Network of over 1,000 social workers and other professionals working with kinship carers and our Kinship Care Researcher Network of over 50 academics.





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.

www.kinship.org.uk

 kinship.org.uk

 0330 016 7235

 info@kinship.org.uk

 [@kinshipcharity](https://twitter.com/kinshipcharity)

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