



# Supporting special guardians during the pandemic

Kinship Response delivery and impact during  
May – October 2020

## About Grandparents Plus

Grandparents Plus is the kinship care charity. We give kinship care families life-changing information, advice, and support when they have nowhere else to turn. We are here for all kinship carers from the beginning - to help them navigate a complex system, and for as long as they need us. We reduce isolation by connecting kinship carers via our online community and support groups and we fight for kinship carers to be recognised and valued for the vital role they play in children's lives and society – and for that to be underpinned by legislation, policy and practice.

## Kinship care and COVID-19

Kinship care is an important form of care. Around 200,000 children (160,000 children in England [1]) are raised by relatives or family friends. Children in kinship care have experienced similar challenges to those children who are looked after by the local authority [2] and compared with children in the general population, are nearly twice as likely to have a long-term health problem or a disability that limits their day-to-day activities [3]. 76% of children in kinship care are growing up in deprived households, and kinship care is more prevalent in areas of deprivation and in ethnic minority communities. As a group, kinship carers are older, poorer and in worse health than any other raising children.

Already vulnerable, the COVID-19 global pandemic is having a significant impact on kinship families, placing additional stress on their already difficult situations. Grandparents Plus consulted with kinship carers throughout the first lockdown period, through short surveys, feedback from our local project workers and enquiries to our advice service and in our annual survey of over 500 kinship carers to find out how they are coping and how their needs are changing.



At the outset, kinship carers reported feeling scared about catching the virus, and what would happen to their children if they fell seriously ill or died. As the lockdown continued their concerns moved from home-schooling and the impact of lockdown on the children in their care to exhaustion from caring for the children twenty-four hours a day without a break. They were, and continue to be, deeply concerned about the uncertainties of living with a 'new normal'

## Grandparents Plus' 2020 annual survey found:

- **70%** of kinship carers struggled during the pandemic.
- **82%** of kinship carers did not feel adequately supported by their local authorities.
- **24%** said they were not sure they could cope in another lockdown

Lack of support meant many kinship carers were just about coping before the pandemic. The lockdown amplified the challenges they already faced. Without additional tailored support there is a real risk that kinship carers will no longer be able to look after the children in their care.

*1 Wijedasa (2015) "The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in the UK" University of Bristol found 180,000 children raised by relatives. A further 20,000 are estimated to be raised by family friends*

*2 Wijedasa (2015) ibid*

*3 Wijedasa (2015) ibid*

## Summary of kinship carer needs through COVID-19

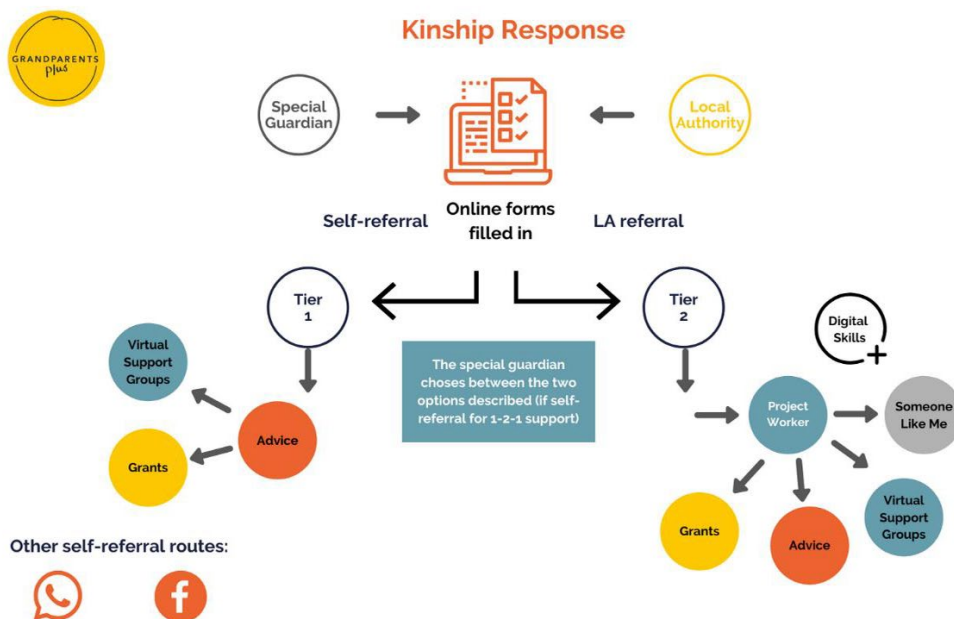


### About Kinship Response

Kinship Response is an adaptation of the Kinship Connected support programme to support special guardians (kinship carers who have parental responsibility until the age of 18), developed and delivered by Grandparents Plus since 2018. An independent evaluation of Kinship Connected found it led to a range of positive impacts; isolation was reduced as were concerns regarding children as many carers gained an increased understanding of their children's behaviour. With the impact of peer-to-peer support, kinship carers felt a sense of connectedness with others and from this, a real resilience to cope, and pride in their caring role [4].

Kinship Response was adapted, in consultation with local authorities and with feedback from special guardians, to provide targeted and time limited telephone and virtual support during the pandemic. Kinship Response offers a comprehensive package of support beyond the specialist therapeutic support normally funded by the Adoption Support Fund. This includes tailored advice and one-to-one and peer support which is what kinship carers have told us they need and for which there is strong evidence of impact.

## The Kinship Response service model



Kinship Response has been commissioned by both individual local authorities and regional adoption agencies for their local area for one year and it is supporting special guardians in 68 local authority areas. Special guardians are able to access the following services and support:

- **Over 900** special guardians will receive one-to-one support from an **expert project worker**, with assessment and follow up calls based on an adapted Signs of Safety model of crisis intervention [5]
- Priority access to Grandparents Plus' specialist kinship care advice service
- Virtual support groups that meet regularly via Whatsapp, Facebook or Zoom video calls
- Membership of Grandparents Plus' Kinship Community of over 8000 kinship carers
- Live regional private Facebook advice surgeries where special guardians can ask questions to help in their caring role
- Tailored and up to date information on Grandparents Plus' website that will help during COVID-19 - [www.grandparentsplus.org.uk](http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk).



### Kinship Response: delivery from May to October 2020

- **378 kinship carers**, between them **raising 527 kinship children**, have received one-to-one support from project workers
- **Over 200 kinship carers** have been matched with a **Someone Like Me** volunteer working on our peer-to-peer telephone support service.

### Kinship Response: the difference it makes

Of the kinship carers who have been referred to Kinship Response:

- **93%** say they feel more confident in their caring role
- **68%** say they are more able to manage family relationships
- **92%** report having reduced concerns about their child's wellbeing
- **78%** feel less lonely and **79%** feel less isolated.

5 <https://www.signsofsafety.net/what-is-sofs/>



### **One special guardian's story**

A grandmother was referred for support, primarily due to living in overcrowded conditions. Her grandchildren were placed with her after the death of her daughter, who was sadly murdered.

As well as the two kin grandchildren under 10, there were two other children under 10 and an adult daughter who was supporting the grandmother. The grandmother struggled at times to manage her own grief as well as supporting the children.

### **How Kinship Response is helping**

The grandmother engaged with Kinship Response one-to-one support which gave her the opportunity to explore her emotions and feelings. She was receptive to the idea of counselling and believed it would promote emotional resilience. We also helped her by:

- Referring her to homicide victim's support.
- Referring her to Winston's Wish for the children.
- Providing specialist advice regarding housing issues.
- Matching her with a Someone Like Me peer volunteer which has enabled her to feel 'normal'. She is now considering becoming a volunteer herself.

Initially the grandmother was not sure about joining a virtual support group, however throughout her one-to-one sessions she grew in confidence and joined her first group in September. She now feels that peer support is helping to reduce feelings of isolation.

*"I found it invaluable speaking with you. After being so alone for so long, your contact meant more to me than I can ever put down in words."*

## Conclusion and recommendations

Kinship carers fulfil an essential role in society; they care for some of society's most vulnerable children, preventing them from entering the care system. However, they are often vulnerable themselves and most would benefit from additional support.

The Adoption Support Fund provides an invaluable source of support for families that cannot be found elsewhere and Grandparents Plus very much welcomes the extension of this funding to support the needs of many special guardians throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kinship Response, funded through the Adoption Support Fund Covid-19 funding, is providing tailored and holistic support for special guardians and their families. The impact to date is positive for special guardians and the children they care for: the special guardians feel less isolated, more confident in their role and report reduced concerns about their children's wellbeing.

Special guardians and other kinship carers need sustained support to develop resilience to protect against the effects of the pandemic and any future unforeseen crises.

### Our recommendations for government

- The Adoption Support Fund to be adequately funded in future, with funds tailored for special guardianship and other kinship families, based on their unique needs.
- The Adoption Support Fund is used to fund the delivery and development of evidence-based support and services specifically for special guardianship families including peer support.
- A communications and promotional strategy is developed that targets special guardians, social workers and relevant services to raise awareness of the fund and the support offered to special guardianship families.
- A robust monitoring and evaluation programme is implemented to measure the impact of support provided by the fund.

For further information about support services for special guardians and kinship carers visit our website: [www.grandparentsplus.org.uk](http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk) or email Kate O'Brien, director of business development and programmes on [kate.obrien@grandparentsplus.org](mailto:kate.obrien@grandparentsplus.org).



Grandparents Plus is the national charity for kinship carers – relatives and friends who step in to raise children who aren't able to live with their parents.

We strive for a society in which kinship carers and the children they care for are recognised, valued and supported.

Our support services address the significant financial, practical and emotional challenges that kinship carers face.



[grandparentsplus.org.uk](https://grandparentsplus.org.uk)



020 8981 8001



[info@grandparentsplus.org.uk](mailto:info@grandparentsplus.org.uk)



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Registered office: The Foundry, 17 Oval Way, London SE11 5RR