



For family or friends who
step up to raise a child.

Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis

October 2023

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Foreword

The publication of *Breaking Point* marks just under one year on from the launch of Kinship's [#ValueOurLove](#) campaign during October 2022. I remember the sense of excitement and optimism which [captured the room in Parliament that day](#), filled with kinship carers expertly and passionately making their case to the MPs and other decision makers who joined us. It felt as though something had changed, and the efforts of kinship carers were finally being recognised and rewarded after decades of hard-fought campaigning.

A few months earlier, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care had [delivered its final report and recommendations](#), drawing policymakers' attention to the clear need to invest in kinship care and the benefits this would bring for families and for society.

Since then, we've successfully mobilised and campaigned alongside thousands of kinship carers to secure some significant progress, [including a commitment to a first ever national kinship care strategy](#) and new investment in a national offer of training and support for kinship carers in England. In February, the UK Government's children's social care implementation strategy – [Stable Homes, Built on Love](#) – placed kinship care and “unlocking the potential of family networks” at the heart of its new reforms.

Despite ongoing political turbulence, interest in and support for kinship care is at an all-time high, with cross-party backing from supporters in Parliament, the Senedd and beyond. A growing number of local authority leaders in England and Wales are pioneering improved support and practice in kinship care too. Most recently, the [UK Government's response to the Stable Homes consultation](#) in England [reaffirmed kinship care as a top priority](#), bolstered by more than 400 kinship carers who generously shared their views and recommendations based on their own experiences.

Kinship Care Week is a moment each year to really celebrate the value which kinship carers' love brings to families across England and Wales. However, this year, *Breaking Point* is yet another reminder that there's still a long way to go for kinship families to be truly valued and recognised in policy and practice. Despite the successes we've achieved in the last year, the situation for kinship families across England and Wales is growing ever more worrying and the need for reform ever more urgent.

Kinship families cannot wait. Our 2023 annual survey has revealed just how close many kinship carers are to breaking point. Whilst we will rightly continue to celebrate each step further towards a future fit for kinship care, what we need now aren't small steps but great strides. The time to be bold and ambitious is today. Governments cannot delay any further and must guarantee the financial support and system reform which would lift kinship carers out of poverty and keep children safe within their family networks. Anything less is unacceptable.

The UK Government has said that the national kinship care strategy for England, due at the end of this year, “will be an opportunity to make real and lasting change”. The Welsh Government has recently said it is too “committed to seeing how kinship arrangements can be improved in Wales”. These aren't just words – these are promises made to every one of the kinship carers who have stepped up to raise their children. Governments must now too step up and live up to their promises by providing the step change in recognition and support that kinship carers desperately need and deserve.

Dr Lucy Peake, Chief Executive
October 2023

Executive summary

Introduction

Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis, published during [Kinship Care Week 2023](#), is the first report based on key findings from Kinship's 2023 annual survey, completed by 1,657 kinship carers caring for at least 2,416 children across England and Wales. It finds that too many kinship carers are struggling against a rising cost of living, pushing some families to breaking point.

Key findings

Some kinship families are at urgent risk of breaking down

12% of kinship carers who responded to our survey told us they were concerned they may have to stop caring for their kinship child (or children) in the next year if their situation did not improve. A further 11% said they didn't know. Concerns were more common for kinship carers caring on their own, experiencing financial insecurity, and with poor health. The most common reasons given for this were financial issues and challenges managing children's emotional and behavioural needs.

This level of uncertainty risks more than 19,000 children across England and Wales currently living in kinship care instead entering local authority care. The result of this would be devastating detrimental impacts for children, families, and the public purse.

A lack of support is splitting up siblings unnecessarily

Nearly 1 in 5 respondents (18%) told us they had at some point been unable to take on the care of a brother or sister to a kinship child already in their care. The most common reasons for this included a lack of space at home, challenges managing children's social, emotional or mental health difficulties, concerns about carers' own health and wellbeing and financial worries. This suggests as many as 20,000 children may have entered the care system unnecessarily over the last decade, denied the chance to live in kinship care alongside their sibling(s).

The cost of living crisis continues to plunge kinship families into poverty

1 in 10 kinship carers (10%) said their household had run out of food and couldn't afford to buy more within the last two weeks, and 7% were behind on rent or mortgage payments. On both measures, kinship carers who responded to our survey demonstrated higher levels of financial insecurity than other cohorts including the general population and households caring for children.

Kinship carers are struggling with poor health and loneliness

Kinship carers were far more likely to report poor health than other adults in the general population. More than one third of respondents (36%) were caring for a child on their own, and nearly 1 in 5 (19%) said they felt lonely 'often or always'. Poor health and lone caring were both factors which correlated strongly with increased concerns about kinship carers' ability to continue caring for their children.

The quality of local authority support and information for kinship families is unacceptably low

Of those kinship carers who had received local authority support, a quarter (25%) rated the quality of the support their family had received as 'very poor'. Even more starkly, more than one third (35%) of respondents rated the information about kinship care provided by their local authority as 'very poor' and a further 20% as 'poor'. Levels of trust in the local authority were low; kinship carers were

much more likely to say they would turn to friends and family, charities supporting kinship families, and educational settings such as schools for support.

Recommendations

See page 32 for a detailed set of recommendations.

Financial support

The UK and Welsh Governments should equalise financial allowances between foster carers and kinship carers, ensuring kinship families receive a non-means tested allowance equivalent to the national minimum fostering allowance.

All local authorities should have an up to date, accessible and visible policy on the provision of financial support for kinship carers, and move towards emulating the leading practice of local authorities who already deliver a non-means tested allowance to kinship carers as soon as possible.

The UK Government should also introduce a statutory right to kinship care leave and pay, on a par with that given to adoptive parents.

Support for kinship families

All kinship carers should receive free and independent advice and information, including legal advice. Local authorities should provide clear and accessible information to all types of kinship carers, and signpost to resources such as [Kinship Compass](#).

Local authorities should ensure the provision of suitable local training and support services, including peer support, for kinship carers.

All kinship families should have access to appropriate emotional and therapeutic support, including a bespoke version of the Adoption Support Fund.

Improving the system

Local authorities should establish specialist kinship teams to improve practice in kinship care, supported by research and other activity from Ofsted and Care Inspectorate Wales.

UK and Welsh Governments should prioritise comprehensive and holistic approaches which recognise the unique nature of kinship care, backed by updated statutory guidance, including within the forthcoming national kinship care strategy for England.

Significant additional investment must be made in children's social care at the next fiscal opportunities to ensure kinship care reforms are effective.

Introduction

About kinship care

Kinship care is when a child lives full-time or most of the time with a relative or close family friend, usually because their parents are not able to care for them. The exact number of children in kinship care is unknown, but estimates using Census data suggest it could be somewhere between 120,000¹ and 162,000² children in England and Wales – that's more than double the number in foster care.^{3 4} Grandparents are the most common kinship carers, but older siblings, aunts, uncles, and other relatives and people who know the child well can also take on the role.

→ [Learn more about kinship care and Census data](#)

There are different types of kinship care, and the rights, responsibilities and support available to kinship families is often dependent on the type of arrangement they have. The majority of kinship carers have an informal arrangement agreed between the carer and the child's parent(s). Other kinship carers may have a legal order made through the family court, such as a special guardianship order (SGO) or child arrangements order (CAO), which grants the carer parental responsibility and provides security for the arrangement. Others will be family and friends foster carers, where the local authority is involved in placing the child with the kinship carer following an assessment and approval process and the child is 'looked after' by the local authority.

→ [Read 'What is kinship care?'](#)

Most children are in kinship care because their parents are not able to look after them, often as a result of problems with drugs or alcohol, domestic abuse or mental illness. Experiences of trauma, abuse and neglect, loss and separation are common for children in kinship care. A kinship carer provides a stable home life where children can grow and develop in a safe, positive environment. They also get to stay in their existing family network, which helps maintain their sense of identity and family relationships.

However, as *Breaking Point* identifies, despite their similar needs and experiences to those who are looked after in local authority care, kinship children struggle to access adequate educational and therapeutic support. The already vulnerable position of their kinship carers is compounded by a lack of financial, practical and emotional support, leading to significant challenges with poverty, ill health and family relationships. Given that the only alternative care option for most kinship children would be the local authority care system, it is imperative that support for kinship families is improved urgently.

→ [Learn about our work to change the system](#)

About the report

Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis, published during [Kinship Care Week 2023](#), is the first report based on key findings from our 2023 annual survey. It finds that too many kinship carers are struggling against a rising cost of living, pushing some families to breaking point.

→ [Learn more about Kinship Care Week 2023](#)

¹ Office for National Statistics (2023a)

² Wijedasa (2017)

³ Department for Education (2023)

⁴ Welsh Government (2023)

As common with previous annual survey reports from Kinship, it provides an updated 'state of the nation' overview of kinship households in 2023 and the challenges they are facing, exploring in particular kinship carers' financial situations and experiences with local authority support and information, and identifies how many kinship families are at crisis point and at risk of breakdown if additional support is not provided.

→ [View Kinship's previous annual survey reports](#)

Case studies included come from kinship carers who completed our 2023 annual survey and specified they were interested in supporting our activity to campaign and raise awareness of kinship care. All are shared with full permission. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

About the 2023 annual survey

Kinship has conducted an annual survey of kinship carers since 2016. The findings help us to develop an understanding of what life has been like for kinship carers over the previous year, and learn more about the issues they and their families face so that we can deliver support services attuned to their needs and campaign for the policy and practice changes they want to see.

The survey was developed using Form Assembly and open to responses from 15 August to 4 September 2023. It was promoted widely via Kinship's Community of kinship carers, social media channels, partner organisations, and our networks of professionals and researchers.

→ [Kinship carer? Join our Kinship Community](#)

→ [Social worker or other practitioner? Join our professionals network](#)

→ [Researcher or academic? Join our researchers network](#)

In total, the survey received 1,657 responses from kinship carers caring for at least 2,416 children in England and Wales. For the first time in a Kinship annual survey, some questions were asked on a 'per child' basis with respondents able to select different responses for each kinship child they care for, allowing us to understand in greater detail the makeup of kinship households and supporting more robust comparisons with other relevant datasets collected for specific cohorts of children.

1,657

kinship carers caring for at least

2,416

children responded to our 2023 annual survey

Most respondents to this survey are likely to be kinship carers who are members of our Kinship Community or who were referred to the survey by other organisations providing support for kinship families. This, compounded by the overrepresentation of kinship carers in more formalised arrangements within our survey cohort, means they are likely to be more aware of the services that we or other organisations offer and are more likely to have received support than other kinship carers. As such, the findings from this and future reports may represent a more positive view of kinship carers' experiences than is experienced by many.

Kinship households: our 2023 annual survey cohort

Kinship's 2023 annual survey received responses from 1,657 kinship carers across England and Wales who were caring for at least 2,416 kinship children. Around two-thirds (65%) of respondents were caring for one kinship child, and around a quarter (26%) for two.

The vast majority of survey respondents were from England (94%) with a smaller number from Wales (6%), mirroring the estimated relative populations of children growing up in kinship care in each nation.⁵ ⁶ This report explores responses from the entire survey cohort across both England and Wales together, noting any questions or findings specific to one nation's cohort where relevant. To understand more about the Welsh survey cohort specifically, you can view our *Spotlight on Wales* summary.

→ [View our 'Breaking Point: Spotlight on Wales' summary](#)

Demographics

Gender

Consistent with previous Kinship surveys, respondents were predominantly female (89%). However, in this year's survey we also requested information about the age, gender and ethnicity of the partner or spouse of the respondent if they were caring for their kinship child alongside them. Whilst the age and ethnicity profile of this group closely matched that of survey respondents, this new question revealed a number of men acting as kinship carers who would otherwise be hidden.

However, even when considering both survey respondents and their partners or spouses together, the majority (62%) of kinship carers continued to be women. This suggests that, in households where a mixed gender couple are acting as kinship carers, the female kinship carer is more likely to engage with Kinship and our services and in turn receive support and connect with other kinship carers. This could also indicate that women more commonly act as 'lead' for the kinship household in terms of providing care for children as well as navigating the systems and structures which support the kinship arrangement, such as dialogue with the local authority and family court.

62%

of kinship carers, including partners to survey respondents, were female

It also reflects what we know about how grandmothers more than any other connected person most commonly find themselves in a kinship caring role, and how gendered norms and stereotypes are compounded by inequalities in economic and wider policy to dictate and shape kinship care options for children – and too the experiences of their carers.⁷ As highlighted in our *Forced Out* report, the lack of employment support for kinship carers and their resultant – often

⁵ Wijedasa (2017)

⁶ Office for National Statistics (2023a)

⁷ Birchall & Holt (2022)

permanent – exit from the labour market is likely to be exacerbating gendered dynamics and inequalities in terms of employment and earnings. In particular, many older women find themselves plunged into poverty due to the multiple and cumulative 'economic penalties' they face as a result of their gender and in taking on a kinship caring role.

→ **Read *Forced Out: delivering equality for kinship carers in the workplace***

Age

The median age of kinship carers who responded to the survey was 55-59, with nearly half (44%) of respondents aged 60 or over. The older age profile of respondents is reflected in grandparents making up the majority of respondents (see [Carer's relationship to the child](#)) and matches closely to previous annual survey reports. Evidence from both analysis of Census data and surveys of fostering services indicate that kinship carers are older than other groups of carers raising children; a recent survey from The Fostering Network found that 57% of new households recruited by fostering services in the year ending March 2021 were aged 45 or over compared to 90% of our survey cohort.⁸

44%

of respondents were aged 60 or over

We know that the older age of kinship carers contributes to the prevalence of health issues which can make caring for children much more difficult, and the additional age gap between children and their carers compared to other families can create challenges for both carers and their children. It also has significant financial implications, with many carers drawing down pensions early and – knowingly or otherwise – putting themselves at serious financial risk in the future in order to care for their kinship child (or children) today.

"We have now contacted Kinship support and are beginning to receive help. We worry that because of our ages and because our savings have dwindled that we won't be able to manage, certainly not if this behaviour becomes worse."

Great grandparent with a child arrangements or residence order

"Because SG [special guardianship] allowances are means-tested we get no financial support to help us bring up our kinship child. We are using funds we would otherwise have used to help fund our retirement to bring up our little boy. Wouldn't change it for the world, but it isn't fair."

Family friend kinship carer and special guardian

"We are getting older and [child's name] has shown signs of aggression over the last few years. Whilst it is subsiding a bit, not sure if we can both cope with the trials of a teenager."

Step grandparent with a child arrangements or residence order

The table below notes the age of the children cared for by survey respondents at the time of the survey, as well as the age of the children when they came to live with them.

Age band	Age of kinship children	Age of kinship children when they came into the care of the respondent
Under 1 year	1%	30%

⁸ The Fostering Network (2021)

1 to 4 years old	15%	37%
5 to 9 years old	34%	22%
10 to 15 years old	39%	10%
16 years and over	12%	1%

The age profile of children in kinship care represented in our survey is somewhat similar to that in the cohort identified by analyses of the 2011⁹ Census and Census 2021¹⁰ in that around 5 or 6 in 10 children in kinship care are aged 10 or over, although our survey cohort features fewer very young children (i.e. aged under 1 year) and older teenagers (i.e. aged 16 years and over) but includes more children aged 5 to 9 years.

However, the age profile of children in kinship care represented in our survey is generally younger than that of children currently in local authority care in England and Wales. Whilst the proportion of 10 to 15 year olds is the largest group across both cohorts at around 2 in 5 children, only 12% of children represented in our survey were aged 16 years and over compared to a quarter (25%) in England¹¹ and 17% in Wales¹². Of those starting to be looked after in local authority care in England last year, 27% were aged 10 to 15 years old and 25% were aged 16 years and over compared to just 10% and 1% of children represented in our survey respectively.

This likely reflects a number of complex factors acting together, including the influence of unaccompanied asylum seeking children as a cohort on the age profile of those starting to be looked after in local authority care, as well as the prevailing use of formalised kinship care arrangements such as special guardianship as a route to permanence for younger children more comparable to that of adoption rather than as a care option for older children who cannot live with their parents; the Commission on Young Lives recently called for additional investment to establish a national support programme which promotes kinship care for teenagers at risk.¹³

Ethnicity

The vast majority of survey respondents (93%), and their partners or spouses caring for their kinship child or children alongside them, were white. Only 4% were Black or Black British, with the majority of these respondents having a Caribbean background.

However, the kinship children represented in the survey had a different ethnicity profile to their carers as the survey respondents. Fewer children (84%) were white, and more were of Mixed Heritage (11%) compared to responding kinship carers (2%). Relative proportions of those of Asian or Asian British or Black or Black British ethnicity were broadly similar. This in some ways likely reflects broader demographic shifts over time and patterns in ethnicity and age across the overall population of England and Wales. For example, nearly half of those who identified as 'White and Asian' or 'White and Black African' (within the 'Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups' category) in Census 2021 were aged 0 to 15 years, substantially higher than 18.5% of the overall population of this age.¹⁴

11%

of kinship children were in the Mixed Heritage ethnic group (compared to 2% of kinship carers)

⁹ Wijedasa (2017)

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics (2023a)

¹¹ Department for Education (2023)

¹² Welsh Government

¹³ Commission on Young Lives (2022)

¹⁴ Office for National Statistics (2023b)

Existing evidence suggests quite complex patterns of ethnicity for children in kinship care. Analysis of the 2011 Census found that nearly one third (32%) of children in relative kinship care in England were from a non-White background, with the prevalence of kinship care being highest amongst Black children (2.7% in England and 3.0% in Wales).¹⁵ Different analysis of the Census 2021 found that three quarters of children in kinship care were in the 'White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British' ethnic group (higher than for those living with at least one parent), and that kinship children were also more likely to identify within 'Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African' ethnic group and within the 'Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups' categories, but less likely to be identified within any 'Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh' ethnic group.¹⁶

We also know that children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds are underrepresented in formalised kinship arrangements and overrepresented in informal arrangements.¹⁷ However, even when considering this alongside geographic patterns in respondents, the ethnicity profile of children represented in our survey was still significantly misaligned with what we understand to be the likely profile of kinship children. Consequently, we recognise the limitations of the survey findings in representing the full diversity of kinship families' views and experiences.

In an effort to boost engagement and reach with kinship carers from ethnic backgrounds historically underrepresented in our surveys, we contacted more than 100 organisations across England and Wales supporting children and families, particularly those operating in areas with higher Black and minority ethnic populations, as well as relevant community and faith organisations. However, we recognise that discrete outreach activity is no replacement for the development of longstanding relationships and understanding of kinship care and of Kinship with kinship families; trust and connection is what supports kinship carers to feel comfortable sharing their views and experiences with us through our surveys.

We are determined to ensure our information and services reach kinship families who we have struggled to engage with previously. Over the course of the next year, our new research study '*Raising someone else's child*' will explore the experiences of kinship carers from Black and Asian communities, providing insight that should influence our work as well as the wider sector.

→ [Read more about Kinship's research into the experiences of kinship families from Black and Asian communities](#)

We're also building on learning from programmes including the Peer Support Service which is engaging with a more diverse group of kinship carers and has pioneered ways of engaging with specific groups less well served previously, including by hosting special interest forums for male kinship carers, LGBTQ+ kinship carers, single kinship carers and younger kinship carers aged 18-35 year old, amongst other groups.

→ [Learn more about our special interest peer support groups](#)

Kinship family structures

Carer's relationship to the child

More than 7 in 10 (71%) kinship children represented in the survey were being cared for by a grandparent, consistent with previous Kinship surveys and which members of the family network we understand to be most likely to become kinship carers; analysis of Census data suggests more than half of children in kinship care live with at least one grandparent.¹⁸ Aunt or uncle (13%) and

¹⁵ Wijedasa (2015)

¹⁶ Office for National Statistics (2023a)

¹⁷ What Works for Children's Social Care (2022)

¹⁸ Office for National Statistics (2023a)

step grandparent (6%) were the other two most common relationships selected by respondents for their kinship children.

Although not directly comparable, our survey cohort features fewer children who are cared for by an older sibling than would be expected given the proportion of children growing up in relative kinship care in households headed by a sibling as identified in analysis of the 2011 Census (at 23% and 19% in England and Wales respectively).¹⁹ However, other analysis of the Census 2021 suggests that far fewer children in kinship care live with one (5.3%) or two (1%) siblings as a kinship carer.²⁰

Type of kinship arrangement

The majority (61%) of children represented in our survey were being cared for under a special guardianship order made following care proceedings involving the local authority. The other most common type of kinship arrangement found between respondents and their kinship children were family and friends foster care where the child is placed under a full or interim care order (9%), a child arrangements or residence order made following care proceedings involving the local authority (7%), a special guardianship order made in private law proceedings (6%), and informal arrangements (6%).

As noted in the Introduction, the majority of survey respondents are existing members of our Kinship Community, many of whom having been supported by or referred to Kinship for our advice and support services by a local authority. Given that much local authority support is restricted to kinship families in formalised kinship arrangements, and particularly those where the child is currently or was previously 'looked after' in local authority care, this is reflected too in the type of kinship arrangements represented by our survey cohort.

Understanding this complexity in kinship arrangements is crucial to ensuring a holistic approach to kinship care support which recognises the unique needs and strengths of all kinship families, regardless of legal order or lack thereof. Evidence from private family law cases involving kinship carers has demonstrated the overlap which exists with comparable public law cases following child protection concerns, and highlights the implications in terms of differential support entitlements for each route, risking many kinship families going on without support despite their similar needs.²¹

Other caring responsibilities

Alongside caring for their kinship child (or children), nearly 3 in 10 respondents (28%) were caring for other adult family members including elderly relatives and others due to illness, disability or a mental health problem; this is significantly higher than the general population where around 9% of people are providing unpaid care.²²

"I care for a disabled partner as well as kinship caring. This presents additional challenges."

Grandparent with a child arrangements or residence order

14% of respondents were caring for their own biological or step children in addition to their kinship child (or children), and others noted they were also acting as foster carers or adopters or had fairly significant ongoing childcare responsibilities too. This former group told us they were caring for at least 445 biological or step children in addition to their kinship children. Assuming the pattern for our survey cohort held across England and Wales, this suggests that an additional 30,000 children would likely benefit too from improved support targeted at kinship families, such as the provision

¹⁹ Wijedasa (2017)

²⁰ Office for National Statistics (2023a)

²¹ Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2023)

²² Carers UK (2023)

of a financial allowance to kinship carers which could act to lift these children out of poverty alongside those children in kinship care.

Three quarters (75%) of those caring for their own biological or step children said they worried about the impact that becoming a kinship carer has had on them. Taking on a kinship caring role often impacts significantly on the whole family unit and we hear consistently from kinship carers who struggle to manage the complex family dynamics which result from introducing other children into the household. In our 2022 annual survey report – *[The Cost of Loving](#)* – only 3% of respondents who were also caring for their own biological children said their children had ever been offered professional support because of their kinship caring role.²³

²³ Kinship (2022a)

Kinship families in 2023: key findings

Kinship carers' wellbeing

Existing evidence has revealed how kinship carers are far more likely to have a disability or chronic health condition than unrelated foster carers²⁴, and that kinship households are more likely than parental households to be deprived and overcrowded, and to contain people who report long-term physical or mental health conditions or illness that limit their day-to-day activities.²⁵

In addition, previous Kinship surveys have identified the significant health and wellbeing challenges facing many kinship carers. In our 2022 annual survey report – *The Cost of Loving* – over half (56%) of kinship carers told us they had a long-term health condition or disability with nearly a quarter (23%) needing but not receiving professional support for this. Only 15% said they had ever received therapeutic support to help them with the kinship carer role.²⁶

In our 2023 annual survey, we prioritised asking questions which would allow comparison to the general population and other relevant cohorts on key self-reported measures of health and loneliness. The latter is particularly important given both the UK²⁷ and Welsh²⁸ Governments' ongoing work to tackle loneliness and support meaningful social connections.

Health

13% of kinship carers who responded to this year's survey said their health was either 'bad' or 'very bad'; this is consistently a greater proportion than recorded elsewhere for adults in the general population, including within a wellbeing survey from August 2023 delivered by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (9%)²⁹, by NHS England for a sample of adults in England in 2021 (7%)³⁰, and in the 2021 Census (5%)³¹. Similarly, far fewer survey respondents said their health was either 'good' or 'very good' compared to the same sources at 63%, 77% and 82% respectively.

13%

of kinship carers said their health was bad or very bad

Being a kinship carer can be uniquely challenging. They are caring for children who have frequently experienced trauma, separation and loss, and they often struggle to access the support that they and their children need. Too many are left 'fighting' to be recognised and for support. These factors can take a toll on kinship carers in terms of the emotional and physical labour demanded. The often unrelenting strain can lead to or exacerbate existing health conditions or disabilities, limiting kinship carers' ability to care for their children as they may want to and impacting on children's own health and educational outcomes in the future.³²

²⁴ Farmer and Moyers (2008)

²⁵ Office for National Statistics (2023a)

²⁶ Kinship (2022a)

²⁷ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2022)

²⁸ Welsh Government (2020)

²⁹ Office for National Statistics (2023c)

³⁰ NHS England (2021)

³¹ Office for National Statistics (2023d)

³² Selwyn et al (2013), Wellard et al (2017)

"My health has deteriorated due to lack of care I am under a great deal of stress. Have had cancer and now am suffering with shingles."

Grandparent and special guardian

"Due to our age and the fact that we do not get any respite at all from our grandson even for a day. I feel that my health will eventually take its toll."

Grandparent and special guardian

"I have heart failure and my husband has asthma and we are mid to late 70s. What would happen should we become unable to care for her?"

Grandparent with an informal arrangement

Loneliness

Over one third (36%) of survey respondents were caring for a kinship child (or children) on their own, consistent with last year's annual survey results, with the remainder most commonly caring alongside a child with a spouse or partner.³³ This is a greater proportion than for foster carers: in a recent survey of foster carers across the UK, 75% were fostering with their partner or other adult.

36%

of kinship carers were caring for a child on their own

Caring for a child alone without the support of anyone else can intensify many of the financial, practical and emotional challenges; this is highlighted in many of the key findings which follow where kinship carers going it alone are more likely to report ongoing worries about finances, health and their ability to continue caring for their kinship children.

"I suffer from depression and anxiety and look after the children on my own and never have a break, I've been close to giving up several times and I'm not sure how long I can cope with no help."

Grandparent with an informal arrangement

"I am a lone carer looking after my own child, my two nephews, working part time, dealing with my own health issues, navigating the breakdown of my own marriage."

Aunt and family and friends foster carer

"My child presents with challenging behaviours. And as I'm getting older it's becoming harder to deal with on my own as a single parent as she's getting bigger and stronger than me."

Grandparent with a child arrangements or residence order

Nearly 1 in 5 respondents (19%) said they felt lonely 'often or always'. This is considerably higher than that recorded within the ONS' August 2023 wellbeing survey (8%)³⁴ and the Community Life Survey 2021/22 for England (6%)³⁵. Reported loneliness was understandably higher again for kinship carers who were caring for their kinship child (or children) by themselves: over a quarter (26%) of respondents caring alone said they felt lonely 'often or always' compared to 15% of those caring alongside a partner or spouse.

³³ Kinship (2022)

³⁴ Office for National Statistics (2023c)

³⁵ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2022)

Nearly 1 in 5

kinship carers felt lonely often or always

Kinship carers commonly report that friendships fade as their time becomes focused on ensuring the safety and wellbeing of their kinship child (or children), leaving them isolated and with little opportunity to connect with friends and other loved ones who may struggle to understand their new circumstances.

"We are more isolated as I used to take them out all the time but I just can't afford to do so anymore."

Grandparent and special guardian

"It can be lonely especially if you are older and have mobility issues."

Grandparent and special guardian

Nearly half (46%) of respondents said that meeting other kinship carers who have had similar experiences to them was either 'very important' or 'important'. We know that peer support can help to improve kinship carers' emotional wellbeing and reduce isolation, and Kinship is proud of our history pioneering the development of peer support groups through evidence-informed programmes such as Kinship Connected.³⁶

→ [Learn more about our commissioned services](#)

Our Peer Support Service, funded by the Department for Education, has to date established over 130 new peer support groups to help kinship carers on their journey. [Kinship Compass](#) – our independent advice, information and support hub – can connect kinship carers to [online and local in-person peer support groups](#), as well as [special interest groups](#) including those for men, LGBTQ+ carers, younger kinship carers and others.

→ [Visit Kinship Compass and learn more about connecting with other kinship carers](#)

³⁶ Starks and Whitley (2020)

Finances

Kinship care and experiences of poverty are inextricably linked. Kinship families more likely to live in deprived areas and kinship carers more likely to have lower incomes than any other group raising children³⁷, and kinship households are more likely to include people who are economically inactive and to be deprived across all measures: employment, education, health and disability, and housing.³⁸ The ongoing costs of caring for a child and lack of financial and employment support for kinship carers compounds this and results in too many families experiencing chronic financial insecurity.

Last year, 6 in 10 kinship carers told us they'd borrowed money, taken out a short-term loan or used credit cards for everyday purchases, and 4 in 10 reported skipping meals, using food banks or buying less food.³⁹ This turbulence has lasting impacts beyond just kinship carers' ability to pay the bills, generating ongoing worry and stress and limiting opportunities for children, despite kinship carers' efforts to insulate them as best they can.⁴⁰

➔ [Read our policy briefing on financial allowances for kinship carers](#)

Kinship carers' precarious financial positions are intensified by the struggles they have maintaining and securing employment, owing particularly to the lack of employment support for kinship carers. Our *Forced Out* report, published earlier this year, highlights how a lack of paid leave and other support for kinship carers in the workplace is resulting in significant unemployment and underemployment for kinship carers, making them more likely to fall into poverty and preventing them from re-entering the labour market to boost their household income.

➔ [Read *Forced Out: delivering equality for kinship carers in the workplace*](#)

In this year's survey, we wanted to get an up-to-date picture of how kinship families were managing the ongoing cost of living crisis in comparison to other groups.

Cost of living

When asked about how they were managing financially these days, 13% of survey respondents said they were 'finding it very difficult', and a further 19% were 'finding it quite difficult'. This is significantly higher than in the general population at 2% and 4% respectively. Put another way, only 4% of kinship carers who responded to our survey said they were 'living comfortably' compared to nearly one third (31%) of the general population.⁴¹

Kinship carers spoke at length about the significant financial sacrifices they'd had to make in order to care for their kinship child (or children). Many felt upset or ashamed about not being able to fund children's hobbies and interests or take them for days out. As in previous surveys, kinship carers were clear about the extreme lengths they often went to in order to protect spending on their children.

"Myself and my husband not eating properly, and not replacing VERY worn clothing. It's embarrassing. I feel humiliated when I have to keep wearing the same 4 t-shirts in rotation. But my granddaughter's needs always come first. She will eat and her special needs must be met."

Grandparent with an informal arrangement

³⁷ Wijedasa (2017)

³⁸ Office for National Statistics (2023a)

³⁹ Kinship (2022a)

⁴⁰ Kinship (2022b)

⁴¹ Institute for Social and Economic Research (2022)

"Can't go on holiday, can't buy clothes for myself, don't go out for entertainment or meals, can't repair the house, just can't spend any money that isn't on her."

Family friend kinship carer with a child arrangements or residence order

More than 2 in 5 respondents (41%) said they felt they couldn't always meet their child's needs in their current financial situation, and a further 8% didn't know. This rose to nearly half (49%) for the cohort of kinship carers who were caring for their kinship child (or children) on their own, and fell to 35% for those caring alongside a partner or spouse.

"We have no money I can't take her on days out I feel very sad for her. I can't financially give her what she deserves. I asked the children services to help me with her uniform for high school. They sent me a link for second hand uniforms."

Grandparent with an informal arrangement

"With the continued cost of living crisis I fear I will not be able to continue to financially support my granddaughters needs."

Grandparent with an informal arrangement

Some kinship families are at breaking point, and our evidence suggests the cost of living crisis is continuing to impact particularly hard on kinship families. 7% of respondents said they were behind on their rent or mortgage payments. Again, this is higher than found in other cohorts found in recent ONS population surveys, including 4% for adults aged 30 to 69 and 3% for households with at least one adult and 1 or 2 children.⁴²

It was also particularly high for certain areas of the country where housing costs likely reflect a much greater proportion of overall household expenditure: nearly 1 in 5 respondents (18%) from Greater London said they were behind on rent or mortgage payments. As a result of being unable to maintain their rent or mortgage payments, more than 2 in 5 (42%) said they feared losing their home.

"Mortgage has gone up massively, along with everything else. My husband has struggled with his mental health and money (lack of) is the main trigger."

Great aunt and family and friends foster carer

"No financial support, getting into debt and cannot afford the rent any longer."

Grandparent with an informal arrangement

"I'm financially crippled and going to court next week for house possession proceedings due to rent arrears."

Grandparent with unknown arrangement

"With our mortgage increasing I may have to go back into full time employment otherwise we could lose our home... sadly I would not be able to look after my grandson."

Grandparent and special guardian

1 in 10 respondents (10%) said their household had run out of food and couldn't afford to buy more within the last two weeks. Some kinship families are in desperate need and are struggling to afford even the basics.

⁴² Office for National Statistics (2023e)

1 in 10

kinship carers said their household had run out of food and couldn't afford to buy more within the last two weeks

Once again, this illustrates a higher level of financial insecurity than other cohorts; the comparable figure for a representative sample of the general population asked across February to May 2023 was 5%, or 8% when comparing to households with at least one adult and 1 or 2 children.

"Gave up the car as living on state pension now and really struggling. Had to ask 95 year old father for help just for food some weeks this summer."

Grandparent with a child arrangements or residence order

"Cost of living is so high. Bills and food is ridiculously priced. This carry on [sic] I am worried I will lose my grandson through lack of money to survive."

Grandparent and special guardian

"8 weeks [wait for Universal Credit] and it was far too long - had to get referred to a food bank by social worker twice."

Grandparent with a child arrangements or residence order

Local authority support

Previous Kinship surveys and other research has evidenced the lack of clear and accessible advice, information and support for kinship families from most local authorities. Across different kinship family arrangements and at different points in their journey, very few kinship carers tell us they have felt fully informed and supported in navigating their new lives and the often complex and unfamiliar policies and processes which they struggle to understand. Given that kinship care arrangements often begin in crisis with little to no notice for the carer, the lack of advice and support can make a very challenging situation even more difficult.

Unfortunately, this doesn't appear to be improving. In 2019, 84% of kinship carers who responded to our annual survey said they didn't receive the information they needed when the child moved in.⁴³ 80% said they did not receive sufficient information and advice in 2020.⁴⁴ Last year, only 3 in 10 kinship carers (29%) told us they had received *any* information about being a kinship carer from the local authority before or shortly after their child moved in.⁴⁵

In our 2023 annual survey, we wanted to explore further kinship carers' overall ratings of the performance of their local authority in supporting and providing information to them and their family, and understand how trust impacted on which organisations and networks kinship carers might turn to for support in times of need.

Quality of support

1 in every 5 survey respondents (20%) said they had never received any local authority support. Whilst it may be appropriate and preferable for some families not to receive what they might see as ongoing formalised support from the local authority, this represents a substantial proportion of families who have never accessed support which may have supported or could support their family arrangement. In the UK Government's response to the *Stable Homes, Built on Love* consultation for England, it noted that over a quarter of respondents said their local authority provided no support for kinship carers, prompting "concerns that kinship carers are left to navigate the process of becoming a kinship carer, and provide a loving stable home, without help from their local authority".⁴⁶

25%

of kinship carers rated the quality of local authority support their family had received as very poor

However, even for those who had received local authority support, a quarter (25%) of respondents rated the support their kinship family had received as 'very poor' and a further 19% as 'poor'. Only 3% said the support they received had been 'excellent'. As some comparison, over half (53%) of foster carers in 2021 rated the support received from their fostering service in general as being excellent or good and 14% as poor or very poor.⁴⁷ Clearly, even where it is being delivered, local authority support around kinship care is not typically experienced positively by many families.

"Lack of finances & lack of adequate support from the LA, they hinder progress rather than enhance it."

Grandparent and family and friends foster carer

⁴³ Grandparents Plus (2019)

⁴⁴ Grandparents Plus (2020)

⁴⁵ Kinship (2022a)

⁴⁶ Department for Education (2023b)

⁴⁷ The Fostering Network (2021)

"My youngest who is nearly 3 has complex needs and is disabled. His sister who is 6 is being assessed for ADHD and FAS. I physically and mentally felt I wasn't coping and was referred by the school to social services. I begged and pleaded for help but they said it was my choice to become a special guardian! I was seriously thinking of walking away."

Grandparent and special guardian

"Local authority support is totally non existent, you have to fight them every inch of the way its [sic] disgraceful."

Step grandparent and special guardian

One third (33%) of respondents said they did not currently live in the same local authority as where their kinship child (or children) were living before coming into their care. Of this group, 57% said they had experienced challenges accessing support for their kinship family as a result. We plan for future Kinship surveys to explore this in more detail to ensure that kinship families who move aren't unfairly penalised and can access appropriate support wherever they are.

"[We've had] delays in therapeutic support being offered due to living in a different authority to where children were living prior to coming to live with us."

Aunt and family and friends foster carer

Quality of information

Even more starkly, over one third (35%) of respondents to our survey rated the information about kinship care provided by the local authority as 'very poor' and a further 20% as 'poor'. Only 2% said this was excellent.

35%

of kinship carers rated the information about kinship care provided by their local authority as very poor

Despite it having been a requirement for local authorities to publish, regularly update and promote widely a 'family and friends care policy' setting out their approach towards promoting and supporting the needs of children living with kinship carers⁴⁸, only 7% of survey respondents from England had ever seen their local authority's policy. Nearly 6 in 10 (58%) said they hadn't seen this, and a further 3 in 10 (29%) said they didn't know this existed.

"Our arrangement has just ended & we could not find out any information of entitlement from anywhere before this happened. It has been very stressful & had little help. Our SGO support stopped overnight. Yet we only received it for 5 of the 15 yrs we were SGO. Their [sic] was no sick pay or redundancy. No help in changing benefits [sic] & NO INFO available!"

Grandparent and special guardian

"[There should be] a standardised information session so that all kinship carers would know their own legal rights and responsibilities and also know the statutory provision that their Local Authority is obliged to offer. This would end the 'postcode lottery' that exists at the moment."

Grandparent and special guardian

⁴⁸ Department for Education (2011)

The forthcoming national kinship care strategy in England must balance the need to deliver significant, long-term investment and legislative change to create a comprehensive system of support, with the opportunity to introduce immediate 'quick wins' that can improve the lives of kinship families in the interim. Supporting and challenging local authorities to improve the visibility and accessibility of information for kinship carers is a clear example of the latter.

Trust

In the context of poor local authority support, access to independent guidance and support for many kinship carers can be crucial. Evaluations of our Kinship Connected programme have highlighted how carers report high levels of trust in the relationship with their project worker, which in turn helped to repair and facilitate improved relationships with others – including social workers and the local authority.⁴⁹

→ [Learn more about Kinship Connected](#)

In our survey, just under half (49%) of respondents said they did not trust at all their local authority to support them and their kinship family; only 3% said they completely trusted them.

49%

of kinship carers did not trust their local authority at all

As outlined by Professor Joan Hunt in her exploration of kinship care social work practice, "skill and time are needed to establish a relationship of mutual trust, explore complex family history and dynamics and take the prospective carer on the 'reflective journey' which will often be required"⁵⁰; this lack of trust can significantly impact on kinship families' experiences and ultimately with their likelihood of receiving the support they might need.⁵¹ Mistrust was also clear from kinship carers as well as their children.

→ [Read Practising in kinship care: The perspectives of specialist social workers](#)

"I don't trust the child's social worker and won't be pushed into anything by her."

Aunt and family and friends foster carer

"Both children have a very negative view on people such as social workers as they had double figure numbers of them while just with me. Social workers that approached the children with different views and attitudes and never stayed in that position long enough to build a trustful relationship. The last social worker built a better relationship up with them but the mistrust stayed."

Aunt and special guardian

"There needs to be better training & time for social workers and honesty from them. More available support and truthfulness for prospective Special Guardians."

Grandparent and special guardian

When asked who they would turn to for support to help them and their kinship family, nearly three quarters (73%) of respondents said friends and family. Other common options included charities supporting kinship families (39%), educational settings such as schools (38%), and peer support groups of other kinship carers (28%). Only a quarter (25%) of respondents said they would turn to

⁴⁹ Starks & Whitley (2020)

⁵⁰ Hunt (2021)

⁵¹ Kinship (2023b)

the local authority despite the clear statutory and other duties held and delivered by children's services.

Over half (55%) of respondents said they would be more likely to access a local support service for their kinship family if this was operated by an independent organisation (e.g. a charity or community group) compared to only 15% who chose the local authority. However, nearly a quarter (24%) said they didn't know, suggesting that kinship carers' receptiveness to offers of support are typically complex and understandably situational and relational.

Keeping families together

We're concerned that kinship carers are being pushed to the brink. Only 13% of respondents said they were 'mostly doing well' when asked to describe their family's status during 2023. The majority (60%) said they were 'facing some challenges but managing'. Over a quarter (26%) said they were 'facing severe challenges' or 'at crisis point'.

Although not directly comparable, a recent survey of adoptive parents found that, whilst they were slightly more likely to say they were 'facing severe challenges or at crisis point' at 31%, they were much more likely than kinship carers to be 'mostly doing well' (25%).⁵²

Kinship's own advice service has seen the level of need and complexity of cases increasing over the last year as inflationary pressures, rising child poverty and the continued crisis in children and adolescent mental health support in particular takes its cumulative toll on kinship families' ability to cope. We are deeply concerned that the urgent need for change is not being recognised sufficiently by Government and local authorities given the devastating consequences which kinship family breakdown would have for children's experiences and outcomes, and for the state.

Risk of family breakdown

Although nearly all kinship carers consider their arrangement to be long term or permanent – 95% in last year's survey⁵³ – and evidence shows that kinship arrangements often have low rates of disruption⁵⁴ and deliver greater stability and permanence for children compared to other care options⁵⁵, the increasing financial pressures on kinship families and lack of support for carers and their children risks some kinship arrangements failing.

The likely alternative for the vast majority of children in kinship care would be local authority care. For nearly 9 in 10 (88%) children represented in this year's survey, respondents said they would have remained in or gone into local authority care had they not stepped up to look after them and a further 7% said they didn't know. For those who didn't think they would have, this was typically because they expected another family member would have become their kinship carer instead.

12%

of kinship carers were concerned they may have to stop caring for their kinship child

More than 19,000

children are at risk of entering local authority care as a result

12% of kinship carers who responded to our survey told us they were concerned they may have to stop caring for their kinship child (or children) in the next year if their situation did not improve. A further 11% said they didn't know.

"We are burnt out but feel that we could have carried on with better support or could have shared care with their mother if there had been support to explore this. That would be better for the children but is looking unlikely. We are very broken and despairing about the situation."

Grandparent with child arrangements or residence order

Again, these worries were more common for kinship carers going it alone (14%) than for those carers with a partner or spouse to support (10%). Responding 'yes' to was also strongly correlated

⁵² Adoption UK (2023)

⁵³ Kinship (2022a)

⁵⁴ What Works for Children's Social Care (2023)

⁵⁵ Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2020)

with those experiencing significant financial insecurity: a quarter (25%) of those who had run out of food in the last two weeks and were unable to afford more said they were concerned about their ability to continue caring for their kinship child (or children). Health of the carer also appeared to be a significant influencing factor: one fifth (20%) of those who reported their health to be 'very bad' or 'bad' feared having to give up compared to only 8% of those with 'very good' or 'good' health.

"I had to give up work to care for [child's name]. Initially we was given the pittance of SGO allowance but now that has stopped. I am trying to re-claim however this has taken forever. That's 500 a month we are down and now our landlord has upped our rent another 100 a month. I am now on PIP my husband has heart issues and arthritis he is working but it is crippling him. I don't know how much longer we can go on."

Grandparent and special guardian

Of those who felt they may have to give up caring for their child in the next year, 35% of accompanying responses explicitly mentioned financial concerns.

"Due to rising costs and limited support financially it may come down to have [sic] the children removed to local authority care. I have recently been told that because the children did not go into LA at all then we are not eligible for a lot of the financial help. If the children were in foster care then those carers would be being paid a fair wage, Just because they are related why should families be penalised?"

Aunt and special guardian

"My wife has given up work to focus on meeting the care needs of our SGO. She was the diagnosed with stage 3 heart failure in December 2022 so she now cannot meet their needs. We have had to put them into breakfast clubs, after school clubs and holiday play schemes. These have taken the financial burden to another level and whilst I receive a good wage, the cost of living and additional childcare cost has pushed us to breaking point. There are no benefits we can claim for them. My wife has a claim for PIP that is awaiting award."

Uncle and special guardian

"The children's allowance is currently up for a review and it really helps us. If we lose that to support the children, we have said we might have to give the children up."

Aunt and special guardian

"If financial help is stopped, we simply won't be able to afford to have the children... the financial support should be mandatory until the child finishes education. It should NOT be means tested either, this should be irrelevant, we have worked hard all our lives, why should we find ourselves living in poverty. What good is that for the children?"

Step grandparent and special guardian

39% mentioned challenges with (often violent) behaviour and difficulty accessing support for their kinship children's mental health and special educational needs. In last year's annual survey report, over half of carers said their child had behaviours which were difficult to manage and a quarter had experienced child-on-carer violence in the last year.⁵⁶ Many spoke of their family's need for respite care to give both them and their kinship child (or children) a break.

"Lack of a support network as extended family not interested in helping. Overwhelmed dealing with SEMH [social, emotional and mental health] issues of child. Woeful lack of

⁵⁶ Kinship (2022a)

respite care options and us in burnout mode. We need family counselling, financial support and respite so we can resource ourselves somehow."

Grandparent and special guardian

"Child's behaviour is causing relationship problems within both the immediate and wider family group. This is also directly impacting on both my and my wife's health. Need to be able to obtain respite care to enable breaks from caring and emotional support for both the child and immediate family members."

Step grandparent and special guardian

"I had 2 grandchildren in my care, but due to behavioural difficulties I had to revoke my order for one of my granddaughters. This has left a huge impact on our lives. More so for my granddaughter. All because social services failed us as a family."

Grandparent and special guardian

Other respondents spoke about housing pressures and overcrowding, as well as their own health and ability to physically continue caring for children at an older age.

"We live in our own 2 bedroom property with 5 people my husband and me sleep in the living room and my grandchildren boy 10 and girl 4 share a room. We live on top of each other."

Grandparent and special guardian

"In the past 2 ½ years my physical health has deteriorated considerably. My husband is also finding it harder and without him I would be unable to cope physically without extra help."

Grandparent and special guardian

"I have a very small 2 bedrooled house. My adult son has one room. My 18 year old special needs granddaughter has the other. My next two granddaughters have beds in my lounge and I have to sleep in a chair also in lounge. We are so over crowded."

Grandparent currently being assessed as a family and friends foster carer

This level of uncertainty risks more than 19,000 children across England and Wales who are currently living within their family networks instead entering the already overstretched care system. This avoidable tragedy would lead to significant detrimental impacts for children, families and the public purse. Evidence suggests that educational, health and employment outcomes for children who have grown up in kinship care are often better than for those looked after by unrelated carers in foster or residential care.⁵⁷ Kinship's own commissioned research has found that, for every 1000 children raised in kinship families rather than in local authority care, the state saves £40 million and increases the lifetime earnings of those children by £20 million.⁵⁸

Sibling separation

Maintaining relationships with siblings can be a significant protective factor for children growing up in kinship care.⁵⁹ The UK Government's recent response to its *Stable Homes* strategy consultation in England also highlights the views of children and young people who fed into the consultation who were particularly concerned about sibling separation and wanted the maintenance of these relationships to be prioritised.

⁵⁷ Wellard et al (2017), Sebba et al (2015), Sacker et al (2021)

⁵⁸ Nicol Economics (2020)

⁵⁹ Wellard et al (2017)

Despite kinship care options offering additional opportunities to ensure brothers and sisters can be cared for together within their family network, nearly 1 in 5 respondents (18%) told us they had at some point been unable to take on the care of a brother or sister to a kinship child already in their care.

Nearly 1 in 5

kinship carers were unable to take on the care of a brother or sister to a kinship child already in their care

The most commonly given reasons for this included a lack of space at home (49%), the carer's ability to manage the child's social, emotional or mental health difficulties (46%), concerns about their own health and wellbeing as a carer (45%), and financial worries (44%). Other reasons given included the local authority refusing to support, a lack of paid leave from employment, age of the child or carer, and concerns around difficult family dynamics and ongoing contact.

"Asked to take newborn sibling but I was working full time and there is no maternity, or equivalent leave for SGO."

Aunt and special guardian

"At the point we were asked we were facing severe challenges with existing child, no support offered to help her so we could take on her brother. It was clear that if we didn't jump at the chance (rather than ask for support) they were moving straight onto adoption which is what has happened. Existing child has not forgiven us, me particularly."

Step grandparent and special guardian

"Concern that, as we grow older, we may not have the energy to give two children a sufficiently stimulating life - especially given the demands of the health issues facing our first kinship child."

Grandparent and special guardian

Assuming the pattern of responses in our survey held for the whole cohort, as 20,000 children may have entered the care system unnecessarily over the last decade. Many of the reasons expressed by kinship carers for being unable to take on additional children could be solved or tackled through appropriate support; it is completely unacceptable that so many children have been denied the opportunity to live alongside their brother(s) or sister(s) in kinship care.

Case studies

Flora

Flora, 72, lives in Sunderland.

"I currently care for two granddaughters under special guardianship, but at various points over the past 12 years, I have had four grandchildren in my care.

At first, it was a baby, a 10 year-old and an 11-year-old. Social services dumped them on me with no money whatsoever to help care for them. I think they play on your emotions because they know they're your grandchildren and you'd do anything for them, so they tell you to get an SGO so they don't have to support the kids anymore. I'm on my own, so I had to quit my job to look after them.

We got nothing from the council. Between my pension, family allowance and tax credit, we had £70 each a week to live on. It all went on the bills and kids. I was basically just told over and over again 'you'll just have to manage'. My savings went on school uniforms, their haircuts...because you want them decent for school.

"I've had nightmares about it – I'm crying just thinking about it – I had a nightmare they came and took the kids away. It's unimaginable – I wouldn't have been able to bear it."

Then their mum had a fourth baby and social services gave me one day to decide whether to let her be adopted or to take her in that day. I had to rush out and buy a cot that afternoon. So then I had one bedroom with a double bed, a single bed and a cot in it, and another bedroom with me and one child in it. A social worker said to me "well don't bring them back in a year's time, because we won't want them".

One of my granddaughters has had a very serious kidney problem since birth, so I have to take her to the hospital all the time. That's a big petrol cost, and it meant that when my car broke, there was no choice but to get it fixed, because I have to be able to get her to the hospital.

I've had to take equity out on my house. I had a broken car, and repairs needed to be done to the house. The boiler went. What could I do? I had to feed them. My roof got blown off in a storm and my friends had to gather together and pay for my roof.

These children have suffered. We've never been on a holiday. Summer holiday time: the other children are going to Spain, to Cornwall, and where we going? Nowhere. I can't take them to the cinema. At the weekend we'll go for a walk. "Nana, I don't want to go for a walk again." They feel like they're second best.

Susie loves gymnastics and dancing - that's her dream, so how can I refuse her that? So I've found her a club, but the classes are £30 a month, then there's ballet shoes, tap shoes... So I've used the equity release money. Some of the things her teacher has asked her to get, I've had to say no to. She's such a good girl and that's what she lives for. She doesn't understand why she can't have things – that I'm a pensioner and I'm on my own with them.

I've scrimped and saved, I've emptied savings, I've got myself into debt for them. You name it, I've done it. Because I won't allow them not to be well fed and well looked after. I won't lose them. But there's no help from anywhere.

Honestly, it would have broken my heart if they'd gone into the care system. I've had nightmares about it – I'm crying just thinking about it – I had a nightmare they came and took the kids away. It's unimaginable – I wouldn't have been able to bear it."

Vera

Vera, 66, lives in South Yorkshire with her husband. Together, they have been raising their granddaughter, now 11, for the past five years after her parents weren't able to look after her.

"My state pension age has just kicked in, and so my local authority has said I no longer qualify for a financial allowance to support our granddaughter. She's just started secondary school and they've just pulled the plug on all financial help.

When we took her in, I had to quit my job because it wasn't the sort of job you could do part-time. My husband had already taken early retirement due to health issues, and we don't fit the criteria for universal credit or pension support, so things were very tight already, and the amount they were giving us wasn't enough to care for her anyway – we were using whatever we had.

The money only stopped at the end of August, so we haven't felt the full impact of it yet but I am very worried about how we're going to pay for everything she needs. I don't want her to go without activities or opportunities – we love her and she has already been through so much.

"I don't know what we'll do if they don't listen to us and restart the financial support."

The school sent home a letter about a year trip to Wimbledon – she won't be able to go to that. Other children are learning to play an instrument, but that's £27 every half term. We can't even get free school dinners for her, so I've had to tell her to make sure she chooses the meal deal every day because in the first week she was choosing what she felt like eating and it was about £5 a day, and then she gets home and she needs an evening meal. She's quite good, she understands. She's getting older and they'll be sanitary protection to add to the shopping list soon – that's very expensive.

We feel cheated to be honest. We've been working since we were 15. We worked hard all our lives and we did the best thing for our granddaughter and took her in, even though it meant we had to put our retirement plans on hold and adapt to a new life, but now we're penalised even more for having a state pension because two pensions mean we're classified as a joint income family now. If she was in the care system, it would cost the local authority an awful lot more money.

We just want to give her the best start to life. She's got childhood trauma, so she's seen a lot of things she shouldn't have seen. She was having therapy but again, they stopped it 16 months ago and I have been fighting to get them to restart it as she so clearly needs mental health and educational help.

I don't know what we'll do if they don't listen to us and restart the financial support. It shouldn't be different amounts depending on where you live and how your council deal with you. I think all kinship carers should have a non-means tested financial allowance so local authorities can't deny you what the child needs because of pensions and savings that were supposed to see you through your old age."

Philippa

Philippa, 58, lives in London.

"Three years ago my husband and I took in his two baby grandchildren when the youngest was just four months old, after a child protection order meant they had to leave their parent's home.

It was during lockdown, and social services just dumped the children and ran. Just the children and a few clothes and toys. No support, no advice. They didn't even leave us a number to call if we had problems. We had to go out and buy a double pram and everything else they needed.

I was a medical secretary and we had a small savings pot, which we couldn't access because of the way it was set up, but that tiny pot of savings disqualified us from claiming any sort of benefits. So all we could do was both change our hours to work part-time, and whichever of us isn't working is looking after the two young children. We're like ships that pass in the night – our marriage is non-existent now.

"On a regular basis we say, 'how much longer can we keep this up?'"

We're absolutely broke. We've had times when we've had to borrow from my husband's mum just to buy the week's shopping. The rented house we're living in is in a terrible state of disrepair, but we can't afford to fix it. We're very cramped. It's a two-bedroom house, but the kids can't share a room or they don't sleep, so my husband sleeps on the sofa and one of the kids is in with me.

A charity donated some toys for the kids and we have to rely on handouts for the kids' clothes and shoes. We wanted to take them to the zoo during the holidays but we looked at the prices and we just can't do it, so we went to the seaside instead, but we were terrified we didn't really have the money for the petrol.

On a regular basis we say, 'how much longer can we keep this up?'. I know we'd never really give them up because we love them so much and they love us. But of course we have talked about it, because we are constantly at breaking point. It's very frustrating. You think – is it ever going to improve? You feel like you're going round in circles, trying to cope. Exhausted. Totally burnt out. You're very alone. It feels like no one cares.

Something has got to give, as the children are the ones who suffer ultimately if kinship carers can't cope."

Gemma

Gemma, 52, lives in Worcester.

"I was a full-time pub manager when, seven months ago, social services removed my granddaughter from her parents and asked me to take her in. I had to quit a job I loved in order to drive her back and forth from her school, which is in a different town, and do all the social worker visits, and also because she couldn't be left alone in the house throughout the summer holidays.

The council said she shouldn't move school because she's already lost everything else and it would be terrible for her mental health, but the cost of the petrol, for a 10 mile round trip, twice a day, is killing us.

We've had absolutely no support from anywhere. When I asked the local authority what support there was to help provide for her, I was told that I'm not entitled to anything because as soon as I took her in, it became a 'family arrangement' so my granddaughter isn't technically a 'looked-after child' that the council have to support. I've written letters complaining about our treatment and asking for more help, but they haven't replied.

We live day-to-day and it's very, very hard. I'm on universal credit. We are behind on rent. We regularly run out of food. I cancelled my pet insurance.

"I have thought about whether I can go on like this, or whether I should hand her back to social services. It makes me feel awful to even consider it, because she's my granddaughter, but what if I can't give her what she needs?"

Both my council and the council that put the child protection order on her refused to give us free school meals or a free bus ride to school because they both said it should be the other one's responsibility. I have only got her free school meals now by begging my MP to intervene.

The local authority wouldn't even give me £50 for school uniform. I had to go to the pawn shop and sell all my jewellery. My granddaughter is 11 years old – she sees her friends doing sports and activities or going on holidays, and she's just stuck in the house. During the summer holidays she got really depressed, and I was heartbroken for her, because I couldn't take her on a single day trip. All I could do was take her to the park. She's almost 12... the park isn't really for her age group. It's all so hard on her mental health. I wish she had access to after-school activities like a foster child would have, so she had something to look forward to each week.

I'm already really worried about Christmas. She's going to have nothing really. I have thought about whether I can go on like this, or whether I should hand her back to social services. It makes me feel awful to even consider it, because she's my granddaughter, but what if I can't give her what she needs?

The local authority have placed her with me, in my care – how can it be that she's still not classed as a looked after child? Even £50 a week from them would make such a difference in my household. I hear foster carers get about £200... what we'd give for an extra £200. What a difference that could make to a child like my granddaughter."

Nesta

Nesta, 40, lives in London.

"I've always worked with children, currently within the NHS, so when both my cousin and my next-door neighbour separately had their children taken away from them by social services, they asked if I would take them in. If I can give a child a good home, then I'm going to do that – whatever the cost to me. So, three years ago, I took in an 8-month-old baby cousin and a 2 year-old child of a friend – they're now 4 and 5 years old – and I have SGOs to care for them, alongside my own 8-year-old son.

I receive £163 per week, per child. It's means-tested so I receive less because I work really hard, full-time to provide for them all. The local authority give you this small amount of money so you can just about survive. It seems to me that they don't want those children to thrive, or have a good life. They don't think about what citizens these children are going to grow up into. My daughter's a paramedic, and people say 'you did a good job there' and I think yes, because I put a lot into her, and I'd love to do the same for these children.

If it was just me and my own son, I would be able to do fun activities every weekend and go on the occasional holiday, but I can't afford to do that with all of them. Every cost triples. When I asked the local authority for holiday money, they said 'no we don't do that, you have to use the money you already get'. Which is fine, except how are you supposed to feed them, clothe them, keep a roof over their head and do activities or take them on a holiday on that amount a week?

"You're just taking them out of poverty to put them back in poverty."

We're in a two-bedroom, so we're sharing rooms. The local authority promised me they'd sort out the housing – but the children shouldn't be sharing rooms when they're not siblings or the same gender. I've been waiting about three years. Everyone's in a bunk bed. I share with the girls on the bottom and the boy is on the top. The front room is the only space that they can play. So I don't want to make that my bedroom or they'll have no place to play.

You're just taking them out of poverty to put them back in poverty. This is why people return children to social services – because the support isn't there and fighting them on everything takes a lot of time and energy. But I will keep fighting because I am all those kids have and this is the only life they're going to get.

I wish the children could have a space for themselves with a nice little bedroom, a garden where they can play, a bike. I'd love them to have a bike. To go on holiday, or have trips to the farm or a theme park. I've taken them to the museum before, because it's free and they love that. I want them to grow up and look back and say 'I had a good childhood'. They can't have sleepovers because there's no room. I want them to have the kind of life that my daughter had.

It would break my heart to give them back to social services. I would find that very hard. It would break me. I would feel I've failed them."

Recommendations

Kinship's [#ValueOurLove campaign](#) is continuing to push Governments, local authorities and other decision makers to equalise support between kinship families and foster and adoptive families across England and Wales. In particular, the forthcoming national kinship care strategy in England offers a significant opportunity to consider the recommendations below to transform support for kinship carers and their children. The UK Government must use this opportunity to deliver lasting change for kinship families who have waited too long already for support.

The recommendations below follow specifically from the key findings included in this report. For more information on Kinship's other policy positions and recommendations, please visit the links below.

- [Learn about our work to change the system](#)
- [Visit our kinship care policy tracker](#)

Financial support

All kinship carers should receive the financial support they need, when they need it.

Financial allowances

The UK and Welsh Governments should equalise financial allowances between foster carers and kinship carers, ensuring kinship families receive a non-means tested allowance equivalent to the national minimum fostering allowance. Local authorities should receive an appropriate increase in funding to deliver this entitlement, ending the current unacceptable variation and poor practice in financial support for kinship families.

- [Read our policy briefing on financial allowances for kinship carers](#)

All local authorities should have an up to date, accessible and visible policy on the provision of financial support for kinship carers. They should emulate the leading practice of local authorities who already deliver a non-means tested allowance to kinship carers as soon as possible, and ensure financial issues are never the reason for an arrangement ceasing or prevent one from starting.

- [Read *Developing Good Practice in Financially Supporting Special Guardians: a guide for local authorities*](#)

In England, testing of family network support packages through ongoing Pathfinder and pilot activity must enable local authorities to fully deliver flexible and intensive funding tailored to the individual needs of families in order to properly evidence how this early support can make a difference.

Kinship care leave

The UK Government should also introduce a statutory right to kinship care leave and pay, on a par with that given to adoptive parents, preventing kinship carers from having to give up work unnecessarily when they step up to take on the care of a child and providing financial security at a crucial time. Employers should ensure their family friendly policies actively include kinship carers, and engage with Kinship's *Kinship Friendly Employers* scheme when it launches later this year.

- [Read *Forced Out: delivering equality for kinship carers in the workplace*](#)

Support for kinship families

Advice and information

All kinship carers should be offered free and independent advice and information, including legal advice facilitated by extended eligibility to legal aid, from the moment they are considering becoming kinship carers and throughout their journey. Local authorities should ensure they have clear and accessible information provided to all types of kinship carers, and signpost to other support services and organisations, including [Kinship](#) and [Kinship Compass](#) – our independent advice, information and support hub.

→ [Visit Kinship Compass](#)

Training and support for kinship carers

Local authorities should ensure the provision suitable local training and support services, including peer support, for all kinship carers. Professionals supporting kinship families should pay particular attention to those caring for children on their own without support, those with other caring responsibilities and those with additional health problems, signposting to other local authority and wider support services.

Emotional and therapeutic support

All children in kinship care should have access to appropriate emotional and therapeutic support given their experiences of trauma, separation and loss. The UK and Welsh Governments should consider developing a bespoke version of the Adoption Support Fund tailored to the unique needs and strengths of kinship families, and local authorities should support families to access other therapeutic services to support children and carers with issues around social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Improving the system

Local authority policy and practice

To improve the quality and delivery of support tailored to the needs and strengths of kinship families, and to build understanding and trust, local authorities should establish specialist kinship teams with the breadth of skills necessary to deliver high-quality social work support where these do not exist already. Ofsted and Care Inspectorate Wales should enhance the attention paid to kinship care practice within their inspections and undertake thematic reviews and inspector training to support this work.

→ [Read *Practising in kinship care: The perspectives of specialist social workers*](#)

A future fit for kinship care

The UK Government should ensure the forthcoming kinship care strategy for England recognises the unique nature of kinship care and delivers a comprehensive and holistic approach to reforming support for all types of kinship family, accompanied by updated statutory guidance. Welsh Government should too explore how its ongoing children's social care reform programme can consider support for kinship families regardless of arrangement. This activity should include a focus on the equalities impact of potential reforms.

Investment in children's social care

The UK Government must not delay significant additional investment in children's social care at the next fiscal opportunities – particularly within the forthcoming Autumn Statement and the next Spending Review. Local authorities cannot be expected to radically recalibrate services, practice

and culture to better prioritise and support kinship families without greater financial and workforce stability.

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