



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

Breaking Point: **kinship carers in crisis**

Spotlight on Wales

October 2023

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Foreword

In its 2021 manifesto, Welsh Labour made a welcome commitment to “radical reform” of children’s social care in Wales.¹ Since the election, First Minister Mark Drakeford and Deputy Social Services Minister Julie Morgan have demonstrated a personal commitment to securing reform of the system.²

On kinship care, just last month Julie Morgan said “the Government is committed to seeing how kinship arrangements can be improved in Wales, particularly as the numbers in care who are being placed in kinship care are growing. We are committed to doing that, irrespective of the legal status of the arrangement.”³

Given this clear commitment, the publication of this ‘Spotlight on Wales’ to accompany our Breaking Point report, drawing on evidence from our 2023 annual survey of kinship carers, is very timely. It both sets out the challenges kinship carers in Wales face today and highlights the solutions and opportunities for reform.

At Kinship, we have been outlining for years how kinship care both delivers better outcomes and experiences for children by keeping them within their loving families, while also providing good value for the public purse.

However, despite caring for children with very similar needs and experiences to those in care or who are adopted, kinship carers typically receive far less practical, emotional and financial support than foster carers or adopters, and their children are often ineligible for statutory support with their education and health needs.

Financial pressures on kinship carers are significant – taking on the care of an additional child or children costs money. There is a higher rate of kinship care in more deprived areas, indicating that many kinship carers may already be on lower incomes. Our most recent evidence shows the rising cost of living combined with a lack of financial support means that kinship carers are experiencing financial hardship and in some cases being pushed into poverty.

As the Welsh Government finalises its Child Poverty Strategy and takes forward its plans on “radical reform” of children’s social care, it has the opportunity to address these challenges. It must therefore make sure that kinship care is at the heart of any changes. We know that prioritising support for kinship carers will mean improved outcomes for the nearly 10,000 children living in kinship care in Wales, and support Welsh Government targets on reducing the number of children going into care and on tackling child poverty.

Dr Lucy Peake, Chief Executive
October 2023

¹ Welsh Labour (2021)

² For example, the First Minister [recently signed a joint declaration with care-experienced children](#), outlining a vision for radical reform of children’s social care in Wales.

³ See Senedd Record for [Children, Young People and Education Committee session on 14/09/2023](#).

Introduction

Kinship has conducted an annual survey of kinship carers in England and Wales for more than a decade. 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.

There were 1,657 responses to this year's 2023 annual survey. Of these, 96 respondents or 6% of the overall cohort were in Wales. *Breaking Point: Spotlight on Wales* looks at the responses from our Welsh respondents in more detail and explores the changes needed to make sure that Welsh kinship carers and their children get the support they need and deserve.

To find out more, you can read the full report – [Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis](#) – which outlines the key findings from the entire survey cohort across England and Wales, and makes a series of recommendations to governments, local authorities and other partners.

→ [Read Breaking Point's key findings and recommendations](#)

Kinship households in Wales: our 2023 annual survey cohort

Demographics

Our Welsh respondents share a similar demographic background to the main survey cohort. They were slightly younger than the overall cohort; the median age was 50-54 rather than 55-59, and just 18% were aged over 60 compared to 44% of the overall cohort.

As with the overall cohort, respondents were also predominantly female, although a greater proportion of Welsh respondents were men (18%) compared to the overall survey cohort (11%). Similar to the overall cohort, respondents were 94% white but the ethnic diversity in kinship children was greater than for their kinship carers, particularly for children with a Mixed Heritage background.

Grandparents were the most common of kinship carers amongst our Welsh respondents, making up 73% of the cohort. There was also a greater number of children cared for by step grandparents in Wales (9% compared to 6% in the overall cohort). Fewer kinship carers in Wales were caring for their kinship child (or children) alone – about a fifth compared to over a third across the whole survey cohort. The average number of children per kinship carer was similar to the overall cohort.

Kinship family structures

Estimates on the number of children in kinship care in Wales vary, although figures derived from the 2011 and 2021 Census suggests it could be between around 7,700⁴ and 9,500⁵.

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

The vast majority of kinship care arrangements are informal⁶, meaning that a family member or friend has stepped in to look after a child without intervention from social services or the courts. Other arrangements where a legal order is present are known as formalised arrangements.

→ [Learn more about the different types of kinship care](#)

Official statistics show that kinship foster care makes up a higher proportion of overall foster placements in Wales than in England; one third (32%) of foster care placements in Wales are friends and family foster care⁷ whereas 18% of fostering placements are with friends and family in England⁸. This may help explain why a higher proportion children being cared for by our Welsh respondents were in family and friends foster care compared to the overall cohort (25% versus

⁴ Wijedasa (2015)

⁵ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023a)

⁶ Farmer et al (2012)

⁷ Welsh Government (2023)

⁸ Department for Education (2023)

10%). Over one third (36%) were cared for under a special guardianship order and just under a quarter (23%) under a child arrangements or residence order.

It is notable that there were comments from family and friends foster carers setting out a desire to remain with this arrangement rather than move to special guardianship or other arrangement to ensure they would receive guaranteed financial and other support.

"So we can have support from Social services for his behaviour, life story work, play therapy ... as well as financial support via his allowance."

Step grandparent and kinship foster carer

"As we need help with parent contact and speech therapy and general help."

Cousin and kinship foster carer

"Lack of financial support if moved to SGO."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

This demonstrates how the lack of support for kinship carers who are special guardians or want to move to another legal order is creating perverse incentives for people to stay as foster carers. This is despite the fact that, for many, the greater permanence and security provided for the child as well as the parental responsibility that a different legal order would provide could be in the family's best interests. Special guardians in our survey commonly used the words 'safe' and 'secure' to describe why their arrangement worked for them.

Key findings

Kinship carers' wellbeing

The self-reported health of kinship carers who responded to our survey is significantly worse than for the general population in Wales. ONS analysis of responses from Census 2021 show that 47% of people in Wales report very good health.⁹ For Welsh kinship carers, this figure was just 5% - lower again than for the overall survey cohort (9%). 5% of Welsh respondents said their health was very bad, compared to just 1.6% of the general Welsh population.

Only 5%

of Welsh respondents said their health was very good, compared to 9% of our whole survey cohort and 47% of all adults in Wales

Existing evidence has revealed how kinship carers are far more likely to have a disability or chronic health condition than unrelated foster carers.¹⁰ Research also shows that caring for a child who has experienced trauma and loss takes its toll and can exacerbate existing health conditions or disabilities.¹¹ Where kinship carers aren't getting the right help for themselves or the children in their care, they describe the knock-on impacts for their own health.

"I am literally at my wits end ... [and] becoming ill with a heart problem"
Grandparent with an informal arrangement

"My husband has struggled with his mental health and money (lack of) is the main trigger."
Great aunt and kinship foster carer

Welsh respondents reported similar levels of loneliness and feelings regarding the importance of having relationships with other kinship carers to the overall survey cohort. Significant impacts on wellbeing were noted for those kinship carers have had to give up work or can no longer participate in social activities as a result of their new caring responsibilities.

"I had to give up work and that isolated me."
Grandparent with child arrangement order

The Welsh Government is due to publish a draft mental health strategy for public consultation by the end of 2023. As part of the consultation, Ministers should look at the specific needs of kinship carers and their families to make sure that the right support is available to them.

Finances

Taking on the responsibility to raise a child costs money. Kinship carers often step up to care unexpectedly after a crisis and so haven't planned for the longer-term additional expense

⁹ Office for National Statistics (2023b)

¹⁰ Farmer & Moyers (2008)

¹¹ Selwyn et al (2013), Wellard et al (2017)

associated with raising a child. In our survey, many kinship carers also described to us how they had to reduce their hours or give up work altogether to look after their kinship child.

"My income as a self-employed accountant has gone down to zero. My latest tax return shows a loss."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

"Had to give up work to care for my newborn granddaughter."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

These factors can compound kinship carers' often already vulnerable financial position. We know that kinship carers tend to live in areas of greater deprivation; analysis of 2011 Census found that, while an estimated one in 67 children in Wales were growing up in the care of relatives, this rose to one in 46 children living in the poorest 20% of areas.

The cost of living crisis is exacerbating the situation even further. Similar to the overall cohort when asked how they were managing financially these days, 14% said they were 'finding it very difficult' and 19% were 'finding it quite difficult'. Just 2% of our respondents in Wales said they were 'living comfortably'.

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

Grandparent with informal kinship arrangement

Kinship carers also described in their responses what they and their families were missing out on and the sacrifices they were making in order to make ends meet.

"No holidays or days out."

Grandparent with a child arrangements order

"Used up all savings for transport to school, & to pay for contact arrangements & afterschool & holiday activities."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

"Not eating myself."

Grandparent with a child arrangements order

"I have to continue working beyond retirement age and will have to continue as long as I am able."

Grandparent and special guardian

As a result of rising costs and financial pressures, as many as 4 in 10 kinship carers said that they didn't feel they could always meet their children's needs in their current financial situation. Some families are already at breaking point: 11% of Welsh respondents said that they had run out of food in the last two weeks and could not afford to buy more. Recent surveys of the general population from the Office for National Statistics show that this situation is the case for just 5% of the Welsh general population, highlighting the particularly precarious situation for kinship families.¹²

¹² Office for National Statistics (2023c)

11%

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

Family and friends (or kinship) foster carers, a small proportion of the overall cohort of kinship carers in Wales, are the only group guaranteed financial support. The Welsh Government is working to ensure parity for kinship foster carers with mainstream foster carers, which is very welcome. However, it should be noted that the difference in legal order between kinship foster carers and other types of kinship carers does not mean there will be any difference in their financial support needs.

In its draft Child Poverty Strategy, Welsh Government showed some recognition that the specific needs of kinship carers needed to be taken into account. Pre-consultation events had included kinship carers, and the draft strategy itself highlighted the importance of the Expert Group on Special Guardianship in ensuring improved and consistent support for Special Guardianship families. It also noted the review of the National Minimum Allowance for foster carers, which will include kinship foster carers.

Kinship responded to the consultation, calling for all kinship carers to be able to access financial support equivalent to that available for foster carers, regardless of the legal arrangement in which they are living. We also called on Welsh Government to ensure that eligibility for other financial support, like the 30 hours Childcare Offer and the School Essentials Grant, included all kinship carers.

→ [Read our full response to the consultation on the draft Child Poverty Strategy](#)

As part of our response, we also urged Welsh Government to support our calls in Westminster for the introduction of a new statutory right for kinship carers to kinship care leave and pay, on a par with that given to adoptive parents. This would help ensure that kinship carers could stop working temporarily to help the child coming into their home to settle and adapt, while also providing financial security and allowing them to return to their job at a later stage.

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

Local authority support

Our previous surveys and wider evidence has shown that clear and accessible advice, information and support is not forthcoming for most kinship care families from their local authority.

While our Welsh respondents seemed to have slightly more trust in their local authority than the overall cohort and more likely to turn to them when they needed help, they also rated the support and information available from them more negatively than the overall cohort. Over two thirds (67%) of respondents in Wales said the information provided to them on kinship care and their options was poor or very poor. This compared to just over half (55%) of respondents in the whole survey cohort.

Over two thirds (67%)

of Welsh respondents rated the information about kinship care provided by their local authority as poor or very poor, compared to just over half (55%) of the whole survey cohort

Commonly, kinship carers in Wales commented that they weren't aware of the different options to secure their family arrangement or that they didn't know they were able to change a legal arrangement once established.

"I have not been informed of any other type (of arrangement)."

Grandparent with child arrangements order

On support, a quarter (25%) of the overall survey cohort said the support they received was at least 'satisfactory' but only a fifth (20%) responded so in Wales. Welsh survey respondents described a need for support with parental contact, help to support their child with experiences of trauma and specialised therapy that wasn't available.

"We need very specialised therapy for the young person ... this is not available at this time. Budget restrictions means this is against the highly recommended support needed to help the young person find a future."

Great aunt and kinship foster carer

Keeping families together

The lack of financial, practical and emotional support for kinship carers in Wales is having a significant impact on ensuring the success and permanence of their kinship care arrangements.

Worryingly, 16% said they were concerned about continuing to care for their kinship child or children in the next year if their situation didn't improve. It should be noted that this compares to 12% of the overall survey cohort, suggesting that the lack of support might be having a greater impact in Wales.

16%

of Welsh respondents said they were concerned about continuing to care for their kinship children, compared to 12% of the whole survey cohort

A lack of financial support combined with a lack of practical support and challenges with getting the right help for their child's emotional and mental health needs has also meant that as many as 19% of kinship carers in Wales have found themselves unable to take on the care of a brother or sister to a child already in their care.

The most common reason for this was concern was around whether or not they would be able to support the child's emotional and mental health needs. This was followed by financial worries, lack of space and the kinship carer's own wellbeing. Concern around the child's emotional and mental health needs as the key reason not to take on a sibling was lower in the overall cohort, which could be a reflection that satisfaction with local authority support is lower in Wales.

Recommendations

When we asked kinship carers in Wales what their number one priority for change would be, 58% said reform of financial support and 14% said emotional and therapeutic support for children in kinship care. Access to legal aid and advice for kinship carers was selected by 6% of respondents, and another 6% said further workplace rights were the key priority for change.

The recommendations below outline the key things Welsh Government, local authorities and other partners should do to improve support for kinship carers and keep kinship families together. For other recommendations of relevance to UK Government and others, please see the full [Breaking Point report](#).

Financial support

Welsh Government is currently undertaking a review of the fees and financial allowances for foster carers. As part of that review, they have committed to ensuring that kinship foster carers will receive the same financial support as mainstream foster carers. We believe enhanced fees and payments also need to be made available to kinship foster carers.

In addition, Welsh Government should use the review to develop a scheme for securing financial assistance for *all* kinship carers on an equal footing to that available for foster carers.

Support for kinship families

Access to emotional and therapeutic support for kinship children was identified by Welsh respondents as the second biggest priority for change. The Welsh Government has initiatives already underway to help ensure that timely, integrated, person-centred therapeutic care is available for all looked after children in Wales. They are also developing a new mental health strategy which will go out to consultation by the end of 2023. It is vital that these initiatives and policies are inclusive of all kinship children regardless of their legal status, given that their needs and experiences are comparable to those in local authority care.

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, signpost to resources such as [Kinship Compass](#), and explore services such as [Kinship Connected](#) (operating in Rhondda Cynon Taf) which delivers intensive 1:1 support and peer support for kinship carers.

Foster Wales has developed its National Commitment that all local authorities in Wales have signed up to. This is an agreed package of training, support and rewards available to all foster carers in Wales. It should be ensured that kinship foster carers are made aware that they can make use of this package. Moreover, Welsh Government should work with Foster Wales to make sure that, as appropriate, additional or more targeted training is developed to meet the specific needs of kinship foster carers as well as identifying how this package of training and support could be adapted to help all kinship carers, regardless of legal status.

Improving the system

Local authorities should establish specialist kinship teams to improve practice in kinship care, supported by thematic reports and other activity from Care Inspectorate Wales to support local authority learning and improvement. Both UK and Welsh Governments should prioritise comprehensive and holistic approaches which recognise the unique nature of kinship care.

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