



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

Forgotten

Support for kinship children's
education and mental health

August 2024



“At times you can feel invisible because you’re a category that doesn’t get talked about as much. People don’t have the same understanding of kinship care as they do about going into care or being in foster care. People don’t really ask questions about it, people just assume it’s fine. And it means that you’re always having to fight against systems that don’t have the space for you.”

*Poppy, aged 23,
raised in kinship care*

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FOREWORD



For too long, children in kinship care have been ignored and overlooked.

In every school playground, there are children who are being raised by a relative or family friend in kinship care. More than 141,000 children across England and Wales benefit from the love and stability offered by grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, cousins, friends and others who have selflessly stepped up in an emergency, opening up their hearts and their homes without hesitation.

But more than two decades of Kinship's work to support and campaign alongside kinship carers has demonstrated the immense challenges which children in kinship care can go

on to experience. *Forgotten* reveals what we've seen and heard from thousands of families: there is an inexcusable absence of support for children in kinship care to help them learn well at school, heal from their traumatic experiences, and thrive into adulthood.

Despite the fact there are three times the number of children in kinship care than in unrelated foster care, successive governments have failed to adequately prioritise and support this group. The evidence we have suggests considerable similarities in experiences of abuse, neglect, separation and loss amongst kinship children to those in other forms of alternative care, yet they are unfairly denied the support which could help them achieve their goals in education, support their relationships, and enable them to grow up happy and healthy.

This is both a tragedy and an injustice.

The publication of the first ever National Kinship Care Strategy for England in December 2023 rightly celebrated the valuable role which kinship carers play, stepping up in service of their children and their communities, and committed to introducing long overdue financial and practical support for some groups of kinship carers. But it completely failed to address the stark gaps in support for kinship children's education, learning needs, mental health and family relationships.

It's right that governments and local authorities want to prioritise family-first options for children, but the sequencing must be right. That requires a step change in the way children in kinship care are recognised and supported before we further incentivise placing more children with family and friends.

There is now huge potential for the new UK Government to address this and rewrite the future for thousands of children. If it is serious about its mission to break down the barriers to opportunity for all, it must consider kinship children, and it must take immediate and bold steps forward to improve the support offered to them.

In Wales too, a new First Minister can seize the moment and harness the opportunity provided by a renewed national focus on the experiences of children and the wellbeing of future generations to finally give kinship families the attention they need and deserve.

Our **#ValueOurLove** campaign has managed to secure more support for kinship families in England and Wales than ever before. But there's still a long way to go. Kinship carers should not be lying awake at night wondering whether or not the child they love would be better off in the care system where they might have a greater chance of accessing the support they need.

It doesn't have to be like this. Following this year's General Election, the relatives and family friends raising children are looking to our political leaders to finally acknowledge the challenges facing their families and to deliver the support they need. And we stand ready to help.

Dr Lucy Peake
Chief Executive
August 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Forgotten explores the support which children in kinship care receive – or don't receive – to help them learn well at school and to manage their mental health and relationships. It shares insights from our 2023 annual survey of kinship carers to reveal how a complex, inadequate and often inaccessible landscape of support for kinship children around education, special educational or additional learning needs, mental health and family contact and relationships is resulting in significant challenges for kinship families across England and Wales.

Given the legacy of childhood trauma for children who enter kinship care and the impact this can have on their learning and wellbeing, *Forgotten* makes the case for the UK and Welsh Governments and local authorities to prioritise the long-overlooked and ignored experiences of kinship children and deliver urgent support tailored to the unique needs and strengths of all kinship families.

KEY FINDINGS

Too many kinship children aren't getting the educational support they need

Overall, only around half of kinship children were reported to be getting the support they needed in education. A complex hierarchy of eligibility – dependent largely on the type of kinship arrangement and whether or not the child is or was previously looked after – is dictating whether or not kinship children receive help with their learning. 2 in 5 kinship carers told us they weren't aware of their kinship children receiving any form of educational support, rising to 3 in 5 for those with informal arrangements. Where high-quality support was being provided, this was often due to the actions of individual teachers and schools going above and beyond what the child might be typically entitled to and what existing structures easily facilitated.

In particular, too few eligible kinship children are accessing support from the Virtual School (although families often find this very helpful when they do). A lack of information and accountability around the spending of Pupil Premium Plus is a significant source of ongoing frustration for kinship carers with eligible children, who do not see it being used effectively to support their needs.

There is a high prevalence of special educational needs amongst children in kinship care, but many are missing out on a diagnosis and formalised support in school

Nearly half of kinship children in England were reported to have a special educational need or disability (SEND), and more than one third of kinship children in Wales an additional learning need (ALN). Diagnosed or suspected social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH) were particularly common. Kinship children represented in our survey were around five times more likely to be learning in a special school than their peers.

Kinship children in England were over three times more likely to have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan than all pupils. However, despite prevalence of special educational needs similar to other children's social care groups (e.g. children looked after in local authority care), far fewer children than would be expected given this prevalence were receiving support through the SEND system. This gap between need and formalised support means the ongoing crisis in the SEND system is likely to be disproportionately disadvantaging children in kinship care. Kinship carers told us about the significant challenges they had securing diagnoses as a means to unlock potential access to support, and battling schools, local authorities and other services to secure vital SEND or ALN support for their children.

The legacy of childhood trauma is at the core of children's experiences: almost half of kinship carers said their children's adverse experiences in childhood had negatively impacted on their ability to cope in education. Kinship carers told us they want to see better recognition and understanding, enhanced entitlements, and additional training and support for teachers and others which recognised how kinship children's experiences impact on behaviour and their ability to cope in the classroom.

Children in kinship care are struggling with their mental health, and emotional and therapeutic support for this group is lacking

More than half of kinship carers said their kinship children had mental health difficulties – a much higher prevalence than amongst their peers. 43% of kinship carers said their children had accessed emotional or therapeutic support – again with eligibility dependent on the type of kinship arrangement – but were mixed on its effectiveness and suitability for their kinship circumstances.

More than a quarter (27%) of kinship carers said their children hadn't received emotional or therapeutic support but that it was needed, and too many families were desperately battling to get urgent help for their children. A lack of entitlements and system pressures were pushing families to do whatever they could: around 1 in 8 kinship carers had paid for therapeutic support for their children out of their own pockets, rising to 1 in 5 for informal kinship carers or those with a legal order secured in private proceedings.

Only 1 in 7 eligible kinship carers had accessed support via the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, and many faced unnecessary barriers in securing an assessment or therapeutic support for their family. Where they had, this often wasn't consistent or tailored enough to best address their children's needs.

Some kinship children need additional support to manage contact and navigate their family relationships and identity

Kinship care helps children to retain important links with their family network: nearly 9 in 10 kinship carers said their children had ongoing contact with parents, and more than one third said they were also in contact with one or more siblings who didn't live with them.

However, contact and family relationships could be a source of intense stress and conflict for both children and their kinship carers owing to the complexities of family dynamics. More than 1 in 4 kinship carers reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their children's

current contact arrangements, and 3 in 5 kinship carers said their children experienced difficulties with the emotional impact of contact. Only 1 in 8 kinship families received local authority support with contact, predominantly those in kinship foster care, and a further 1 in 4 families didn't receive support but felt this was needed.

Around one fifth of kinship carers said their children had received some support to help them navigate their identity and family relationships, such as life story work, and they were generally very positive about the impact it had made. However, nearly 4 in 10 said their children hadn't received this support and that this was needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For a detailed set of recommendations, please see the *Recommendations* section on page 53.

To ensure all kinship children get the support they need in education:

The UK Government should harmonise the existing patchwork of support for kinship children in England and introduce new legislation which guarantees equalised levels of support between children in all forms of kinship care and children looked after in local authority care. This should involve coordinating duties and remits across the triangle of support available through the Virtual School, Pupil Premium Plus and the designated teacher, providing a clear, cohesive and comprehensive offer to all kinship families.

In the interim, the unique needs, experiences and strengths of kinship children should be considered in delivery of Virtual School, Pupil Premium Plus, designated teacher and Personal Education Plan support to all of those eligible. Additional steps should be taken to ensure all eligible families of previously looked after children in kinship care are aware of the self-declaration process for Pupil Premium Plus.

The Welsh Government should extend existing mechanisms of support to children in all forms of kinship care, including funding through the PDG-LAC stream of the Pupil Development Grant, designated person and, where relevant, through the ongoing Virtual School pilots.

Priority school admissions should be extended to all children in kinship care, and further and higher education providers should extend support to those with experience of kinship care.

To ensure all kinship children get the support they need with SEND/ALN and mental health:

The UK and Welsh Governments and local authorities should ensure all kinship families can access appropriate long-term emotional and therapeutic support, including that which supports with contact, family relationships and identity. This should be designed with kinship families in mind and available to all kinship families regardless of the type of kinship arrangement or the child's journey into kinship care. In the interim, local authorities in England should ensure eligible kinship families can access support via the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund.

Pathways should be made available to help children in kinship care secure relevant SEND/ALN assessments and diagnoses where this would help them to access support. Specialist services and support which take into account the higher prevalence of specific forms of SEND/ALN amongst kinship children should be developed, and they should be considered in wider UK and Welsh Government policy activity designed to improve children's mental health and wellbeing.

To enable policy and practice to most effectively support kinship children:

Local authorities and others should ensure the provision of high-quality information and advice to kinship carers, including by signposting to Kinship, on the support available to their children. Forthcoming kinship care statutory guidance in England should reaffirm the requirement for local authorities to provide up-to-date, visible and accessible information relevant to all types of kinship family.

Education and other professionals supporting kinship families should receive training on trauma and childhood adversity and its impact on learning and development, and the unique needs, strengths and experiences of kinship families. Governments should improve data collection on children in kinship care and their outcomes, and future research should explore the voices and experiences of children in all forms of kinship care to understand their perspectives on how best to deliver support.

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT KINSHIP CARE

Kinship care is when a child lives full-time or most of the time with a relative or family friend, usually because their parents are not able to care for them. The best estimates suggest there are more than 141,000 children in kinship care in England and Wales – three times the number in unrelated foster care. Grandparents are most commonly kinship carers, but they can also be older siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins and family friends.¹ Kinship care can take many forms, and the rights, responsibilities and support available to kinship families depends largely on the type of arrangement they have.

→ Learn more about the different types of kinship care

ABOUT FORGOTTEN

Forgotten explores the support which children in kinship care receive – or don't receive – to help them learn well at school and to manage their mental health and relationships. It shares insights from our 2023 annual survey of kinship carers to reveal how a complex, inadequate and often inaccessible landscape of support for kinship children around education, SEND/ALN, mental health and family contact and relationships is resulting in significant challenges for kinship families across England and Wales.

Given the legacy of childhood trauma for children who enter kinship care and the impact this can have on their learning and wellbeing, *Forgotten* makes the case for the UK and Welsh Governments and local authorities to prioritise the long-overlooked and ignored experiences of kinship children and deliver urgent support tailored to the unique needs and strengths of all kinship families.

Case studies included in the report come from kinship carers supported by Kinship and/or who are involved in contributing their views and expertise to our policy and campaigns activity, including those who completed our 2023 annual survey. All are shared with full permission, but some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and their families: these are marked with an asterisk.

About our 2023 annual survey

Kinship has conducted a sector-leading annual survey of kinship carers for several years. These are the largest of their kind, and 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.

Our 2023 annual 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

1 Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021

carers, social media channels, partner organisations, and our networks of professionals and researchers.

In total, the survey received 1,657 responses from kinship carers caring for at least 2,416 children in England and Wales. Responses to some questions were requested for each individual kinship child in their care, allowing us to understand in greater detail the makeup of kinship households and ensure kinship carers could detail important differences in experiences and support between their children. Other questions were asked on a carer or household basis. What was asked of respondents is detailed as relevant in the report.

→ [Learn more about our 2023 annual survey cohort](#)

Acknowledgements

This report was authored by Sam Turner, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at Kinship.

We're grateful to all of the kinship carers and young adults raised in kinship care who kindly gave up their time to respond to our 2023 annual survey, share their stories with us to feature in the report, and/or lent their expertise to inform the key findings and recommendations. Thanks also go to Kinship staff from across the organisation who shared their insights from years of working alongside and delivering high-quality advice and support to kinship families.

We're also grateful to external colleagues for offering helpful feedback on earlier versions of the report's key findings and generously sharing their knowledge to inform the recommendations, including Rebecca Brooks from Adoption UK, Jenny Young from Blue Cabin, Richard Rose from Therapeutic Life Story Work International (TLSWi), and Jancis Andrew and Matthew Cooke from the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH). Acknowledgement here does not imply endorsement of the report or its recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS

TOO MANY KINSHIP CHILDREN AREN'T GETTING THE EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT THEY NEED

Educational support for children in kinship care

We hear every single day from kinship carers who want to support their children's learning and to understand what's available from schools, the local authority and others to help them attain and progress well in their education. Evidence suggests that children in kinship care may have better educational outcomes than their counterparts in local authority care¹ and go on to achieve higher level qualifications in adulthood³. However, whilst the love and security within kinship care arrangements can help to insulate children from some of the instabilities associated with the care system and support better educational experiences as a result, kinship children's outcomes are still stubbornly lower than those in the general population.^{4,5}

Sammie-Jo

Sammie-Jo, 19, grew up in kinship care.

"I came to live with my grandmother when I was just a baby because my parents weren't able to care for me. To avoid me going into foster care, my grandmother stepped in to look after me.

I had an amazing childhood with my grandmother but things became more challenging as I got older. When I was ten-years-old I got a new baby brother who was in the care system briefly before coming to live with us at my grandmother's. Another brother was born later on and grew up in the care system. It was about then when I first started to struggle with my mental health.

I always felt different to my friends at school because I wasn't living with my mum, but instead an older woman. We looked different as a family and I could see the other kids had mums and dads and what looked like normal, happy families. When I was younger, I sometimes had this fantasy that if I had a mum or dad who was looking after me things would have been better. Or that if I was fostered, I could have had somebody to call mum.

I didn't even know what kinship care was until I was in Year 12. When I was young, I knew that my family wasn't normal but we didn't get any support – financial, practical or emotional. I think it would have been helpful to get emotional support early on when I could talk about being in kinship care, as it would have helped me better understand why I was living in that situation and that it was normal to feel that way I did. If I had had

2 Sebba et al (2015) The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data

3 Sacker et al (2021) The lifelong health and wellbeing trajectories of people who have been in care: Findings from the Looked-after Children Grown up Project

4 Hunt, J (2020) Two decades of UK research on kinship care: an overview

5 Wellard et al (2017) Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood

Sammie-Jo *contd.*

somebody, a therapist, who could have reminded me that I was wanted in my family that would have helped.

Some people have said to me 'you live with me your family you should be fine' but they don't understand what it's like. Yes, I have a relationship with one of my parents and I know they are doing their best. Yes, I love my grandmother. Some of us have the unique situation where we're not raised by our birth parents who are still around and so this can make us feel misunderstood, isolated and neglected. When I was younger, I felt really hurt and upset, like I'd missed out on the chance to be part of a family. If I had somebody to talk to, they might have helped me see things differently."

The hierarchy of support

As is common with many other aspects of kinship family support, there is a complex picture of educational support available to children growing up in kinship care largely dependent on the type of kinship arrangement and the child's journey into kinship care. Children in kinship foster care, by virtue of being 'looked after' in local authority care, typically have the greatest set of entitlements to support, followed by kinship families with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings and where the child was previously looked after, before others such as those with a child arrangements or special guardianship order secured in private law proceedings. Those in an informal arrangements have the fewest rights and poorest access to support.⁶



Only around half of kinship children were getting the support they needed in education.

In our 2023 annual survey, kinship carers said that only around half (54%) of their kinship children were getting the support they needed in education, but the level to which this was true varied by the type of kinship arrangement: children in kinship foster care were the most likely to be getting the support they needed (63%). For those cared for in informal arrangements or under a legal order secured in private proceedings, respondents said that more than one third were explicitly not getting the support they needed (35% and 36% respectively).

We asked kinship carers responding to our survey whether they were aware, for each kinship child in their care, of any of the following means of advice or support being used to help them in education: local authority Virtual School; Pupil Premium Plus (England) or Pupil Development Grant (PDG-LAC) (Wales); designated teacher; and/or Personal Education Plan (PEP).



2 in 5 kinship carers said they weren't aware of their kinship children receiving any form of educational support, rising to 3 in 5 for those with informal arrangements.

Overall, 2 in 5 (41%) of kinship carers said they weren't aware of their kinship children receiving any form of educational support.⁷ As might be expected, responding kinship carers were much less likely to report no support being received when the child was in

⁶ Foundations (2023) Understanding the variation in support for kinship carers: a survey of local authorities in England

⁷ This and all of the following findings in this section refer only to respondents from those kinship care households containing one single type of arrangement; this reflects 95% of our 2023 survey cohort. For example, the responding kinship carer may be caring for three kinship children but they are all cared for under a special guardianship order made in private law proceedings.

kinship foster care (13%) or cared for under a special guardianship order made following care proceedings (35%), and more likely to report no support where there was a special guardianship or child arrangements order secured in private law proceedings (55%) or where there was an informal arrangement (60%).

As such, comments about positive experiences with support were most commonly – but not exclusively – seen from kinship foster carer respondents. In these contributions, the support received via the school and/or local authority, or other help provided within their children's place of learning, was seen as critical to their wellbeing and a significant positive contributor to their experiences in education.

"The support he receives is massively important to him attending school."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

"Yes very useful. My child gets overwhelmed in large groups. School have placed him in a small class."

Uncle and kinship foster carer

"The school has been absolutely amazing and have supported us every step of the way. Being classed as a LAC [looked after child] give us the option to pick the best school and we are pleased with our choice."

Uncle with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"School counsellor and having a plan around certain lessons have helped keep attendance and achievement."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

Kinship carers found the type of kinship arrangement and the child's legal status acted to either grant them access or lock them out of support. For those families whose arrangements had moved from kinship foster care to (predominantly) special guardianship, the lack of forthcoming help and support associated with the loss of the child's 'looked after' status caused significant challenges. In outlining what additional support they wanted to see for their kinship children in education, many advocated for equalised support between children in all forms of kinship care and those in local authority care. For some kinship foster carers, the lack of support for previously looked after children in other kinship arrangements – such as special guardianship – was one of the reasons for them being hesitant to change their arrangement, reflecting similar concerns we hear very commonly from kinship carers who worry about the loss of guaranteed financial support too.

"While I was under the status of fostering the children, PEP [Personal Education Plan] meetings were happening within school and involvement help with virtual school. Extra meetings set to try and put in place in school any extra help required for either child to help them settle and have it explained to the school any issues the children were experiencing from there past so the appropriate help could be offered/ tried and re looked at if wasn't working. Since my SGO this year I have encountered difficulties with the help put in place by school as if things in place haven't worked in school quickly this help has been taken away from child."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"We had to fight to get free milk and meals as SGO [special guardianship order] was not recognised by the LA [local authority] as within their regulation. Counselling has been made available"

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

"As our children are lack of LAC none of this is available to them through our LA."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"[LA1] would not help us because the children are not LAC, however [LA2] took a discretionary view and were a great help. I don't know how we would have coped without it."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

"[There should be] parity with CLA [children looked after] for all kinship placements. As we are still on [a care order] we can access more services, but would move to SGO if similar support was available."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

Individuals vs the system

Where positive support had been provided to help kinship children learn well in education, this was often because individual teachers or school staff, or schools themselves as a whole, had been seen to go 'above and beyond' what might be expected of them or what the child or family might be entitled to through children's services or elsewhere. In many cases, survey respondents wanted to make clear that – despite immense continued struggles to access appropriate support for their children's needs in school – they were not blaming individual actors but the system pressures and processes which acted against the perceived best wishes of the children they were caring for. High-quality support was too often experienced despite rather than because of the existing structures of support.

"The school and head teacher and support staff have been amazing from the beginning and have done everything in [their] power to help my grandchild"

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"If my middle grandson didn't have the support of his current teacher I don't know where we would be without her!!"

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"We are lucky and have a very good school who have worked with us to help support and settle the older child and he is now doing well. The first 2 terms were very hard work but the school worked hard with him"

Step-grandparent and kinship foster carer

"All support my children have had through their education is due to the amazing school they attend. Local authority has done nothing towards their educational support."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

"The children's school has gone above and beyond to support the children in school. They have also been incredibly supportive to us as a family and individually."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

Several respondents spoke about poor information provision from schools, local authorities and others which left them in the dark about what support might be available for their children. Too often, kinship carers discovered their children were eligible for but missing out on much-needed support because it involved them understanding and often explicitly

asking for it. For many, gaining this knowledge relied on meeting other kinship carers in peer support groups or having conversations with other parents and carers in the playground.

"We found out ourselves through talking to other families."

Step-grandparent and kinship foster carer

"I'm not totally sure what it means as it's never been explained to me."

"I'm not sure what is available."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"PP [pupil premium] - I've had to ask for specific help. School is not proactive."

"I discovered that there was a designated teacher after 2.5 years of child being at school."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"If you don't know and don't ask your children don't get."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Pupil premium, PEP, Designated Teacher were a total mystery to me and the schools never discussed them with me."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

Requiring self-declaration in order to access support is a particular challenge for kinship carers who often take on their caring role in an emergency with little preparation or warning, and who often do not get the early information and advice they need at the very beginning of their kinship journeys. Last year, 35% of kinship carers rated the information about kinship care provided by their local authority as very poor⁸, and in 2022 we found that nearly 8 in 10 kinship carers hadn't received any preparation support around being a kinship carer before or shortly after their child moved in⁹.

However, even when kinship carers were aware of support, many struggled to access it for several reasons, including challenges proving eligibility, finding the right professionals in the school or local authority to fulfil the requirements needed to apply, or having moved between different schools or local authority areas. Accessing even what they were entitled to was seen to be a 'battle' and one fraught with hurdles at every step.

"Knowing about it is one thing access to it is another."

Family carer with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"School struggling to access support due to been in a different local authority to where the order was made, not been able to access support easily and waiting lists are so long child is being let down and not supported how they should be."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"I find we are constantly struggling with education setting and consistency not much communication feel like we are constantly pestering school."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"It's a constant fight to get the right support in a school setting. I feel as if I am not listened to as a kinship carer. I also believe there is stigma attached to the children or teachers do not have the relevant training in supporting children like ours."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

8 Kinship (2023) Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis

9 Kinship (2022) The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022

"I had an uphill struggle trying to find out what was available and then getting it put in place."

Grandparent with a child arrangements order made in private proceedings

As explored further in the report in the context of access to SEND/ALN and mental health support, many respondents also highlighted how they felt their ability to get support hinged on securing a formal SEND/ALN or other diagnosis. Delays around assessments were often identified as the main barrier to their children getting the help they needed to learn well in school, and a number of respondents suggested that automatic assessments or fast-tracked or automatic pathways to secure an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan (England) or Individual Development Plan (IDP) (Wales) for kinship families may help prevent difficulties for others in the future, recognising the likelihood of children in kinship care requiring additional support in education.

"Struggling to get an assessment for attachment disorder/FAS [foetal alcohol syndrome]/autism etc so can't get to the support stage."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"EHC plans for all the children might be needed. For the schools and doctors to be clear about who is supposed to be responsible for the diagnosis of certain conditions (school have said we must see our GP for an ASD/ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] diagnosis, the GP say school are responsible for the diagnosis - this is not only confusing and frustrating but is causing delays in getting the children the help they need)."

Grandparent with a child arrangements order made in private proceedings

"[Kinship carers need] quicker diagnosis so correct support can be put in place. Worried in 2 years eldest will be secondary age he will not cope in the setting being offered need diagnosis so correct setting can be accessed."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"[Kinship carers need] an early assessment of special needs so my granddaughter is not let down by the educational system as my daughter was."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

Anna

Anna, 48, and her husband have been kinship foster carers to their three grandchildren since they came into their care aged two, three and four-years-old, in 2019.

"Right from the get-go we didn't get the support we needed to help the children who had all been traumatised and witnessed things they shouldn't have seen.

The eldest had anger issues and would hide under the table and my three-year-old granddaughter couldn't sleep and still can't sleep now. We've seen the trauma coming through with all of them in different ways – although they've all had abandonment issues.

It was obvious they needed therapeutic and emotional support, but it wasn't forthcoming from the children's local authority which is different to ours. We offered to pay for it privately but were told we couldn't because we didn't have parental responsibility.

Anna *contd.*

It means we've been going round in circles for years, trying to get them assessed by CAMHS and assessments for ADHD. The local authority has let the children fall through the gaps. After waiting three years we finally managed to get an assessment for ADHD but have to wait another year for a diagnosis.

My granddaughter has issues at school. She disassociates and will not connect. She has complex needs but we've been told to build more evidence in order to get her a CAMHS assessment. It's ridiculous!

My grandson won't be able to cope at secondary school and because there's no diagnosis there won't be any support. I'm worried he won't get off the bus, he's likely to lose his books and end up in detention every day without any support.

I've reached breaking point hundreds of times, but you keep going because you have to, and we love our grandchildren."

The following section details more specific findings and reflections from survey respondents for specific areas of educational support: the Virtual School, Pupil Premium Plus or Pupil Development Grant (PDG-LAC), designated teacher and Personal Education Plans (PEP).

Kinship families' experiences of educational support

Virtual School

A Virtual School is a group of professionals who provide advice, guidance and support to specific groups of children supported by a local authority, and work with families, education settings, teachers and others to promote those children's educational progress. In England, each Virtual School Head (VSH) has a statutory responsibility for coordinating support for looked after and previously looked after children supported by that local authority. In 2021, the role was extended to include additional non-statutory oversight for children with a social worker.

As part of the UK Government's National Kinship Care Strategy for England published in December 2023, the role was again expanded to champion the educational attendance, attainment and progress of all children in kinship care, regardless of legal order or lack thereof, as well as provide advice and information on request to kinship families secured by a special guardianship or child arrangements order, regardless of whether or not the child was previously looked after; this duty will commence from September 2024.¹⁰

In Wales, a three-year Virtual School Model pilot began in March 2021, with 13 local authorities involved in developing their educational support for looked after children. An ongoing evaluation has identified how local authorities have to date used the awarded funding from the Welsh Government in different ways to develop or implement a Virtual School model or improve their existing capacity and support systems for care experienced young people.¹¹

¹⁰ For more information on the National Kinship Care Strategy for England, please visit: kinship.org.uk/national-kinship-care-strategy.

¹¹ Welsh Government (2024) Virtual School Model of Integrated Education for Care-Experienced Children: Initial Evidence Gathering from Local Authority Pilots

For many respondents who had received support, the Virtual School and its staff had been an incredibly valuable source of help for them and their children, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of kinship care arrangements and supporting them with advocacy and support – particularly in liaising with the child's school or place of learning. Sometimes, the Virtual School had gone above and beyond their duties to offer help to kinship families who wouldn't be eligible for any kind of formalised support.

"Virtual school have arranged transport to and from school. they are sent a weekly news magazine and are sent some books too. the virtual school has been helpful... they attend the school meetings and listen to the boys and arranged art therapy too."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

"Virtual school brilliant help and support for us even after got SGO"

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Virtual school has been extremely useful in helping to get alternative provision"

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

"As we are informal carers we don't qualify for much support but I learnt about the Virtual School through a Kinship Carers webinar, contacted them and they have been extremely helpful, including giving me access to the resources on the CATCH [Children and Trauma Community Hub]."

Aunt and informal kinship carer

However, some kinship carers also highlighted challenges engaging with the Virtual School and the limits of what they were able to do in the face of wider system pressures on the SEND system or in delivering support which relied on significant involvement and backing from the child's main place of education.

"It took a lot of time for virtual school to find a school that was suitable for child 1. Virtual School were happy to keep him in hubs across the borough where he was receiving no education. I fought this and finally a school was found that was suitable and a turning point in his life."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Child 1 struggles to write because of the ADHD but nothing has been done to help him - school turns it into a subject specific issue and the Virtual School falls in line for tutoring instead of helping find a tutor that can help him learn to write well. It doesn't help that we're out of area for the Virtual School so it relies on the school."

Aunt and kinship foster carer



Only 1 in 8 children cared for under a special guardianship order made following care proceedings were said to be receiving support from the Virtual School.

Despite Virtual School support provision in England targeted at previously looked after children, for the vast majority of children cared for under a special guardianship order made following care proceedings (where it's very likely their child was previously looked after), their kinship carers said they weren't aware of their child receiving any support through this structure: fewer than 1 in 8 (13%) children in this arrangement were reported to be receiving support compared to around half (52%) of children in kinship foster care. Although we don't know comprehensively the reasons for this gap, it points to both a lack of awareness and suitable information provision about the nature of what the Virtual School is able to offer to this group of kinship carers, reflected in a number of comments left by respondents.

"I was not able to have any support from Virtual School as I was told that Special Guardians did not have any access to Virtual school"

Grandparent with special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Our local authority will not allow us access to Virtual School because he's no longer Looked After."

Friend carer with special guardianship order made following care proceedings

Pupil Premium Plus (England) or Pupil Development Grant (PDG-LAC) (Wales)

Pupil Premium Plus is additional funding - £2,570 for each eligible pupil for the 2024 to 2025 financial year – intended to support the educational outcomes of looked after and previously looked after children. For children in kinship foster care who are looked after by the local authority, this funding is paid directly to the local authority and managed by the Virtual School Head (VSH) who is tasked with working alongside the child's school to ensure the funding is used appropriately. For previously looked after children cared for in other kinship arrangements such as special guardianship, the funding is paid to the school – but the child's carer must self-declare their eligibility directly with the school during the Autumn School Census.¹²

In Wales, the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) is funding given to schools and educational settings which includes a comparable 'PDG-LAC' stream intended to support the educational attainment of looked after children, children who have been adopted, and children subject to a special guardianship order. This funding is given to local authorities on the basis of the number of currently looked after children; they may choose to pass all to schools and settings or retain some for activities which benefit the authority's relevant supported children and young people.

Pupil Premium Plus or PDG-LAC was the most common form of support for kinship children noted by survey respondents, with nearly 3 in 5 (58%) of children in kinship foster care and nearly half (49%) of children cared for under a special guardianship order made following care proceedings being supported. Some respondents explained how this additional funding was being used to better support their kinship children.

"The pupil development grant helps with uniform costs, although he only attends 1.5 hours a day he does wear uniform."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

"Pupil premium has helped fund after school activities & some funding towards revision books for GCSE."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"The Pupil Premium has been used to pay for tutors outside of school."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

¹² For more information on Pupil Premium Plus and kinship care, please visit <https://compass.kinship.org.uk/advice-and-information/pupil-premium-plus>

"All the children received free school meals and 2 younger ones get swimming lesson paid through pupil premium plus."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"It [PP+] helps with the cost of trips and after school activities."

Grandparent with other kinship arrangement

"Pupil premium was used to pay for expert early years teacher time to put in an accelerated learning plan."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

However, a substantial number of kinship carers noted dissatisfaction with the way that additional funding allocated through Pupil Premium Plus or PDG-LAC routes had been used or what it was ultimately able to deliver for their children, as well as the lack of information provided to families about this. Many felt oversight over how (predominantly) schools were choosing to utilise this funding was insufficient and wanted to see greater transparency and accountability. Others encountered poor understanding from schools and others about eligibility and could not identify any positive impacts for their children despite their eligibility.

"I've only heard that school get extra money, not seen any support from it [Pupil Premium Plus] at all."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"PPP [Pupil Premium Plus] my children both receive but only because I personally took the paperwork to school and explained to them that the children were eligible and they had to put it on the school census. None of the three schools involved had ever heard of it for SGO children or knew about it. This was shocking to me as a large amount of money is involved. Apart from neither child receives any extra support as a result of their legal status or their past."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"I have been given very little information about Pupil Premium, even when attempting to research this subject. I became aware of it's possible availability through discussions with other parents and attempted to find out more. I wanted to know if we were automatically eligible and how to apply. I have since approached the school where our kinship child attends to find out more and am still left not entirely sure how to apply and what is involved."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Pupil Premium only put in place after we chased the school and we lost a year's support because they did not know what they are doing. We do not see any benefit for our child in having the Pupil Premium. The whole process has not been useful and we received no information...we only found out about this by accident"

Family friend with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"I was only ever advised that my child was entitled to Pupil Premium as when she started school I was claiming Income Support. I found out through my own research 3 years later that in fact she is and was entitled to Pupil Premium Plus. The Head Master is the designated teacher and has never offered to talk to me about what the Pupil Premium Plus (which I told him to claim for her) is being spent on."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

It was common for responding kinship carers to share frustrations about the lack of bespoke or tailored interventions delivered for their kinship children and highlighted examples of where funding had been used to support a broader group of pupils. Guidance for school leaders on the use of Pupil Premium Plus funding makes clear that it is not a personal budget for individual children and schools do not have to spend this so that it solely benefits those pupils who meet the funding criteria (e.g. they may invest in support which also benefits other pupils with identified needs or whole-class interventions which also benefit non-disadvantaged pupils).¹²

However, it was clear the extent to which this freedom was being used felt uncomfortable for many kinship carers who struggled to access information from school leaders about exactly how the funding had been allocated, and how its use was intended to improve their children's educational progress. Very similar concerns can be found amongst adoptive parents too: a recent survey found that just 39% were satisfied with the way Pupil Premium Plus was being used to support their child.¹⁴

"The funds were not discussed and some of it was used to train the entire school staff team for trauma training and we were then told that this had emptied the pupil premium pot funds. When I did ask for funds to pay for music lessons I was given a difficult time and had to get virtual head involved from local authority."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"In receipt of pupil premium but no evidence of how this was used to her benefit. The Pupil Premium needs to be accountable to both parent/Carer with proof of how it is spent."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"The older two get pupil premium and although I could have used this for educational trips and equipment to help them engage at home the school headteacher decided they will pool it together to help other children as well. The school hasn't given a breakdown of how they are using the pupil premium for my children."

Uncle with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Pupil premium's use seems to be a closely guarded secret at the schools. There's a reluctance to specify what benefit the children get directly, other than the occasional contribution to school trips."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

Designated teacher

In both England and Wales, each maintained school is required to designate a member of staff as having responsibility for promoting the educational achievement of looked after children (i.e. including children in kinship foster care) in that school. This is known as a designated teacher in England and a designated person in Wales.

In England, the role was extended following the Children and Social Work Act 2017 to include previously looked after children, including children in kinship care who left local authority care due to the making of a special guardianship or child arrangements order. The designated teacher should act as the central point of initial contact within the school to join up with relevant local authority colleagues, including social workers, Virtual School practitioners and other children's social care, and support the delivery of relevant children

¹³ Department for Education (2024) Using pupil premium: guidance for school leaders

¹⁴ Adoption UK (2024) The Adoption Barometer: A stocktake of adoption in England

Personal Education Plans within school. They should support the wider school to understand and respond to the needs of children with care experience, contributing to whole-school policies and cultures.

Awareness of ongoing support from a designated teacher was the lowest for any form of educational support, although this was again highest for children in kinship foster care (27%) and broadly similar (between 11 and 13%) across all other kinship children.

Experiences with the designated teacher were mixed amongst kinship carer respondents, although most who did mention engaging with this role said they valued the school-specific expertise and support they were able to offer and their help coordinating with other relevant colleagues within the school (e.g. SENCo/ALNCo) and beyond (e.g. Virtual School Head).

"We have regular meetings with designated teacher which is very useful and supportive."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"A designated is something he has now. This has helped him feel comfortable in the school premises although not enough to get him into a classroom."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

"Designated teacher has been amazing."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

However, some did not find their child's designated teacher helpful or simply didn't know they existed in the first place. It is clear that, particularly amongst the carers of previously looked after children, awareness of the designated teacher is too low: in a recent survey of adoptive parents, only around half (53%) said they knew who the designated teacher was at their child's school.¹⁵

"The designated teacher at his last school was a waste of time. That wasn't the most positive experience. The new school seem a lot more on the ball."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"School is not proactive. I discovered that there was a designated teacher after 2.5 years of child being at school."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

Personal Education Plan (PEP)

A Personal Education Plan (PEP) is a statutory requirement for all looked after children (i.e. including children in kinship foster care) across both England and Wales. It forms part of the child's care plan and intends to support the child's educational progress by detailing what is needed to help them, including but not limited to, catch-up support, transition support, attendance and behaviour support, and other careers advice or out-of-hours learning activity. A number of relevant professionals should be involved in supporting the PEP, including the child's social worker, the Virtual School Head (VSH), designated teacher or person, and Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).

Local authorities in Wales are currently also required to designate a specialist practitioner – a Looked-After Children in Education (LACE) Coordinator – to coordinate each looked after child's education plan and support the educational needs of looked after children and care leavers supported by that local authority, although their exact roles are defined by individual local authorities and can vary throughout Wales.

Given the nature of its implementation for a specific cohort, a relatively high proportion (nearly 7 in 10 – 68%) of children in kinship foster care represented in our survey cohort were said to be supported through this. However, this still suggests that for as many as 3 in 10 children with eligibility, their kinship foster carers are not aware of the PEP or how their kinship child is being supported. Where kinship carers were aware, they were for the most part very complimentary about its usefulness and how the process and personnel involved had helped to unlock support for their children.

"I attended PEP meetings and this was helpful and informative regarding the children's educational levels and how they were doing at school."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

"PEP unlocking additional budget towards phonics support and drama therapy."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

"The PEPs have been very useful because it's allowed us to know more about how the children are doing and has allowed some teachers to be better informed and supportive of them."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

"We have only had one PEP so far as my niece was in nursery. It was very positive. She is due to start primary in a few weeks but unfortunately we haven't had any support so far with transition. And no further PEP has been arranged. I am having to chase this with the CSW."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

The following section explores what kinship carers told us about their children's special educational and additional learning needs and their experiences navigating the SEND and ALN systems in England and Wales respectively, and how they want to see places of learning and education professionals recognise and support kinship children who have experienced trauma.

THERE IS A HIGH PREVALENCE OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AMONGST CHILDREN IN KINSHIP CARE, BUT MANY ARE MISSING OUT ON A DIAGNOSIS AND FORMALISED SUPPORT IN SCHOOL

Where kinship children learn

School Census data suggests that there are as many as 26,460 children aged 5 to 15 years who are previously looked after and cared for under a special guardianship or child arrangements order and attending a state-funded primary, state-funded secondary or special school in England.¹⁶ However, as this information is reliant on self-declaration from parents or carers, it is likely to underestimate the total cohort size, and there is no published estimate of the overall number of previously looked after children cared for under these arrangements to understand this as a proportion of the whole cohort.

Of school-aged children aged 5 to 15 years old represented in our survey cohort, the vast majority (89%) were learning in mainstream schools. Of these, 2% were in specialist provision at a mainstream school.



Kinship children were around five times more likely to be learning in a special school than all pupils in England and Wales.

Our results suggest a higher proportion of kinship children are studying in special schools, likely reflecting the much greater prevalence of special educational or additional learning needs – just over 7% were in a special school compared to only 1.7% of all pupils in England¹⁷ and 1.2% in Wales¹⁸. A greater proportion of kinship children were also recorded as being in alternative provision (AP) compared to the proportion of all pupils in England, but the overall numbers are too small to make any firm conclusions on what this tells us.

"Our child is in a specialist private SEN [special educational needs] school for children with developmental trauma. Independent school using adaptations to support sensory processing issue & the learning struggles connected with children who have experienced trauma. As far as we are aware a 'one off'. Requires lengthy daily travel, but we are fortunate to have a place at this school where most students seem to thrive and which seems to also provide support for parents. A godsend!"

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

When asked what educational support would make a difference for their family, several kinship carers spoke about the need for a special school place which could deliver the tailored and specialist support they thought their children needed. Some spoke about a shortage of available places and having battled with children's services and others in the local authority in an attempt to secure specialist provision for their kinship children.

¹⁶ Department for Education (2024) Pupils declared to have Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangements Orders data table, published 23 April 2024 in response to written question UIN 21851 from Munira Wilson MP.

¹⁷ Department for Education (2023) Schools, pupils and their characteristics: Academic year 2022/23

¹⁸ Welsh Government (2023) Schools' census results: January 2023

"The only reason we have special schools and diagnosis is that we went private got into debt and took the LA to court for a special school. I have triplets all the same diagnosis and one is out of school as we still fighting in court. We are up to 25 thousand pounds in debt."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Need special school but mainstream on EHC [Education, Health and Care] plan. Fighting atm [at the moment]. Not enough send places locally. Even if get on EHC plan looking 12 months plus before a place will be available"

Grandparent with a child arrangements order made in private proceedings

"Eldest child is in wrong setting and needs to move to a SEMH [social, emotional and mental health needs] school"

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

"[We need] a specialist school for those with ASD [autistic spectrum disorder], a much smaller school, with just a few children per class as she is overwhelmed socially by mainstream school"

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"My child does not have specialist school placement as there is a shortage. School should have knowledge and skills to support trauma and attachment issues."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

For those represented in our survey cohort aged 16 and 17, most (57%) were learning at a mainstream school or college, but a similar proportion were in a special school or alternative provision as with the 5 to 15 years group, and a further 12% were recorded by their kinship carer respondents as being in employment or training. 12% were NEET (not in education, employment or training); this is much higher than for 16 to 17 year olds in England (4.6%)¹⁹ and 16 to 18 year olds in Wales (7.4%)²⁰, although overall numbers are small and relatively minor changes therefore result in fairly significant percentage changes.

Challenges with post-16 provision were highlighted by a small number of responding kinship carers, in particular the way that much support ceased to be available at this crucial age despite a requirement for them to continue in some form of learning until age 18.

"All stops at 16, no help for sixth form and as issues and delays with applying for EHC plan we are now fully unsupported with the transition and the needs remain. Even with support in senior school we have had to teach large areas of the curriculum at home and spend considerable time tutoring him."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

"He has had a "go to" member of staff at school who has been a lifeline. HOWEVER, PP+ [Pupil Premium Plus] FINISHES AT 16 SO HE NOW HAS 2 YEARS WITH NO SUPPORT FROM THE GOVT, DESPITE THEM INSISTING HE STAYS IN EDUCATION - THAT'S NOT RIGHT!"

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"He had pastoral support at secondary school which was amazing. This was not discussed and no transition of information was made to the college. College pastoral support has been disappointing. College made it difficult for his counsellor to attend sessions on the premises whereas the secondary school were very accommodating!"

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

19 Department for Education (2023) Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18

20 Welsh Government (2023) Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): 2023

Special educational needs amongst kinship children in England



Nearly half of kinship children in England had a special educational need or disability.

According to kinship carer respondents, nearly half (47%) of children in our survey cohort in England had some kind of special educational need or disability. This is substantially higher than the proportion of all pupils with special educational needs in England (17.3%).²¹

This proportion is broadly aligned with prevalence of special educational needs found in other groups supported by children's social care, and reflects similar findings from wider research around the prevalence of SEND in kinship children.²¹ 58% of children looked after in care for more than 12 months, 45% of children looked after for less than 12 months, 50% of children in need, and 41% of children on child protection plans have identified SEN.²³

For each kinship child in their care, we asked responding kinship carers to specify across a range of SEND categories whether or not they had received a formal diagnosis or if needs were suspected but not yet diagnosed.

The most commonly diagnosed types of SEND for children represented in our survey cohort were social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH), autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and learning difficulties, and the most commonly suspected but not yet diagnosed were attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), SEMH and ASD. The table below outlines the ten most commonly diagnosed or suspected types of SEND for kinship children in England as a percentage of the total relevant cohort from our survey.

SEND type	Diagnosed	Suspected	Diagnosed or suspected
Social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH)	13%	18%	31%
Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)	11%	18%	28%
Attachment disorder or difficulties	9%	17%	27%
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	7%	18%	26%
Learning difficulties	11%	11%	22%
Sensory needs (i.e. vision, hearing or multi-sensory impairment)	8%	8%	16%
Speech, language and communications needs (SLCN)	10%	5%	15%
CPTSD or PTSD	2%	9%	11%
Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)	2%	7%	9%
Physical disability	3%	1%	4%

21 Department for Education (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England

22 Hunt, J (2020) Two decades of UK research on kinship care: an overview

23 Department for Education (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England

**Nearly one third of kinship children in England had diagnosed or suspected social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH).**

That social, emotional and mental health needs are the most commonly diagnosed or suspected type of SEND amongst kinship children is unsurprising given their likely experiences of trauma, separation and loss before entering kinship care. This also aligns with what we know about the primary type of special educational need for other social care groups such as children looked after for more than 12 months and children in need, where SEMH represents the primary identified need for over half and over one third respectively of those with SEN.²⁴

Although the level of children's social, emotional and mental health needs can vary, the childhood adversity faced by the majority of kinship children before coming to live with their kinship carer and ongoing challenges managing the impact of early life trauma when in kinship care, compounded by a lack of appropriate and available support, can leave many kinship families at breaking point. In 2022, over half of kinship carers told us their child(ren) had behaviours which were difficult to manage, and a quarter had experienced child-on-carer violence.²⁵ Last year, 12% of kinship carers told us they were concerned about their ability to continue caring for their children in the next year, with 2 in 5 of those specifically mentioning challenges with often violent behaviour and difficulty accessing support for their kinship children's mental health and special educational needs.²⁶

**More than 1 in 10 kinship children in England had a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).**

Autistic spectrum disorder is also very common amongst this cohort: kinship children in England represented in our survey were around 10 times as likely to have a diagnosis of ASD when compared to 5-19 year olds in England²⁷, a similar prevalence to adopted children²⁸. The vast majority (89%) of kinship children in England with declared SEND had two or more diagnosed or suspected difficulties. This reflects what we commonly hear from kinship carers about the multiple challenges their children face in education owing to the complexity of their identified needs and the lack of appropriately tailored support.

Sarah

Sarah, 39, and her partner Matt, 42, from Woking in Surrey, took over the care of her two-year-old nephew, Craig*, in 2019 when his parents were no longer able to look after him.

"We had an initial honeymoon period which led us into a false sense of security, as he became aggressive, kicking, punching and biting me. The damage could be quite severe. He would be happily playing with his wooden train set one minute and throwing pieces at me the next minute. He would grab our pets and pull their tails. I had never seen this kind of behaviour before.

24 Department for Education (2023) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England

25 Kinship (2022) The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022

26 Kinship (2023) Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis

27 NHS Digital (2017) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017: Autism spectrum, eating and other less common disorders

28 Adoption UK (2023) The Adoption Barometer: A stocktake of adoption in the UK

Sarah *contd.*

Our lives changed instantly when Craig came into our lives. He wouldn't sleep and constantly screamed and slammed doors. I loved him but I struggled with his behaviours and felt that I couldn't cope. I was up until the early hours most nights trying to find out as much as I could and joining support groups because no-one was helping us. I didn't want Craig* to grow up thinking these behaviours were ok and felt I had to do something because his behaviours would be so much worse when he was 15.*

I learnt about adverse childhood experiences and thought 'that's what this is' and realised he needed to learn healthy ways to manage his feelings. The local authority finally organised for him to see an occupational therapist. But we were stunned when she thought he would become violent and advised us to think about placing him in a secure specialist unit. I cried my eyes out. This wasn't support!

For three years we struggled to get any proper help from the local authority and in the meantime, we had to deal with his aggressive behaviours every day. I got to the stage where I had to leave the family home for a couple of days and stay with my mum. She encouraged me to see my GP, who diagnosed compassion fatigue and burn out.

I remember being so upset, and angry. I felt I'd done my best but couldn't go on, so I called the local authority and said, 'you need to get someone here now and pick him up because I can't do this anymore'. They put me through to a lovely lady who reassured me that they would have support for us within two weeks and that's when Lisa, our project worker from Kinship came round and changed my life overnight. I remember, she said to me 'you don't have to feel alone anymore, I'm going to help you,' and she did."

With Kinship's support over the last two years, Craig* has accessed a diagnosis for autism and ADHD and has been accessing the right therapeutic and emotional support. Lisa has also ensured that the family were receiving financial help and bursaries to access further support for Craig*, such as after school clubs and sensory items.

"Thanks to Lisa, Craig no longer has any aggressive outbursts, and we feel like our lives have been transformed. She has helped us in so many different ways. I am so thankful. Without the support from Kinship, Craig* would be back in the system, and I would have felt as though I'd let him down. Our placement almost broke down but now we're a happy family.*

We had our last session with Lisa last week and we feel ready to face the world. Before Lisa, it felt as though we were trudging through murky water but now it's like we're having a lovely swim in clear blue water. When I wake up in the morning, I don't fear or dread the day, I look forward to it."

Support for kinship children's special educational needs

In our 2022 annual survey report – *The Cost of Loving* – we found that, whilst provision for kinship children's additional needs at school or college was generally more commonplace than support for physical or mental health needs, there were very few children growing up in kinship care with learning needs who didn't require some kind of additional professional support in education.²⁹

For most types of SEND, many more kinship children were suspected to have needs than had received a diagnosis. This suggests that many kinship carers are struggling to ensure their children get an assessment and diagnosis; kinship carers told us these were crucial to better understanding their children's needs and how best to support them, and to accessing relevant help from the local authority, school, health services or other provider.



Kinship children in England were over three times more likely to have an EHC plan than all pupils, but far less likely than other social care groups.

Kinship children represented in our 2023 annual survey cohort for England were over three times more likely to have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan (15%) than all pupils (4%). A further quarter (24%) had SEN support status – this is again significantly higher than for all pupils in England (13%)³⁰ – and a further fifth (21%) did not have either an EHC plan or SEN support status but had reported that support was needed and/or that an assessment for an EHC plan had been requested.

However, unlike the comparable prevalence of special educational needs to other social care groups, the proportion of kinship children with SEND who have an EHC plan or SEN support status is much lower. 30% of children looked after for more than 12 months have an EHC plan – double the proportion of children in kinship care – and a similar level is seen in children in need (28%). Although, kinship children are around as likely to have either an EHC plan or SEN support status (39%) as children with a child protection plan (41%).³¹ The SEND code of practice recognises the importance of addressing special educational needs in the stability of looked after children's lives and says that local authorities “*should be particularly aware of the need to avoid any delays for looked after children and carry out the EHC needs assessment in the shortest possible timescale*”, but this is only relevant for children in kinship foster care.³²

The high levels of special educational need identified within our survey cohort of kinship children – similar to that seen in other social care groups – but comparably much lower levels of formalised support through the SEND system is likely to be causing significant challenges for kinship families.

The Public Accounts Committee said in 2020 that “*children with SEND but who do not have EHC plans risk missing out on the support they need, especially in mainstream schools that are under significant financial pressure*”.³³ In an absence of funding and resources for children with SEND across the health and education systems, many families are turning to the “*legislative guarantee of support*” provided by an EHC plan.³⁴

²⁹ Kinship (2022) *The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022*

³⁰ Department for Education (2023) *Special educational needs in England*

³¹ Department for Education (2023) *Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England*

³² Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care (2015) *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years*

³³ House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2020) *Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities*

³⁴ Children's Commissioner for England (2024) *New statistics on Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) for children with special educational needs* [Published 29 January 2024]

However, substantial numbers of children with complex needs are missing out on support through an EHC plan. Rising demand and insufficient funding has led to significant budget deficits for local authorities to the extent that emergency 'safety valve' financial support from the Department for Education has been conditional on councils agreeing to make significant cuts to SEND provision in their areas.³⁵ The inevitable result of this artificial demand suppression has led to a success rate of more than 98% for those families who appeal SEND support decisions made by local authorities.³⁶ The Department for Education's most recent annual report now acknowledges an upgraded "*critical – very likely*" risk that high needs cost pressures are leading to the SEND and AP system becoming "*financially unsustainable*".³⁷ The National Audit Office (NAO) is scheduled to look at the Department for Education's support for SEND and Alternative Provision in England in the Autumn of 2024³⁴ following an earlier damning report published in 2019³⁹.

This ongoing crisis in SEND support is therefore likely to be disproportionately disadvantaging children in kinship care and too their carers who continue to battle for the support they need. We heard from a number of kinship carers who found the process of getting a diagnosis and/or support through an EHC plan to be immensely difficult, often having exhausted any and all available support available from the school or elsewhere before this point, with multiple agencies, actors and processes acting as barriers to securing the help they felt their children needed.

"School tries hard but has only just agreed to support an application for EHC plan. He meets most of his educational targets so they think it is unlikely to succeed with LA."

Grandparent with a child arrangements order made in private proceedings

"None of the support is useful as the only form of legal documentation that a school or Academy will accept is in the form of an EHC plan. We have asked the school for help and they said they need a diagnosis for that to happen. We get a diagnosis and now they say that they can't help without an EHC plan in place."

Uncle with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"EHC plan needed for eldest, turned down even with diagnosis. Counselling desperately required for bereavement and associated depression and anxiety"

Grandparent with child arrangements order made following care proceedings

"It feels as the bare minimum of time is afforded to my child and this has been picked up by him. I have had to request a EHC plan as the school have said the interventions they have provided have not helped."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"After high level complaints to our LA, escalating with Ofsted inspector, and going to verge of tribunal with EHC plan due to inability to access education due to developmental trauma and an inadequate EHC plan, we secured a funded place at our chosen SEN school and a therapy package with Family Futures organisation."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

35 Department for Education (2022) Guidance on our intervention work with local authorities

36 Ministry of Justice (2023) Tribunal Statistics Quarterly: July to September 2023

37 Department for Education (2024) Department for Education consolidated annual report and accounts 2023 to 2024

38 National Audit Office (2024) Work in progress: Support for children and young people with special educational needs [Accessed 15 July 2024]

39 National Audit Office (2019) Report: Support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in England

Some respondents spoke of the EHC plan unlocking high-quality support, but others suggested plans were often not adhered to or agreed support delivered poorly.

"The EHC plan has enabled [name] to have 1 to 1 support for 4 years which has enabled him to catch up with the rest of his class."

Step grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Had to fight for every little bit of help she gets the school just seems to ignore the EHC plan"

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"It's too hard to access and when schools get funding for the EHC plan they misuse it and it does not go to benefit the child. There needs to be more accountability."

Other relative with child arrangements order made following care proceedings

"Frequent conversations with class teacher regarding her struggles with school work but never taken seriously. No support from teaching assistants, they were to support the children under EHC plans."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

Jo

Jo, 63, is a special guardian who lives in Huddersfield with her 68-year-old husband. They took over the care of a relative's newborn baby when the parent was unable to look after her.

"Social services said they would take the baby into care if no-one stepped up for her, so obviously we did."

The first signs of trauma started to show when she started school. She would worry terribly all the time that we wouldn't pick her up. But her main worries have always been that we are going to abandon her, or we are going to die. She catastrophises and is in a heightened state all the time.

It's been an uphill struggle to convince the authorities that she needs support. She can't concentrate and relax into learning at school because she has all these anxieties, so she's missed out on a lot. She also has very poor self-esteem. She thinks 'if my mum doesn't like me, how can anyone else?'

She often says things like 'I don't want to be in this world anymore', 'I wish I had never been born', 'I wish I would die'. It's heart-breaking. She has had long periods out of school when she has been in crisis, and I have struggled to get help from CAMHS. Basically, she's fallen between the cracks.

I did manage to get eight weeks of counselling for her two years ago when she was out of school for six months but only because I went to the local mental health trust and sat in the director of nursing's office and refused to leave. I was desperate but eight weeks wasn't anywhere near enough. She needs sustained proper specialist therapy to help her process her emotions."

After years of battling, Jo has managed to get an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan, which means her kinship child will finally get classroom support for a couple of hours every day.

Jo *contd.*

"However, there's still nothing for her out of school hours, or in the school holidays when she struggles the most. And I fear things will get worse with secondary school approaching and hormones kicking in.

We absolutely love her and would not want our lives to be any different but it's really hard. The constant fighting to get support is exhausting. She should get the help she needs."

Additional learning needs amongst kinship children in Wales⁴⁰

In Wales, a new unified system of support for children is currently being rolled out which introduces a new term – additional learning need (ALN) – to replace existing systems for special educational needs in schools and learning difficulties and/or disabilities in further education.



More than one third of kinship children in Wales had an additional learning need.

More than one third (36%) of Welsh respondents' kinship children were reported to have an additional learning need. Although this is a significantly lower proportion than for kinship children in our English survey cohort reported to have special educational needs, it still suggests a nearly three times greater prevalence of additional learning needs or special educational needs than for all pupils in Wales (13.4%)⁴¹. In comparison, 54% of children receiving care and support in Wales have additional learning needs or special educational needs.⁴²

Social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH) and autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) were the most commonly diagnosed or suspected type of additional learning need amongst children in kinship care in Wales at 38% and 31% respectively, common with their peers in England. The Welsh cohort also demonstrated similar complexity and prevalence of multiple needs; the majority (83%) of kinship children who were reported to have an additional learning need had more than one diagnosed or suspected need, and over half (56%) had four or more needs.

Support for kinship children's additional learning needs

Children and young people with additional learning needs in Wales will have an Individual Development Plan (IDP); these are replacing all existing plans including statements of special education needs. There were more than 10,000 pupils with IDPs under the new ALN system in Wales in January 2023, representing just over 2% of all pupils in local authority maintained schools.⁴³ Welsh kinship children represented by our survey cohort were around five times more likely than all pupils to have an IDP (11%), and a further 19% did not but had requested an assessment – although overall sample sizes are fairly low.

⁴⁰ Our smaller survey cohort of kinship children in Wales (134) than in England (2270) means that percentages should be seen as indicative rather than robustly representative.

⁴¹ Welsh Government (2023) Schools' census results: January 2023

⁴⁰ Welsh Government (2023) Children Receiving Care and Support Census: on 31 March 2022

⁴³ Welsh Government (2023) Schools' census results: January 2023

The impact of trauma and adversity for kinship children in education

The vast majority of children in kinship care have experienced trauma, separation and loss. The circumstances which lead to a child entering a kinship care arrangement are often very similar to the reasons why a child might enter the local authority care system – in many cases, they are the very same children. In our 2022 annual survey, 54% of kinship carers said their kinship children had experienced abuse or neglect⁴⁴, this is comparable with primary needs identified for other social care groups, including looked after children⁴⁵. This isn't true just for those children in formalised arrangements supported intensively by the child welfare system: wider research has explored how experiences of abuse and neglect, drug and alcohol abuse and parental mental illness are common too for informal kinship families and those secured by a legal order made in private law proceedings.⁴⁶



Almost half of kinship carers said their children's adverse experiences in childhood had negatively impacted on their ability to cope in education.

Experiences of childhood adversity before coming into kinship care have a substantial impact on children's development. This can lead to significant ongoing challenges for their social, emotional and physical wellbeing – and both the ability of their kinship carers to manage and support this in the home environment and for teachers and other support staff to do so in a school or other education environment. Almost half (48%) of kinship carers said their children's adverse experiences in childhood had negatively impacted on their ability to cope in education. The higher prevalence of special educational needs and disabilities amongst children in kinship care reflects the legacy that childhood trauma has on a child's ability to cope well in school and beyond.

Many who grow up in kinship care do heal and thrive in education through high-quality support from their caregivers and other professionals. But our evidence suggests this is too often lacking for kinship families. When we asked kinship carers what support they wanted to see introduced to help their kinship children succeed in education, the vast majority spoke to the urgent need to address emotional and mental health support and prioritise this as the foundation for their children's learning. There was a very strong sense from respondents that additional catch-up support, tutoring or other academic or learning interventions would be wasted unless sufficient efforts were targeted towards identifying and supporting special educational or additional learning needs, and particularly addressing social, emotional and behavioural challenges.

"The children have had tutoring which has been useful but nothing has been done to help manage / address their underlying issues (ADHD and slow processing)."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

"[We need a] plan around meeting social and emotional needs."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"I have been asking for the last 12 months for help with trauma."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

44 Kinship (2022) The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022

45 Department for Education (2023) Children looked after in England including adoptions

46 Selwyn et al (2013) The Poor Relations? Children and Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out

"Therapy to help with aftermath of ACE. 1 to 1 support so she can access outdoors at play and lunch. Proper sensory breaks (not a walk to another building). Qualified teaching input. Proper quiet space in school when over stimulated. Peer groups for other children in kinship care."

Grandparent and private CAO

"Support with past trauma, therapy etc that could be put into place quickly rather than waiting months."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

Many kinship carer respondents called for improved training around trauma and its impact on learning and behaviour for teachers and other education professionals to ensure their children and others who have faced similar experiences are better recognised and supported. Some referred specifically to common diagnoses of SEMH and other special educational or additional learning needs across kinship children and the need for improved understanding and awareness of how to support these and the reasons why their children might have difficulties in the classroom given their experiences.

"[There should be] training for teachers. Parents are given attachment training, PACE, speak easy, ASD, ADHD and lots of other training to be able to support our children after all the trauma they have endured. Schools have our children to look after for around 7 hours a day and every teacher should be made to attend all of the above training and more so they can hopefully understand why a child may behave the way they are or what help they need in a better way than what they are providing at the moment."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Education and training of educators around emotional trauma and the impact this can have on a child's presentation. Less reliance on exclusions because child can't cope."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"These difficulties don't just happen at home they are there with them all the time, outside socialising and within the school setting. [We need] the school to support what I'm trying to achieve at home and not give up on them. Abandonment issues don't stop when they are in school and for the child to hear from teacher that maybe mainstream school isn't for them as they don't know how to handle her is another form of abandonment to this child, another reason to feel shame and worthless."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Mandatory training for all school staff in effect of emotional trauma suffered through separation. All staff, not just TAs."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"[We need] teachers that are educated in understanding children with abandonment issues, anxiety, emotional issues and immaturity. A school system that allows the children time to grow and trust who is around them and not expect them to always follow the rigid rules and policies that allows a school to abandon them."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

More specifically, kinship carers wanted to see the unique needs and experiences of kinship families recognised and understood within the educational community and in professional practice, and the diversity of family arrangements more broadly celebrated.

"School staff need more awareness training on what it means to be a Kinship child and how different this is from fostering or adoption."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

"There needs to be more training and understanding towards children in kinship care. Perhaps a book/leaflet that can be passed to teachers/schools with the child explaining their background and the effects these have had, and behaviour that may be the result of this"

Aunt with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

"Generally a better recognition in schools that all families are different and not this overpromotion of a mum and a dad being the standard model. The second a child feels different, however much you work to help them understand and feel loved, all that is limited by the world that is painted for them. This of course goes beyond kinship carers but to all unique family setups that we see now. It all needs to be celebrated."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

Ali

Ali*, 30, grew up in kinship care.

"I always felt different and the odd one out growing up because at school classmates would always ask 'why do you live with your nan?' I never knew what to say because I didn't even know or understand why I lived with my nan. I tried to ask her but she wouldn't tell me the truth. I know she was trying to protect me but I didn't really understand why things were the way they were. I felt like I was the only person being raised by their nan.

These comments made me feel really bad about myself and I became so isolated and angry. When I was a teenager, I started to behave badly and get in trouble at school and I wasn't able to pay attention in class or study. Teachers would yell at me for not doing my homework and I wouldn't be able to explain that there was too much going on at home or inside my head to do it.

I also think I might have ADHD – I haven't been diagnosed but my mind is always racing and I'm very impulsive. I ended up losing contact with my best friend because of how I was behaving and acting out which made things even more difficult. Causing mayhem at school was my way of distracting myself from the thoughts in my mind.

I tried to talk to teachers about what was going on with me but they weren't interested in understanding. I really needed somebody to listen to me. I felt rejected by almost everybody and so I gave up. I felt embarrassed and ashamed. When I was 18, I broke down and felt like I didn't want to be here anymore."

CHILDREN IN KINSHIP CARE ARE STRUGGLING WITH THEIR MENTAL HEALTH, AND EMOTIONAL AND THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT FOR THIS GROUP IS LACKING

Mental health difficulties in kinship children

Research suggests there is a high prevalence of mental health difficulties amongst children in kinship care and that they are likely to have worse emotional and behavioural outcomes than children in the general population.⁴⁷ Our *Growing Up In Kinship Care* study found that young people who grew up in kinship care had a prevalence of mental health disorders and learning difficulties similar to care leavers.⁴⁸



More than half of kinship carers said their kinship children had mental health difficulties.

This was also reflected in our 2023 annual survey responses: more than half (51%) of kinship carers said their kinship children had mental health difficulties, and a further 16% said they didn't know. As a comparison, in 2023, about 1 in 5 (20.3%) of children aged 8 to 16 years old in England had a probable mental health disorder.⁴⁹ Other research suggests that 45% of looked after children have a diagnosable mental health condition.⁵⁰

Accessing emotional and therapeutic support



43% of kinship carers said their children had accessed emotional or therapeutic support.

For kinship carers who had managed to access support for their children's mental health challenges, many celebrated the difference this had made and spoke about the value that therapeutic approaches had for their emotional health and wellbeing. Although these approaches took many forms, responses from kinship carers suggested play therapy was more common than other forms of support.

"ILS [Integrated Listening Therapy] from the local authority - immensely professional when we got it and very pertinent."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

"They both had art expression therapy which I feel helped a great deal."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Regular play therapy has been very helpful for him to manage his emotions and articulate feelings."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

"One to one session to cope with life/school challenges (bullying, understand why she is not with her biological parents and manage her emotions). They recommend strategies and techniques that aim to make life easier, for example, how to manage a panic attack, how to improve sleep or how best to communicate with family and friends, etc."

Friend carer with other kinship arrangement

47 Hunt (2020) Two Decades of UK Research on Kinship Care: An Overview

48 Wellard et al (2017) Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood

49 NHS Digital (2023) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey

50 NICE: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2021) Looked-after children and young people: NICE guideline ING205|

"It has helped with both of them seeing a Psychologist Play Therapist every week term time, due to their Developmental Trauma."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

However, even where support had been accessed, responding kinship carers spoke about the battles they had fought with the local authority and other agencies to secure this and the impact this had on themselves and their children. This echoes our 2022 annual survey report – *The Cost of Loving* – where 65% of kinship carers said accessing mental health support was either 'difficult' or 'very difficult' compared to 48% for those accessing physical health support.⁵¹ The results illustrated that there was significant unmet demand for mental health support in particular for children growing up in kinship care, and that even where this support was being provided, kinship families were struggling to access this easily.

"Getting that support was the hardest thing. As elderly carers the fight was stressful, we thought our boy was going to die. It took far too long to get the help and without the support of paediatric community nurses I don't think he would have survived."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

"The counselling was arranged by school pastoral Leads and SEN. All organised and paid for by the schools. The younger one benefited greatly for this one to one time each week. The impact of Early Childhood Trauma gradually begins to revealed itself as the child grow and my husband and I constantly fight for support for these children."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Long term play therapy applied for by children's services after we reported we were at breaking point and considering suing children's services for breaching the court approved support plan."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"He received play therapy via his primary school. I asked social services for support but was turned down."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

Michael

Michael*, 54, and his wife **Sally***, 54, live in Doncaster, and are special guardians to their three grandchildren who came to live with them in 2017 when their parents were unable to look after them.

"Our grandchildren had suffered severe neglect, hunger, and physical harm before they came to us. The smallest one ended up in hospital covered in bruises with severe malnutrition. It was heart-breaking, and the trauma of their experiences continues daily.

Before he came into our care, he used to get so hungry, he'd eat scraps out of the bin. He'll still look in our bin when he's walking past, just to see what's there. It's embedded in him. We think the smallest is probably autistic, but it's a two-year struggle to get him diagnosed and we're not getting any help.

We're trying to get a CAMHS referral for our granddaughter but getting her school on board is almost impossible and we're going round in circles. She also needs grief counselling as she was close to her dad and thought he was a hero, but he died due to ill health. Really,

⁵¹ Kinship (2022) *The Cost of Loving: annual survey of kinship carers 2022*

Michael *contd.*

she's lost both parents, as mum's out of the picture and she needs emotionally propping up by professionals.

You think the children are getting support at school but they're not. Our granddaughter is struggling at school. She pretends everything is ok and is good at masking what is going on. We are desperate for professional support.

We did get some play therapy for the grandchildren when I threatened to throw the special guardianship order in when I thought our marriage was going to breakdown. But it wasn't enough, and they all still need grief and emotional support alongside specialist support to help them deal with the trauma they've experienced."

As seen with the provision of educational support earlier in the report, easier access to emotional and therapeutic support was often dictated by whether or not the child was currently or previously in the local authority care system, with the 'looked after' status acting to remove barriers which prevented children from getting the support they needed.

"Younger child only got help after the placement with us broke down and we could no longer cope. Once she was back in the care system there was so much more help available including Dialectical Behavioural Therapy, Counselling and mentoring."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"It's been extremely slow going, it's taken over a year to get them to start an actual form of treatment or therapy."

Sibling and informal kinship carer

"We have had to fight for 5 years to be able to access therapy for a self-harming child who was sexually abused. No one at the local authority was willing to sign off on it even though they didn't have to fund it because no one deals with CAOs (even though there are so many children on CAO orders)."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"One child has had CAMHS one to one therapy due to previous carers persistency but soon as she was removed from their care this was winded down and now has monthly family therapy combined with art therapy at school. Other child has waited years to access therapy and now after 3 months of support the therapist is leaving and there has been talk of ceasing therapy."

Uncle with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"They received counselling with CAMHS, sleep clinic, and social services were involved briefly, but as they were dealing with abuse that had occurred outside of Wales and our kinship child was now considered to be in a safe home there was little they could offer as far as support, other than sympathetic words and telling us we were doing a great job, and admitting frustration that there was no financial support or other assistance they could provide us as we fell through the cracks due to not fitting existing categories. Thankfully the counselling was great and our kinship child started to build trust in the process whereas in the past she felt let down by the system who had failed to intervene when she was living at home."

Sibling and informal kinship carer

In addition, some kinship carers noted that the support their children had received hadn't made the difference they had hoped for a wide variety of reasons including a lack of consideration for the individual needs and experiences of their child, but most commonly due to the transient nature of support offered as short-term blocks with inconsistent delivery. Too many interventions were seen not to deliver the long-term support their children needed to build relationships with trusted adult professionals.

"An SGO support worker did some work in school with her but was only a certain number of weeks which helped whilst it was happening but seems to have gone backwards since stopped."

Step-grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Getting help has been a struggle, all that have been offered were short programmes which didn't work. High school arranged a councillor which made a massive impact and has really helped, this was not a set 6wk programme like the others were."

Friend carer with a child arrangements order made following care proceedings

"School counsellor/pupil support worker (1:1 and small group) was working quite well for his anxiety and social interaction difficulties but she left school for another job in May 2023."

Grandparent with a child arrangements order made in private proceedings

"Trauma counselling, play therapy was useful but not long enough, youngest child built up a bond was then upset when treatment stopped, felt abandoned again."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"I know myself from working with my brilliant foster worker, other professionals and GP that issues/ difficulties do not resolve quickly and sometimes help put in place doesn't always work or needs to be revisited and other options tried. These children are not a quick fix at home or at school. I fostered/SGO these children to give them love, stability, patience, understanding and time to work through any difficulties they may face as they try to understand [their] new unconventional reality."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings



More than a quarter of kinship carers said their children hadn't received emotional or therapeutic support but that it was needed.

A significant proportion of respondents – more than one quarter (27%) – said that their kinship children hadn't ever received emotional or therapeutic support but that this was needed. Respondents were keen to emphasise the lengths they'd gone to in their attempts to secure support via the local authority or through other means despite children's services often having awareness about the social, emotional and mental health needs of their children.

"We asked local authority for emotional support/therapy for eldest in July 22. My partner & myself were forced to do therapeutic parenting course or they wouldn't proceed. Then they as yet haven't proceeded. This lengthy delay has resulted in numerous conflicts with birth mother, police involvement and still not decided on an action plan."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Learning about FASD from a FASD specialist. Help & support has been withheld by our LA for years to the point where it's now too late to benefit my child."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"The detachment from their mum caused some emotional distress and behaviour issues that I was unable to resolve and was unable to get help from local authority to assist in finding therapy to support the child."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Both children have received bereavement counselling which we arranged not children's services. The elder child has anger and emotional problems which his school and children's services are aware of but are unwilling to provide support and assistance again it is something we are trying to organise and provide."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

Meryl*

Meryl*, 51, and her partner live in Cambridgeshire and took in her two grandchildren in 2021 when they were aged six and two years old.

"Trying to get any kind of therapeutic support is like smacking your head against a brick wall. Crucial paperwork has been lost by the local authority which means these poor kids are not getting the support they need. It's all so difficult and daunting."

"My grandchildren have had traumatic starts to their lives and my grandson remembers things that happened before he came to us which are very disturbing. Nine times out of ten, kinship carers like us don't have any idea what the children have been through, but we do know they've experienced trauma."

"I've had to fight for the little support they get, which amounts to a play therapy session after school once a week and access to a special education needs support worker who supports all the pupils in the school one day a week and it's not enough. It's so frustrating, I feel like I'm pulling my hair out every day."

"My granddaughter is five years old and has not had proper therapeutic support, even though she shows inappropriate behaviours. I would like to see them both attend a safe place where they can express themselves freely through art therapy and where families can talk about their experiences and experts can give them the support they need."

"Kinship carers are expected to be therapists, psychologists and counsellors. I have independently put myself on courses to understand how trauma can affect them, with no support from the local authority, but most kinship carers won't be able to do this. Both grandchildren need to be in therapeutic and educational supportive settings. If they don't get the right support at the right time, we don't know what will happen later on."

"I'll keep fighting to the ends of the earth to help them and they have both improved and are learning to express their emotions instead of being aggressive. But this is through what we are doing, not through any support we've been given. They have a routine and smiles on their faces, which is great to see but they need professional therapeutic support."

For some kinship carers, a lack of forthcoming support from the local authority or through CAMHS or the school had led them to fund private support out of their own pockets. With nowhere to turn to and often increasingly urgent difficulties faced by their children, this was the only option which some kinship carers felt they had to prevent escalation of violent behaviour or worsening mental health.



Around 1 in 8 kinship carers had paid for therapeutic support for their children out of their own pockets, rising to 1 in 5 for informal kinship carers or those with a legal order secured in private proceedings.

Around 1 in 8 (13%) of kinship carers had used their own money to pay for therapeutic support for their children, and a further quarter (24%) were actively considering doing so in the near future. However, this again varied by the type of kinship arrangement. As many as 1 in 5 informal kinship carers or kinship carers with a legal order secured in private proceedings had done so compared to only 1 in 9 kinship foster carers. This may well be due to the additional entitlements available to children who are 'looked after' in local authority care within their kinship fostering arrangement, whereas children in less formalised kinship arrangements are very unlikely to have any entitlements to mental health support. Many kinship families won't be in a financial position where they can comfortably pay for ongoing private therapeutic support. Poverty and kinship care are inextricably linked due to the often challenging 'starting position' for kinship carers who take on the role, compounded by the lack of financial and workplace support. 1 in 10 kinship carers told us last year that they had run out of food in the previous two weeks and couldn't afford to buy more⁵², and Census 2021 analysis highlights that over two-thirds of kinship households are deprived in one or more dimensions⁵³.

"Currently paying privately as 20 month waiting list for CAMHS. We can't afford this long term. Child has many issues resulting in self harm."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Support is an ongoing battle. Fighting for ASF funding for counselling currently paying privately but not sufficient sessions because we can't afford it."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"We paid for play therapy, for 2 years. This happened every week, cost us £70 per week. We eventually stopped as we couldn't afford it."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"We are still reviving support from ASF. But it is costing us £50 a week for travel since my husband can no longer drive."

Great grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Family therapy earlier would have been helpful, but we couldn't afford it with the solicitors bills and schooling."

Friend carer with a child arrangements order made in private proceedings

When asked what support kinship carers wanted to see provided for their children for mental health challenges, respondents to our survey offered a range of different therapeutic approaches but also highlighted the importance of training for kinship carers and wider professionals on trauma, additional opportunities for timely assessments which provide diagnoses, as well as wider non-therapeutic emotional and peer support.

⁵² Kinship (2023) Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis

⁵³ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021

"Access to school councillor, provision for specialist therapy, full training for kinship carers on how to support children with trauma, practical strategies."

Aunt and kinship foster carer

"The best support would be enough trauma trained staff to listen to and understand him and our family issues and concerns."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

"Help from social services from them and also for us, so they we can better support our kinship child. Because we've had barley any training or support in how to help him with his PTSD etc."

Sibling and informal kinship carer

"Automatic assessment for all children either in or leaving local authorities care to go to a kinship family and all children in kinship care that was arranged privately in order to avoid the child going into care. The waiting times are ridiculous and the children who have suffered already continue to do so. The incidence of mental health and ASD issues coupled with trauma is high and should be recognised as a priority."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

"Meeting other children in the same situation so they don't feel like they are different it would help with confidence and help them to talk with someone going through the same experience."

Sibling with a child arrangements order made following care proceedings

Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) funds therapeutic services for eligible adoptive, special guardianship and child arrangements order families in England. It is available for children and young people up to and including the age of 21 (or 25 with an EHC plan) where the child was previously looked after, and families apply to the relevant local authority or Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) who then assess eligibility and apply directly to the ASGSF, purchasing support from their own list of suppliers when approved. Funding is currently available until the end of March 2025 to support with the costs of specialist assessment and therapy.

Awareness and understanding amongst kinship families



1 in 7 kinship carers with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings had accessed support via the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund.

Around 1 in 7 (14.5%) kinship carers with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings (and who therefore are very likely to be eligible) told us they had accessed support for their family via the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund. This is significantly lower than for other eligible groups; a recent survey of adoptive parents found that 50% were receiving support via the Fund in 2023.⁵⁴

The National Kinship Care Strategy, published in December 2023, rebranded the then Adoption Support Fund as the Adoption and Special Guardianship Fund to try and boost awareness and applications from eligible kinship families. This followed only 13% of applications to the Fund coming from special guardianship families despite more children having left the care system each year through this route than via adoption since 2019.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Adoption UK (2024) The Adoption Barometer: A stocktake of adoption in England

⁵⁵ Department for Education (2023) Children looked after in England including adoptions

We know that more than £250 million has been committed in total funding since 2019/20 through the ASGSF via nearly 77,000 approved applications, but inconsistent recording practices and varying structures for supporting eligible SGO or CAO applications through local authorities or RAAs means we cannot see exactly how this splits across different types of eligible families.⁵⁶

Previous evaluation of the Adoption Support Fund found that awareness levels were lower amongst special guardians than for adoptive parents⁵⁷, and the Review of the Adoption Support Fund COVID-19 Scheme also suggested that “SGO families may need a different approach, particularly to marketing support for them”⁵⁸. Whilst the impact of the rebranding is yet to be seen, it is unclear as to how else the Department for Education plans to boost awareness of the Fund amongst eligible families and the services and professionals who support them in order to close the stark gap in applications and awarded funding.

Although a step in the right direction, the renaming decision also oddly continues to omit eligible child arrangements order families despite their inclusion within the eligibility criteria since April 2022, risking those families and those supporting them being unaware they can apply. Indeed, survey respondents caring for children under a child arrangements order made following care proceedings were more likely to say they didn't think they were eligible than to say they had received support or applied for the Fund, reflecting the need to do much more to raise awareness amongst this recently eligible cohort.

Delivering appropriate therapeutic support for kinship families

For a small number of kinship carers who responded to our survey, therapeutic support accessed via the ASGSF had been incredibly valuable for their child and helped unlock the professional intervention they needed to support healing from trauma.

“Has accessed support for play therapy using ASF which helps to support some of her emotional needs.”

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

“ASF money used for therapy for both children and has been incredibly useful in helping them to deal with past trauma.”

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

“Once we had reached the point of more intense therapeutic life story work, which both we and the therapist thought there needed to be more emotional maturity both with our granddaughter and also her parents, we moved onto Sensory Integration work. That has offered a lot to our granddaughter in understanding how her body feels with various emotions, has helped with developing strategies that she can use to help self-regulate, and it has also helped the school team understand her needs better.”

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

“Again, a sympathetic member of [LA] children's services, managed to access ASF for us despite the fact that the children are not LAC. We were on the brink of the SGO breaking down because my husband and I were in desperate need of support. The therapeutic support for us and our eldest was invaluable.”

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made in private proceedings

⁵⁶ Department for Education (2024) Data table published 27 March 2024 in response to written question UIN19415 from Caroline Ansell MP.

⁵⁷ Department for Education (2022) Evaluation of the adoption support fund 2018 to 2022

⁵⁸ Department for Education (2021) Review of the adoption support fund COVID-19 scheme

However, the National Kinship Care Strategy also highlighted anecdotal evidence which suggested Fund applications for children in kinship care were more complex than those for adoptive families and that those children had a different set of support needs. Indeed, evaluation of the Adoption Support Fund found that the extent to which the Fund was seen to have positively helped carers and their children was lower amongst special guardians than for adoptive parents.⁵⁹ As such, the Department for Education committed in the National Kinship Care Strategy to undertaking a formal analysis of the Fund's SGO and CAO applications and the therapies provided to understand how it is being used for kinship families.

As an isolated policy choice, the UK Government's rebranding efforts misdiagnoses many of the reasons why we know kinship families struggle to access the Fund. Our advice and support work with kinship carers suggests that many find local authority professionals to be lacking in the knowledge and capacity required to submit an application. Respondents to our survey had themselves faced numerous challenges in getting an application supported by their local authority due to misunderstandings about eligibility from practitioners or due to requirements that other therapeutic options have been exhausted prior to an application being sent. As families weren't able to apply directly themselves, the additional 'gatekeeping' layer of local authority approval slowed down applications and ultimately children getting access to therapy.

"I've tried to access ASF funding but barriers at the local authority mean I haven't been able to access this for several years. Staff at local authority said that because my child is going through ASD assessment we should wait until this is completed until applying for ASF funding which is highly inappropriate given my child is grieving for her sibling who passed away age 6."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"I applied to the adoption support fund twice and got turned down twice because I was a special guardian and not an adopter. I'm pretty sure they didn't know the rules on allowing special Guardians and our local authority didn't know they could use the adoption support fund because I haven't adopted this child I was refused."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"We applied for ASF for therapeutic life story work for our oldest child. But we were turned down by our LA who said SGO holders were not entitled to it. I knew this was wrong and made a formal complaint. My complaint was successful because they were in breach of the law. We still did not receive the funding however because [LA] did it know how to access it! An astonishing situation. Instead they funded it fully themselves from the LA budgets. We were happy with this as it didn't much matter where the money came from as long as we got it. And we received high quality therapy. But it is not a good situation for the LA to be in."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"ASF access. Child refused as not considered to have a big enough problem as well behaved in school environment."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"8 years of CAMHS and they are useless and they won't give me a supporting letter to say they cannot support so I can go ASF funding."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

59 Department for Education (2022) Evaluation of the adoption support fund 2018 to 2022

Kinship carers also regularly tell us that, even when an assessment is carried out and some support offered, approved local authority providers often don't have the expertise and understanding of kinship care to deliver support tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of kinship families. Respondents to our survey also shared that the support they received hadn't been as effective or appropriate as they'd hoped. Alongside increasing understanding and awareness, it is vital the Fund is reformed to better suit kinship families' contexts, and to ensure that kinship carers do not find their local authority unaware of or unwilling or unable to secure appropriate therapeutic support through the Fund even when they know it exists.

"She has been receiving therapeutic support funded from the adoption support fund for a number of years. It's difficult to evaluate its effectiveness as she is not making any progress."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"We pay privately for long term therapy from Youth Emotional Support Services. This was briefly paid for by the adoption support fund. But had to be reviewed every 6 weeks and we need long term consistent therapy not for it to be regularly stopped and reviewed."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Using the ASF was the most valuable support for my child and for me, but this would of been better if the support included the whole family as a unit including my north children who are also impacted."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"The support is never long term, it comes in short bursts and doesn't allow a trust to develop. Our child is slow to trust adults, given his history, so he is reluctant to engage with yet another stranger. Also CAMHS said he needed one sort of therapy and this has never been offered to us via the ASF. The LA prefer to use in house services or providers that they have a relationship with, not necessarily the best for the child."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

SOME KINSHIP CHILDREN NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT TO MANAGE CONTACT AND NAVIGATE THEIR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY

Contact with parents and family



Nearly 9 in 10 kinship carers said their child(ren) had ongoing contact with parents, and more than one third said they were also in contact with one or more siblings who didn't live with them.

The vast majority (88%) of kinship carers said their kinship child or children had ongoing contact with at least one parent; this is a slightly higher figure than might be expected given the 78% of kinship carers who reported so in both our 2022 and 2021 annual surveys.^{60,61}

More than one third (36%) of kinship carers said their child or children were in contact with one or more siblings they didn't live with. We know that sibling relationships for children in kinship care are incredibly important; a fifth of young people in our *Growing Up in Kinship Care* study had lost contact with a sibling or mourned the loss of closeness with a sibling where contact was only occasional, and they had strong and complex feelings of rejection, guilt and concern where relationships weren't present.⁶²

1 in 10 (10%) households were in contact with extended family members only. These wider familial links can also be crucial for experiences both now and into the future; enduring family links can help to maintain young people's social connectedness and provide an additional source of support into adult life, something which many young care leavers can lack when they 'age out' of the care system at age 18.⁶³

Managing contact

Ongoing contact with parents and other relatives acts as both a significant benefit and a key tension within kinship care: it can be one of its defining features. The desire to maintain family relationships is one of the main considerations for decisions made by family and friends to step up as a kinship carer, and for kinship carers, children's services and the family court in the pursuit of a particular type of kinship arrangement.



More than 1 in 4 kinship carers reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their children's current contact arrangements. 3 in 5 kinship carers whose children had ongoing contact said they experienced difficulties with the emotional impact of contact.

Research illustrates that parental contact in kinship care is highly variable, with ongoing contact experienced as both a protective factor for wellbeing, as well as problematic and negative for children.⁶⁴ Many kinship carers reported that poor quality and unreliable contact with parents and others served to compound some of the feelings of loss and rejection their kinship children were already struggling with. This leads to the feelings of dissatisfaction

60 Kinship (2022) *The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022*

61 Kinship (2021) *Kinship Care: State of the Nation Survey 2021*

62 Wellard et al (2017) *Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood*

63 Wellard et al (2017) *Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood*

64 Hunt, J (2020) *Two decades of UK research on kinship care: an overview*

and worry amongst kinship families as reflected in our own survey cohort, with more than a quarter (26%) saying they were not satisfied with their contact arrangements and 60% identifying that their kinship children experienced difficulties arising from the emotional impact of contact.

Manging this contact can be a particular challenge for kinship carers who may not know how best to support their kinship children whilst also navigating complex feelings of frustration, mistrust and anger and yet also sometimes loyalty, love and hope given their own relationships with the child's parent(s). In response to the question 'what is the hardest thing about being a kinship carer?', respondents in our 2022 annual survey report – *The Cost of Loving* – spoke to the often uniquely challenging family dynamics inherent in kinship care and the emotional fallout which resulted from the family's circumstances for both them and their children.⁶⁵

Responses from kinship carers in our survey highlighted the challenging nature of contact for their kinship children and the sometimes detrimental effects this had for them, and said that they wanted greater support for both their children and for themselves to better manage difficult relationships.

"[We got] Theraplay with psychotherapist. Most useful result of this was a professional recommendation that it was detrimental to the children to continue to have direct contact with birth mother. On this advice, we ceased direct contact and things are way more settled since."

Step-grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Support around relationship building attachment support ongoing due to the in and out of parent contact."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"I feel the youngest would benefit from some support now he is growing older. Even though he does see both parents it is the one-to-one contact as he misses them. He was non-verbal when he came back from care having been initially separated from his siblings in care. He was physically taken from his mother initially. He has severe learning difficulties as he has a duplicate chromosome. he has been diagnosed with ADHA, Autism, Hypermobility, dyslexia, and dyspraxia, as well as other conditions. It is so sad seeing him struggle with life."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Now he's seeing a psychologist (paid for by the ASF). He is struggling to use this but it is early days and birth mum is unreliable. Her drama often gives him cause for worry/ upsets him/does not show care... and so emotional trauma is current as he worried about her constantly."

Great grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

⁶⁵ Kinship (2022) *The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022*

Support with contact



Only 1 in 8 kinship families received local authority support with contact, although this varied considerably by the type of kinship arrangement. A further 1 in 4 (24%) families didn't receive support but felt this was needed.

13% of kinship carers of survey respondents told us they were receiving some local authority support to help manage contact, fairly significantly lower than the quarter (25%) of respondents who said they were within our 2022 annual survey.⁶⁶

This did track very closely with the type of kinship arrangement however, with more than 3 in 5 (62%) kinship foster carers receiving support compared to as little as 8% of special guardians where the order was made following care proceedings and only 1% of special guardians where the order was made in private proceedings. Support with contact, even more so than for other forms of kinship family support, is very much tied to the 'looked after' status which those children in kinship foster care have; this is likely due to the strength of the regulations and guidance on maintaining family links for children in care and the systems and practice in place to support this.

"Contact worker takes the children to contact with mother - LA provides taxis for mother."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

"Social Workers great support to me, we have a good team of caring people. Parents see children 3 times a week when we visit parks, have family meals."

Grandparent with a child arrangements order made following care proceedings

"Specialist program funded by LA with details provided to family court in a protracted and hostile dispute."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"SW [social worker] is supportive. Child is old enough to arrange own contact with support."

Step-grandparent and kinship foster carer

"Arrangements are discussed at care team meetings and children's SW sees them regularly."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

It's therefore unsurprising too that informal kinship carers were the most likely to say that they didn't receive support but that this was needed. Overall, around 1 in 4 (24%) of respondents said this was the case, rising to 38% of all informal kinship carers.

25% of kinship foster carers had contact facilitated through a contact centre; this experience was essentially unique to this group of kinship carers. For some special guardians where the order was made following care proceedings or those likely to move to this arrangement soon, they spoke both positively and negatively about being able to manage contact themselves and no longer having to use formalised and supervised contact mechanisms such as contact centres.

⁶⁶ Kinship (2022) The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022

"Parents allowed 12 hours contact a year. But I am allowed to monitor and manage contacts after years of contact centres etc."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Contact centre at first but court is on the 11th so they want family to take over and manage themselves."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

Poppy

Poppy, 23, lives in London and grew up in kinship care.

"I was so relieved when I moved in with my grandmother, because I knew I was safe, but it was confusing and overwhelming. Neither myself or my grandmother knew how to handle our relationship, or our relationships with my mother. My grandmother would try to protect me from what was going on in my family.

We didn't talk about everything that was going on much. It was all too painful and complicated and difficult, and I think my grandmother probably had no idea how to explain any of it to an 8-year-old. There was no-one to help us navigate any of it – we just struggled through it all by ourselves and did the best we could.

I felt guilty sometimes – my mum would ask when I was going back to live with her – I knew it wasn't what was best for me but it's hard, when you're just a kid, managing conversations like that. There was no-one to mediate between us, or counsel me through that.

I would bury myself in books to cope. I never really talked about my circumstances, or what was hard. I just bottled it all up. It was four years before I even told my best friend that I lived with my grandmother."

Identity and relationships

The unique position of kinship care means it can straddle the arenas of both private family life and significant state intervention depending on the type of arrangement and the child's journey into and through kinship care. Every child's kinship experience is different and they will have their own unique perspectives on their living situation, family relationships and understanding of themselves as having experience of care or kinship care –despite the unifying thread of being raised by a relative or family friend.

Interviews with children growing up in kinship care have demonstrated the fluidity of their constructions of 'family' and children's understanding of kinship care as *"a specific scenario that requires specific recognition, knowledge and support"*.⁶⁷ Other research with teenagers and young adults found that young people felt both let down and abandoned by their parents and yet developed intense loyalty too, highlighting the intricate and complicated acts of relationship-building and identity formation for children in kinship care.⁶⁸

67 Shuttleworth, P (2023) Recognition of Family Life by Children Living in Kinship Care Arrangements in England

68 Wellard et al (2017) Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood

Support to navigate identity and family relationships, including life story work



Around 1 in 5 kinship carers said their children had received some support to help them navigate their identity and family relationships, such as life story work. However, nearly 4 in 10 said their children hadn't and that this was needed.

Only 22% of respondents said their children had received support such as life story work, and 38% said they hadn't and that this was needed. Again, this did vary by the type of kinship arrangement: fewer than 11% and 12% of informal kinship carers and kinship carers with a legal order secured in private proceedings said their children had received support compared to more than a quarter (26%) of kinship foster carers. Nearly half (47%) of informal kinship carers said they hadn't and this was needed.

"Therapy and life story work was promised from a young age but never happened sadly."

Grandparent with a child arrangements order made following care proceedings

"We are waiting for life story work as this was not provided by the Local Authority where the child lived."

Other relative with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

For those children who had received support, their kinship carers were generally positive about the impact it had made and the importance of the facilitated space it provided their kinship children to understand more about who they were and explore questions about family, although this wasn't universal and kinship carers acknowledged that significant ongoing intervention was likely to still be necessary.

"The eldest child has play therapy around life story work and benefited from it. The younger child had the same but didn't benefit anywhere near as much."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Theraplay to discuss and explore feelings/emotions, Life Story work. Felt positive at the time and saw little improvement but behaviour has become more difficult since and child struggles with social skills and emotions."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"The support was beneficial – life story work to help make sense of the position we are in."

Aunt with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

"Life story work - enjoyed by child. Helped them to understand what was going on in their family, and made it possible for open conversations between us about parents issues, etc, which has helped in development of good relationships between child and their parents, and between child and ourselves."

Grandparent and kinship foster carer

"Therapy through Life Story work aged 13-14. Very helpful to grandson as he was able to fully explore his situation in age-appropriate way with therapist; reasons not living with parent, lack of named father etc."

Grandparent with a special guardianship order made following care proceedings

Melanie

Melanie, 47, is a special guardian and lives in London with her partner Tony, 55. They took on the care of her eight-month-old niece following the death of Melanie's sister in 2021.

"My sister had a complicated pregnancy, she suffered two strokes and spent several months in hospital before getting sepsis and then dying. It was very traumatic and a big shock to us. We didn't have children, but we weren't going to let my niece go into the care system.

It became clear early on that my niece was not hitting her learning milestones. I noticed she only started to crawl at 14-months, she said her first word at 15-months and her second word aged two, and didn't start walking until 17-months old.

I kept raising concerns but we weren't given any support. We had a succession of social workers, but no-one would listen to us and we were left to fight in court for a support plan which was really poor. It's so frustrating.

We managed to get 15 hours of nursery when she was two and the nursery workers recognised that there was a problem straight away and told the local authority that she needed more guidance and supervision than other children."

While Melanie says her views about her niece were dismissed as the "rantings of an anxious carer", pressure from the nursery now means that the local authority has agreed to an autistic spectrum assessment, although this means a wait of up to 18 months. Without a diagnosis, Melanie has been told that her three-year-old niece will not qualify for one-on-one support, or the age-appropriate counselling she believes she needs to deal with her mother's loss.

"I think she experienced trauma from a baby as she was in hospital with her mum when she was poorly. She never bonded as her mum was in the intensive care unit and then she went into temporary foster care before coming to us.

Although she was tiny when her mum died, I have to explain in a child appropriate way what happened and she needs professional support with that. We expect her trauma will become more vocal as she gets older and when she starts to ask us more about her mum and why she doesn't live with her four siblings, who live with their dad.

Children shouldn't have to suffer like this. We shouldn't have to fight to get the therapeutic and emotional support they need."

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO ENSURE ALL KINSHIP CHILDREN GET THE SUPPORT THEY NEED IN EDUCATION

The UK Government should look to harmonise the existing patchwork of support for kinship children in England based on the type of kinship arrangement and previous experience in local authority care. New legislation should be introduced which guarantees equalised levels of support between children in all forms of kinship care and children looked after in local authority care, recognising the shared impact of childhood adversity on learning whilst respecting the unique needs, experiences and strengths of each cohort. This should involve coordinating duties and remits across the triangle of support available through the Virtual School, Pupil Premium Plus and the designated teacher, providing a clear, cohesive and comprehensive offer which considers how each element works to support the others.

Virtual Schools

Whilst the forthcoming Virtual School Head (VSH) role extension in England is welcome, it continues to embed a hierarchy of support for kinship children based on legal order. The Department for Education should move away from further stepped extensions of the Virtual School Head role accompanied by annual grant funding and instead deliver new legislation and guidance which cohesively outlines how appropriate advice and support should be made available to all kinship families.

The Welsh Government's Virtual Schools pilot should include consideration of how current practice and future structures can also include kinship children and test new ways of supporting kinship families.

Pupil Premium Plus and Pupil Development Grant (PDG-LAC)

The UK and Welsh Governments should extend eligibility for support via Pupil Premium Plus and the PDG-LAC stream of the Pupil Development Grant to include all children in kinship care, and issue new guidance on how local authorities and schools can best deliver support tailored to this group. This should also include strengthened expectations on how schools and local authorities outline to eligible families how funding is being used to support their children. Schools and local authorities should take further steps to involve kinship carers in decisions made about use of this funding to most effectively support their child's learning.

In the interim, to maximise the number of kinship children in England who receive support funded by Pupil Premium Plus, schools, Virtual Schools and local authorities should take additional steps to boost awareness of the process for declaring eligibility through the School Census amongst the families of children they support or have previously supported.

The Department for Education should also explore the feasibility of an alternative opt-out system for previously looked after children in kinship care, sensitive to the disclosure preferences of those with parental responsibility, which links the children looked after data

return (SSDA903) with the School Census, avoiding the need for an additional layer of self-declaration and ensuring those eligible see the benefits of support delivered through Pupil Premium Plus.

The Welsh Government and local authorities and schools in Wales should ensure that previously looked after children cared for under special guardianship are considered in how PDG-LAC funding is used. Given current funding is allocated based on the number of children currently looked after in each local authority, future policy development should consider how allocations can better reflect those previously looked after based on learnings in England.

Designated teacher

The remit of the designated teacher in England and the designated person in Wales should be extended to include all children in kinship care, offering advice and supporting coordination between relevant professionals in the local authority where relevant and those in the child's place of learning. In the interim, they should ensure they consider the specific needs and experiences of previously looked after children in kinship care as part of their responsibilities.

Personal Education Plans

Future policy development work should explore if it would be beneficial to extend the use of Personal Education Plans (PEP) to all children in kinship care, or to those previously looked after as an initial first step and to ensure continuity of support when leaving local authority care. In the interim, special guardianship and other support plans should include a strong focus on the support required to help kinship children in education, mirroring relevant elements of the Personal Education Plan for looked after children which kinship carers and their children feel would be of value.

In Wales, Looked-After Children in Education (LACE) Coordinators should consider how to best support children in kinship foster care specifically as part of their responsibilities, including in the coordination of Personal Education Plans.

School admissions

Schools Admissions Codes in both nations should be amended to extend priority admission rights to all children in kinship care to ensure they can learn in the most appropriate setting for them.

Further and higher education

Recognising the additional challenges they face in education, further and higher education providers should consider where it makes sense to extend the support they offer to care-experienced students to those who have spent time in kinship care too, such as contextual admissions policies. Sector bodies including UCAS and the Office for Students should support and challenge higher education institutions to define and include kinship care-experienced students in their access and participation plans.

TO ENSURE ALL KINSHIP CHILDREN GET THE SUPPORT THEY NEED WITH SEND/ALN AND MENTAL HEALTH

Emotional and therapeutic support for kinship families

The UK and Welsh Governments and local authorities should ensure all kinship families can access appropriate long-term emotional and therapeutic support tailored to their unique needs and experiences. This could include developing bespoke services modelled on a version of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund designed for kinship families, acknowledging the different approaches they need to adoptive families. This should be available to all kinship families regardless of the type of kinship arrangement or the child's journey into kinship care, take a 'whole family' approach which recognises entire family units (including biological and step children in the kinship household), and include funding for non-therapeutic support where this would be of significant benefit to children and their kinship carers.

Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund

In the interim, to most effectively utilise the existing Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund in England, recording practices should ensure local authorities and Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) record the split of awarded funding between SGO/CAO and adoptive families. Forthcoming Department for Education research into the therapeutic support offered by the Fund to kinship families, committed to within the National Kinship Care Strategy, should proceed at pace to inform future delivery and development.

Local authorities should ensure professionals working with kinship families have sufficient knowledge and capacity to support effective applications for eligible kinship families, and should ensure any delivery providers understand the specific needs and experiences of kinship families and how they differ to adoptive families.

Pathways to early assessment and diagnosis

Children looked after, including in kinship foster care, are entitled to receive an initial health assessment on entry into local authority care; local authorities should ensure this is completed prior to any movement to a different kinship arrangement supported outside of the care system, and appropriate assessments or support should not be jeopardised by the loss of the child's 'looked after' status. Forthcoming kinship care statutory guidance in England should encourage local authorities to recognise the elevated prevalence of SEND amongst kinship children similar to looked after children and ensure there are no delays to EHC needs or other assessments.

Future SEND reform in England, including a revised SEND Code of Practice, should consider an automatic entitlement to an EHC needs assessment for children in kinship care. Local authorities and schools in Wales should recognise the likelihood of ALN amongst kinship children and ensure they progress quickly with an assessment if requested and subsequent IDP provision as appropriate.

Specialised support for kinship children and families

Local authorities and other organisations supporting kinship families should consider advice, training and support which takes into account the elevated prevalence of particular forms of SEND/ALN amongst children in kinship care, including autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD and attachment disorder or difficulties. This could include, for example, specialist training offers or peer support groups for kinship carers caring for children with a specific form of SEND/ALN.

In addition, local authorities and relevant sector organisations should develop specific (therapeutic) life story work approaches which recognise the complexities in kinship family relationships and identity formation for kinship children. Local authorities should support children and kinship carers with navigating potential difficulties arising from contact with parents and support them, regardless of type of arrangement, to maintain links to the people and places which matter to them.

Recognising kinship children in mental health policy

Kinship children and their elevated prevalence of mental health difficulties should be recognised within the new UK Government's plans to introduce a Children's Wellbeing Bill and to deliver specialist mental health professionals in every school and Young Futures Hubs for drop-in mental health support in communities across England.

As part of its work to progress the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, the Welsh Government should look at the specific needs of children in kinship care in addition to those of care-experienced children and young people, and consider kinship children as part of its commitment to ensuring that care-experienced children receive trauma-informed therapeutic care.

TO ENABLE POLICY AND PRACTICE TO MOST EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT KINSHIP CHILDREN

Information and advice

Local authorities, schools and other support services should ensure the provision of high quality information and advice to kinship families about their eligibility for entitlements to support, including but not limited to support through the Virtual School, Pupil Premium Plus/PDG-LAC and/or the designated teacher and/or LACE Coordinator, as well as the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund and other services to support with mental health, contact and relationships. This should include signposting to organisations including Kinship, including relevant workshops and information delivered as part of the national training and support offer for all kinship carers in England.

All local authorities should ensure they provide up-to-date, visible and accessible information about the support available to kinship families of all types throughout their kinship journeys. Forthcoming kinship care statutory guidance for England should reaffirm the requirement for local authorities to publish a specific family and friends care (kinship) policy and a clear local offer of support, and the new National Kinship Care Ambassador should support and challenge local authorities to deliver this.

Training for professionals on kinship care and the impact of childhood adversity

Teachers, education professionals (e.g. SENCOs, ALNCOs, teaching assistants, education welfare officers etc) and other professionals supporting children in kinship care across children's social care, health and other public services should receive initial and ongoing training as relevant on the needs, strengths and experiences of children in kinship care and the key circumstances and challenges for kinship families. This should include information about the impact of trauma and childhood adversity on children's development, learning and behaviour.

Data and insights

Statutory and wider data collection on kinship children should be improved. The data-linking project between the Department for Education and Ministry of Justice outlined in the National Kinship Care Strategy for England should include not only the children looked after data return (SSDA903) but other sources, including the National Pupil Database.

Governments should also consider utilising other methods of data collection, including the School Census, to build an improved picture of the number, characteristics and educational outcomes of children in all forms of kinship care, and undertake analysis of existing data to understand the settings in which kinship children are learning and their progression to further and higher education. This analysis and future research should include consideration of potential ethnic disparities amongst kinship families.

Kinship children's rights and participation

Where appropriate, children in kinship care should have access to formal advocacy services which help them to be involved in decisions made about their care. The Children's Commissioners for England and Wales should ensure their work to uphold children's rights considers kinship children and ensure relevant policymaking engages with children in all forms of kinship care. Organisations should consider establishing peer support and activity groups or other opportunities for children raised in all forms of kinship care.

Future research

There is minimal research on or activity designed to understand the views of children and young people in kinship care, particularly for those in informal arrangements, in stark contrast to other groups supported by children's social care. Future research should explore the voices and experiences of children in all forms of kinship care, as well as adults who grew up in kinship care, to consider their perspectives on how to deliver support which sensitively addresses kinship care's place between private family life and state child welfare intervention. This should include views on self-identification as 'care experienced' given active policy debates around further defining and protecting this group.

CONCLUSION

Forgotten reveals how children in kinship care are being denied the support they need with their education, mental health and relationships, and offers new evidence to support governments, local authorities and other partners with the difficult but necessary task of changing this. It exposes how children in kinship care have been largely forgotten and ignored in policymaking and, through the eyes of the kinship carers raising them, outlines the impacts that poor support has on their learning and wellbeing.

Across each of the topics which *Forgotten* explores – education, SEND/ALN, mental health, and contact, identity and relationships – there is a consistent story which plays out again and again.

We find that too many kinship children and their kinship carers aren't receiving suitable support, and that access to help is largely determined by the type of kinship arrangement and the child's previous experience in local authority care rather than need. Despite comparable prevalences of special educational or additional learning needs and mental health difficulties to other children's social care groups, such as those looked after in local authority care, our evidence suggests that children in kinship care are not getting equalised levels of support. Where support has been offered, this isn't tailored to the unique needs, strengths and experiences of kinship families, and kinship carers have often been forced to make enormous personal sacrifices to secure this – in many cases despite rather than as a result of the policies and systems currently in place.

However, *Forgotten* also illustrates that well-supported kinship care can and does continue to make a transformative impact on the lives of children.

The love and security in kinship care is what helps children to grow up happy and healthy. It means that children in kinship care can be protected from some of the harsh instabilities and disconnections of the care system, delivering better experiences and outcomes into adulthood. But we know that for kinship children these still lag considerably behind their peers in parental households. We must raise our expectations and our ambitions for kinship children and break down the barriers which might continue to prevent them from achieving what they want to in life.

Change won't come easy. There are significant system-wide and national challenges across children's mental health, SEND and education which must be tackled alongside any efforts targeted at children in kinship care. We must ensure that kinship care forms an integral and respected pathway in children's social care more broadly, and that kinship families are considered across all policymaking which touches the lives of children and families. We can't do this alone or in isolation, and will need everyone to play their part.

The new UK Government and Welsh Government have an enormous opportunity to harness the growing recognition of and support for kinship care to deliver real and lasting change. We must maintain this momentum but turn our focus to the more than 141,000 children in kinship care across England and Wales who have been forgotten for too long.

ABOUT KINSHIP AND OUR SUPPORT

ABOUT KINSHIP

Kinship is the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We're here for all kinship carers. The grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, other family members and friends who step up to raise children when their parents aren't able to. We want every kinship family to have the recognition, value and support they need and deserve.

We offer kinship carers financial, legal, practical and emotional support and understanding from the moment they need it, for as long as they need it. Our expert advice, information and guidance helps with complicated and stressful decisions that so many kinship families have to make. We're always there to support them through difficult times and celebrate the good.

Kinship carers are strong and determined. Together, they are powerful. We help them build communities of support and action by connecting families locally and across England and Wales.

We're at the heart of kinship networks, partnering with and influencing service providers, local and national government and other organisations. We give everything we have to fight for each family and their rights, changing society until every kinship family is recognised, valued and supported.

SUPPORT FOR KINSHIP CARERS

Becoming a kinship carer can be overwhelming and there's a lot of information to take in. Whether you are new to kinship care, already caring for a child or supporting a family member or friend, we're here to help.

→ Get help and advice from our Kinship Advice Team

Wherever you are in England and Wales, you're not alone. If you're looking for a local kinship peer support group or simply just want someone to chat to, there's a community just for you.

→ Find a kinship peer support group

→ Talk to another kinship carer

Please see below for a summary of our online advice and information and workshops relevant to the topics explored in *Forgotten*.

Education

→ How schools should support children in kinship care

→ Pupil Premium Plus

- Finding a school
- Help with school costs
- Childcare for kinship carers
- Choosing childcare as a kinship carer

SEND/ALN

- Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Support for children with disabilities
- Childcare for children with disabilities

We also provide a workshop outlining the EHCP and SEND process for kinship carers.

Mental health

- Mental health and emotional support for kinship carers
- Self-soothing and regulation
- Recognising and responding to anxiety
- Managing anger
- Adoption and special guardianship support fund for kinship carers

We also provide relevant workshops on kinship care which can help kinship carers support their own and their children's mental health and wellbeing including:

- An introduction to kinship care
- Understanding trauma and attachment in kinship care

Contact, relationships and identity

- Preparing a child for contact time with family
- Managing contact time with family
- What is contact time with family?

We also provide relevant workshops for kinship carers including:

- Sensitive conversations with kinship children
- Understanding trauma and attachment in kinship care

“Our kinship child is now 17 and is generally a happy, healthy, outgoing, independent person with a positive outlook and ambition. As a family we muddled through with no training or financial support to get through some truly dark and scary moments.”

Sibling and informal kinship carer



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

ABOUT KINSHIP

We are Kinship. The leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We're here for kinship carers – friends or family who step up to raise a child when their parents aren't able to.

We are made by and for our community of kinship carers. For too long they have been isolated without the help they need.

Our purpose is to change lives, and change the system.

We support, advise and inform kinship carers. Connecting them so they feel empowered.

Because a child needs the love and warmth of a thriving family.

We develop research, campaigns and policy solutions. Creating positive change across society.

Because for kinship families, love alone is not enough.

And as we see momentum building for change, we keep working with our community and making impact.

Join us. Together, let's commit to change for kinship families.

www.kinship.org.uk



kinship.org.uk



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