



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

Kinship

**Submission to the Department for Education's
*'Foster care reform: proposed changes to
assessment and handling of allegations of
abuse'* consultation and *'Fostering for the
future: improving the foster care system'* call for
evidence**

March 2026

Introduction

Kinship carers are family or friends who step up, often during an unexpected crisis, to care for a child when their parents aren't able to. This may be because the parent has died, is unwell, has gone to prison, is experiencing problems with drugs and alcohol, or are neglectful or abusive. Kinship carers are usually grandparents, aunts or uncles, brothers or sisters, a stepparent, stepbrother or stepsister, or someone who isn't related but knows the child well. Whatever their relationship to the child, in that moment a commitment is made. To bring love and hope to a child who has experienced trauma, no matter what.

It is estimated there are more than 141,000 children living in kinship care in England and Wales – 3 times the number in unrelated foster care.¹

Some kinship carers will have a legal order securing the family arrangement which provides them with parental responsibility, such as a special guardianship order or child arrangements order made following care proceedings or secured privately through the family court. Others will be kinship foster carers where the child is 'looked after' and has been placed with them by the local authority. However, the majority of kinship families are likely to have only informal arrangements in place made privately within the family.²

Our written submission considers only those proposals and questions relevant to, and the potential impacts on, kinship carers (i.e. kinship foster carers and not mainstream foster carers). As such, we only consider consultation proposal 1 ('Amending the role of fostering panels and strengthening quality assurance standards within the assessment process') and call for evidence issue 7 ('Removing barriers to kinship and known adults providing care').

To inform our submission, we hosted two online discussion sessions with kinship carers who were currently – or had previously been – kinship foster carers, in addition to an online discussion session with Kinship's 'Insights Group' of kinship care practitioners working within local authority teams, all with experience of coordinating kinship foster carer assessment and approval. Any verbatim quotes included below come from these discussions unless otherwise stated. We're grateful to all of those who shared their expertise and experiences to strengthen our response, informed too by our more than 2 decades of advice, support, research and campaigning alongside kinship families and the evidence and insight gained from this,

¹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) [Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021](#) Released 26 September 2023, ONS website, article.

² For more information on the different types of kinship care, please visit kinship.org.uk/what-is-kinship-care.

1. Foster care reform: proposed changes to assessment and handling of allegations of abuse

Consultation Proposal 1: Amending the role of fostering panels and strengthening quality assurance standards within the assessment process

Question 9: To what extent do you agree that fostering panels provide value that is proportionate to the time and resources required to operate them?

- 1.1. Neither agree nor disagree.
- 1.2. Practice around the use of fostering panels for kinship foster carers is inconsistent. They can provide a crucial additional layer of scrutiny over decision making which aids in considering the unique needs, strengths and experiences of kinship foster carers. However, in other circumstances, they can be an unhelpful or even redundant aspect of the process and, at worst, can act as a barrier to children living with kinship carers in a timely and supported fashion.
- 1.3. Our position is that consideration of whether or not fostering panels are maintained for the initial approval and one-year annual review of kinship foster carers specifically is most appropriately considered as part of a more substantial set of reforms to the regulations around kinship foster care. In isolation, removal of this requirement is unlikely to significantly impact experiences and outcomes for kinship families either positively or negatively; it is not itself the critical source of tension in the system but just one illustration of where the existing regulatory framework isn't working for this particular cohort and requires change.
- 1.4. As such, below, we outline some of the advantages and disadvantages in the use of fostering panels for kinship foster carers to inform the government's consideration of the potential impacts of its proposal alongside those for mainstream foster care. We also offer some interim suggestions for policy and practice change ahead of future planned reform to create a "simpler rulebook", including rewriting national fostering standards and guidance. Ultimately, we believe a separate regulatory framework is required for kinship foster care which, at the very least, should include a distinct set of fostering regulations designed for this cohort.

Question 10: What would you see as the advantages or disadvantages of removing fostering panels from initial assessment and the first annual review process?

Advantages

- 1.5. As outlined in the government's consultation document, we know that the fostering panel can be "especially burdensome" for some kinship foster carers and experienced as "intrusive and ill-suited" to understanding the complexities of kinship care and their family situations. Removing the requirement for panels could reduce the number of kinship carers who face poor, invasive and stigmatising practice.

"What they don't understand is that they're catching people at the most vulnerable time in their lives... Panel doesn't really see the challenges of contact and family relationships as it would be for kinship foster carers. Social workers aren't dealing with it and neither are they. I wasn't really prepared for this when I went to panel."
- 1.6. Kinship carers who shared their own panel experiences with us described these as "frightening", "overbearing" and "intimidating". Some suggested the number of people involved was "excessive", feeling enormous "pressure to get all our information together", and that it was a "sad process which made us feel we were just going through the motions".

Others recalled receiving difficult and ill-considered advice from children's services staff to "not get emotional as they'll think you're not coping" and spoke of a pressure to "act like someone else at the most traumatic time of your life".

- 1.7. Practitioners similarly described experiences of some panels as "particularly scary places for kinship carers to go" which risked "setting them up to fail" at a point when they are feeling overwhelmed following an enormous change to their lives. They also highlighted the impact – emotionally and practically – that panel elements of the process (particularly at review stage) could have for children too who are often very aware of and impacted by added stress placed on their caregivers, leading to a risk that "the worry could filter through and destabilise".
- 1.8. Both kinship carers and practitioners also highlighted that some fostering panels lack sufficient awareness and understanding of the nature of kinship care and how this differs from mainstream foster care, impacting on discussion and questioning at panel stage as well as subsequent decisions. Unlike in mainstream fostering assessments, approval of a kinship foster carer is wrapped up in the same decision making process as whether or not a specific child is placed with them. Removal of the panel requirement could help to ensure decision making and accountability is placed more firmly and clearly with trained and expert practitioners.
- 1.9. Some kinship carers reflected on feelings of shame following inconsiderate panel questioning which failed to recognise the often very difficult family dynamics and complex feelings of loss, anger and loyalty. Practitioners spoke of having to work alongside panel members less familiar with the backgrounds and circumstances of many kinship foster carers to ensure they had the appropriate knowledge and judgement to make informed recommendations. This dynamic is also highlighted in research with specialist kinship care practitioners:

"Panel have a very high standard and lots of our carers who come forward are a bit rough round the edges... Panel's understanding of relatives and friends placements is not a great as it could be. I think where the panel is so used to a threshold being a very straight, horizontal line, when it comes to relatives and friends placements you do not get that straight horizontal line, it's very convoluted. And I think that's where the difficulties come in".³
- 1.10. Removal of the panel could also support the reallocation of time and resource. In cases where the kinship carer has been temporarily approved under Regulation 24, they are already caring for the child on a day-to-day basis and may have been doing so for a considerable period of time, including up to and beyond statutory timescales of 16 / 24 weeks. At this point, the panel was seen by some kinship carers as an immensely disruptive interruption at a critical time, and often pointless and/or additionally stressful where there were ongoing court proceedings happening in parallel.
- 1.11. Many practitioners highlighted circumstances where the panel was deemed to be largely redundant given the parallel oversight in the family court and the likely journey of that child and family, but where the regulatory timescales demanded this be completed regardless. Some spoke of the panel being "nothing more than a tick box exercise when you know you're in court just a few weeks later" and where a route such as special guardianship is the clear likely outcome based on the needs of the child and family. This was seen as being

³ Hunt, J (2021) [Practising in kinship care: The perspectives of specialist social workers](#). Kinship and Cardiff University.

more commonplace since the pandemic where proceedings are continuing to conclude less quickly and panels are more commonly taking place before this.

- 1.12. Practitioners recognised that “*assessments are often made in the context of care proceedings, where ultimate decision-making power rests with the court, not the local authority*”⁴, and saw court proceedings as taking priority where a fostering assessment might be happening in parallel. Short timescales for preparing assessments and reports for court were seen as the factor predominantly influencing timelines and practice, with many practitioners navigating challenging and inconsistent views on whether full approval should be needed at this point. In some cases, the “push and pull” of the fostering regulations and court proceedings meant that extending temporary approval beyond statutory limits was seen as the right choice for the child and family. It is possible that this messy and complex area of practice – and the risks associated with holding kinship children in placements outside of the regulations and the inconsistency in local authorities’ comfort to do so – could be improved by relaxing the requirement for a panel.
- 1.13. Relatedly, both kinship carers and practitioners spoke of experiences with the perceived and often illogical gap between approval as a kinship foster carer under the fostering regulations and a successful assessment for and making of a special guardianship order in the family court. Kinship carers spoke of experiences facing a negative recommendation at panel but subsequently being positively assessed for the permanency and parental responsibility which comes with special guardianship, all whilst already caring for the children. Practitioners recognised that it might in many circumstances be those kinship carers in more vulnerable situations who would benefit from the additional oversight and support of the fostering route.
- 1.14. There are some circumstances where removing the requirement for a panel could also reduce delays in children going to live with kinship carers, promoting better early stability and relationships at an incredibly turbulent time in their lives. For example, we heard from a kinship carer who was due to take on the care of a child who was at the time being looked after in unrelated foster care. Final approval by a fostering panel was understood to be the reason for an unnecessary 7 month delay in the child coming to live with them, during which time they weren’t able to arrange appropriate contact or progress with support planning.

Disadvantages

- 1.15. Although the panel was seen as an unnecessary and to some extent a duplication of work in some kinship situations, practitioners were clear that the panel and wider fostering assessment and approval process delivered value and made sense where a care order and medium to long-term kinship fostering “felt aligned with what that child and that carer will need”. Panels were also seen as playing an important role in providing additional independent oversight, particularly in more complex, risky circumstances – a “reassurance of checks and balances” – and especially where there might be conflict or where practitioners would be minded not to recommend approval.

“We do need a space which feels less onerous, and more comfortable, but we can’t lose robustness as we need to find those people who are not going to be okay. We need a strong route to evidence that and need the resource to say no sometimes.”

- 1.16. Both kinship carers and practitioners also spoke to valuable experiences at panel and resultant positive impacts for their relationships with the local authority and their own caregiving. Even where the experience before and initially might be quite intimidating, some

⁴ Hunt, J (2021) [Practising in kinship care: The perspectives of specialist social workers](#). Kinship and Cardiff University.

kinship carers appreciated the very different setup to other engagement with the local authority – one which reflected the seriousness of the task and which could be quite validating.

“It was a massive process. But taking on our grandchild was also a massive decision. It [the panel] didn't feel that wrong – what we were doing was really serious and we needed guidance. They also needed to know that we were the best possible people to be doing that job... The formality didn't bother us – it gave it credibility.”

- 1.17. Some kinship carers also described receiving very helpful feedback and appreciated the opportunity to speak with those with a range of lived and learned experiences, including other current or previous kinship foster carers. Removal of the panel risks removing the strongest and clearest opportunity for kinship carers to meet and learn from the experiences and expertise of other kinship carers at what might be a particularly formative and important time. It's vital that the assessment and approval process includes and makes best use of the valuable insight and experience which can be provided by those with experience of kinship care.
- 1.18. Indeed, we are aware of – and some practitioners reflected on experiences developing – specialist panels for kinship foster carers with a smaller, curated and trained membership inclusive of a range of relevant experiences. There is an opportunity to further develop and share this practice to ensure any ongoing requirement can be delivered with significant added value for both practitioners and kinship families. Research with specialist practitioners has suggested too that “recommendations for approval should be considered by an appropriately constituted panel, with expertise in, and training on, the distinctive characteristics of this form of care”.⁵
- 1.19. Removal of the panel would also reduce the opportunity for kinship carers to use this to consider their ongoing support needs at a point when this might be most useful to them, and to hold local authority practitioners to account. Some kinship carers raised concerns the removal of the panel could “make us more invisible” and said that this had provided one of the few opportunities in the process for “more of a two-way communication” where they could question the panel and by extension the local authority too, broadening the focus of the panel away from scrutiny and primarily approval to a wider consideration and consolidation of support.
- 1.20. There is also no guarantee that practitioners, including the agency decision maker with ultimate responsibility and accountability, will have a stronger understanding of kinship care and appreciation for the complexities of kinship foster care than fostering panel members. Kinship carers spoke of poor conduct from professionals as much as with panel members, and we know that negative early negative experiences with children's services have a longstanding impact on continuing relationships, engagement and support.⁶
- 1.21. The government's rationale outlines the risks of diluting responsibility across too many actors, but both kinship carers and practitioners also raised the risk of *concentrating* responsibility, and especially at a point where practice around kinship care was still very inconsistent and developing – although most acknowledged this was improving. In our 2025 annual survey, 42% of kinship carers said they didn't trust their local authority at all, albeit down from 44% in 2024 and 49% in 2023.⁷

⁵ Hunt, J (2021) [Practising in kinship care: The perspectives of specialist social workers](#). Kinship and Cardiff University.

⁶ Kinship (2023) [Submission to the Department for Education's consultations on the Stable Homes: Built on Love strategy and Children's Social Care National Framework and Dashboard](#)

⁷ Kinship (2025) [Handle With Care: Annual survey of kinship carers 2025](#)

- 1.22. It's also unclear as to whether the panel element specifically is likely responsible for delays to children entering or being better supported in kinship care at any significant scale, especially given the extent to which many kinship carers will already be caring for children. Practitioners raised this was unlikely, largely due to the aforementioned tight court timelines imposed and the existing flexibility provided through Regulation 24: "you can't afford to have any drift in kinship fostering assessments – they need to be court-ready and that deadline is 12 weeks".

Question 11: What changes (if any) would you seek to make to standards and guidance to ensure that effective quality assurance takes place throughout the assessment process?

- 1.23. Ultimately, kinship carers and practitioners were unanimous in their support, as previously recommended by Kinship, for a new regulatory framework for kinship foster care to include as appropriate a distinct set of standards and separate assessment and approval process designed with kinship families in mind. Regardless of specific views on the panel element, kinship carers spoke of the whole assessment and approval process as one designed for mainstream foster carers ("the forms need ripping up and completely starting again"). Practitioners agreed:

"The fundamental mistake we've made is trying to fit our carers into a system that was never designed for them. We're fitting a square peg in a round hole... It's time for a simplification of the system which is more meaningful for them. Something stripped back, simple and easy to navigate and understand."

- 1.24. We hope future reform plans, including the rewriting of national standards and guidance, will consider the unique needs, experiences and strengths of kinship foster carers and their position within the wider fostering assessment and approval approach. We would urge consideration of the approach being taken by the Welsh Government to establish a separate 'kinship foster carer' category within regulations separate to that of mainstream foster carers.⁸ This will also need to align with any learnings and recommendations from the Law Commission's ongoing review of the kinship care legal landscape.
- 1.25. However, ahead of this more substantial reform, we would encourage the Department for Education to explore other regulatory changes and actions which could nudge the system in the interim towards a more helpful mode of operation, dependent on whether this proposal is taken forward, including:
- encouraging the use of specialist kinship foster care panels, taking a role in sharing best practice and supporting and challenging local authorities to deliver these.
 - introducing a statutory requirement for specific training on kinship care and the experiences and circumstances of kinship families for panel members and relevant practitioners, and/or a requirement for kinship foster care panels to include members with lived experience.
 - allowing flexibility in Regulation 24 timescales in situations where there are parallel ongoing court proceedings, and/or the requirement for a full fostering panel recommendation where there is evidence of suitability following a period under temporary approval.

⁸ Welsh Government (2025) [Consultation: Improving adoption, fostering and kinship services](#)

2. Fostering for the future: improving the foster care system

Issue 7: Removing barriers to kinship and known adults providing care

Question 41: To what extent do you think the Kinship Care guidance (published October 2024) is applied in practice when assessing prospective kinship foster carers?

- 2.1. Agree.
- 2.2. Although practice is mixed and inconsistent, and too many kinship foster carers continue to experience a system which does not appropriately consider their needs and strengths within the application of existing national minimum standards, we do see an increasing consideration of the guidance and growing positive application of this flexibility for kinship foster carers.
- 2.3. Practitioners reflected on the updated 2024 guidance as being “helpful” and that panels had “adopted and taken this into account”. However, most also suggested this was the basis on which they had already been working and the reframing in guidance alone likely wasn’t the strongest signal or driver of practice change for them, and wanted to see further action taken to emphasise the different approaches required between mainstream and kinship foster carers.

Question 42: In your view, what would help ensure the Kinship Care guidance is embedded effectively in practice when assessing prospective kinship foster carers?

- 2.4. Practitioners suggested that opportunities to learn from other local authorities – including through groups such as Kinship’s Insights Group and Professionals Network – and Ofsted as the regulator, were strong and helpful influencers of practice for local authority practitioners. The latter is important especially given Ofsted plans to consult on and make changes to its inspection framework for local authority children’s services (ILACS) this year.

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.

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