



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

Kinship

Submission to the Department for Education's
*'Improving help and child protection: revised
framework'* consultation

September 2026

Question 28: Do you agree that the current statutory framework for help, support and protection is clear enough about how to effectively safeguard children in kinship care?

Disagree

Question 29: If you do not agree, how would you like to see the statutory framework strengthened? (e.g., greater recognition that children living in kinship care may be impacted by complex family dynamics, more support for kinship carers to manage safeguarding responsibilities, training to improve services' understanding of the context of kinship arrangements, support for managing contact, etc.)

(Unless otherwise specified, quotes included below come from kinship carers who participated in an online discussion held to support our response to this consultation question.)

The existing statutory framework already helpfully establishes that practitioners and others supporting kinship families should:

- build trust and respectful relationships with members of the child's family network and acknowledge their expertise;
- recognise how poor past experiences of statutory services can impact on kinship families' engagement;
- understand the complexity of kinship families and work sensitively to help them repair and manage challenging family dynamics; and
- provide specialist, dedicated and flexible support for both formal and informal kinship carers and their children.

These are crucial elements within any statutory framework which seeks to effectively safeguard children in kinship care. Specific statutory guidance on kinship care, published in October 2024, further develops these. As such, below we offer suggestions for how guidance relating to help, support and protection for children and their families might be further strengthened based on insights from our and others' research with kinship carers, Kinship's more than two decades of advice and support with kinship families, and a discussion session with a small group of kinship carers in response to this specific consultation question.

Updated statutory guidance should:

- 1. Set out the unique safeguarding challenges which might arise from the often-complex family dynamics involved in kinship care, and the skills and knowledge required by practitioners to effectively consider and support these.**

Kinship care can be very complex. Kinship carers may experience conflicting feelings including love and loyalty towards the parent(s) of the child in kinship care, who they have their own prior relationship and connection to whilst navigating their own loss, anger, shame or scepticism.

Skilled social work is therefore required to support kinship families to understand and recognise risk, particularly following a period of acute family crisis. This demands compassion, patience, sensitivity and decision-making ability. Practitioners will often be required to manage ongoing relationships with both the child or children and their kinship carer(s) at the same time and consider carefully the support and safeguards required both now and into the future as relationships and family dynamics shift – potentially considerably.

"We've never done a kinship assessment here without looking at family dynamics because you can't look at placing a child within a family without exploring the implications of how those relationships work. And how that's going to interplay in the short term and in the longer term. And how that's going to be managed, because it's such an emotive situation, to have another family member care for your child, and that can resonate throughout the family."

"There's the added complexity around these enmeshed relationships that have been going on for years and how that complicates things and the meaning of those relationships, which in adoption you don't have, of course, because they're strangers. In kinship it's an added layer of complexity that we need to think through. And sometimes you don't know how those are going to impact until you start doing the assessment, and then you realise that X isn't talking to Y or that that has happened. So that dynamic adds another complexity."

Practitioner – quoted in Hunt (2021: p26)¹

Although this practice is particularly important at the beginning of any kinship arrangement and during any assessment of a potential kinship carers' suitability, high-quality relational social work will likely be required for some time. Practitioners must be skilled in guiding kinship carers through a 'reflective journey' to help them recognise and understand both what has happened and what will be needed of them now to keep a child safe.

"Working with those families, taking them through how complicated their situation is and helping them understand that, what it means to look after those children. Nothing seems simpler than caring for a member of your own family, but in the context of the work we do nothing is more complicated."

"Having to work through with them around matters, having to separate out their relationship, generally with their own child, now that they're caring for the grandchild, and having to support them in that shift of family loyalty maybe, supporting them with divisions in the family, perhaps the stigma of 'I'm now caring for my daughter's child, what are people going to make of it in the community?'"

Practitioner – quoted in Hunt (2021: p24)

¹ Hunt, J. (2021) Practising in kinship care: The perspectives of specialist social workers. Kinship and Cardiff University.

Where a child's parent(s) and/or other members of a child's family might present an ongoing risk to their safety, this can be particularly challenging, especially where the extent of a family's difficulties wasn't known to the kinship carer beforehand. Some will be coming to terms with the fact their relative or friend was a risk to the child's safety at the very time they are stepping up to take on the care of the child and navigating all this comes with – practically, financially and emotionally.

"There's family loyalty and disbelief – 'I can't believe my son would do that'. To shift that narrative is massive. We're not looking for a full shift, just signs. They have to grieve about what's going on with their kids or what they've found out about their children. Because often they don't know, or they know bits of it."

Practitioner – quoted in Hunt (2021: p23)

"There was one where the issue was (grandfather's) ability to protect the baby from his daughter. He needed to understand her dependence on drugs. We linked him with a drug worker, he went to a parental drug support group, he went on (X) course. We worked through all that in the assessment because luckily with that one we had time."

Practitioner – quoted in Hunt (2021: p23)

In particular, given the use of kinship care as a form of alternative care for children when a parent or parents are in prison, practitioners must be aware of potential safeguarding issues in relation to the criminal justice system and probation services. Kinship carers, children and their parents must be supported to build and maintain safe relationships, and plans must be made to ensure children are kept safe when a parent leaves prison. Our [new research project exploring kinship care and maternal imprisonment](#) seeks to identify policy and service interventions which can support this complex area of work.

2. Set out an expectation that kinship children, kinship carers, parents and others should receive suitable local authority support to manage challenging relationships and contact with family members to prevent potential safeguarding risks arising.

Given the above, guidance should establish a clear expectation that all of those involved in the child's life, including their kinship carers, should receive the support they need to effectively safeguard children and ensure the positive handling of ongoing family relationships and contact.

Unlike foster carers and adoptive parents, many kinship carers are raising children with little or no preparation or training. This leaves many kinship carers ill-equipped to deal with the enormity of coordinating family contact and its impacts. Around 1 in 6 enquiries to our advice service include an issue around family relationships. Our national training and support offer, funded by the Department for Education, includes [online and in-person workshops](#) dedicated to supporting kinship carers with managing both the practical and emotional elements of family contact.

Although special guardians in particular do recognise and often welcome the responsibility they are given to coordinate their kinship child's contact arrangements and might not require continued intensive children's services involvement to manage this, this shouldn't mean services should step away completely. Kinship carers consistently tell us

they urgently need better support to manage contact with parents and other family members. 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.^{2 3} Support with the delivery of safe and positive contact should be explicitly encouraged in updated guidance.

"I think contact is a massive, massive, massive issue. Like what I'm seeing on my group is that lots and lots and what I'm hearing on the ground is that lots of people are having issues of contact. For some people, the dynamics change. When you take care of the kids, your relationship with other family members, friends, the birth parents themselves can become really, really strained."

"I would definitely agree about contact being one of the biggest issues and time again in my group and for me over the years, it's been a real issue and very many of them saying it's unfair how it is that the parent always gets the support, whereas the kinship carer who is bringing the child along gets no support."

"When the children move from one local authority to another, it is just like a get out of jail free card for the local authorities because they both say nothing to do with me. And so this is why I had what, 8, 9 plus years of nobody talking because they kept saying, go and see the other one, it's them, it's not us. It certainly wasn't fair to me, it wasn't fair to the children. They just washed their hands and the next group went, oh, moving to our area, no, nothing to do with us. If you're talking about safeguarding, if you're not even acknowledging the children exist, how can you keep them safe?"

In our 2023 annual survey, the vast majority (88%) of kinship carers told us their kinship child or children had ongoing contact with at least one parent, and more than one third (36%) with one or more siblings they didn't live with. But only 1 in 8 received any local authority support to manage this – almost exclusively those who were kinship foster carers.⁴

Too many kinship carers are left almost entirely on their own to manage contact. They make significant efforts to balance and resolve a complex interplay of fragile family relationships, volatile and unpredictable behaviour, adherence to legal requirements, and the ongoing impact of contact for their kinship children who may have significant unmet emotional and mental health needs, whilst navigating their own complex relationships. Despite this, they are frequently denied support which could help to ensure children's continued safety, wellbeing and stability.

"We had to supervise it. We had problems of the parent not turning up or who comes along, trying to bring along other people who aren't supposed to be coming, how frequently it's supposed to happen, the distance you have to travel... that wasn't written into the arrangement that we had. But the local authority don't ever want to know about that. They don't want to get involved with contact. They just say, oh, that's an arrangement between you and the parents. So kinship carers find themselves managing this additional thing because it's hard enough bringing up

² Hunt, J (2020) Two decades of UK research on kinship care: an overview

³ Wellard et al (2017) Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood

⁴ Kinship (2024) [Forgotten: Support for kinship children's education and mental health](#)

these children who are traumatised, but they have this additional thing with all the new emotions that are raised from seeing the parent or going along to contact and not seeing the parent because she doesn't turn up for whatever reason. So there are all these additional things with no help. And even when you ask for help with the contact, they, well, in my experience, they're sort of saying, well, no, that's nothing to do with us. So they gave us a venue, but wouldn't supervise for a couple of years. And ever since then it's literally just been down to us. So I know pretty much everybody in the group one way or another has had different issues and would have liked some support or at least some understanding from the local authority about this."

"I think people really need to understand that if a birth parent has got an addiction to alcohol or drugs, as long as they're safe to be around their kids, I don't think it's unsafe for them to have contact. I think it just needs to be supervised properly, probably by a professional rather than expecting the kinship carers to do it. Because I think it's unfair. It's a lot on us to expect us to manage contact. And it puts us and the kids in a place of, potentially in a place of risk and affects the dynamics of the relationship."

An absence of support risks not just poor experiences for kinship children but could exacerbate risks to their safety and wellbeing. It also creates a risk to current kinship family stability and the government's aim to increase the number of children alongside their siblings in kinship care. In our 2025 annual survey, of the more than 1 in 8 (13%) kinship carers who said they were concerned about their ability to continue in the next year, 43% cited challenges with family relationships and contact as a reason for this. In addition, of the nearly 1 in 5 (18%) kinship carers who had been unable to take on the care of another kinship child, nearly half (47%) highlighted difficulties managing family contact.⁵

Kinship care statutory guidance outlines that kinship local offers should *"identify services available to kinship carers to support the management of family time arrangements, and where necessary to offer independent supervision... this might be a direct service provided by the local authority children's services or an arrangement made through a contact centre or family mediation service"* and local authorities should *"consider providing family time support for different types of kinship arrangements, including for children who are not looked after"*.⁶

This is welcome, but professionals should be explicitly encouraged to use support planning for all kinship families. This is a crucial foundation for keeping children safe in kinship care. Support plans offer a vital way for the system to effectively plan for future needs and establish expectations for when support might need to be reviewed. It also helps kinship carers to work alongside any contact requirements set out in court orders.

Guidance for professionals working in kinship care – co-developed alongside kinship carers and based on pioneering research – sets out how support planning should *"look beyond the child's current circumstances to anticipate how needs, pressures, and relationships may change over time"* (e.g. including the management of contact in online spaces) and include a focus on how well contact arrangements are working, what

⁵ Kinship (2025) *Handle With Care: Annual survey of kinship carers 2025*

⁶ Department for Education (2024) *Kinship Care: Statutory guidance for local authorities* [October 2024]

support might be needed if they become difficult or contested, and what mediation or practical support could help manage family relationships or conflict.⁷

"I think the courts also have to be aware of what the writing into the SGOs of what the expectation of contact is. So, you know, some people have it written in its weekly, some people have it written in it's every fortnight or 3 times a year, and some people were lucky enough to just have a full stop. We've got an SGO with a full stop with nothing written in there whatsoever. So it's all down to discretion."

"That's [online safety] the hardest one to try and manage. You think you're keeping your children safe every which way and then suddenly discover that, yeah, birth mother has been in touch with them online and you knew nothing about it."

3 in 5 kinship carers say their children experience difficulties with the emotional impact of contact.⁸ The need for tailored therapeutic and emotional support for kinship children which includes exploration of identity and family relationships is vital and must be considered alongside practical and financial support for contact itself.⁹

3. Acknowledge the specific context for kinship care, including an underdeveloped system of support, fractured relationships between families and statutory services and poor understanding from practitioners, and recognise the role that other partners can therefore also play in keeping children in kinship care safe.

We require systems and practice which can adapt to changing family circumstances and respond to how risk might change over time. This is challenging in the context of some formalised kinship care arrangements – including where children are cared for under special guardianship or child arrangements orders – given that, as outlined in the consultation document itself, *"local authorities may no longer provide support or services"*.

"I think the difficulty is around some of the stuff we're predicting, further forward, in terms of permanence, where the carers will need support, is that from a childcare perspective their view is the here and now and about the safeguarding, so that if you've got 20 cases with a safeguarding issue, and one where you're perhaps taking a longer perspective, about difficulties down the line, it's a very different path - life story work and the attachment issues that brings..."

Practitioner – quoted in Hunt (2021: p65)

The context for kinship care is a dysfunctional system which is fragile and underdeveloped. For example, the ineffective legal framework and unfair rules around eligibility for support dependent not on need but the type of kinship arrangement means that some families who might be most in need of ongoing support end up securing a type of kinship arrangement least well set up to offer this.

"The placement is so vulnerable it needs the protection of a care order but because of its vulnerabilities the panel might not approve it. This is where we get a lot of these

⁷ El-Hoss, T., Thomas, F., Hughes, S., Raja, A., Horne, A. and Seth, C. (2026). Making a Support Plan: A Kinship Care Companion. University of Exeter, Kinship and CoramBAAF.

⁸ Kinship (2024) Forgotten: Support for kinship children's education and mental health

⁹ Kinship (2026) For kinship families, with kinship families: Submission to the Department for Education's 'Adoption support that works for all' consultation [May 2026]

anomalies where the panel say this doesn't reach the threshold for a placement which would offer monitoring and support so (the carer) is going to have to go off and get an order which offers very little in the way of monitoring and support. It's so frustrating."

Practitioner – quoted in Hunt (2021: p38)

This insufficient and hierarchical system of support is one of the defining features of kinship care and it has major implications for children's wellbeing and safeguarding. Poor information and advice about legal options and how routes to particular arrangements impact on long-term eligibility for support increases the risk of possible harm in the future, for example due to the absence of funded therapeutic support options for children who may need this in later childhood, or financial pressures which increase household stress and reduce parenting capacity at a time of acute need.

Whilst this cannot be solved by changes to guidance for practitioners alone, strong understanding of the system's weaknesses and expectations of high-quality advice and support from practitioners early in kinship families' journeys can at least mitigate against some of the worst impacts of this for children and their families further down the line.

Only a fifth (21%) of kinship carers say they completely or moderately trust their local authority; and more than 2 in 5 (42%) say don't trust them at all.¹⁰ This is a markedly different relationship with the state than for many foster carers or adoptive parents and is impacted further by patterns of fear and mistrust amongst some Black and Asian communities of kinship carers.¹¹

For some, there might be prior poor experiences which remove any confidence that practitioners can support them. For others, they might hold significant worries that voicing concerns about their child's safety – and their ability to manage this – could result in them being deemed unfit to continue caring for their kinship child.

"Trust and blame are massive for carers. And building that trusting relationship where they think you're going to make false promises and then disappear are massive. It's not so easy to work with kinship carers because there's always that flip side of 'this is our family, I don't feel we need to be answerable to the local authority for what we do.'"

Practitioner – quoted in Hunt (2021: p22)

"I think that trust and relationship goes through everything, doesn't it? It's the attitudes we feel that social workers and some other professionals have about kinship care and the way we feel we are treated that I think is really at the centre of this."

"I wouldn't have had the confidence to ring the council for help, because they are going to think I can't look after my granddaughter, they'll just take her away. And I was frightened."

¹⁰ Kinship (2025) [Handle With Care: Annual survey of kinship carers 2025](#)

¹¹ Tah, P. & Selwyn, J. (2025) [Raised by Relatives: the experiences of Black and Asian kinship carers](#). Kinship and the Rees Centre, University of Oxford.

Maeve, kinship carer for her grandson, quoted in EL-Hoss et al (2026)¹²

This context must be acknowledged when considering the role of the local authority and other statutory partners and in setting expectations for what kinship families should receive from practitioners. The ability for kinship carers to hold meaningful, trusted relationships with the services who support them is paramount to ensuring kinship children are protected from harm. Guidance should further ensure that the development of these relationships is prioritised by practitioners as a means to deliver effective safeguarding.

In particular, kinship carers want to be understood as experts in the lives of their children and their families, and to see this recognised and reflected in the actions taken by practitioners to help keep children in kinship care safe. Too many feel their views on risk aren't taken seriously or they aren't given the space to have their concerns heard, both around the kinship children in their care and others in their family network.

"One of the big points I'd like to make about safeguarding is to have a line open to kinship carers. So when they've left children behind or there's children come along post SGO that are still with birth parents and the kinship family can see danger approaching, rather than it getting to crisis point. Listen to us, listen to the kinship carers, give the kinship carers somewhere to voice their safeguarding concerns, because every single time there's a safeguarding concern, it has to go back through to initial response who is a starting point and it has to go all through the history again and then further on. Link the whole system together."

As a result, many kinship carers will find trust and understanding elsewhere and seek support from other organisations and partners. This includes primarily the voluntary sector and places of education and childcare, such as schools, colleges and nurseries. The National Kinship Care Strategy recognises that the voluntary sector has *"for many years... held communities of kinship carers together"* and that it is *"uniquely placed to provide impartial support and advocacy"*.¹³ The important role of non-statutory services in building and bridging connections with kinship families is also highlighted by Foundations' Kinship Care Practice Guide.¹⁴ Kinship Navigator programmes, such as Kinship Connected, can help to improve relationships between kinship families and statutory services, delivering better outcomes for children and families.¹⁵

"But it's that third sector, isn't it, that sometimes is a more appropriate place and a place where perhaps you feel you can trust them a little more. That was a very warm, welcoming place for many of us at the time."

"That trust is broken right at the beginning when you're trying to jump through hoops to keep everybody happy. And then when you meet your peers or your groups or whatever within the community, that's where your trust forms. It's people who you can speak openly to."

¹² EL-Hoss, T., Thomas, F., Hughes, S., & Raja, A. (2026) *Making a Support Plan: A Kinship Care Companion*. Kinship and University of Exeter

¹³ Department for Education (2023) *Championing Kinship Care: The National Kinship Care Strategy*

¹⁴ Foundations (2025) *Practice Guide: Kinship Care*

¹⁵ Starks, L. & Whitley, J. (2020) *An evaluation of Kinship Connected for Grandparents Plus*. Starks Consulting Ltd with Ecorys.

As set out in the statutory framework, successful outcomes for children and effective safeguarding depends on several agencies, organisations and individuals working together. The beneficial role which wider partners can play in the lives of kinship families is however limited by low levels of awareness and understanding. Practitioners working across education, health and other universal services, including family hubs, can help to identify, signpost and support kinship families with challenges before they emerge into safeguarding risks for children. To help with this, guidance should set out expectations that all practitioners working with children and families should have appropriate training and knowledge around the unique needs, strengths and experiences of kinship families.

"I think more schools need to have better training to have a better understanding of what children are dealing with, because a lot of them don't. A lot of them don't understand. And so it's not that there'd be any part of the contact arrangement itself, but a better part of understanding and having training around the trauma the kids are going through."

"In the family hub we were meeting in a year went by before they would put a door on. We kept saying, can we have a door? And then finally she just said, well, why do you need a door? There was no comprehension that we wanted to have private and you know, confidential discussions. And we didn't want the whole of the central part of the family hub listening into our conversations, but no recognition of that. And that just made me feel they don't get us."