Kinship

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

Time Hasn't Healed

Annual survey of kinship carers 2026

Executive summary

Time Hasn't Healed shares an updated 'state of the nation' overview based on key findings from Kinship's 2026 annual survey of nearly 1,500 kinship carers, identifying evidence of both demonstrable progress and deteriorating experiences since the very first Kinship annual survey in 2016. It calls for a renewed national focus on the mental health of children in kinship care given evidence of significant and urgent need, against a backdrop of other recent welcome improvements.

Kinship families in 2026



Kinship children in 2026 are less likely than they were in 2016 to be getting the support they need.

Despite significant progress in recognition and support for kinship families over the last decade, kinship carers in 2026 (26%) were 4 percentage points more likely than in 2016 (22%) to say their children aren't getting the support they need for healthy emotional and social development, and 4 percentage points more likely (22%) than in 2016 (18%) to say their children aren't getting the support they need to learn and achieve at school.

There are signs of increasing prevalence and complexity of mental health needs at a time when access to therapeutic support is at risk.

Nearly 7 in 10 kinship carers (69%) said that a kinship child they care for regularly displays behaviours they find challenging to manage, up 3 percentage points from 2025 and 17 percentage points from 2022. Of those kinship families in England who had accessed the adoption and special guardianship support fund (ASGSF) in the last year, nearly 4 in 10 (37%) saw the level of support for their children reduced.

Kinship families want more support to help manage family relationships.

Kinship carers recognise the benefits of positive relationships between kinship children and their parents and others, but are struggling to manage contact and its impacts without support. For kinship children who had contact with their mother, nearly a quarter (24%) of kinship carers described this contact as being harmful or very harmful.

Financial support can make a difference but remains patchy and insufficient.

Financial insecurity continues to be a core part of too many kinship families' lives. Just under half of kinship carers in 2026 (49%) disagree they are getting the financial support they need, up by 11 percentage points since 2016 (38%). However, there are signs that the delivery of non-means tested financial support could be increasing and this appears to be making a very positive impact on experiences for kinship families in Kinship Zones.

Ratings of local authority support, information and trust continue to improve from a low base against a backdrop of positive reform.

Kinship carers' ratings of local authority support and information and their trust in the local authority have all improved again for the fourth consecutive year, albeit from a very low base. More kinship carers than last year report having seen their local authority's kinship local offer and having had advice or support from the virtual school, and fewer kinship families than in recent years are at urgent risk of breaking down, although acute concerns remain for 1 in 10.

Kinship family journeys

Kinship care often begins suddenly following experiences of significant trauma, separation and loss.

More than half of kinship carers (56%) said their kinship children were unable to live with their parents as a result of substance misuse. Other factors such as neglect, parental mental ill-health and domestic abuse were common across all types of arrangements. More than 7 in 10 (72%) kinship carers took on the care of their kinship children at short notice – 42% of this group said they had only minutes to make the decision and a further 20% said only hours. This leads to significant whole-family impacts, including for other children in the kinship household.

Expectations around permanence and movement between arrangements are complex and reflect variations in support.

Kinship care helps to deliver permanence for children in a range of different ways. Uncertainty at the beginning of a kinship arrangement is common but dependent on the type of kinship arrangement, as are kinship carers' expectations about changing type of arrangement. Only 32% of kinship foster carers in 2026 plan to move to a different arrangement, down from 38% in 2025 and 49% in 2023, with significant implications for their experiences as well as policy and practice in the kinship care system.

Recommendations



Mental health and therapeutic support

The UK Government should reconsider proposals made earlier this year to reform adoption and kinship support in England and take the opportunity to design a new system which recognises the unique needs, strengths and experiences of children in kinship care and their kinship carers. This should extend to all types of kinship family, consider complex whole-family dynamics and retain a focus on access to specialist therapeutic support. Any devolvement of the adoption and special guardianship support fund (ASGSF) must be accompanied by significant investment and capacity-building in local authorities.

Financial support

Early evidence from the Kinship Zones financial allowances pilot should enable governments to set a clear ambition and timeline for the equalising of financial allowances between kinship carers and foster carers. In the interim, new guidance should be issued to local authorities to reduce current unacceptable variation and poor practice in the delivery of financial support. The parental leave and pay review should deliver a new right to statutory leave and pay for kinship carers.

Information, training and support

Kinship local offers should be meaningfully coproduced with kinship families and signpost to independent advice and support services. Local authorities should enhance support around the management of contact and family relationships, using effective support planning led by specialist practitioners. Governments and local authorities should invest in tailored and accessible training and support services, including peer support and kinship navigator programmes.