Kinship

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

Time Hasn't Healed

Annual survey of kinship carers 2026

November 2026



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Executive summary

Introduction

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



For more detailed recommendations, please see page 37

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.

Foreword



In many ways, the ecosystem of kinship care has changed dramatically since we delivered our first annual survey of kinship carers in 2016. Our pioneering surveys – the largest of their kind – have helped to both secure and measure significant progress over the last decade, including record investment into kinship care by governments, the development of specialist kinship teams in several local authorities, and growing public awareness and understanding of kinship families.

But in many other ways, the challenges facing kinship families and the experiences they share with us have remained all too familiar.

Time Hasn't Healed shows that too many kinship carers are still struggling to make ends meet, left alone to navigate complex systems and challenging family dynamics after stepping up to care for children in crisis. Children in kinship care continue to face enormous difficulties with their learning, development and mental health, routinely failed – or simply forgotten – by systems which aren't designed to recognise their unique needs and circumstances.

The central message from our 2026 annual survey findings is this: we should rightly celebrate the progress we've made together over the last decade, but use 2027 as an opportunity to renew our focus on supporting children in all forms of kinship care.

In our 2025 annual survey report, we asked the UK Government to handle its reforms in England with care, recognising the risk that poorly sequenced plans might exacerbate some of the most egregious dysfunction we saw in the system every single day.

Since then, much has happened which we can welcome. The Kinship Zones programme, launched in April 2026, is starting to deliver improved financial support and will ultimately benefit up to 5,000 families. Evidence from this year's annual survey shows continued incremental improvements in kinship carers' ratings of local authority support, information and trust – albeit from a very low base – bolstered by strengthened statutory guidance and legal duties. Continued investment in Families First Partnership programme reforms are also reconfiguring the system to better identify and support family networks earlier to keep children safe.

However, elsewhere, the system remains fragile and underdeveloped. Financial support outside of Kinship Zones remains patchy and insufficient. Informal kinship families continue to be largely locked out of support, with family network support packages (FNSPs) unlikely to be the mechanism to deliver them much-needed practical and financial help. Kinship care too often remains an afterthought in systems designed for adoptive and foster families.

In particular, one piece of the jigsaw remains glaringly absent: support for kinship children's mental health. And this isn't just at a standstill; it's getting worse. We're seeing increased prevalence and complexity of social, emotional and behavioural needs at a time when

government plans could further erode access to vital therapeutic support. In 2024, we said that children in kinship care had for too long been "ignored and overlooked", but today we risk embedding this by design rather than by accident.

In the context of a substantial increase in mental distress among children and young people as identified by the Fonagy Review, it would be all too easy to see our 2026 annual survey findings as reflecting broader trends. But this would be a simplistic and fatalistic reading which ignores the evidence of progress elsewhere in the system over the same period. Targeted investment and policy attention can and does improve the experiences and outcomes of kinship families. We know this. We see it every single day.

As we move towards a rewired state with its focus on prevention and bringing decision-making closer to the communities it intends to help, let's keep children in kinship care in our hearts and our minds.

Dr Lucy Peake
Chief Executive
November 2026

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[1] – three times the number in mainstream foster care[2,3].

Kinship carers are most commonly grandparents, but they can also be older siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, other relatives and family friends. 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.

About *Time Hasn't Healed*

Time Hasn't Healed shares key findings from Kinship's 2026 annual survey of nearly 1,500 kinship carers to provide an updated 'state of the nation' overview of kinship families. It identifies where there has been demonstrable progress, as well as where experiences for kinship families have ceased to improve – and in some cases even deteriorated – over the last decade since our first ever annual survey in 2016.

Whilst we note that year-on-year results indicate some welcome improvements in addressing support needs for kinship families, we focus on the urgent need for a renewed national focus on the mental health of kinship children given evidence of increasing prevalence and complexity of need and a policy context which presents both opportunities and risks for their access to therapeutic support.

About our 2026 annual survey

Kinship has conducted a sector-leading annual survey of kinship carers since 2016 – the largest of their kind. The findings help us to develop a better 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. This enables us to deliver support services attuned to their needs and campaign for the policy and practice changes they want to see.

Our 2026 annual survey was developed using Form Assembly and open to responses from 24 June to 23 July 2026. It was promoted widely via Kinship's Community of kinship carers, social media channels, networks of professionals and researchers, and via partner organisations working with kinship families and those who support them.

1 Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021 [Published 26 September 2023]
2 Department for Education (2025) Children looked after in England including adoptions [Published 26 November 2025]
3 Welsh Government (2026) Children looked after by local authorities: April 2024 to March 2025 [Published 16 July 2026]

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Sam Turner, Associate Director of Policy and Public Affairs, and survey analysis was completed by Anam Raja, Research Manager.

We're extremely grateful to the nearly 1,500 kinship carers across England and Wales who shared their views and experiences with us this year.

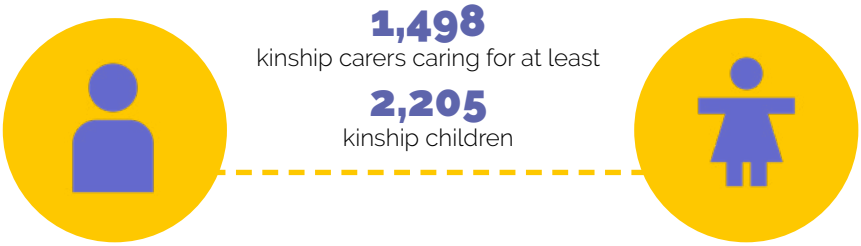
We are also grateful for the support Kinship receives from Postcode Lottery players. The long-term, flexible funding we are awarded through the Postcode Support Trust is so valuable. It enables us to deliver this annual survey and, together with support from our other core funders, underpins much of the work we do with, and for, kinship families.





Our 2026 annual survey cohort

1,498 kinship carers kindly gave up their valuable time to complete our 2026 annual survey. Together, they were caring for at least 2,205 kinship children. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of kinship carers were caring for one kinship child and around a quarter (26%) for two, with 1 in 10 (10%) caring for three or more children. On average, kinship carers were looking after 1.49 kinship children.

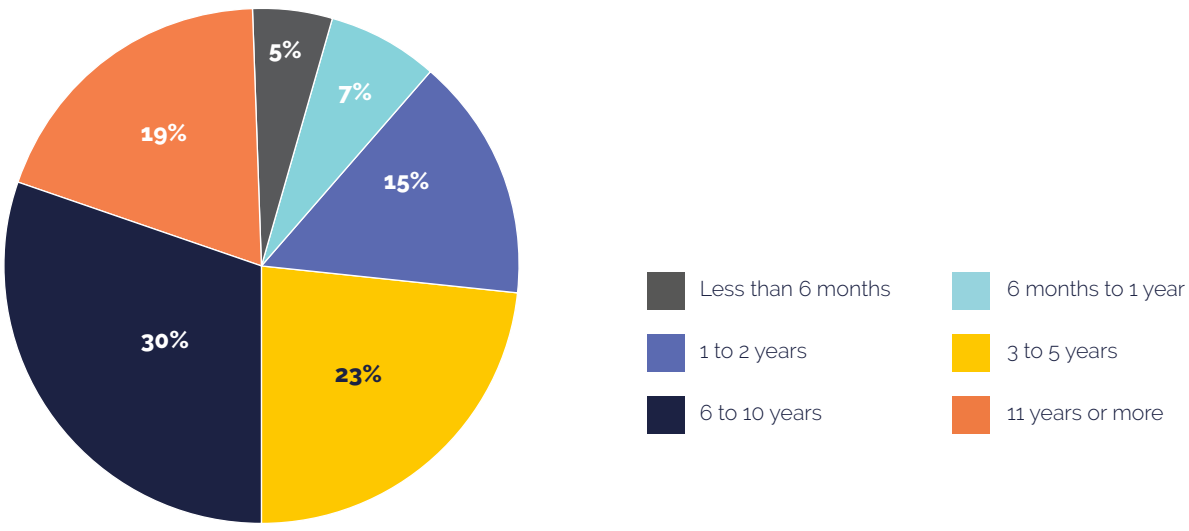


Kinship care experience

Respondents had most commonly been a kinship carer for between 6 and 10 years (30%), with nearly 1 in 5 (19%) having done so for 11 years or more.

It's particularly welcome to see a continued increase in the number of kinship carers completing our annual survey who have only recently taken on the care of a kinship child; **the proportion who said they had been a kinship carer for under 1 year has doubled from 2024 to 12% this year**. Given that those who have only recently become kinship carers often face particularly acute challenges, it's positive that this cohort appears to be increasingly integrated within our Kinship Community with access to the benefits this brings for signposting to appropriate advice, information and support.

Number of years as a kinship carer?



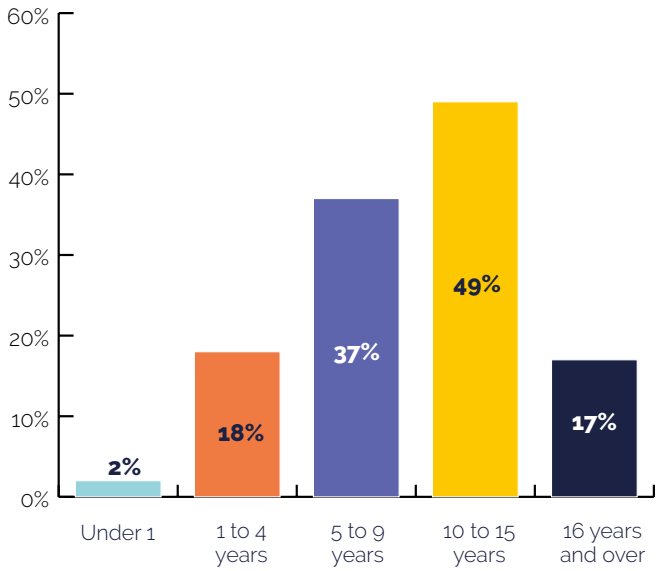
Age

The median age of kinship carers who completed our 2025 annual survey was 60 to 65 and half (50%) of respondents were aged 60 or over. This reflects the continued high proportion of grandparent kinship carers amongst our survey respondents as well as other analysis which has found that most children living in kinship care (59.2%) lived with at least one grandparent.[4] A similar age profile is also seen in the partners and spouses of survey respondents (where applicable).

We are particularly pleased to see that more kinship carers aged under 30 – many of whom who are older siblings to a kinship child in their care – completed our 2026 survey than ever before.

Similar to other recent survey cohorts, around half (49%) of kinship carers were caring for at least 1 kinship child aged 10 to 15 years old and 37% were caring for at least one kinship child aged 5 to 9 years old.

Percentage of kinship carers caring for a child by current age



**Note that percentages do not add to 100 as kinship carers may be caring for multiple children in different age groups.*

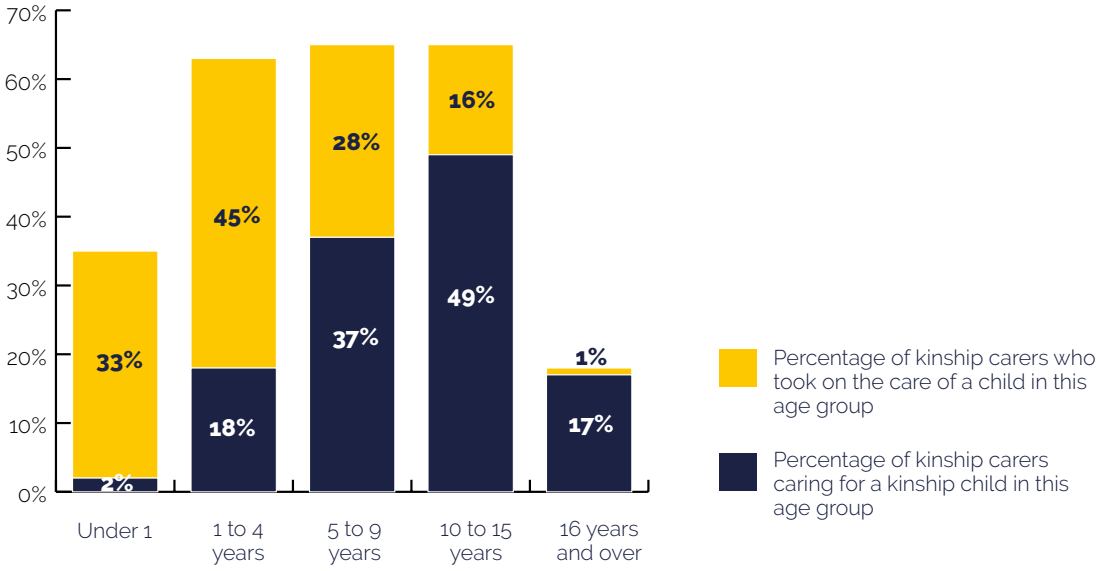
This continues to suggest that the kinship children represented in our survey cohorts are more concentrated within those middle age categories than seen in other data on the makeup of potential kinship households[5] This is on average a younger cohort compared to all those in local authority care (where more than a quarter are aged 16 and over)[6] and more reflective of the age profile of those in kinship foster care specifically[7].

4 Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021 [Published 26 September 2023]
5 Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021 [Published 26 September 2023]
6 Department for Education (2025) Children looked after in England including adoptions [Published 26 November 2025]
7 Department for Education (2024) Children in Care and Foster Care: Written question Parliament: written question, UIN 15020. Answered on 27 November 2024.

Age of children entering kinship care

The age of the child or children at the point a kinship carer steps up obviously has an enormous impact on a family's experience. Although kinship carers can take on the care of children at any age, we know they are more likely to take on the care of younger children. **Nearly 8 in 10 kinship carers responding to our survey took on the care of a child when they were 4 years old or younger**, and only 1% a child at age 16 or 17 (despite more than 1 in 6 of respondents currently caring for a child of this age).

Percentage of kinship carers caring for a child by current age and age when taking on their care



Compared to available data on the age of children when a special guardianship order is made following care proceedings, our survey cohort likely overrepresents those who have taken on the care of children aged under 1 and underrepresents those who have taken on the care of a child age 10 or older; for the year ending 2025/26, 46% of SGOs were granted for children aged under 5.[8] The average age of a child leaving the care system to special guardianship is 6 years and 5 months and to adoption is 3 years and 2 months. A much higher percentage of children who enter local authority care do so when they are older; 27% of children who started to be looked after last year were aged 10 to 15 years and 28% were 16 years and over.[9]

8 Coram (2026) Adoption and Special Guardianship Quarterly Data Collection: Headline Measures: Q1 2026/27 [Published September 2026]
9 Department for Education (2025) Children looked after in England including adoptions [Published 26 November 2025]

Gender

The gender split across our survey cohort in 2026 remains identical to previous years, with women representing the vast majority (87%) of respondents. Including the partners or spouses of survey respondents (if applicable) gives a more balanced picture of kinship caring responsibilities and gender: 66% of kinship carers within the households represented in our 2025 annual survey were female.

Gender	Percentage of kinship carers	Percentage of kinship carers' partners or spouses	Kinship carers and their partners or spouses
Female	87%	18%	656
Male	12%	82%	354
Non-binary	<1%	<1%	<1%
Prefer not to say	<1%	<1%	<1%

Ethnicity

The percentages of respondents from each ethnic group were near-identical to our 2025 survey cohort (see table below), with kinship carers from White backgrounds representing the overwhelming majority of respondents (93%).

We are continuing to embed the learnings from our Raised by Relatives research report, published last year, to ensure our annual survey cohort in future years better reflects that of our wider Kinship Community and what we understand the likely ethnicity profile of the wider kinship family population to be.[10]

Ethnic group	Percentage of kinship carers	Percentage of kinship carers caring for at least one child from this ethnic group
Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh	1%	1%
Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African	4%	3%
Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups	2%	13%
White	93%	86%
Other ethnic group	<1%	<1%

The ethnicity profile of the kinship children cared for by kinship carers responding to our survey continues to be more diverse, although likely still underrepresents children from some ethnic backgrounds.[11] The identified underrepresentation of children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds in formalised kinship arrangements (i.e. kinship foster care and special guardianship) very likely contributes to the skewed ethnicity profile of our annual survey cohort given the relative underrepresentation of those with informal arrangements.[12]

10 Tah, P. and Selwyn, J (2025) Raised by Relatives: the experiences of Black and Asian kinship carers in England. Kinship and the Rees Centre, University of Oxford.
11 Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021 [Published 26 September 2023
12 What Works for Children's Social Care (2022) Understanding formal kinship care arrangements in England: Analysis of administrative data



"In my Growth and Inclusion role at Kinship my eyes have really being opened as to how diverse communities operate. One of the most recent learnings for me is that 'kinship care' doesn't really translate into a lot of languages. We've had to work on ways to explain it and talk people through it. I'm really pleased with the work our research team has been doing to support this understanding.

In the future I want to see more cultural awareness among professionals working with kinship families as well as more understanding into how different cultures interpret and apply things. Professionals need to be sensitive to that in their approach." **Meet Maxine, an aunt kinship carer from London and Kinship's Growth and Inclusion Lead**

While only 2% of kinship carers were from a Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups background themselves, 13% were caring for a child with this ethnic background. This highlights the need for support and spaces which help kinship carers navigate important conversations about racial identity, culture and heritage, including our Diverse Families online peer support group for kinship carers raising children with mixed or different cultural identity to themselves.

Relationships

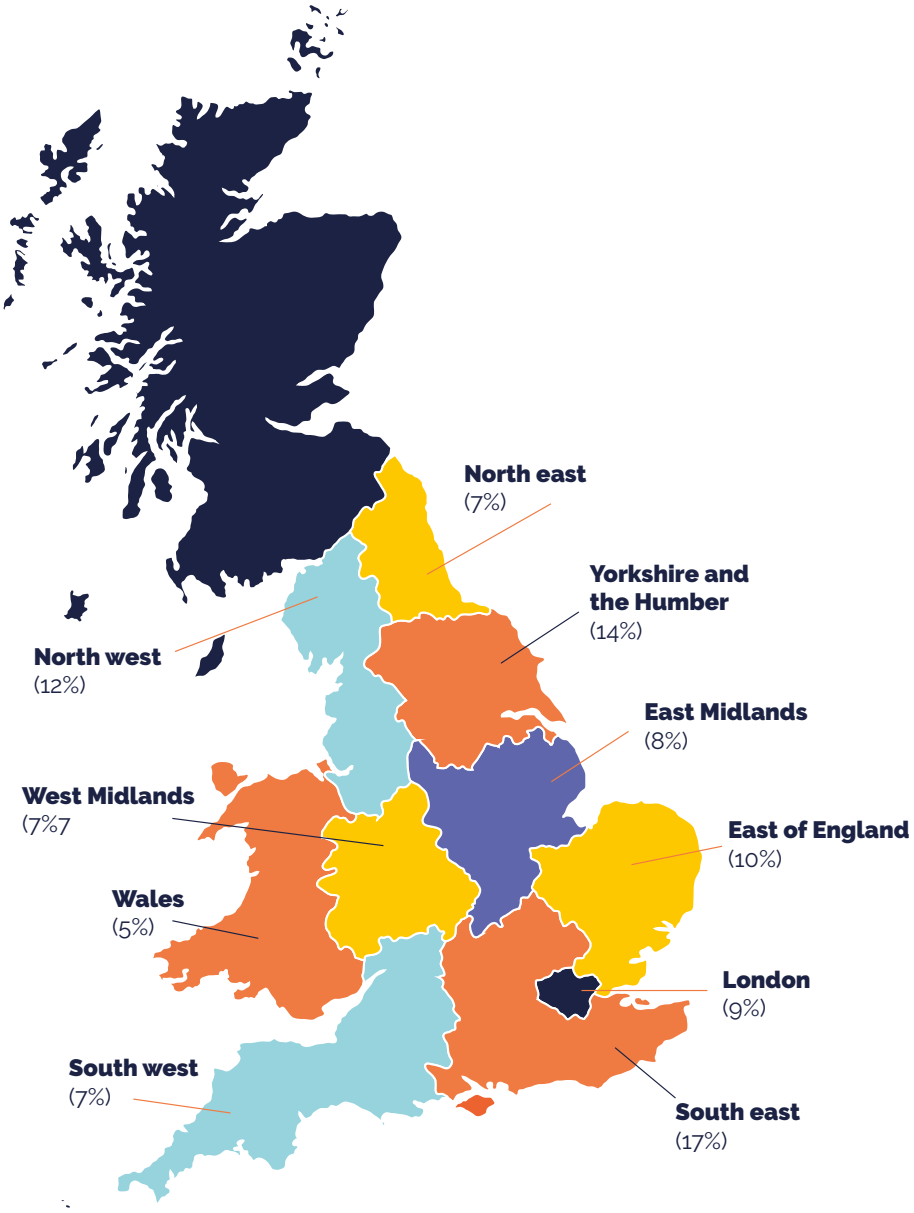
Similar to last year, 70% of kinship carers completing our 2026 annual survey were grandparents to at least one kinship child in their care. This followed a general trend of growing diversity in relationships since our first annual survey in 2016 where 86% of respondents were grandparents.

This year's cohort includes the highest ever number of sibling kinship carers who have responded to an annual survey, reflected too in the growing proportion of kinship carers aged under 30 (see above). This cohort brings a specific set of circumstances and experiences less frequently heard in policy and practice discussions focused on kinship family support needs.[13]

13 Stabler, L (2025) An exploration of sibling kinship care with siblings, policy makers and practitioners in the UK: Identifying pathways for improving understanding and outcomes. PhD Thesis, Cardiff University

Location

We received at least 1 response from a kinship carer living in all but 3 local authorities which deliver children's services in England and Wales. Our 2026 cohort is similar in its geographical profile to last year.



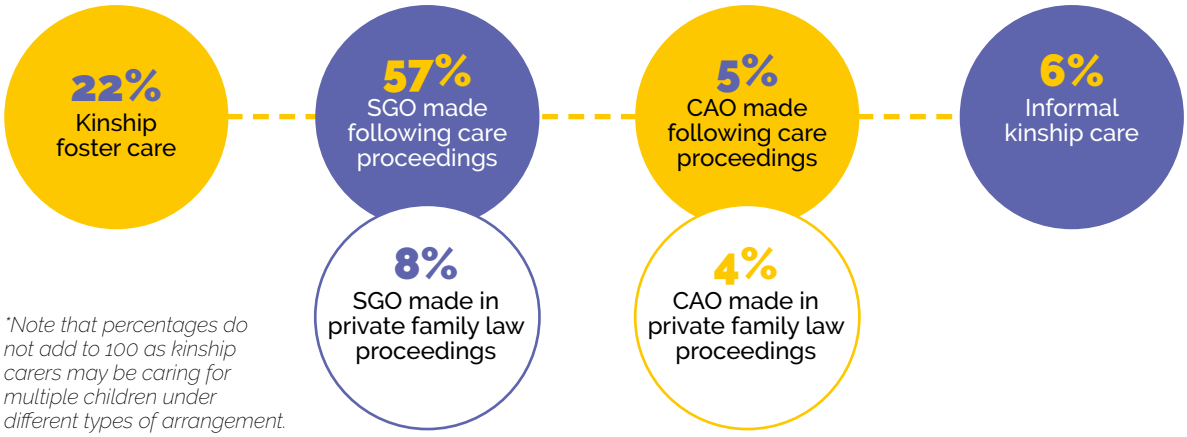
It is also fairly reflective of the estimated number of kinship households identified in each region or nation according to ONS analysis of Census 2021 data (although we may overrepresent kinship carers from the South East and underrepresent those from London and the West Midlands). Prevalence of kinship care varies considerably across the country: 6 of the ten local authorities with the highest proportions of kinship households in England are in the North East.[14]

Around 3 in 10 kinship carers (28%) said their kinship children lived in a different local authority area before coming into their care, 3 percentage points lower than last year (31%). Comparing where children lived at this point to where they lived with their kinship carer(s) at the time of our survey offers some interesting insights about the geographical flows of kinship families within our survey cohort. Kinship children were more likely to live in London (15%, +6pp), the South West (12%, +5pp) and the West Midlands (9%, +2pp) prior to coming into kinship care, and less likely to be living in Yorkshire and the Humber (11%, -3pp) and Wales (4%, -3pp).

14 Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021 [Published 26 September 2023

Type of kinship arrangement

A smaller proportion of survey respondents than in recent years had a special guardianship order (SGO) for at least one kinship child in their care (65%, down 3pp from 2025 and 2024), although they still represented the clear majority. This change is mostly due to the relative increase in the proportion of kinship foster carers (22%, up 4pp from 2025 and 6pp from 2024). We tentatively offer one potential reason for this increase on page 36.



**Note that percentages do not add to 100 as kinship carers may be caring for multiple children under different types of arrangement.*

For those caring for at least one child under an SGO or child arrangements order (CAO), the majority (86%) said this order was made following care proceedings involving the local authority rather than in private family law proceedings.

For those caring for at least one child as a kinship foster carer (including those temporarily approved under Regulation 24), 3 in 5 (60%) said the child had been placed with them under a full care order (section 31) and 21% under an interim care order (section 38). In addition, 7% were acting as a kinship foster carer under a voluntary arrangement (section 20 in England and section 76 in Wales).

12% of kinship carer respondents said they didn't know under what order or arrangement the child had been placed with them. This is concerning given the importance this has in determining next steps for the child's care and who is able to make decisions about this. The proportion who are unsure likely reflects complexity of the legal landscape and the often-poor information provided to kinship carers about their rights and entitlements and how to navigate the family justice system during what might is likely to be an immensely stressful time.

Of those kinship carers with an SGO or CAO made following care proceedings, 7 in 10 said their kinship child was placed with them by the local authority and they were supported as a kinship foster carer prior to this. However, for nearly a quarter (23%), the child was instead living in unrelated foster care. In addition, 3% of respondents said the child was living with a different relative, 1% said they were living in a children's home, and 6% said 'other' (most commonly because the child was living with their parent(s) or they took on the care of the child as a newborn baby directly from hospital).

Kinship families in 2026

10 years of progress and paralysis

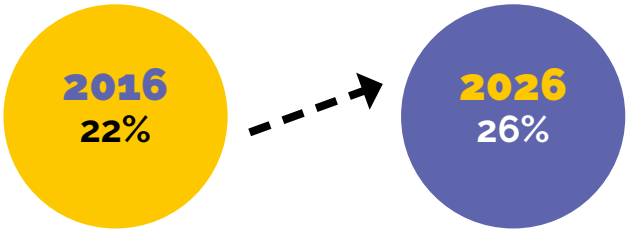
There are signs that overall support for kinship carers has improved in the last decade, even if the proportion who believe they aren't getting adequate support remains stubbornly high. **Respondents to our 2026 annual survey were 5 percentage points more likely (23%) than kinship carers were in 2016 (18%) to agree they were getting the support they needed to bring up their kinship children**; they were also 8 percentage points less likely to disagree (45% compared to 53%).

Kinship carers today also feel better recognised and valued. **Nearly a third (32%) of respondents this year agreed they felt respected as a kinship carer, up from 29% a decade ago**. Similarly, they were 5 percentage points less likely to disagree (35%, down from 40%). We are proud to have played our part in improving public and professional understanding of kinship carers and the contribution they make to the lives of children and our communities through our efforts such as Kinship Care Week, the annual celebration of kinship families.

However, despite greater recognition of kinship care from government, local authorities and the wider public – and significant progress starting to be made in recent years to boost support for kinship families – our survey results suggest support for kinship children is an area where experiences and outcomes may be getting worse.

Kinship carers in 2026 (26%) were 4 percentage points more likely than a decade ago (22%) to say their children aren't getting the support they need for healthy emotional and social development. Or put another way, they were 4 percentage points less likely to agree they were getting this support (44% in 2026 compared to 48% in 2016). Kinship carers this year (22%) were also 4 percentage points more likely than kinship carers were in 2016 (18%) to say their children aren't getting the support they need to learn and achieve at school.

Percentage of kinship carers who said their children were not getting the support they needed for healthy emotional and social development



It is also clear that, when support is provided, experiences can be different. Responding to our 2026 annual survey, kinship foster carers (52%) were 18 percentage points more likely than informal kinship carers (34%) to agree that their kinship children were getting the support they needed for healthy emotional and social development, and 17 percentage points more likely to agree their kinship children were getting the support they needed to learn and achieve at school (62% compared to 45%). This reflects a pervasive and damaging feature of the kinship system: support is determined largely by the type of kinship arrangement rather than children's needs.



"I felt safe and loved with my grandmother, but it was really hard to cope with what was going on. I could see the sacrifices my grandmother was making – giving up her job and trying to raise me without any support. It was incredibly difficult and not part of her life plan, and I felt a bit responsible for that.

Kinship children and young people can feel invisible because people don't understand your support needs. I didn't have a counsellor who I could talk to and who could help me make sense of my feelings. It was really confusing.

It wasn't until I was 17 that somebody asked about how I was feeling and why. If I'd had that support years earlier, it would have been much easier to manage my anxiety. It's not fair that so many kinship children are left to struggle alone after such difficult starts in life. We all deserve the support we need to heal."

Poppy, age 25, from London, raised in kinship care by her grandmother from the age of 8

It's unacceptable that support to help kinship children heal from trauma and learn well in school is in a worse place now than it was in 2016. In 2024, our Forgotten report drew attention to the needs of children in kinship care having for too long been ignored and overlooked, and we urged governments and local authorities to prioritise mental health and educational support for this often-invisible group.[15] We reiterate this call now and with even greater urgency.

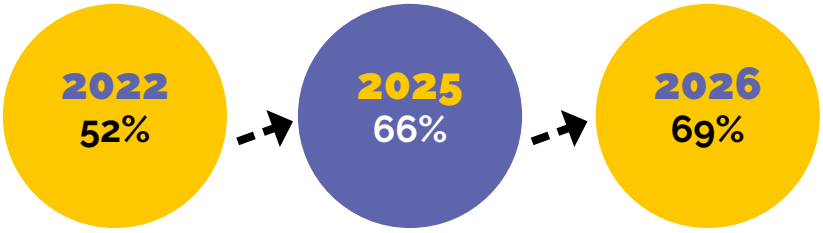
Mental health and therapeutic support

Most worryingly, there are further signs from our 2026 annual survey that kinship children's needs are growing increasingly complex and that kinship carers aren't getting the support they need to respond effectively, risking serious mental ill-health and family instability.

Experiences of trauma, separation and loss can have a major impact on kinship children's development and may sometimes lead to significant ongoing social, emotional and mental health difficulties which require specialist support. Evidence is clear that kinship children have elevated levels of mental health needs and SEND comparable to other children's social care groups, including looked after and adopted children.[16]

Nearly 7 in 10 kinship carers (69%) told us this year that a kinship child they care for regularly displays behaviours they find challenging to manage, up 3 percentage points from last year's survey and 17 percentage points from 2022. Difficulty managing children's social, emotional and mental health needs remains a primary reason why kinship carers are worried about their ability to continue looking after their children.

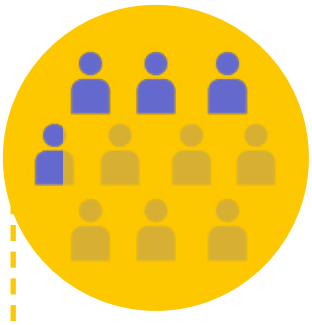
Percentage of kinship carers who said a kinship child they care for regularly displays behaviours they find challenging to manage



These findings come following last year's reductions in the level of funding available for therapeutic support for some kinship children in England through the adoption and special guardianship support fund (ASGSF). It's clear these changes have had a detrimental impact on kinship children's ability to access sufficient, timely support.

15 Kinship (2024) Forgotten: Support for kinship children's education and mental health
16 Kinship (2026) For kinship families, with kinship families: Submission to the Department for Education's 'Adoption support that works for all' consultation

Of those kinship families in England who accessed the ASGSF in the last year, nearly 4 in 10 (37%) saw the level of support for their children reduced and 17% were unable to access the support recommended by a specialist assessment. As many as 1 in 5 (19%) experienced a delay in their application being processed and 16% an unplanned break in therapy. These figures echo those from a recent survey of adoptive parents which found that 40% experienced a delayed application, 34% had an unplanned break in therapeutic support, and nearly half (49%) saw their adopted child's support reduced in frequency or length.[17]



Nearly 4 in 10

kinship families who accessed the ASGSF last year saw a reduction in their child's level of support

Our submission made earlier this year to the government's consultation on proposals to reform adoption and kinship support, including devolvement and other possible changes to the ASGSF, made clear that these plans were unlikely to deliver the intended outcomes.[18] We outlined how high prevalence of therapeutic support needs amongst kinship families were being compounded by uniquely challenging circumstances for kinship families, and that poor and inconsistent access to support was increasing the risk of kinship family breakdown and sibling separation. We noted that proposals to devolve the ASGSF without significant additional capacity-building failed to consider the very different policy and practice landscape for kinship care, and highlighted evidence that kinship families could benefit from a different approach which recognised their unique needs, strengths and experiences different to those of adoptive families.



"As a child, nobody really asked me how I felt about being in kinship care. I didn't even know that I was in kinship care. What I needed was somebody who understood my questions about my identity and to have therapy to help me work out who I was. I knew my nan loved me, but she wasn't equipped to deal with everything I was experiencing.

There were periods where I would spend days in my room, only really leaving when I had to. Some of that was depression, but some of it was loneliness too.

I think early therapeutic support would have really helped me. It needs to change as you grow and begin to understand your story. It needs to recognise that every child's experience of kinship care is different. And it needs to support kinship carers too, because their wellbeing has an enormous impact on the children they're raising."

Lucas, age 19, from Bradford, raised in kinship care by his grandmother from the age of 3

Additional evidence published since May continues to support this. Research on special guardianship families in Wales found that many kinship children had experienced significant early adversity and commonly had significant mental health, neurodevelopmental and learning needs.[19] In addition to existing evidence on the importance of specialist therapeutic intervention for children cared for under special guardianship orders[20] and the risk that unmet needs had for family stability[21], the most recent output from the Family Routes

17 Adoption UK (2026) The Adoption Barometer 2026 Update: England
18 Kinship (2026) For kinship families, with kinship families: Submission to the Department for Education's 'Adoption support that works for all' consultation
19 Stabler, L. et al (2026) Special guardianship families in Wales: Identifying Children's Strengths and Support needs. CASCADE, Cardiff University
20 Ecorys UK and Rees Centre, University of Oxford (2026) Family Routes: exploring needs, experiences and outcomes among young people growing up in adoption and special guardianship. Department for Education [January 2026]
21 Selwyn, S. & Gardiner, J. (2025) Family Routes: children who returned to care after leaving for adoption or to live with a special guardian. Rees Centre University of Oxford. Department for Education [September 2025]

longitudinal study (commissioned by the Department for Education) noted the value which special guardians (and adoptive parents) placed on therapeutic parenting, attachment parenting and non-violent resistance (NVR) training– including that funded by the ASGSF.[22]

Contact and family relationships

Linked closely to kinship children's emotional wellbeing and mental health is the quality of family relationships and ongoing contact with relatives. One of the benefits of kinship care is that it enables children to grow up safely within their family network and retain relationships with parents and others. However, contact and family relationships can also be a source of conflict and harm, compounding trauma and mental health challenges – especially where support for managing these relationships is absent.

The vast majority (89%) of kinship carers responding to our 2026 annual survey said that their kinship children had ongoing contact with relatives, with patterns broadly reflecting what we have seen in other recent annual surveys.[23]

Kinship Minds

Kinship Minds is a new free, self-paced online course designed with and for kinship carers. Funded by the Prudence Trust, it supports kinship carers to recognise the signs of trauma and mental health needs, understand what might be behind their kinship child's behaviour, and discover practical ways to respond that help them feel safe and supported.



62% ongoing contact with mother

46% ongoing contact with father

35% ongoing contact with sibling(s) they didn't live with

11% ongoing contact with other relatives

Maternal relationships appear to be particularly challenging; **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 for the child, compared to 15% for those who had contact with their father**. Contact with siblings and others in the family network was reported as overwhelmingly beneficial for the children in their care: only 6% of kinship carers said that contact with brothers, sisters or other relatives was harmful.

Too many kinship carers are left to manage contact – and its impacts – completely alone, despite the strength of family relationships being a crucial factor in children's experiences, outcomes and stability. In 2023, only 1 in 8 kinship families said they were receiving local authority support with

24% of kinship carers described maternal contact as being harmful or very harmful

22 Ecorys UK (2026) Family Routes: needs, experiences and support for adoptive parents and special guardians. Department for Education [September 2026]

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

contact. **A quarter (25%) of kinship carers whoresponded to our 2026 annual survey said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their kinship children's contact arrangements**, very similar to when we last asked this question in 2023 (26%).[24]

The importance of high-quality support for navigating contact and family relationships is gaining recognition in policy and practice. Recently updated kinship care statutory guidance includes a new set of National Kinship Standards which set out expectations for how local authorities and other partners should approach kinship care. Standard 4 asks that local authorities provide *"appropriate support to kinship carers to help them manage complex family dynamics and arrangements"*.[25] As part of their review of the kinship care legal framework, the Law Commission identified opportunities for the family court to further consider family relationships in the making of legal orders for kinship care situations and made a set of provisional proposals to enhance court scrutiny and deliberation in this space.[26]

We asked kinship carers in this year's survey to share with us their experiences managing contact and family relationships, and the additional support, if any, they would like to manage this. The dominant message was that contact is one of the most difficult aspects of kinship care. Key themes shared by respondents included:

- **Challenges with inconsistent and unreliable parental behaviour**. Kinship carers described the difficulties they faced managing expectations of both parent(s) and their children, and the disappointment, confusion and upset for children when relatives failed to attend or cancelled sessions at late notice. Many recognised the importance of maintaining family relationships but felt contact was too often driven by unrealistic adult and/or overly optimistic professional expectations rather than children's wellbeing and best interests.

  "As much as we try to normalise family time the parents don't consider the impact on the children when they don't turn up or are late or are volatile."

  "The children have emotional overload & exceptional bad behaviour afterwards. Parents argue & fight in front of the children so all contacts has ceased."

  "BM [birth mum] & BD [birth dad] has been on hold for months. Life settled down, although LO [little one] expressed wish to see BM. Saw BD last month and LO is showing distress and disturbing behaviours. anger, change of voice, not sleeping, wetting the bed, violence."

- **The burden of managing contact without support**. Kinship carers – particularly those who weren't kinship foster carers – shared how they were expected to organise, supervise and facilitate contact with little practical or emotional help, absorbing often alone the financial and emotional costs associated with complex family dynamics. Particularly where special guardians had been granted an order following care proceedings, they felt largely abandoned by children's services and unable to secure support via a written support plan when difficulties arose at a later date.

  "99% us doing the work and a poor 1% from birth parent who just has no idea how to show love to a child. Very sad and disruptive. No training despite asking for 3 years and always have to fight for supervised contact from local authority. Feels like we always have to justify why we need help and repeat the same discussions and reasons every year. Terribly stressful."

24 Kinship (2024) Forgotten: Support for kinship children's education and mental health
25 Department for Education (2026) Kinship care: statutory guidance for local authorities
26 Law Commission (2026) Kinship care: Consultation paper

"We manage it as we are the supervisors of the contact (2hrs twice a week, 5 hours on Christmas Day and 5 hours on the little one's birthday). We pay for it as we have contact out in the community so we pay for all of us to attend the venue we choose. It impacts our time as it cuts into our weekends and my day off work."

"I want the social services and local authorities should seek to the care plan they wrote and hand over to the guardian. They have to support in the stages of the care plan written to us. Sometimes what you need their support after 1 year in caring for the child. You are told the child is no more under any social service care. You are left in the dark and struggling with what to do with the child care. This is not acceptable."

- **Family conflict often leads to increased instability**. Difficulties maintaining positive and enduring relationships with parents and family networks bled into other areas of families' lives too, impacting negatively on children's educational progress and mental health, increasing household stress and financial insecurity, and leading to hostility and repeated court applications to amend or discharge orders, and ultimately threatening the stability of the kinship arrangement itself.

  "The child's mother takes us to court every year since the SGO was granted for much more and unsupervised contact, despite not adhering to the current arrangements. This has made our life an absolute misery!"

  "It's very stressful managing contact when that person is related. It can be very volatile and communication can sometimes breakdown. We have been cancelled on a few times with little explanation but when we had to cancel because of illness we were threatened with court as we were 'jeopardising father/daughter relationship'. It's hard to keep emotion out of managing it."

  "More clearer expectations. The birth parents do not accept they are unable to be unsupervised with the children because it's not clearly laid out in any court documents. Now me as a kinship guardian has to deal with abuse and harassment as they aren't getting what they want. There is no support once the paperwork is signed. The system is failing and my placement will fail as a result of this."

- **Kinship families want support to maintain positive relationships**. Despite the challenges, respondents overwhelmingly valued children's connections with parents, siblings and wider family when these relationships were safe and beneficial, including the positive impact on identity and cultural heritage. Kinship carers went to great lengths to support these but wanted additional support – including supervised contact, therapeutic support, mediation, financial assistance and specialist kinship care-aware services – to ensure contact was child-centred and sustainable. They also recognised the child's parents often weren't getting the support they needed but felt helpless to do anything about this.

  "Would really welcome some impartial support in re establishing this - but only if would be in children's best interests of course - and setting out boundaries / plan of action to have contact with mum."

  "In kinship you think you're stepping up to support children. You end up managing parents who make contact arrangements so difficult, sometimes they don't turn up, cancel last minute, don't see them for months. It's impossible to manage and SS leave you to it as soon as the order is made, so your [sic] on the front line to the difficulties and abuse. More should be done to support kinship carers to not have to bear the long term mental strain of managing parents."

"Our daughter (mum) can have contact as and when so he sees her a couple of times a week, sometimes at our house and sometimes she takes him out and his little sister lives with mum so he also sees her with mum and little sister also has regular sleepovers here… to build and maintain solid relationships. He sees [other family members] regularly. It's important he sees a fully functioning family filled with love and support. All of his contact helps not only socially but also to embed his identity especially as he is mixed race."

Cost of living pressures



Twice as likely

to be using credit more than usual, such as credit cards, loans or overdrafts

Kinship families continue to struggle financially. Our 2025 annual survey findings did suggest some of the starkest signs of acute financial pressures had ameliorated following a period of peak inflation and spiralling costs of basic goods[27], but this year's figures show that financial insecurity and poverty remain a core part of too many kinship families' lives.

Nearly half of kinship carers (48%) told us they were using their savings as a result of cost-of-living pressures, 19 percentage points higher than was the case for other UK adults (29%) during a similar time period[28]. In addition, kinship carers (29%) were twice as likely than other UK adults (14%) to be using credit more than usual such as credit cards, loans or overdrafts. These figures are similar to or slightly higher than they were last year, both in absolute terms and in the gap between kinship households and the general population.

Kinship carers (68%) were also significantly more likely than the general population (41%) to be shopping around more, but interestingly were less likely to say they were spending less on food shopping and essentials (30% compared to 38%). This might suggest that kinship households are more likely to have exhausted any household savings associated with reductions in spending on food shopping and essentials, putting their household financial security in a much more fragile position than for others.

Similarly, kinship carers were also less likely to say they were using less fuel such as gas or electricity in their home (27% compared to 33%, or 40% when isolating those aged 50 to 69). Although our survey collection took place during the UK's second-warmest June and July on record, more than half of kinship carers (54%) said that it was either somewhat or very difficult to afford their energy bills compared to around a third (32%) of other UK adults. With energy bills forecast to see the biggest rise in 4 years in January, this places kinship households in a particularly vulnerable place as we head into winter.

The trend over the last 10 years is mixed. Whilst it's positive that kinship carers in 2026 are 7 percentage points more likely than those in 2016[29] to agree their income is sufficient to meet their kinship children's needs (29%, up from 22%), the proportion who disagree remains unchanged; that means **nearly half of kinship carers (46%) believe their financial situations are preventing them from providing what their children need to thrive**.

27 Kinship (2025) Handle With Care: Annual survey of kinship carers 2025
28 Office for National Statistics (2026) Dataset: Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: household finances, 1 to 26 July 2026 edition [Published 14 August 2026]
29 Grandparents Plus (2016) Kinship Care: State of the Nation 2016

Financial support

We know that financial support for kinship families is often poor, based on the type of kinship arrangement and whether or not the child was previously looked after rather than on family needs.[30] This is then compounded by inconsistent practice across local authorities, meaning families living only a few doors away from each other over a local authority boundary might see completely different approaches taken to financial support eligibility and conditions.

The broad trend since 2016 has not been positive. **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%)**. The percentage who agreed with this statement remained very similar (30%, down from 31%).



"We were temporary foster carers to start with but it was so intrusive we went to court and got a special guardianship order giving us full parental rights. However, the little financial support we do receive is means tested as I have a work and state pension, so we don't get left with very much and it's expensive to raise a child. Your money just disappears.

We love our granddaughter to bits and wouldn't have it any other way but kinship carers really need the same financial and practical support as foster carers".

Meet Rod and Julie, grandparent kinship carers from Chesterfield

However, there are some emerging signs that the system is beginning to move in the right direction and that steps taken by government and local authorities are making a difference. Whilst the overall proportion of kinship carers receiving a financial allowance remains similar to previous years, the prevalence of conditions placed on the delivery of these allowances – such as means testing, annual reviews and/or restrictions on how long they are paid following the making of an order – appears to be reducing.

For special guardians where an order was made following care proceedings, only 50% said their allowance was means tested and a very similar percentage (49%) said it was subject to annual review this year, in contrast to a prevalence between 63% to 67% for means testing and 54% to 63% for annual reviews recorded for this cohort in our annual surveys between 2023 and 2025. The delivery of allowances for a fixed duration only (i.e. for 2 years following the making of an order) remains very similar to previous years at 12%.

This may reflect increasing numbers of local authorities recognising the benefits – to outcomes for children, families and their budgets – of removing means testing requirements and equalising allowances between foster carers and at least some groups of kinship carers.[31] The number of kinship carers in receipt of a non-means tested allowance through the Kinship Zones financial allowances pilot may also be reflected here.

It's clear that the provision of financial support for kinship families delivers a positive impact on kinship carers' sense of financial security. 4 in 10 kinship carers (39%) who received a financial allowance for all or some of the children in their care agreed they were getting the financial support they need compared to 3 in 10 (30%) of all kinship carers, and were 3 percentage points more likely to agree their income was sufficient to meet their child's needs.

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

31 McGrath, P. (2022) Developing Good Practice in Financially Supporting Special Guardians a guide for local authorities. Kinship, commissioned by Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board.

A guaranteed non-means tested financial allowance delivers even greater security: **8 in 10 kinship carers (79%) of those receiving an allowance through the Kinship Zones programme agreed they were getting the financial support they needed and 6 in 10 (60%) agreed their income was sufficient**. This clearly demonstrates the transformative impact which consistent and sufficient ongoing financial support can have for kinship families.



8 in 10

kinship carers receiving an allowance through a Kinship Zone agreed they were getting the financial support they needed

Those who responded outlined some of the positive impacts this guaranteed financial support has had for their kinship children and households.

"This has been life-changing for us. We have been able to work fewer hours. I had been working an additional evening a week to pay bills; now I can be home three days to do school pickups. It has been so beneficial. We have seen a positive impact on his behaviour. Also, we struggled financially before, we ensured our child got everything he needed, however we had to often go without ourselves."

"It's been great it's really helped us out financially as i had to get an extra job to pay for school trips and things and now i don't need put in the extra hours and that means spending more hours with my family."

"Payments very helpful as had no financial from the age of 2 until started receiving kinship payments few months ago. The extra support money is invaluable in terms of my granddaughter helping with extra things as a school leaver about to start college in September."

"Receiving the allowance means we are able pay for clubs and activities for the children and also be able to take them on holidays."

"I have very recently received this financial support, prior to this [local authority] had reduced the allowance by 74% (only just covering the weekly school dinner costs). Since being in receipt of the new allowance I don't feel the need to budget on provisions and extra for my child."

"I have been able to reduce my working hours to suit school hours to be there for her more. Going into after-school clubs was too longer days for her to cope with."

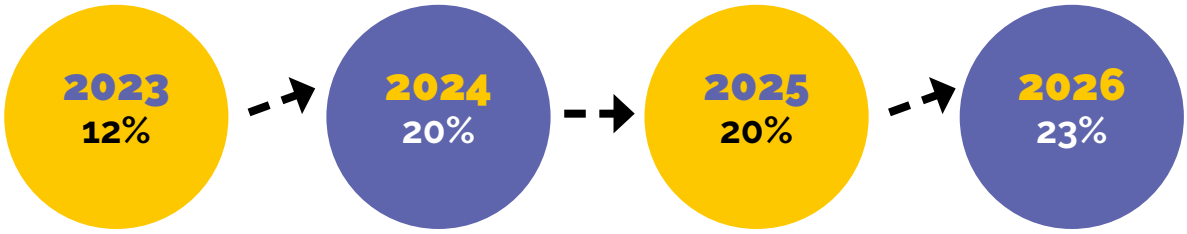
"Support has been the difference between living and surviving."

Local authority support and engagement

The most positive findings from our 2026 annual survey can be found in response to the year-on-year 'tracking' questions included on kinship carers' experiences of local authority support, information, trust and engagement. Here we see clear signals of positive system change and improving experiences.

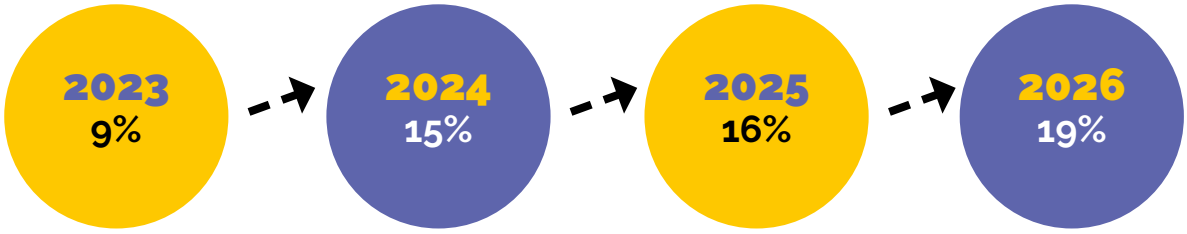
Kinship carers' ratings of local authority support and information and their trust in the local authority have all improved again progressively for the fourth consecutive year, albeit from

a very low base. Of those who had received local authority support, **kinship carers in 2026 (23%) were nearly twice as likely as those just 4 years ago (12%) to say the support their family had received from the local authority was excellent or good**. They were also 10 percentage points less likely to say it was poor or very poor.[32] We know that high-quality support planning is an important foundation for successful kinship care arrangements, giving families the confidence their needs will be met and preventing problems from escalating over time.[33]



Percentage of kinship carers who rated the support received from their local authority as excellent or good

Positive ratings of local authority information have more than doubled over the same time period. **Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) kinship carers this year rated the provision of information about kinship care as excellent or good, up from just 9% in 2023**. Ratings of trust have understandably improved alongside support and information too, with nearly a quarter (24%) of kinship carers telling us they completely or moderately trust their local authority to support them and their kinship family, up by 10 percentage points since 2023.



Percentage of kinship carers who rated their local authority's provision of information as excellent or good

However, we should reserve space for some caution alongside any celebration of these improvements. The responses to our 2026 annual survey still show that more than a third (34%) of kinship carers rate the local authority support they've received as poor or very poor, 2 in 5 (42%) rate the information provided about kinship care as poor or very poor, and a similar proportion (39%) say they don't trust their local authority at all.



"We didn't have anyone around us in terms of support. Social services said we needed to get a solicitor which they paid for, but we didn't get any financial support for two years. We didn't know we were entitled to a financial allowance; we weren't told anything. We were left in the dark trying to find our way through.

The lack of support and information for kinship carers like us was really bad. We had seven years of non-stop meetings, court proceedings and social services planning but no support. We only found out about kinship support from the charity Kinship at a peer support meeting for kinship carers a few years ago which was amazing."

Meet Heather and Nick, kinship carers from London raising their 4 grandchildren

32 Kinship (2023) Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis
33 University of Exeter, Kinship and Coram BAAF (2026) Making a Support Plan: A Kinship Care Companion: Guidance for Professionals

There are other signs that steps taken by the UK Government in recent years have helped to improve opportunities for kinship families to access local authority support and information. **Kinship carers in England who responded to our 2026 annual survey (18%) were more likely than last year (13%)[34] to say they have seen their kinship local offer**, likely reflecting an additional year for local authorities to deliver the requirement set out in updated statutory guidance in October 2024[35] and in preparation for the new legal duty which commenced on 29 June 2026 following the passing of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026.[36]



18%

of kinship carers said they had seen their local authority's kinship local offer, up from 13% last year

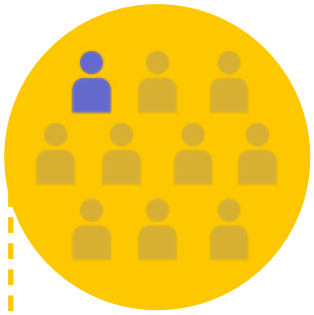
The Act also introduced a legal duty on local authorities in England to consult with kinship carers when making their local offers. Over the last year, we've worked with several pioneering local authorities – including Telford – to help them coproduce their kinship local offers with kinship carers and the children they're raising. The percentage of kinship carers who said they had been invited by their local authority to give feedback or help shape local support this year was marginally higher than last year, up by 1 percentage point to 16%.
Since September 2024, the remit of the virtual school head (VSH) role has included an extension to champion and support a wider group of kinship children in England, including the provision of advice and information on request to families secured by an SGO or CAO regardless of whether or not the child was previously looked after.[37] The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 will further place this on a statutory footing from autumn 2027, subject to a consultation on changes and updates to statutory guidance.[38]

This extension appears to be having a positive impact on access to advice to support kinship children's education. **A quarter (25%) of kinship carers this year said that they or a kinship child they care for had ever received advice or support from the local authority virtual school, up 3 percentage points from 2025**. Previous Kinship research has found that support and advocacy from the virtual school is often spoken of very highly by kinship carers.[39] Together with the introduction of a new indicator within the school census to better identify children in both formalised and informal kinship care[40], this could support improved educational outcomes and experiences for this cohort in the future, although we continue to urge the UK and Welsh Governments to take forward the recommendations outlined in our Forgotten report.

Family (in)stability

It is positive that the proportion of kinship families at urgent risk of breakdown appears to have decreased and is currently at its lowest since we first began to record this in 2023. **1 in 10 (10%) kinship carers said they were concerned about their ability to continue in the next year if their situation doesn't improve, down 3 percentage points from its peak last year (13%)**, and a further 10% didn't know.

34 Kinship (2025) Handle With Care: Annual survey of kinship carers 2025
35 Department for Education (2026) Kinship care: statutory guidance for local authorities
36 Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026. Section 5 – Information: children in kinship care and their carers. [Accessed via legislation.gov.uk on 27 October 2026]
37 Department for Education (2025) Promoting the education of children with a social worker and children in kinship care arrangements: virtual school head role extension
38 Department for Education (2026) Delivering the children's social care reset: an implementation plan for local partners
39 Kinship (2024) Forgotten: Support for kinship children's education and mental health
40 Department for Education (2026) Complete the school census: Data items 2026 to 2027 [Accessed 27 October 2026]



1 in 10

kinship carers are concerned about their ability to continue in the next year

However, whilst positive in direction, this still represents a significant minority of kinship carers and the potential for devastating consequences for thousands of children – most of whom would otherwise be looked after in unrelated foster or residential care – and the state. Research suggests that kinship carers in England provide £4.3 billion of economic value by caring for children[41], and that for every 100 children looked after in well-supported kinship care than local authority care, the state saves £4 million and increases the lifetime earnings of those children by £2 million[42].

Special guardians – particularly those with an order made in private family law proceedings – were the least likely to be concerned about their ability to continue. Potential instability was most commonplace amongst both informal kinship carers and those with CAOs made in private family law proceedings: 14% of this group were concerned and a further 11% didn't know.

Difficulties managing children's social, emotional and mental health challenges remains one of the primary reasons for this concern (55%) and common across all arrangement types. This further instils a sense of urgency on the UK Government to reconsider its proposals for reforming access to therapeutic and wellbeing support for kinship and adopted children given the risk this could further erode routes to funded therapy (see page 19).

Other common reasons include concerns about age and health (55%), financial worries (55%), a lack of support from others to help provide care (47%), and challenges with family contact and relationships (46%). Financial worries were particularly common amongst informal kinship carers. Analysis of previous annual surveys has also identified additional risk factors associated with a higher likelihood of concern, including lone caring, financial insecurity, and poor health.[43]

41 Petrillo, M., Zhang, J., Driscoll, B., and Hughes, N. (2025) Valuing Kinship Carers in England. Kinship. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.34452.00648
42 Nicol Economics for Grandparents Plus (2020) Kinship Care: The Opportunity
43 Kinship (2023) Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis

Kinship family journeys

Reasons for entering kinship care

Children enter kinship care for a variety of reasons. **More than half of kinship carers (56%) responding to our 2026 annual survey said their kinship children were unable to live with their parents as a result of substance misuse**. Other common factors included neglect (52%), parental mental health difficulties (43%), domestic abuse (38%) and emotional abuse (31%).

This broadly aligns with available information on the reasons why children enter local authority care or are receiving support from children's services. Although not directly comparable with our figures, over the year ending 31 March 2025, over half of children who started to be looked after in Wales (56%) received care and support initially because of abuse or neglect.[44] For children looked after in England, 67% have their primary category of need recorded as abuse or neglect[45] and neglect is the initial category of abuse for half (50%) of children on a child protection plan. The most common factors identified at the end of a 'child in need' assessment are domestic abuse, mental health concerns, alcohol and drug misuse, emotional abuse and neglect.[46]

Factor which led to kinship child(ren) being unable to live with their parents	Percentage of kinship carers
Substance misuse	56%
Neglect	52%
Parental mental health	43%
Domestic abuse	38%
Emotional abuse	31%
Physical abuse	18%
Parental absence	11%
Parental disability or illness	9%
Parental death	8%
Young parent	5%
Parent in prison	4%
Child mental health	4%

However, there are some differences in the prevalence of these reasons across different types of kinship arrangement. As might be expected given this group of kinship children will have either current or prior experience in local authority care, factors which would place a child at risk of suffering significant harm and lead to child protection investigation are more prominent in responses from kinship foster carers and kinship carers with a legal order secured following care proceedings.

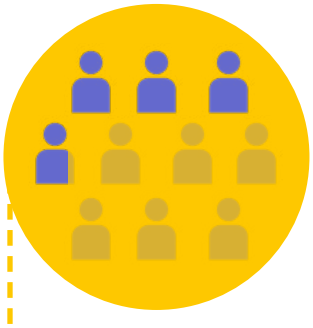
44 Welsh Government (2026) Children looked after by local authorities: April 2024 to March 2025 [Published 16 July 2026]
45 Department for Education (2025) Children looked after in England including adoptions [Published 26 November 2025]
46 Department for Education (2025) Children in need: Statistics on children in need in England, including child protection plans and referrals to and assessments completed by children's social care services: Reporting year 2025 [Published 30 October 2025]

This cohort was 16 percentage points more likely than informal kinship carers and those with an order secured following private family law proceedings to have noted their kinship children were unable to live with their parents as a result of substance misuse, 16 percentage points more likely to note domestic abuse or emotional abuse, and 8 percentage points more likely to note physical abuse.

Other observations include:

- Understandably, parental death was significantly more likely to be a factor noted by those with a CAO (31%) or SGO (18%) secured in private proceedings or informal kinship carers (20%) than for kinship foster carers (3%).
- The child's disability or illness was a factor more commonly associated with the use of CAOs (10%) and informal kinship care (8%) than with special guardianship (3%).
- This was also true for the child's mental health: 10% of respondents with a CAO made in private proceedings and 9% of informal kinship carers noted this compared to only 2% of special guardians.
- Conversely, parental disability or illness was more commonly noted by special guardians and informal kinship carers (10%) but less so by those with CAOs (4%).
- Parental mental health was a factor identified consistently (between 35% and 47% of respondents) across all types of kinship arrangement.

However, it is important to acknowledge that, even in the case of children in informal arrangements or those cared for under legal orders secured in private proceedings, our evidence suggests they are very likely to have experienced considerable trauma and adversity in childhood. **Nearly 4 in 10 (38%) informal kinship carers said their kinship children had experienced neglect, and the prevalence of emotional abuse (29%) for this cohort was similar to that recorded by kinship foster carers or those with an order made following care proceedings**. Experiences of parental substance misuse, domestic abuse and other forms of abuse and neglect are not uncommon.



Nearly

4 in 10

informal kinship carers said their kinship children had experienced neglect

This is echoed by research on non-standard cases in private law proceedings which has identified the potential for significant overlap between what might be seen as private law and public law issues and where child protection concerns may be playing out in the background for many kinship families[47]. Evidence on special guardianship families in Wales also suggests needs and experiences are similar across families regardless of the route to special guardianship.[48]

Ultimately, the experiences of children across different forms of kinship care are often more similar than they are different. And those in informal kinship care or cared for under an order secured in private proceedings, just like those with formalised care experience, are likely to benefit from specialist support which recognises and supports healing from experiences of trauma, separation and loss.

47 Cusworth, L. et al (2023) Uncovering private family law: Exploring applications that involve non-parents ('the other 10%'). Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

48 Stabler, L. et al (2026) Special guardianship families in Wales: Characteristics and Care Pathways. CASCADE, Cardiff University

How kinship care begins

Some kinship care arrangements emerge gradually and in fragmented ways, whereas others begin in a singular moment following a particular family emergency. We asked a series of questions in this year's survey to explore the circumstances around the beginnings of kinship care arrangements and the impact this has for families.

More than 7 in 10 (72%) kinship carers told us they took on the care of their kinship children at short notice. Of this group, 42% said they had only minutes to make the decision and a further 20% said only hours. The speed of the life-changing decisions being made is one of the defining features of kinship care and makes it different to fostering and adoption, requiring often very different policy and practice solutions.



7 in 10

kinship carers took on the role at short notice, with most having only minutes or hours to make the decision

As just one example, the government is currently considering employment rights for kinship carers through its parental leave review. Earlier this year, we published our proposed model for a new statutory right to kinship care pay and leave, designed alongside kinship carers and workplace leaders. This considers the factors common within kinship care – including the lack of notice – and recommends a two-phase approach which adapts existing models of pay and leave available to others with caring responsibilities to meaningfully support kinship families whilst minimising complexity for government and employers.[49]



"Out of the blue we received a call from social services asking us if we would take in our nephews then aged just 11 months and 3 years old, otherwise they would go into local authority care. It felt like we had to make an immediate decision.

We made the snap decision on that call to take them, not knowing how long it would be for, or if we'd receive any support. It was instinctive. You just think, we need to stop these kids going into care, to strangers. We need to keep them in the family."

Meet Oly and Leasa, kinship carers from London raising their 2 nephews

The lack of time to prepare – practically and emotionally – inevitably has major implications for kinship carers' ability to navigate unfamiliar and complex children's social care and family justice systems, understand their rights and entitlements, receive crucial advice about their options, and advocate for the support they and their kinship children might need now and into the future. **More than half of kinship carers (57%) said they didn't feel adequately supported at the time of taking on the care of their kinship children, and a further 8% didn't know**.

49 Kinship (2026) Designing a new right to paid leave for kinship carers

Especially where kinship carers step up following an emergency, expectations around the duration or permanency of a kinship arrangement may be unknown. Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) kinship carers said they didn't expect their kinship arrangement to be long-term or permanent when they took on the care of their kinship children, and a further 12% said they didn't know – both slightly higher than seen in last year's survey cohort.[50]

However, expectations varied considerably depending on the type of kinship arrangement. Understandably given the outcome, a greater proportion of special guardian respondents (75%) expected their arrangement to be long-term or permanent at the time they first took on the child's care, compared to 68% of those with CAOs, 57% of kinship foster carers and just over half (53%) of informal kinship carers. 3 in 10 (29%) informal kinship carers said they didn't expect their arrangement to be long-term or permanent and a further 2 in 10 (19%) said they didn't know.

We explore to what extent kinship carer respondents see their current arrangements as being long-term or permanent – and any expectations around the child's reunification with parents or a change in the type of arrangement – later in this section.

Unplanned, Unprepared, Unwavering

During Kinship Care Week 2026 (5 to 11 October 2026), we launched a new documentary photography series – 'Unplanned, Unprepared, Unwavering'. Created through rare-access photography, this series captures the realities of kinship care through the lives of families who have stepped in to raise a relative or friend's child, often with little warning and no time to prepare. Seven families, seven stories, one shared reality.

Find out more

Whole-family impacts

The impacts of kinship care reverberate around the entire family network and into many facets of people's lives. Taking on the care of a relative or friend's child delivers a series of profound changes for kinship carers, the children they step up to care for, the child's parents and other relatives, as well as other children in the new kinship household – such as the kinship carers' own biological, step or adopted children.

56% of kinship carers said taking on the care of their kinship children was the biggest decision of their lives. The consequences are indeed life-changing: 47% said their relationships with family or friends were strained, 30% postponed or abandoned plans to change career or take a new job, 30% reported pressure on their relationship with a partner or spouse, and 20% postponed retirement or return to work.

The National Kinship Care Ambassador has accurately described kinship care as a *"whole-family transition that requires a coordinated, whole-system support"*.[51] Updated statutory guidance also acknowledges that *"other children in the kinship household can be affected by the new arrangement and may require support"* and asks local authorities in the creation of their kinship local offers to consider *"the potential needs of the whole kinship family, including siblings, kinship carers, parents and other children in the kinship household"*.[52]

50 Kinship (2025) Handle With Care: Annual survey of kinship carers 2025
51 Davis, J. (2026) Improving the Kinship Local Offer and Approach to Kinship Care Insight report: February 2026. Department for Education.
52 Department for Education (2026) Kinship care: statutory guidance for local authorities

Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) of kinship carers said they were looking after other children in their household alongside their kinship children – most either 1 (49%) or 2 (34%) additional children. Alongside the 2,205 kinship children represented by the households who took part in our survey, there were at least 472 other children being cared for by kinship carers at the same time.

6 in 10 (62%) of this group said that taking on their kinship caring role has had an impact on their biological, step or adopted children. When asked to explain further, key themes shared by kinship carers included:

- **Reduced parental time and attention**. Kinship carers described the substantial time and energy they needed to devote to their kinship children, particularly where they had experienced trauma, behavioural challenges, disabilities or required frequent appoints with professionals. This led to less one-on-one time for other children with their parents, and challenges around resultant feelings of jealousy or resentment.

  "[Name]'s needs, emotional regulation and stunted learning development has negatively affected my older children (now 13 & 11). They have found it hard to accept the extra time and care he needs as it often means they get less."

  "Majority of time has gone on the cared for children because of there [sic] behaviour/ trauma affecting them especially at school so less time for our own."

  "My own children have had to sacrifice a lot and dont get as much time and attention they need from me as im busy dealing with the 2 grandchildren with special needs."

  "Our daughter was six, and basically just had to accept the arrangement. She is now almost 15 and resents time lost with us, her parents."

- **Emotional strain and mental health impacts**. Respondents outlined elevated levels of anxiety, stress and mental ill-health for other children in the household as a result of increased household tensions, their own exposure to aggressive or violent behaviour, 'secondary trauma' from witnessing family crises or abuse, and the burden of taking on additional caring responsibilities in the home themselves. In some cases, this led to kinship carers seeking counselling or therapy.

  "It has effected the mental health of all family members. My biological children all became young carers and had experienced physical and psychological abuse at the hands of kinship children."

  "Caused a lot of family stress. 2 sons do not visit anymore. Younger two see the stress and trauma caused and worry continuously."

  "Son required councilling [sic] and 3 other sons did as well, two had to move out and go in to their own flat."

- **Pressure on household finances and living arrangements**. Practical impacts included almost immediate overcrowding in the household which required children to share or give up bedrooms or convert living spaces into bedrooms, resulting in a loss of privacy and personal space. Last year, 18% of kinship carers said someone in their family had to sleep in unsuitable conditions in the last 12 months so that a child they care for had somewhere to sleep.[53] Increased household expenses were also felt keenly by other children and particularly where the kinship carer(s) had been forced to give up

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

work. Respondents noted their children missing out on activities, holidays and other experiences they might have previously enjoyed given overstretched family finances.

"Same salaries have to stretch across 7 instead of 5. Oldest child has lost their bedroom. 5 teenagers/yp [young people] have to share one bathroom. House is more cramped."

"My daughter and I were housed having spent a year in women's refuge and had to give up her room for her male cousin and we began sharing this has been the case for the past 8 years."

"Our granddaughter is special needs, Disabled and the sgo order has dropped over £120 a week. We have to use food banks can't afford to use car only for her appointments. So no special days out etc."

- **Closer familial relationships and positive outcomes**. Despite the significant challenges, many kinship carers also highlighted the development of closer sibling-like relationships between their kinship children and other children in the household, increased empathy and maturity, stronger family bonds, and examples of children developing an understanding of others' adversities and taking pride in protecting and caring for younger relatives. These deep, meaningful connections underscored why kinship care was the right option, despite the sacrifices.

"I think it has been beneficial in lots of ways for my son to have the two boys live with us since they were all very young. They are more like siblings and have grown up together."

"Our little girl is disabled and needs a lot of 1 to 1 attention, which means our other children get less focus. However, they love her so very much and their lives are enriched in so many other ways."

"We have 9 year old boy, he doesn't complain and loves the baby but we know he gets a bit frustrated at times sharing the adults in his life. He wouldn't change it for anything and is very proud and protective of her."

Permanence

As outlined in kinship care and care planning statutory guidance for England, kinship care can support the delivery of permanence for children (defined as *"the framework of emotional, physical and legal conditions that gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity"*) in multiple different ways.

For some children, permanence will be achieved through a temporary period in kinship care followed by a return to parents, where it has been possible to address the factors which led to the child being unable to live with them. For others, however, *"kinship care arrangements can provide an important alternative route to permanence"*.[54] This understanding how kinship care can support permanence is crucial in the context of the Law Commission's recent conclusion that the *"preference… given to establishing a permanent arrangement for the child at the earliest opportunity… appears to reduce the possibility for reunification with the parents"* and their provisional proposals to enhance opportunities for consideration of reunification within the legal framework for England and Wales.[55]

The vast majority (93%) of kinship carers responding to our 2026 annual survey said they expected to be caring for their kinship children on a long-term or permanent basis at the time of responding. This is understandable given that – by definition – those

54 Department for Education (2026) Kinship care: statutory guidance for local authorities
55 Law Commission (2026) Kinship care: Consultation paper

with more transient arrangements are less likely to be captured by our annual survey at a given point in time, and given the average care duration and type of kinship arrangement overrepresented in our annual survey cohort (i.e. long-term special guardians). However, note that permanence through kinship care may not have been the expectation at the beginning of an arrangement (see above).

Expectations did vary depending on the type of arrangement, reflecting how each is typically used in practice. 97% of special guardians expected to be caring for their kinship children permanently, compared to 92% of those with CAOs, 88% of informal kinship carers and 84% of kinship foster carers. It should also be noted that the latter two groups were also significantly more likely than kinship carers with SGOs or CAOs to say they didn't know, at 9% and 10% respectively.

Of those who didn't expect to be looking after their children on a long-term or permanent basis, the most common reason (56%) was because a plan was in place for reunification with parents. Other respondents expected a return to local authority care or, for those approaching adulthood, anticipated they would soon begin to live independently. For others, they were unsure what would happen but were aware their own age and health or child's behavioural challenges meant the long-term continuation of their arrangement was very unlikely.

Changing kinship arrangements

As outlined above, expectations around permanence depend on and are in turn influenced by expectations about the type of kinship arrangement. Across all kinship carers who responded to our 2026 annual survey, **the majority (75%) did not expect to change to a different type of kinship arrangement, but more than 1 in 8 (13%) said they did and a further 10% didn't know**, illustrating what can be a fluid and complex system to navigate even in very stable kinship families.

Understandably given the permanency of the order, special guardians were the group least likely to expect a change to their arrangement. 93% of those with an SGO made in private family law proceedings and 85% of those with an SGO made following care proceedings said they didn't expect to change. Those who did or were unsure were largely respondents caring for multiple children with one under special guardianship and another in kinship foster care who wished to have all their kinship children under the same legal arrangement. Others were considering adoption or were facing upcoming legal challenge from parents.

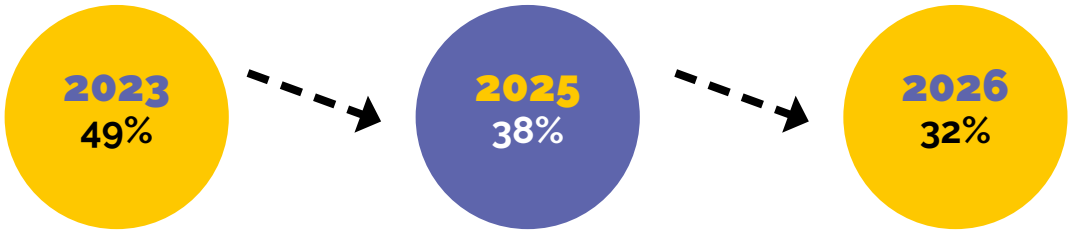
Kinship carers with CAOs were more likely to say they did expect to change arrangement (10%) or were unsure (19%), the vast majority noting a desire to move towards special guardianship or expecting the child to return to live with parents. The former group saw special guardianship as an opportunity to secure greater support and stability into the future, but also raised concerns about the cost, the impact of additional court proceedings, uncertainty about how to go about it or the differences between the legal orders.

Just under half (48%) of informal kinship carers expected their arrangement to stay the same but around 3 in 10 (29%) expected to change, most commonly because they were applying for or hoping in the future to secure a legal order granting parental responsibility. However, some respondents also noted that they wanted to be recognised as kinship foster

carers and were in dispute with their local authorities over being classed as a 'private' family arrangement. A further 2 in 10 (20%) were unsure, with future decisions depending on how the arrangement progressed, if the absence of parental responsibility became problematic, and if the child's parent(s) regained sufficient caregiving capacity for reunification to be an option.

Around one third (32%) of kinship foster carers expected to change, the vast majority to special guardianship. Echoing the more detailed exploration explored in our 2024 Out of Order report, this was sometimes an intentional, informed choice to secure parental responsibility and stability but in other cases because they felt pushed by children's services or because they felt it was their only option. A further 22% of kinship foster carers were unsure about their future arrangement.

2026 therefore marks yet another year where the percentage of kinship foster carers who do not plan to change arrangements has declined substantially. Last year, our Handle With Care report noted that **38% of kinship foster carers in 2025 expected to move to a different arrangement, down from nearly half (49%) just 2 years earlier in 2023.**[56] **This year's figure was 32%, down a further 6 percentage points from last year**.



Percentage of kinship foster carers who expected to move to a different arrangement

We suggested last year that this might reflect an increasing proportion of kinship foster carers retaining their current arrangements given the inadequacy of guaranteed financial and other support elsewhere – a very common discussion heard in peer support groups of kinship carers across the country. We may also be seeing this reflected in the lower proportion of kinship foster carers completing our annual survey this year (see page 16).

The UK government's pilot of financial allowances through its Kinship Zones programme aims to *"strengthen our understanding of what drives the decision for a kinship carer to become a kinship foster carer instead of an alternative type of kinship arrangement"* and test whether guaranteed financial support for arrangements outside of the care system *"enables kinship families to consider placements outside of the care system"*.[57]

Last year, 50% of kinship foster carers said they would move to a kinship arrangement outside of the care system if equitable financial support was guaranteed[58], suggesting there is considerable potential for this to deliver behavioural change and the safe transition to other more suitable kinship arrangements for some families, when in the child's best interests as part of care and permanence planning. This year's further evidence of increasing immobility amongst kinship foster carers makes this an even more urgent consideration for government and local authorities, and we urge them to take further steps to ensure financial support does not remain a barrier to kinship families pursuing the right type of arrangement for them.

56 Kinship (2025) Handle With Care: Annual survey of kinship carers 2025
57 Department for Education (2026) Kinship Zones: programme specification
58 Kinship (2025) Handle With Care: Annual survey of kinship carers 2025

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 kinship families. This should include an approach inclusive of all types of kinship family which supports whole-family consideration of complex family dynamics and retains a core focus on access to specialist, tailored therapeutic support.

Any decision to devolve operation of the adoption and special guardianship support fund (ASGSF) must be accompanied by significant investment and capacity-building in local authorities to improve their expertise and understanding of the therapeutic needs of – and effective approaches for – kinship children and their families.

Future SEND reform should consider the specific needs and circumstances of kinship children. Additional identification of kinship children via the school census should be used to enhance our understanding of educational and SEND needs and inform future mental health and wellbeing interventions.

Financial support

The UK Government should use early findings from the Kinship Zones financial allowances pilot to set a clear ambition and timeline for the equalising of financial allowances between kinship carers and foster carers across England as soon as possible. The Welsh government should follow suit. Ahead of this, local authorities should emulate the leading practice of those who already deliver a non-means tested financial allowance to kinship carers.

In the interim, UK and Welsh governments should issue new guidance to local authorities to reduce current unacceptable variation and poor practice in the delivery of financial support for kinship carers. This should include updating kinship care and special guardianship statutory guidance in England alongside the significantly outdated standardised means test model to clarify lawful and reasonable approaches.

The UK Government should use the Kinship Zones programme (and wider Families First Partnership programme reforms) to further explore how and in which circumstances family network support packages (FNSPs) can be used to meaningfully support informal kinship families where a relative or friend is the child's primary caregiver.

The UK Government should set out plans to introduce a new right to statutory pay and leave for kinship carers following the conclusion of its parental leave and pay review in early 2027. This should recognise their specific needs and circumstances and ideally follow our proposed two-phase model designed alongside kinship carers and workplace leaders.

Information, training and support

Local authorities in England should deliver meaningful kinship local offers coproduced with kinship families which follow updated kinship care statutory guidance and the National Kinship Standards. They should include clear signposting to independent advice and support, including Kinship's specialist advice service and both the national peer support service and training and support service for kinship carers in England, funded by the Department for Education.

Local authorities should enhance the support offered to all kinship families around contact and the management of family relationships. Expectations and support should be written into high-quality support plans and regularly reviewed by specialist practitioners.

The UK and Welsh Governments and local authorities should follow the evidence and recommendations from Foundations' Kinship Care Practice Guide and invest in the delivery of tailored and accessible training and support services for kinship carers, including peer support. Each kinship family should have access to a kinship navigator programme which can act as a trusted point of contact and enhance relationships between kinship carers and statutory services.

Kinship

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

About Kinship

We are Kinship. The leading kinship care charity. We're here for kinship carers – friends or family who step up to raise a child when their parents aren't able to. We support kinship families across England and Wales and are expanding our work into Scotland.

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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Kinship is the working name for Grandparents Plus, which is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales under number 4454103 and registered as a charity under number 1093975.
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