



# The Commission on Young Lives and kinship care

## Briefing for debate led by Baroness Armstrong of Hilltop on Thursday 26 January 2023

### Summary

- The Commission recognises the benefits of kinship care as an alternative to local authority care for vulnerable teenagers. It recommends a national support programme to extend kinship care for teenagers at risk, and an ‘invest-to-save’ approach which delivers funding to support an additional 3,000 families so that more teenagers can remain safely cared for within their family network.
- Evidence suggests that kinship care can provide better experiences and outcomes for children than local authority care options. However, any extension of kinship care must include accompanying reforms to support for kinship families. This should include financial support for kinship carers, and appropriate educational and mental health support for kinship children to recognise their experiences of trauma, separation and loss.

### Kinship care for teenagers

The Commission’s report recognises the importance of extended family networks and the positive role kinship carers can play in supporting young people when their parents are unable to.<sup>i</sup> **We were pleased to see the Commission call for a national support programme to extend kinship care for teenagers at risk given that most young people in kinship care experience stable, consistent, and loving care from someone who is connected to them throughout their childhoods.** Educational, health, and employment outcomes for those who have grown up in kinship care, although consistently lower than for their peers in the general population, are often better than for those who were looked after by unrelated carers in the care system.<sup>ii</sup> Wider family members should be engaged and supported earlier to become kinship carers, and involved in decisions made about the child’s care, when it is in the family’s best interests.

*“She’s growing, she’s happy, she’s inquisitive, she’s not drinking and smoking and sleeping all day. She’s making better choices and looking after herself. She trusts me and relies on me and knows she has unconditional love.”*

**Kinship carer, quoted in Kinship’s *The Cost of Loving* report (2022)**

### Robust support for kinship families

The Commission found that families of at-risk children often felt ignored or unsupported. It is essential that kinship carers are well supported, both financially and practically, to ensure the longevity and stability of placements for vulnerable teenagers. The Commission rightly states that **“many more teenagers could stay with their extended family if they had the right support”** and proposes the introduction of a new ‘Family First’ approach in Government and local agencies to build and strengthen families.<sup>iii</sup> However, a ‘Family First’ approach must be founded on the basis that kinship families are properly supported; it is not simply a cheaper alternative to local authority care.

**We welcome the Commission’s ‘invest-to-save’ recommendation that funding is made available to support an additional 3,000 families to provide kinship care for teenagers so they can remain safely within their family network.** However, it is imperative this is accompanied with ongoing reform to kinship family support, such as a right to a financial allowance, paid leave, and access to tailored support and training as recommended by the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care.<sup>iv</sup>

Families in crisis often act quickly and instinctively to protect vulnerable teenagers, making arrangements informally with very little advice. Our recent survey of kinship carers found that only 21% of kinship carers received preparation support around becoming a kinship carer from their local authority before or shortly after their kinship child(ren) moved in. Currently, access to support is largely based on the legal status of the child and where they live, not on their needs. **78% of carers told us they felt they did not receive the support they needed from their local authority in order to meet the needs of their kinship child(ren)** and 7 in 10 kinship carers had been forced to spend their savings or pension pots to cover essential costs.<sup>v</sup> During a cost-of-living crisis, this is not sustainable and may undermine the stability of a placement. Every effort must be made to equalise financial, practical and emotional support between kinship and foster families to ensure more vulnerable teenagers can stay within their extended family network.

## Life chances and educational prospects for vulnerable teenagers in kinship care

We welcome the recommendations around funding for mental health provision for vulnerable teenagers. Our written evidence submission to the Commission highlighted how children in kinship care have elevated rates of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and needs similar to those in local authority care.<sup>vi</sup> 54% of kinship carers told us their children had experienced abuse or neglect before coming to live with them, and 98% believed their child would have gone into local authority care had they not stepped up.<sup>vii</sup>

Experiences of childhood trauma and adversity can have a significant impact on young people's ongoing wellbeing and development. Kinship care offers children love, stability and security within their wider family, but too often kinship carers have to fight for therapeutic and other mental health support. **3 in 5 carers (59%) told us their children have long-term physical or mental health needs, and over half said their child had behaviours which were difficult to manage.**<sup>viii</sup> Despite this, unlike children in local authority care, those entering kinship care do not typically have a right to a mental health assessment and are often excluded from other mental health support services.

*"100% school attendance - just going into Y11 and expected to pass all her GCSEs, ability to form a few close friendships, seeing her able to relax at home (not always on guard), lovely relationships with grandparents and cousins formed, normal stropky teenager behaviour means she feels safe."*

**Kinship carer, quoted in Kinship's *The Cost of Loving* report (2022)**

The love that kinship care provides acts as a protective factor, offering stability which helps children to perform better at school or college, although outcomes remain lower than for their peers in the general population.<sup>ix</sup> Additional educational support – including eligibility for Pupil Premium Plus and support from the Virtual School – should be extended to all children in kinship care, recognising how experiences of trauma and adversity impacts on learning.

## Suggested questions

Peers should use the debate to highlight Kinship's #ValueOurLove campaign and push the Government on its commitments to kinship families ahead of its forthcoming children's social care implementation strategy.

1. The Commission's report calls for a national support programme to extend kinship care for teenagers at risk. What will the Government do to ensure that kinship carers are financially and practically supported to care for vulnerable teenagers?
2. Kinship care is often overlooked as an alternative care option for teenagers. How does the Government plan to work with local authorities to ensure wider family members are involved in family decision-making when in the child's best interests?
3. What are the Government's plans to equalise support between children in all forms of kinship care and those in local authority care as part of its forthcoming children's social care implementation strategy?

## #ValueOurLove campaign

The recommendations made by the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care in May to “unlock the potential of family networks” marked a pivotal moment for kinship care. Through the #ValueOurLove campaign, we want to see the Government respond boldly and positively to the Review and **commit to a first ever kinship care strategy which includes these four urgent changes** to equalise support between kinship families and foster and adoptive families.



- 1. Equalise allowances between foster and kinship families:** All kinship families should receive the financial support they need, when they need it. This should include a financial allowance that matches the current minimum fostering allowance to help them cover the unexpected costs of caring for a child.
- 2. Equalise access to training and support between kinship carers and foster carers:** Kinship carers should have access to information, advice, practical and emotional support from the point they take on a child, including free legal advice, preparation and training, therapeutic and peer support.
- 3. Equalise leave between adoptive and kinship families:** Kinship carers should receive kinship care leave on a par with adoption leave when the child first moves into their care to allow the child to settle in.
- 4. Equalise support between children in kinship care and those in care:** Children in kinship care should have extra support in school and access to health and therapeutic support to help them deal with the impact of abuse, trauma and loss.

To date, the campaign has received the support of **over 11,500 signatories** including a number of parliamentarians across both Houses. You too can lend your support, learn more about the campaign, and **find out more about kinship families in every parliamentary constituency in England and Wales** by visiting:

**[ValueOurLove.Kinship.org.uk](https://ValueOurLove.Kinship.org.uk)**

## About Kinship

Kinship is the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We offer kinship carers financial, legal, practical, and emotional support and understanding from the moment they need it, for as long as they need it. We want every kinship family to be recognised, valued, and supported. For more information, please visit [kinship.org.uk](https://kinship.org.uk) or contact Natalie Grubb-Latouche, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer, at [natalie.grubb-latouche@kinship.org.uk](mailto:natalie.grubb-latouche@kinship.org.uk).

<sup>i</sup> Commission on Young Lives (2022) [Thematic Report 2: A new partnership with families](#)

<sup>ii</sup> Hunt (2020) [Two decades of UK research on kinship care: an overview](#)

<sup>iii</sup> Commission on Young Lives (2022) [Hidden in Plain Sight](#)

<sup>iv</sup> MacAlister (2022) [The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care: final report](#)

<sup>v</sup> Kinship (2022) [The Cost of Loving: annual survey of kinship carers 2022](#)

<sup>vi</sup> Kinship (2021) [Written evidence submission to the Commission on Young Lives](#). For further information view our [kinship care policy tracker](#).

<sup>vii</sup> Kinship (2022) [The Cost of Loving: annual survey of kinship carers 2022](#)

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> Sacker et al (2021) [The lifelong health and wellbeing trajectories of people who have been in care](#)