



Kinship

**Submission to the Welsh Government's consultation
on the Daft Child Poverty Strategy for Wales**

September 2023

Summary

Kinship welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the draft Child Poverty Strategy. We were delighted to learn that kinship carers had taken part in consultation events already. We are keen to work with Welsh Government as the strategy is finalised to make sure that kinship families can benefit from the actions that follow.

There are a number of key points we want to make about the strategy to make sure it works for kinship carers, as follows:

- Kinship care families are more likely to living in areas of deprivation and are under extra financial strain as they are having to bring up a child that they weren't expecting to be responsible for. Our growing evidence shows that the cost-of-living crisis means they are struggling more than ever financially.
- Targeting support at this group would both help tackle child poverty and support Welsh Government's wider agenda on improving support for children and young people who are on the edge of care or who are looked after.
- It would also be in line with the "sustainable development" principle of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. It would help ensure that children and young people can stay connected to their families and communities and reduce the number of children needing to go into care. In turn, this will result in improved outcomes for these children and young people. Longer term, this is likely to mean improved outcomes for their children too.
- Currently, accessing financial support as a kinship carer depends on the legal order underpinning the arrangement. Yet this is irrelevant to the financial support needs of a kinship family.
- All kinship carers, regardless of legal status, should be able to access the same level of financial support as foster carers.
- Likewise, children in kinship care, regardless of legal status, have experienced similar adversities to those looked after children who are placed in mainstream foster care or residential care. They also face more struggles at school than children in the general population. Therefore, children in kinship care and their families should be able to access all of the same supports available to looked after children and those in adoptive families that are in place to secure improved outcomes for those groups.
- In addition, any support available to help parents increase their incomes (e.g. access to childcare) should be available to kinship carers.

A full list of our recommendations is at the end of this document.

About kinship care and Kinship

Kinship care is when a child lives with a relative or friend who isn't their parent, usually because their parents aren't able to care for them as a result of parental drug or alcohol misuse, bereavement, imprisonment, parental abuse or neglect, or parental ill-health. Most children growing up in kinship care are living in households headed by a grandparent, but many other relatives including older

siblings, aunts, uncles, as well as family friends can also be kinship carers. **Analysis of census data from 2011, shows that at least 9,500 children in Wales are living in kinship care.**¹

The vast majority of these kinship care arrangements are 'informal' - a family member has stepped in to look after a child, without intervention from children's services or the courts. Official statistics show that there are just under 1,600 kinship foster carers (often known as family and friends foster carers) in Wales.² This means that a child with 'looked after' status has been placed by a local authority with a friend or family member, who will have to go through an assessment and approval process as a foster carer. Other formal forms of kinship care include where a family court makes a child arrangements order or special guardianship order to secure the arrangement, typically with at least some degree of involvement from local authority children's services.

Kinship is the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We're here for all kinship carers – the grandparents and siblings, the aunts, uncles, and family friends who step up to raise children when their parents can't. We support kinship carers regardless of their legal status – whether they are caring for a child informally, as a special guardian, as a kinship foster carer, private foster carer or under a child arrangements order.

¹ <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/documents/kinship/wales-kinstast-briefing-paper.pdf>

² <https://stats.wales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After/childrens-services-children-looked-after-childrenlookedafterinfosterplacementsat31march-by-localauthority-placementtype>

Submission

C. Objective 1: to reduce costs and maximise the incomes of families

"We don't do it for the money, but without the money we can't do it."

Kinship carer

Under objective 1, the draft Child Poverty Strategy identifies that to better support kinship carers, Welsh Government has established an expert group "with the aim of ensuring an improved and consistent needs-based approach to supporting special guardianship families across Wales." The draft strategy also identifies that Foster Wales is working on a new structure and payment levels for the National Minimum Allowance for foster carers. Separately, Welsh Government has repeatedly committed to ensuring that this review will ensure that kinship foster carers will be able to access the same financial support as mainstream foster carers.³

While we welcome both of these developments and hope that they will result in increased financial security for some kinship carers, we believe that a more holistic approach is needed so that **all** kinship carers can get the financial support they need, regardless of the legal order or lack thereof underpinning the arrangement.

"It doesn't come cheap, bringing up another child."

Kinship carer

Taking on the responsibility to raise a child or children costs money and at population level, we know that kinship carers already tend to live in more deprived areas. While an estimated one in 67 children in Wales are growing up in the care of relatives, this rises to one in 46 children living in the poorest 20% of areas. For kinship families, the unexpected addition of an extra family member or members because of a family emergency is only going to add strain to the household finances. Indeed, in a survey we carried out last year of over 100 kinship carers in Wales almost 6 in 10 said they did not always feel able to meet their children's needs in their current financial situation. Nearly 6 in 10 told us that over the last year they were going into debt or selling possessions to help make ends meet.

Kinship foster carers, a very small proportion of the overall cohort, are the only group of kinship carers who are currently guaranteed financial support. While the review of the National Minimum Allowance and the commitment from Welsh Government to ensure kinship foster carers can access the same financial support as mainstream foster carers is welcome for this group of kinship carers, there is no difference in financial support needs between kinship foster carers and other kinship carers.

As a result of the regulations on special guardianship and the Code of Practice on Special Guardianship, many special guardians may be eligible for some financial assistance, but this is only following an assessment and will vary considerably between – and often within – local authorities due to inconsistencies in policy and practice. In addition, the regulations on special guardianship state that financial support must not include any element of remuneration for the care of the child, although special guardians who were previously foster carers can be provided with the same level of assistance for two years following the granting of the special guardianship order (SGO). Some councils have found ways to continue providing the same level of support to special guardians on an ongoing basis, beyond the two years, but this is by no means guaranteed. Special guardians who were never foster carers and where the child was not previously looked after are unlikely to get this level of assistance at all.

³ See for example, pages 15-16 of the Welsh Government's response to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's report on children's social care: <https://senedd.wales/media/tizdd0ro/gen-ld15931-r-e.pdf>

It should also be noted that the way financial assistance works for special guardians creates perverse incentives for kinship carers to keep a kinship foster care arrangement when an SGO would be more appropriate, as financial assistance is guaranteed for those with a foster care arrangement.

Outside of fostering and special guardianship arranged following care proceedings, kinship carers are very unlikely to get any financial assistance at all.

Given the costs of raising a child or children that you did not expect to take on the responsibility for, the fact that kinship care families tend to be more concentrated in areas of deprivation and our growing evidence that kinship carers are struggling financially, we believe that *all* kinship carers should be targeted with financial support. This should be regardless of legal status as it is irrelevant when it comes to need.

Recommendations:

- Welsh Government to implement the outcomes of the review of the National Minimum Allowances and enhanced allowances for foster carers to ensure that kinship foster carers can access the same level of financial support as mainstream foster carers.
- Welsh Government to amend the regulations and Code of Practice for SGOs to ensure special guardians can access the same level of financial support as foster carers
- Welsh Government to use the review of the National Minimum Allowances for foster carers as a starting point to develop a scheme for securing financial assistance for *all* kinship carers on an equal footing to that available for foster carers

Eligibility for financial assistance and supports

More widely under objective 1 of the draft strategy, there is a description of a whole range of financial assistance and supports available to help reduce costs in a number of areas, for example, the School Essentials Grant. The supports listed are positive in ensuring there is more money in people's pockets. Many of these are already available to looked after children, but despite having been through similar adverse experiences and be more likely to be living in deprivation, children in kinship care are not automatically eligible unless their family satisfies the other eligibility criteria around income and benefits.

Recommendation:

- Welsh Government to work with local councils to review eligibility for all available financial assistance and supports, including the Schools Essentials Grant to ensure all kinship care families are eligible.

D. Priority 1 entitlement (putting money in people's pockets)

The strategy talks about increasing provision of face-to-face information, advice and support to ensure people claim their financial entitlements as a priority. We welcome the focus on ensuring people have access to the right information, advice and support so that they can get the benefits they are entitled to as well as accessing any hardship grants or similar.

As part of this, it is vital that Welsh Government recognises trusted sources of advice and support and help ensure that people can access the advice they need on entitlements from organisations where they are already getting advice or where they would feel confident to turn to for advice, if it were available.

At Kinship, we run a local authority commissioned programme called Kinship Connected, which offers tailored family support through specialist project workers and support group development for kinship carers. The programme includes 1-1 advocacy support in meetings, emotional support, linking up kinship carers with local peer support networks, support with children's behaviour and signposting. Helping kinship carers to access financial grants and signposting them to our advice line to make sure they get advice on benefit entitlement is also a key part of the programme.

In Wales, we are contracted to deliver the programme by Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) County Borough Council. From April 2022 to March 2023, we worked with 40 carers in the local authority area, who together were caring for 62 children. In that year, we were able to secure 11 financial grants for those accessing the programme. These grants were for things like beds, family days out and uniforms and totalled over £13,000. At the same time, we received 85 calls to our advice line from RCT residents over that year (higher than elsewhere in Wales due to signposting through Kinship Connected) and ensured that over callers we able to claim £13,000 in benefit entitlements. This service shows how we are already directly helping ensure that there is extra money in people's pockets in line with the aims of the draft Child Poverty Strategy. If this programme were to be rolled out across Wales and we were achieving the same level of outcomes, we would be putting an extra £338,000 in the pockets of those kinship carers who need that support the most.

As the leading kinship care charity in Wales, who understands the specific needs and experiences of kinship carers, we are a trusted source of advice and support. We would welcome any opportunities work more closely with Welsh Government and with individual councils across Wales to ensure our tailored information, advice and support is more widely available for the families of the estimated 10,000 children living in kinship care in Wales.

Recommendation:

- Welsh Government and local councils across Wales to work with third sector organisations working with kinship carers to help ensure the right information and advice on entitlements is getting to kinship care families.

Development of the Welsh Benefits system

We welcome plans to develop the Welsh Benefits system and secure a system that is streamlined, accessible and delivered with compassion. We would welcome the opportunity to work with officials on the development of the system to ensure that an understanding of the circumstances of kinship carers and their families is built in from the start.

Notably, we believe it could be useful to align with ongoing efforts in England to develop an inclusive and comprehensive definition of kinship care for the purposes of improving understanding and awareness, so where appropriate this can properly be built into any streamlined eligibility and application process.

It is clear that kinship carers should be eligible for those local benefits that would otherwise be available to parents, adoptive parents, and foster carers. Benefits and entitlements that care experienced children and young people can access should also be made available to children growing up in kinship care. Providing further clarity on what is considered kinship care within the Welsh Benefits system would mean that an understanding of kinship arrangements would be embedded and help secure the aim of delivering support with compassion. It would mean eligibility would be clear and any new kinship carer or young person living in kinship care applying for financial support would not be starting afresh in having to explain their situation. Anyone working in processing applications should have training in kinship care to ensure that the system is accessible for kinship carers and for young people in kinship care.

Recommendations:

- Welsh Government to work with kinship carers and organisations that represent their interests as the Welsh Benefits System is developed so that:
 - There is clarity around a shared understanding of kinship care arrangements for the purposes of delivering financial support.
 - It is clear that kinship carers are eligible for those benefits that would otherwise be available to parents, adoptive parents, and foster carers and that any benefits available to care experienced young people are made available to those living in kinship care.

E. Objective 2 Pathways out of poverty

Under objective 2 on supporting parents out of poverty, the draft Child Poverty Strategy highlights the importance of the 30 hours Childcare Offer for Wales. It is essential that this vital offer is available to all kinship carers, regardless of the legal status of their kinship arrangement, so that kinship carers can be supported to work and provide financially for their families. Looking at the current eligibility and the documents you need to provide to apply, some kinship carers would struggle to access it, because for example they may not have 'parental responsibility' and therefore they would not have any of the documents highlighted on this [webpage](#).

The draft Child Poverty Strategy also identifies the importance of the Pupil Development Grant, which allows schools to access additional funds to target extra help at children from deprived backgrounds. The Pupil Development Grant is also rightly available for looked after children and for adopted children to ensure improved long-term outcomes, given the lower education achievements of care experienced children. However, the vast majority of those in kinship carer, particularly those in informal arrangements or those with a special guardianship order will not be eligible for this extra help at school. This is despite studies showing that difficulties in at school were almost as high for children in kinship care as for looked after children. Indeed, our research shows 60% of the young people in kinship care had difficulties in learning compared to 68% in local authority care. This compares to 19% of children in the general population. [08]

Recommendations:

- Welsh Government to ensure that all kinship carers can access the 30 hours Childcare Offer for Wales, if they meet the same criteria they would have to meet as a parent and to make clear to kinship carers that they are indeed eligible
- Welsh Government to make sure that the Pupil Development Grant is available to schools to support any children living in kinship care.

F. Priority 2 – Creating a Fair Work Nation

As part of Welsh Government's ambitions around creating a Fair Work Nation, we would like to draw your attention to Kinship's #ValueOurLove campaign and Forced Out report and ask of the UK Government to commit to introducing paid leave for kinship carers, equivalent to that available for adoptive families, in its forthcoming kinship care strategy due by the end of 2023. Although a reserved issue, we would welcome the Welsh Government's support for this call. We would like to see Welsh Government put pressure on the Department of Business and Trade to adopt the policy and also encourage employers in Wales to introduce kinship care leave themselves. We have a growing number of employers working alongside us who have introduced this or are in the process of doing so who would speak to their rationale and approach.

Recommendations:

- Welsh Government to discuss with their counterparts in Westminster the importance of kinship care leave and possibilities for its introduction.
- Welsh Government to work with employers in Wales to encourage them to introduce employment policies, such as paid kinship care leave, to support kinship carers to continue in their roles and to be able to support their families financially.

G. Objective 3 - to support child and family wellbeing and make sure that work across Welsh Government delivers for children living in poverty, including those with protected characteristics, so that they can enjoy their rights and have better outcomes

The draft strategy highlights that Welsh Government is currently developing a new Mental Health Strategy for Wales.

In signing the “Radical Reform Summit Declaration,” Welsh Government has committed to the following vision for the future “Care experienced children and young people will be able to get help to support their mental health whenever they need it, as soon as they need it.” We would expect the upcoming mental health strategy to set out how this will be delivered. In addition, in a debate on children’s social care on 12th July 2023, the Mental Health Minister Lynne Neagle committed to ensuring that care experienced children and young people could access trauma informed therapeutic support.⁴

We welcome these developments. However, not all children living in kinship care will be defined as care experienced. Yet, research shows that children in kinship care, regardless of legal status, have experienced similar adversities to looked after children. For example, in Selwyn et al’s 2013 study of informal kinship care⁵, parental drug or alcohol misuse was a reason for kinship care in as many as 68% of families. For more than a third (37%) domestic abuse was involved, whilst more than a quarter (26%) of children had experienced parental mental illness or parental death. Two thirds of the carers said that the child had been abused and/or neglected, some over a considerable period. It is therefore clear that children living in kinship care should be able to access the same therapeutic support as care experienced children.

In addition, as part of the mental health strategy, the particular emotional and mental health needs of children and young people in kinship care as well as the specific needs of kinship carers who are having to deal with the wider impact of the family crisis that has resulted in the child or children coming to live with them needs full consideration.

Recommendations:

- Welsh Government to ensure that plans for ensuring that care experienced children and young people can access the trauma informed therapeutic support they need includes those in kinship care, regardless of whether they are “care experienced”.
- In developing the mental health strategy, Welsh Government should look at the specific needs of kinship carers and children in kinship care and consult with them and organisations that represent their needs.

⁴ <https://record.assembly.wales/Plenary/13407> see para 507

⁵ Selwyn, J. Farmer, E., Meakings, S. and Vaisey, P. (2013) *The Poor Relations? Children and Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out*, University of Bristol/ Buttle UK

H. Objective 4: to ensure children, young people and their families are treated with dignity and respect by the people and services who interact with and support them and to challenge the stigma of poverty

We welcome the Welsh Government's commitment to ensuring that that children and young people are involved in the development of policy that affects them. We note that the draft Child Poverty Strategy references the work of the Exploring Radical Reform summit and believe that the high-level Ministerial engagement with care experienced children and young people through the summit is to be applauded. As plans are developed to look at how the vision described in the declaration signed by Ministers and young people following the summit are to be delivered, we would welcome the opportunity to ensure that children living in kinship care can both be engaged in the work and are able to fully benefit from the changes that follow, regardless of whether they would be defined as "care experienced". As outlined above children living in kinship care have experienced similar adversities to looked after children, regardless of whether they would be defined as care experienced.

Recommendation:

- Welsh Government to expand the remit of the work of the Exploring Radical Reform summit and the implementation of the Declaration to include children and young people in kinship care, regardless of whether they would be defined as care experienced.

I. Full list of recommendations

- Welsh Government to implement the outcomes of the review of the National Minimum Allowances and enhanced allowances for foster carers to ensure that kinship foster carers are able to access the same level of financial support as mainstream foster carers.
- Welsh Government to amend the regulations and Code of Practice for SGOs to ensure special guardians can access the same level of financial support as foster carers
- Welsh Government to use the review of the National Minimum Allowances for foster carers as a starting point to develop a scheme for securing financial assistance for *all* kinship carers on an equal footing to that available for foster carers
- Welsh Government to work with local councils to review eligibility for all available financial assistance and supports, including the Schools Essentials Grant to ensure all kinship care families are eligible.
- Welsh Government and local councils across Wales to work with third sector organisations working with kinship carers to help ensure the right information and advice on entitlements is getting to kinship care families.
- Welsh Government to work with kinship carers and organisations that represent their interests as the Welsh Benefits System is developed so that:
 - There is clarity around a shared understanding of kinship care arrangements for the purposes of delivering financial support.
 - It is clear that kinship carers are eligible for those benefits that would otherwise be available to parents, adoptive parents, and foster carers and that any benefits available to care experienced young people are made available to those living in kinship care.
- Welsh Government to ensure that all kinship carers can access the 30 hours Childcare Offer for Wales, if they meet the same criteria they would have to meet as a parent.
- Welsh Government to make sure that the Pupil Development Grant is available to schools to support any children living in kinship care.
- Welsh Government to discuss with their counterparts in Westminster the importance of kinship care leave and possibilities for its introduction
- Welsh Government to work with employers in Wales to encourage them to introduce employment policies, such as paid kinship care leave, to support kinship carers to continue in their roles and to be able to support their families financially
- Welsh Government to ensure that plans for ensuring that care experienced children and young people can access the trauma informed therapeutic support they need includes those in kinship care, regardless of whether they are care experienced.
- In developing the mental health strategy, Welsh Government should look at the specific needs of kinship carers and children in kinship care and consult with them and organisations that represent their needs.

- Welsh Government to expand the remit of the work of the Exploring Radical Reform summit and the implementation of the Declaration to include children and young people in kinship care, regardless of whether they would be defined as care experienced.

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