



Kinship

Submission to the Education Committee's
children's social care inquiry call for evidence

January 2024

Introduction

Kinship care is where a child is raised by a relative or friend, normally because their parents aren't able to care for them. Kinship carers step up to raise children, often in crisis situations and to prevent the child or children from going into foster or residential care. Around half of kinship carers are grandparents, but many other relatives including older siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins as well as family friends can also be kinship carers. There are more than 130,000 children living in kinship care in England – more than double the number in foster care – although this figure is likely an underestimate.¹

Some kinship carers will have a legal order securing the family arrangement which provides them with parental responsibility, such as a special guardianship order or child arrangements order made following care proceedings or secured privately through the family court. Others will be kinship foster carers where the child is 'looked after' and has been placed with them by the local authority. However, the majority of kinship families are likely to have only informal arrangements in place made privately within the family.²

Our written evidence submission focuses on the most relevant areas within the call for evidence's terms of reference and explores the Government's action to date around kinship care as part of its wider children's social care reform programme. It is based on our extensive experience delivering programmes alongside kinship families for more than two decades as well as our own robust research and survey evidence, bolstered by references to other academic, research and data sources where relevant and appropriate.

More detailed information and commentary around the Government's plans for kinship care, including current action, our verdict and what we think should happen next across a range of kinship care policy areas, is available at our online kinship care policy tracker: kinship.org.uk/kinship-care-policy-tracker

Summary

- The Government's relatively new celebration and recognition of kinship care as a core part of the children's social care system, articulated clearly within *Stable Homes, Built on Love* and the National Kinship Care Strategy, is very welcome. Investing in kinship care makes sense: it can improve experiences and outcomes for children and families, whilst reducing wider demand on children's social care services and delivering cost savings for the public purse. The Government has taken a number of positive steps forward to prioritise and support wider family networks to care for children when they cannot live with their parents.
- However, the Government's existing plans for kinship and children's social care reform must go much further and faster. Without additional consideration of policy sequencing, long-term strategic planning beyond this Spending Review period, significant additional investment in children's social care and an understanding of how poverty and wider public service reform impacts on child welfare intervention, the vision articulated by the Government in the National Kinship Care Strategy will not be realised.
- The Government should provide all kinship families with the urgent support they need today and build the legislative and wider structures for a future kinship care system which recognises the unique needs, experiences and strengths across all types of kinship family. Current progress on key elements of financial, practical and emotional support (including financial allowances, kinship care leave and support for kinship children) is insufficient, and delayed reform only risks

¹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) [Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/childpopulationandchildren/articles/kinship-care-in-england-and-wales-census-2021). Released 26 September 2023, ONS website, article. For more information on the Census figures and what they can and can't tell us, visit: <https://kinship.org.uk/news/new-census-2021-analysis-of-kinship-households-published/>

² More information on the different types of kinship care can be found on our website at: <https://compass.kinship.org.uk/advice-and-information/what-is-kinship-care/>

further costly destabilisation; our evidence shows that many kinship carers are concerned about continuing to care for their children if their situations don't improve.

1. How combinations of kinship care, residential education, foster care and adoption could provide alternatives to residential care.

Recognising and prioritising kinship care within the children's social care system

- 1.1. The Government's *Stable Homes, Built on Love* implementation strategy published in February 2023 prioritised, for the first time, kinship care as a central pillar of children's social care and of the Government's work to improve support for families. The first ever National Kinship Care Strategy published in December 2023 notes the Government's vision that "*kinship care will be the first consideration for a child who can no longer live with their parents*" and sets out initial steps towards establishing a new system and improved support for kinship families.
- 1.2. The Government's continued recognition of kinship care as a distinct and valuable element within children's social care, and the celebration of its positive impact for children and society, marks a step change from previous Government rhetoric and action which focused almost exclusively on fostering and adoption. After decades of being overlooked and marginalised, the value of this acknowledgement by Government of kinship families' challenges and strengths is welcome, and comes after the Independent Review of Children's Social Care's recognition that "*thousands of grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters who care for their family members*" have for too long been a "*silent and unheard majority*" in children's social care who deserve "*far greater recognition and support*".³
- 1.3. However, it is fundamental for children's experiences and outcomes – and crucial for the operation of children's social care services – that the right care option is considered and secured for each individual child and their own unique circumstances. It is welcome that the Children's Social Care National Framework has as a principle that "*children are raised by their families, with their family networks, or in family environments wherever possible*", but this must not result in pushing children towards kinship or other forms of care which do not reflect their best interests owing solely to a fixed, perceived hierarchy of care options. We want to see kinship care recognised and supported as part of a comprehensive children's social care system which responds to the needs and strengths of each child and family situation.

Delivering cost-effective and timely reform to support children and families

- 1.4. Well-supported kinship care can deliver a cost-effective alternative to other forms of care for children unable to live with their parents. It makes sense to invest in kinship care; it delivers good outcomes and experiences for children, families and the public purse. Research suggests that children who grow up in kinship care are more likely to have stable, permanent homes and go on to have better long-term employment, educational and health outcomes than their peers in foster or residential care.^{4 5 6}
- 1.5. Our evidence also suggests that for every 1000 children that are raised in kinship families rather than in local authority care the Government saves £40 million and increases the lifetime earnings of those children by £20 million.⁷ The potential cost savings associated with investing in kinship care – and particularly in delivering improved financial support for kinship families – was

³ MacAlister, J (2022) [Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report](#)

⁴ Sacker, A., Murray, E., Lacey, R. and Maughan, B. (2021) [The lifelong health and wellbeing trajectories of people who have been in care: Findings from the Looked-after Children Grown up Project](#). London: Nuffield Foundation.

⁵ Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I. and O'Higgins, A. (2015) [The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data](#). Rees Centre, University of Oxford and University of Bristol.

⁶ Wellard, S., Meakings, S., Farmer, E. & Hunt, J. (2017) [Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood](#).

⁷ Nicol Economics for Grandparents Plus (2020) [Kinship Care: The Opportunity](#)

highlighted in both the Independent Review of Children's Social Care's final report and *Stable Homes, Built on Love*.

- 1.6. The sequencing of reform is crucial: the Government's welcome prioritisation of kinship care and specific actions to rebalance children's social care in favour of supporting family networks should not push the system towards increasing the number and/or proportion of all children unable to live with their parents into kinship care before accompanying reforms to financial and other support for all kinship carers have been introduced. To do so would be dangerous and risks pushing further children and families into poverty and potential breakdown.
- 1.7. It's imperative that existing kinship families urgently get the support they need and a system is built which guarantees crucial financial, practical and emotional support to all kinship families *before* the wider children's social care landscape shifts significantly to further prioritise permanency for children through kinship arrangements. This is because the existing system of support is completely insufficient to meet the needs of children and families; 12% of kinship carers told us they were concerned about continuing to care for their kinship children in the next year if their situations didn't improve, largely due to challenges around finances and children's social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.⁸
- 1.8. The absence of a coherent legislative framework for kinship care and the resultant lack of legal rights, entitlements and protections for children and their carers is the single most significant omission in children and families policy in England. Future reform which builds a new kinship care system must recognise that kinship care is fundamentally different to other forms of care for children who cannot live with their parents. Simply extending entitlements or support currently available to foster or adoptive families – without consideration of the unique needs, strengths and circumstances of kinship care – will not deliver what kinship families need nor the outcomes intended.
- 1.9. This is particularly important given the typically more disadvantaged starting point for kinship carers and families. 67% of children living in kinship care are in deprived households⁹, and kinship carers are more likely than any other group raising children to be older, with long-term health conditions and disabilities, living in insecure housing, and on low incomes or unemployed¹⁰. They are also more likely to be caring for children alone and to have additional caring unpaid responsibilities for other adult family members.¹¹ As a cohort, their socioeconomic circumstances are typically very different to those of foster carers and adopters before they take on the care of a child, with this selfless action often exacerbating an already vulnerable position.

2. The government's children's social care implementation strategy, *Stable Homes, Built on Love*, released in February 2023, including: how effective the strategy has been so far; and how effective it is projected to be in the long term.

- 2.1. *Stable Homes, Built on Love* made several welcome commitments to improving support for kinship families and placed kinship care at the heart of its reform plans; the new Children's Social Care National Framework has as one of its pillars that "*children and young people are supported by their family network*". In the strategy, the Government committed to piloting new ways of prioritising and supporting family-led care options for children, delivering a dedicated national kinship care

⁸ Kinship (2023) [Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis](#)

⁹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) [Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021](#). Released 26 September 2023, ONS website, article.

¹⁰ Wijedasa, D. (2017) [Children growing up in the care of relatives in the UK](#). Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, University of Bristol. Policy Report 18

¹¹ Kinship (2023) [Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis](#)

strategy by the end of the year, and investing in a national offer of training and support for kinship carers.

- 2.2. The National Kinship Care Strategy – *Championing kinship care* – was published in December 2023. Therefore, commentary below on the current and projected effectiveness of the Government's *Stable Homes, Built on Love* children's social care implementation strategy also considers commitments and action described in the National Kinship Care Strategy.

Building a new kinship care system

- 2.3. *Stable Homes, Built on Love* rightly said that “kinship care has received little national policy attention” and committed to producing a first ever national kinship care strategy to “establish the foundations for a future, transformed kinship care system in England”. The recently published National Kinship Care Strategy will deliver £20 million investment until March 2025 as part of “first step” ‘Phase One’ reforms to “pivot the system to ensure children and families are at the very centre”, after which ‘Phase Two’ reforms will seek to embed the most effective policies so that more children in kinship care can benefit.
- 2.4. Whilst we are pleased to see the Government take concrete steps to improve support for kinship families, the Strategy stops short of articulating a detailed, long-term roadmap for kinship care which includes any commitments or ongoing investment beyond the current Spending Review period. As noted above, kinship families need the Government to provide urgent and targeted support today, and to build a future system which supports the kinship families of tomorrow.
- 2.5. Additional investment across children's social care is notably absent from the Government's plans. Local authorities cannot be expected to do increasingly more with increasingly less; radical recalibration of services, practices and culture which better prioritise and support kinship care cannot be delivered successfully without greater financial and workforce stability supported by wider investment too in children's social care. Increasing and deepening levels of child poverty¹² risk undermining long-term efforts to pivot the system towards greater use and support for kinship care, given what we know about the impact of poverty and deprivation on likelihood of child welfare intervention.¹³
- 2.6. We know there are significant racial disparities in kinship care; children from Black and minoritised ethnic backgrounds are underrepresented in formalised arrangements such as kinship foster care and kinship special guardianship.¹⁴ The Government's plans to reform kinship care must consider in what ways its commitments will or will not disproportionately impact on kinship carers and children from specific ethnic backgrounds, and should be accompanied by both a thorough equalities impact assessment (EIA) and child rights impact assessment (CRIA).

Defining kinship care

- 2.7. *Stable Homes, Built on Love* consulted on a working definition of kinship care, and the National Kinship Care Strategy outlined a new definition to be included within statutory guidance. This brought together different types of kinship care arrangements already understood but not clearly defined in other legislation or guidance, and could help to improve the visibility of kinship families across policymaking and public services. More broadly, it is welcome that the Government will move towards use of ‘kinship care’ rather than ‘family and friends care’; consistent use of

¹² Stone, J. (2023) [Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2021/22](#). Centre for Research in Social Policy: Loughborough University.

¹³ Bywaters, P. et al (2020) [The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report](#). Nuffield Foundation.

¹⁴ What Works for Children's Social Care (2022) [Understanding formal kinship care arrangements in England](#)

terminology across Government and beyond will improve understanding and enable more kinship carers to identify as so and access appropriate support.

- 2.8. However, current Government reform plans for kinship care effectively ignore the definition, and fail to utilise it as a means to clarify entitlements and direct support to a wider group of kinship families. Instead, commitments made by the Government (such as delivery of a financial allowances pathfinder and extended advice through Virtual School Heads) continue to undermine the definition's potential value by restricting support to particular groups of kinship carers. All kinship carers – regardless of the legal order or lack thereof securing the family arrangement – typically have similar needs, experiences and strengths, and this should be reflected in the support offered to them.^{15 16}
- 2.9. The Government should detail how it will use the definition to raise awareness and ensure kinship families are considered in wider policy-making and service provision across Government, including in relevant programmes of work such as family hubs and the Start for Life programme. It should ensure that all kinship carers, including informal kinship carers, get access to the financial, practical and emotional support they need.

Data and research

- 2.10. The National Kinship Care Strategy outlines a new data-linking project between family court data held by the Ministry of Justice and children's social care and other data held by the Department for Education to better understand the cohort of children in formalised kinship care arrangements. This is welcome given there is no available data at present that gives us an accurate and robust understanding of kinship families across the country, in stark contrast to other areas of children's social care such as fostering and adoption. The Government should work closely with expert sector organisations such as Kinship, Foundations and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory to identify gaps in research, evidence, and statutory and wider data collection and publication, and confirm further plans to improve this.
- 2.11. The Children's Social Care Dashboard and relevant Dashboard Indicators for Outcome 2 of the Children's Social Care National Framework could enable kinship carers and others to understand more about local authority variation in kinship care outcomes and practice. However, as noted earlier (1.6), we would strongly caution against use of Indicators which prematurely incentivise the placing of more children into kinship care prior to the introduction of improved family support.

Engaging and supporting family networks

- 2.12. Since the publication of *Stable Homes, Built on Love*, the Government has commenced delivery of two programmes of work backed by £45 million investment which include testing of how to improve early family network support: a Families First for Children (FFC) pathfinder and a Family Network Pilot (FNP). We welcome that new models of support which redirect funding and support to kinship families earlier (and without a child having to enter local authority care) are now being tested in several local authorities across England.
- 2.13. However, the lack of clarity on a future wider rollout (i.e. the conditions which need to be met, expectations around funding, timescales or points of assessment to stop, scale or adjust pilot programmes, parallel pre-legislative work within the Department for Education etc) is insufficient for local authorities delivering services and for kinship families. As with other Government-led pilot or pathfinder programmes, there is a significant risk that effective reforms are unnecessarily

¹⁵ Kinship (2022) [The Cost of Loving: annual survey of kinship carers 2022](#)

¹⁶ Selwyn, J. Farmer, E., Meakings, S. and Vaisey, P. (2013) [The Poor Relations? Children and Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out](#). University of Bristol and Buttle UK

delayed and act instead to 'bake in' additional costs in the future; analysis shows the Government is set to spend an additional £1 billion on children's social care over the next 10 years unless it speeds up its reform plans.¹⁷

Financial allowances

- 2.14. Following a commitment in *Stable Homes, Built on Love* to “explore the case for mandating” a financial allowance across all local authorities as recommended by the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, the National Kinship Care Strategy has instead outlined a 4-year pilot of financial allowances in up to 8 local authorities from 2024-8 with £16 million invested in the first year. Only special guardians where the child was previously in care will be eligible, and the amount offered will be equivalent to the fostering allowance in that local authority. This will explore how a financial allowance can deliver improved outcomes for families and cost savings for local authorities.
- 2.15. We’re disappointed that the Government hasn’t made a commitment to introduce financial allowances nationally for a wider group of kinship carers and end the unfairness which denies financial support and plunges many families unnecessarily into poverty; 1 in 10 kinship carers told us in our 2023 annual survey that their household had run out of food in the last two weeks and couldn’t afford to buy more.¹⁸ Continued financial hardship is likely to lead to children unnecessarily entering the care system; we estimate as many as 19,000 children are at risk of entering local authority care in the next year due to the financial and other challenges facing kinship families across England and Wales.¹⁹
- 2.16. Existing financial support provision for kinship families is inadequate and extremely variable, reflecting not the needs of the kinship family but instead a legal and postcode lottery.²⁰ This is a barrier to permanence; the system currently perversely incentivises kinship carers to become foster carers given this is the only route by which they can access guaranteed financial and other support, even though this often isn’t in the best interests of the child or their family.
- 2.17. Other scrutiny bodies have also encouraged the Government to go further: the Lords Public Services Committee has recommended that the Government should “ensure that sufficient financial support for those caring for their kin is provided regardless of whether the arrangement is formal or informal, and that it is consistent across England. Additional funding should be allocated to local authorities to provide this support in the immediate future”.
- 2.18. The Government has previously celebrated those local authorities who do already offer special guardians and other kinship carers equivalent financial support to foster carers. *Stable Homes, Built on Love* highlighted that “this often makes good financial sense for local authorities, kinship carers and, ultimately, for children and their outcomes” and encourages others to adopt pioneering practice²¹: “we do not want local authorities and partners to feel the need to wait for permission to act now... [local authorities] should feel confident to pursue approaches and ways of working that we know are the right ones”.
- 2.19. Given evidence from the Independent Review for Children’s Social Care, National Kinship Care Strategy, Kinship and others about how improved financial support for kinship carers can deliver

¹⁷ Action for Children, Barnardo’s, The Children’s Society, National Children’s Bureau (NCB) & NSPCC (2023) [Briefing: The Cost of Delaying Reform to Children’s Social Care](#).

¹⁸ Kinship (2023) [Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis](#)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Foundations (2023) [Understanding the variation in support for kinship carers: a survey of local authorities in England](#)

²¹ For an overview of three leading local authorities delivering financial support for special guardians, see Kinship (2022) [Developing Good Practice in Financially Supporting Special Guardians: a guide for local authorities](#).

greater permanence, experiences and outcomes for families with positive impacts for local authority budgets, we believe there is already a strong case for the Government to introduce a mandatory financial allowance for all kinship carers across all local authorities. The pathfinder must not paralyse earlier progress towards a wider rollout and respond to emerging evidence and practice, and other local authorities should be encouraged and supported to deliver equalised financial allowances within the forthcoming kinship care statutory guidance.

Kinship care leave

- 2.20. *Stable Homes, Built on Love* committed to “explore additional workplace entitlements” for kinship carers, and so it is extremely disappointing that no further commitments have been made to introduce a statutory pay and leave offer for kinship carers following recommendations from the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care and House of Lords Children and Families Act 2014 Committee²² that this is provided on a par with adoption leave. Instead, the Department for Education has only committed to introducing a pay and leave offer for its own kinship carer staff in the future, and has published new guidance for employers on how they can support kinship carers in the workplace²³.
- 2.21. More than 8 in 10 kinship carers told us they had been forced to give up work permanently or reduce their hours after taking on the care of a child.²⁴ Introducing kinship care leave would not only allow carers to better support children and give them the time they need to settle into their new family environment, but would also create immediate financial stability for kinship families at a time of immense turbulence, reduce dependency on welfare benefits, and enable long-term security by allowing carers to build pensions and save for retirement. It would also prevent carers from having to leave the labour market unnecessarily and ensure vital nurses, teachers and support workers are kept active in our hospitals, schools and communities; prior to taking on the care of a child, kinship carers are overrepresented in healthcare, education and adult social care roles.²⁵
- 2.22. Our Kinship Friendly Employer scheme has supported leading employers such as Tesco, John Lewis Partnership, Card Factory and others to introduce their own paid leave policies for kinship carers.²⁶ Although new guidance is welcome, the Government should go further and introduce a right to statutory pay and leave for kinship carers on a par with that offered to adopters. This would align well with other welcome policy change to support people with parental and caring responsibilities to remain in the workplace when they would like to, including enhanced rights to flexible working and leave entitlements for unpaid carers.

Information, training and support for kinship carers

- 2.23. The Government’s *Stable Homes, Built on Love* strategy committed to investing in the delivery of a national training and support offer for all types of kinship carer. Following a competitive tender process, Kinship has been awarded a contract to deliver a comprehensive programme of online and in-person information, support and training from Spring 2024. The Government has also committed to further £1.8 million investment into sustaining peer support for kinship carers; Kinship has established more than 130 peer support groups across England through the National Peer Support Programme over the last two years.

²² House of Lords Children and Families Act 2014 Committee (2023) [Children and Families Act 2014: A failure of implementation](#)

²³ Department for Education (2023) [Kinship carers in the workplace: guidance for employers](#)

²⁴ Kinship (2023) [Forced Out: delivering equality for kinship carers in the workplace](#)

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ For more information visit: kinship.org.uk/get-involved/kinship-friendly-employers

- 2.24. This new investment is very welcome and should help to ensure that many more kinship carers, including informal kinship carers, receive consistent and high-quality support, including peer support. Only 2 in 10 kinship carers told us they had received any preparation support before or shortly after their child moved in²⁷, and 25% rated the support provided by their local authority as 'very poor'²⁸. In addition, in our most recent annual survey, more than one third of kinship carers were caring for a child on their own and nearly 1 in 5 said they felt lonely often or always; peer support can help to improve kinship carers' emotional wellbeing and reduce isolation.²⁹
- 2.25. A lack of appropriate and independent advice, especially at the point of becoming a kinship carer, can leave kinship carers vulnerable to being exploited and unsure about the best option for them to pursue to support their new family.³⁰ 35% of kinship carers rated the information provided about kinship care by their local authority as 'very poor', and only 7% had ever seen their authority's 'family and friends care policy'.³¹ The Government should ensure all local authorities signpost to Kinship Compass³² and other sources of information and advice for kinship carers, and reaffirm the requirement for local authorities to publish a clear and accessible policy outlining their approach to supporting kinship families.

Family justice and legal aid

- 2.26. *Stable Homes, Built on Love* committed to explore "options for an extension of legal aid for carers with SGOs and CAOs", but no further plans are currently in place. A commitment made previously by the Ministry of Justice in 2019 to extend legal aid to kinship carers pursuing a special guardianship order in private family law came into force on 1 May 2023, but this does not address the recommendation made by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care to extend eligibility in a wider range of circumstances.
- 2.27. Closing gaps in the provision of free and independent advice and legal aid support between kinship carers involved in securing different legal orders across both public and private law is crucial; evidence shows how there is significant overlap with public law and local authority involvement within private law cases³³, but the long term support available to kinship families during and afterwards is often dictated by the legal arrangement and route taken³⁴. The Government should extend non-means tested legal aid entitlements which enable kinship carers to access independent legal advice, pursue a legal order, and protect themselves if taken back to court at a later date.
- 2.28. It is welcome that the Law Commission will carry out a review into the legal framework for kinship care to understand how current legislation can lead to variation in rights and entitlements for families and make recommendations for improving transparency, accountability and ultimately experiences for kinship carers and their children. This should examine the private vs public route distinction and its impact on the experiences and resultant support for kinship families. In the interim, the family justice system should recognise kinship carers in legal proceedings where

²⁷ Kinship (2022) [The Cost of Loving: annual survey of kinship carers 2022](#)

²⁸ Kinship (2023) [Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis](#)

²⁹ Starks, L. and Whitley, J. (2020) [An Evaluation of Kinship Connected for Grandparents Plus](#). London: Grandparents Plus.

³⁰ Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (2018) [Firm foundations: complaints about council support and advice for special guardians](#)

³¹ Kinship (2023) [Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis](#)

³² Kinship Compass is an independent online information, advice and support hub just for kinship carers. For more information visit: compass.kinship.org.uk

³³ Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2023) [Uncovering private family law: Exploring applications that involve non-parents \('the other 10%'\)](#)

³⁴ Foundations (2023) [Understanding the variation in support for kinship carers: a survey of local authorities in England](#)

appropriate and take steps to ensure all kinship carers pursuing private law orders understand the implications involved.

Support for children in kinship care

- 2.29. The National Kinship Care Strategy committed to extending the remit of Virtual School Heads to include children in kinship care through £3.8 million investment over 2024-5. Given children growing up in kinship care had been largely absent from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and the Government's subsequent *Stable Homes, Built on Love* strategy, despite evidence showing their very similar needs and experiences to those entering local authority care, this is very welcome and should help improve educational advice and support to kinship families.
- 2.30. However, frustratingly, some entitlements to new support through the Virtual School are again restricted in inconsistent ways to particular cohorts of kinship families, undermining what we know about their similar needs and strengths regardless of legal order or lack thereof. The Government should go much further to equalise educational support between children in kinship care and those who are looked after, including extending eligibility for Pupil Premium Plus and support from the Designated Teacher, and taking steps to refine and improve support for kinship children pursuing further and higher education.

Therapeutic support for kinship families

- 2.31. Following the National Kinship Care Strategy, the Adoption Support Fund has now been renamed as the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund with the intention of increasing applications from eligible kinship families. This is as, despite more children leaving care to special guardianship than adoption each year since 2019³⁵, successful applications for special guardianship families reflect only 13% of those across the entire Fund³⁶.
- 2.32. Although welcome, this solution in isolation misdiagnoses why many eligible kinship families struggle to access the Fund, owing often more to poor awareness and understanding from local authorities, little social work capacity to support applications, and a lack of suitable, tailored therapeutic options which recognise how kinship care situations differ to adoption. A rebranding exercise risks simply setting up more kinship families to be denied the therapeutic interventions which could improve children's mental health and family stability.
- 2.33. Evaluation of the Adoption Support Fund has found that awareness and positive outcomes for carers and their children were lower amongst special guardians than for adoptive parents³⁷, and the Government's own review of the Adoption Support Fund COVID-19 Scheme also suggested that "*SGO families may need a different approach, particularly to marketing support for them*"³⁸.
- 2.34. We want to see the Government deliver a bespoke whole-family version of the Fund designed with all kinship families in mind, not just those secured with a legal order and where the child was previously in care. This should include access to include non-therapeutic support where this would be of significant benefit to children and their carers, including navigating complexities around family contact.

Improving local authority practice

- 2.35. The Government has committed to delivering new statutory guidance on kinship care in Spring 2024, replacing existing family and friends care guidance last updated in 2011, and will appoint a

³⁵ Department for Education (2023) [Looked after children in England including adoptions: Reporting year 2023](#)

³⁶ Department for Education (2022) [Evaluation of the adoption support fund 2018 to 2022](#)

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Department for Education (2021) [Review of the adoption support fund COVID-19 scheme](#)

Kinship Care Ambassador to support and share leading practice amongst local authorities. Both are welcome steps, particularly given the need to strengthen and update guidance to reflect the new policy context for kinship care and deliver a more consistent approach to the standard of support provided for kinship families by children's services.

- 2.36. However, the Ambassador role and wider Government work to improve social work and other professional practice in kinship care (i.e. the new Early Career Framework for social workers; Practice Guides to sit alongside the National Framework) must recognise that practice in kinship care is less well developed and approaches vary considerably between – and even within – different local authorities. Our research has identified some of the key challenges and considerations for specialist social work practice in kinship care.³⁹ There is a risk the new Ambassador role's power is muted in the context of local authorities operating without the capacity, space nor expertise to embed new ways of working, and particularly given the extreme workforce and financial pressures in children's social care.

3. How effectively Ofsted works as a regulator and inspector for children's social care.

- 3.1. The National Kinship Care Strategy notes that Ofsted inspectors will receive additional bespoke training around kinship care and that Ofsted have committed to reviewing published guidance to ensure references to kinship care are clear and that local authorities' strengths and weaknesses in kinship care practice are captured in their inspection reports. This should ensure they can scrutinise and investigate local authorities' support and practice around kinship care more effectively; this must be reflected much more clearly and visibly in their inspection reports where significant discussion of kinship care is largely absent.
- 3.2. However, it is unfortunate that the Strategy didn't go further to consider the inspectorate given the role Ofsted play in supporting and challenging local authority practice with kinship families. We want to see Ofsted significantly enhance the attention paid to kinship care practice and support within its inspections and undertake a thematic review of its inspection reports to support this work. Ofsted should also consider establishing a separate judgement for kinship care within its inspection framework for local authority children's services, similar to the recent (re)introduction of this for care leavers. This would align the inspection framework with the new National Framework, giving sufficient weight to considerations around kinship care and supporting family networks.

³⁹ Hunt, J. (2021) [Practising in kinship care: the perspectives of specialist social workers](#)

About Kinship

Kinship is the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We're here for all kinship carers. The family members and friends who step up to raise children when their parents aren't able to. We want every kinship family to have the recognition, value and support they need and deserve.

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. Our expert advice, information and guidance helps with complicated and stressful decisions that so many kinship families have to make. We're always there to support them through difficult times and celebrate the good. Kinship carers are strong and determined. Together, they are powerful.

We help them build communities of support and action by connecting families locally and across England and Wales. We're at the heart of kinship networks, partnering with and influencing service providers, local and national government and other organisations. We give everything we have to fight for each family and their rights, changing society until every kinship family is recognised, valued and supported.

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