



Kinship care for babies

Westminster Hall debate tabled by Rt Hon Andrea Leadsom MP

- Too often, kinship care is overlooked or dismissed too early as a permanence option for babies and young children in favour of adoption, despite strong evidence of positive experiences and outcomes for children and their families.
- Kinship carers and their children typically do not receive the support they need and deserve, especially when compared to adopters and foster carers, despite caring for children with very similar needs and experiences.
- We want to see much greater support and investment in kinship care so that babies and all children grow up with love, stability, and security. This should include financial allowances for all kinship carers, access to information and advice, practical and emotional support, and training for key professionals around kinship care.

What is kinship care?

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. There are over 200,000 children in kinship care across England and Wales being brought up by grandparents as well as older siblings, aunts, uncles, family friends and neighbours. Over 40,000 children in kinship care are aged 0 to 4 years.ⁱ

Kinship care keeps children connected to their family network and important people in their lives. Research shows that children in kinship care have more stable experiences and positive outcomes than those in local authority care.

Children in kinship care may be living in an informal arrangement agreed by their parents, on a Child Arrangements Order or Special Guardianship Order, or 'looked after' by the local authority and placed with kinship foster carers. This complex picture means the support available to kinship carers varies enormously. They often face a legal and postcode lottery which determines what help they can receive. As a result, they and their children experience significant financial, emotional, and practical challenges.

Key issues

Too often, kinship care is overlooked or dismissed too early as a permanence option for babies and young children in favour of adoption, despite strong evidence of positive experiences and outcomes for children and their families.

96% of kinship carers who responded to Kinship's 2021 State of the Nation survey believed the children would be living with them permanently.ⁱⁱ A significant review of the evidence for special guardianship identified that this route has a low rate of disruption and offers much greater levels of stability for children than non-kinship foster care.ⁱⁱⁱ The risk of placement instability and likelihood of emotional and behavioural difficulties is also typically lower for orders made when children are aged under 4 years.

Unlike adoption, kinship care options preserve a legal connection to children's birth parents and offer a route to permanence within their extended family network. This supports young people's continued development of healthy relationships and a sense of belonging and identity. Over two-thirds of young people surveyed in

Kinship's *Growing Up in Kinship Care* study went into kinship care with at least one sibling.^{iv} Many said the enduring family network which kinship care supported helped to improve their social connectedness and emotional health as they grew older.

"He was only young when he got took off my dad. I brought him up for a couple of years because my dad's drinking was getting out of control . . . He's been adopted out, closed adoption . . . It broke me. I was in hospital for months after self-harming. I had admissions to hospital, counselling, everything."

Young person aged 18, from 'Growing Up in Kinship Care'.^v

Kinship carers and their children typically do not receive the support they need and deserve, especially when compared to adopters and foster carers, despite caring for children with very similar needs and experiences.

Last year, 3800 children left care via a Special Guardianship Order – 39% were aged 1 to 4 years at the date of the order and 11% were under 1 year.^{vi} For three consecutive years, more children have left the care system on a Special Guardianship Order than through adoption, yet there is a significant lack of parity in support available to kinship carers when compared with adopters or foster carers.

Kinship carers are more likely to be older, in poorer health, insecurely housed, socially isolated, and living in poverty than any other parenting group. Most kinship carers find that taking on the role – often with very little notice or preparation – means they are plunged into poverty (around half of kinship carers have to give up work to take on caring responsibilities for the children^{vii}). As a result, a significant number of children in kinship care are growing up in poverty and deprivation which has a detrimental impact on their life chances.

Kinship's 2021 Financial Allowances survey highlighted that 82% of kinship carers had worried about their financial situation in the past year, and 76% of those who received an allowance felt it did not allow them to meet the needs of the children they cared for.^{viii}

"The biggest challenge I faced when I took in my kinship children was financial. I had to take unpaid parental leave and I wasn't entitled to benefits as the children's parents were still claiming them. I had lost my salary and I had no money coming in. We were a family of three that became a family of six..... I even lost out on a promotion as the local authority advised I stayed home to make sure the children were settled."

Aunt and kinship carer supported by Kinship.

Most children and young people in kinship care have experienced similar adversities to children who are looked after or have been adopted; 66% of children in all forms of kinship care have experienced abuse and/or neglect.^{ix} Children in kinship care face significant emotional, social, and behavioural challenges which can have a significant impact on their development and life chances.

Carers can often struggle to access the support they and their children need, including legal advice, information about housing and benefits, peer support within the community, and therapeutic support for their children to heal from trauma.

The Early Years Healthy Development Review highlighted how kinship carers have to battle to access support, often repeating their story to multiple professionals, but benefit from being able to meet with other people who are in similar positions to share experiences and build a support network.^x

Our recommendations

Here's what needs to change to improve things for babies and kinship carers:

- 1. Kinship care options should be considered for all babies alongside other routes to permanence.**
Well-supported kinship care should be the primary consideration when a baby or child is unable to live with their parents.
- 2. Financial support should be made available to all kinship carers, regardless of legal order.**
The lottery of financial support should be ended through provision of a universal, standard allowance that at least matches the national minimum fostering allowance (currently £132 per week). Kinship carers should also be eligible for paid leave from employment on a par with adoption leave.
- 3. Practical and emotional support should be introduced for kinship families in every local authority.**
This should include support for carers to prepare for the arrival of babies and children, ongoing support for managing contact with family, and peer support to reduce isolation and loneliness. The Government should rename and extend the scope of the Adoption Support Fund so it provides all kinship family members with pre-therapy and therapeutic support. All children should be eligible for a health assessment on entry to kinship care and receive priority access to mental health support.
- 4. Public services and key professionals supporting babies should recognise and respond to the specific needs of kinship families.**
Family hubs should provide a welcoming and supportive space for kinship carers, with joined up working and processes which ensure carers can access support without having to repeat their story or justify their role. Professionals such as health visitors should receive training on kinship care.

Suggested questions

MPs should use the debate to raise awareness of the disparity in support for kinship families, and call for the Government to consider all kinship families, regardless of legal status, in its wider programmes of support for babies, children and families.

- What assessment has the Government made of introducing a universal financial allowance for all kinship carers?
- What plans does the Government have to expand the scope of the Adoption Support Fund, recently extended until 2025, learning from the success of the broader COVID-19 ASF Scheme?
- What plans does the Government have to ensure the expansion of family hubs recognises and considers the needs of babies in kinship care?
- What plans does the Government have to support babies and children living in kinship care, including those who are not formerly looked after?

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. Our expert advice, information, and guidance help with complicated and stressful decisions that so many kinship families must make. We are 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 are at the heart of kinship networks, partnering with and influencing service providers, local and national government, and other

organisations. We communicate directly with 8,000 kinship carers and 1,000 kinship care professionals. In 2020-21, our advice service advised 3,500 kinship carers. In 2022 we will be rolling out a new national peer support service, funded by the Department for Education, which will support kinship carers in every local authority in England.

For more information or to arrange a meeting, please contact Sam Turner, Communications and External Affairs Manager at sam.turner@kinship.org.uk or on 07399 154170.

ⁱ https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/documents/kinship/Kinstat_%20Briefing%20Paper%20001_V2.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://kinship.org.uk/kinship-annual-survey-2021/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/special-guardianship-a-review-of-the-evidence>

^{iv} <https://kinship.org.uk/report/growing-up-in-kinship-care-experiences-as-adolescents-and-outcomes-in-young-adulthood/>

^v <https://kinship.org.uk/report/growing-up-in-kinship-care-experiences-as-adolescents-and-outcomes-in-young-adulthood/>

^{vi} <https://coram-i.org.uk/resource/asglb-q1-2021-22-headline-measures/>

^{vii} <https://frg.org.uk/product/doing-the-right-thing-a-report-on-the-experiences-of-kinship-carers/>

^{viii} <https://kinship.org.uk/financial-survey/>

^{ix} <https://kinship.org.uk/kinship-annual-survey-2021/>

^x <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-best-start-for-life-a-vision-for-the-1001-critical-days>