

Out of the Shadows

A vision for kinship care in England

Executive Summary

March 2022



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It makes sense to invest in kinship care. Kinship carers - family members or friends who care for a child when their parents are unable to - look after some of the most vulnerable children in society, usually preventing them from entering the care system. In England and Wales, there are currently estimated to be over 162,400 children in kinship care¹, nearly double the 88,115 children in local authority care.^{2,3} Well-supported kinship care leads to better outcomes for children and reduces pressure on children's social care.⁴

Most kinship carers take on the role at a time of crisis. They take on the full financial cost of the child, usually without any financial support. They take on the responsibility for every aspect of the child's wellbeing and development. Children in kinship care have often had difficult experiences which can lead to them displaying their distress in behaviours that can be hard to manage. Even so, kinship carers make sure the children's emotional, behavioural, health and educational needs are met, again usually without help or support.⁵

The impact of being a kinship carer on people's lives is huge. Although kinship care can happen to anyone, kinship carers are more likely to be experiencing disadvantage in their lives. For example, when compared to parents or other cohorts of carers like foster carers, kinship carers are more likely to be older, in poorer health, living in poverty and deprivation, living in insecure accommodation, and be in low paid employment or unemployed. Kinship care is also far more prevalent in Black and minority ethnic communities.⁶

Kinship carers have to cope with the emotional impact of the family crisis which resulted in the

children moving into their care, as well as any assessment and court processes they may have to go through. Kinship carers not only have to parent the child, they also have to make sure the child understands the reasons they cannot live with their parents and has a safe relationship with them, which can involve managing complicated contact arrangements. Kinship carers also often find the role can make them isolated as their family and friends move on with their lives and they find it hard to fit in with other parents.⁷

One key message from both research and kinship carers themselves is that the support available to them is inadequate. There is no clear national strategy on how kinship carers should be supported. Currently, support is based on the legal status of the child rather than their level of need. For example, some local authorities are beginning to offer better support to special guardians, but informal kinship carers still struggle to receive any support. However, there are also still many local authorities that offer very little support to kinship carers regardless of the child's legal status. Kinship carers are being pushed into poverty, having to choose between feeding themselves or the children. They are left alone to raise children with complex needs with no support.

Despite all these challenges, kinship carers fight to provide children with loving and stable homes for as long as they need. However, many are now at breaking point. If the children were not living with their kinship families, most would be in local authority care. This would overwhelm the already stretched children's social care system. It would also have an adverse impact on children. When compared to children in local authority care, children in kinship care are more likely to

¹ 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.

² Department for Education (2021) Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2020 to 2021.

³ Stats Wales (2021) Children Looked After, available at: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After>

⁴ Hunt (2020) Two Decades of UK Research on Kinship Care: An Overview, London: Family Rights Group.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wijedasa, D. (2015) The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in the UK: Characteristics of children living with relatives in England: Part I, University of Bristol, Bristol.

⁷ Hunt (2020).



have stability, better health, development and educational outcomes, and better relationships with their families.^{8,9}

The case to invest in kinship care is strong. Not only do children have better experiences and outcomes, but kinship families who receive support are less likely to fall into crisis and are more likely to stay together.¹⁰ Furthermore, recent economic analysis has found that for every £1 local authorities invest in kinship care, there is a return of £1.20 - a 20% return on investment.¹¹ It costs local authorities more to deal with the fallout of not supporting kinship families properly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current system where the support a kinship family receives is determined by the legal status of the child and where they live rather than on their needs is unfair and leaves some of the most vulnerable families without help. There is a clear case for improving support for all kinship carers, regardless of the child's legal status or where they live.

The report's recommendations are split into two phases: changes that need to happen now to alleviate the pressure on kinship families; and strategic changes needed to develop a kinship care system that is fit for purpose for the future.

CHANGES NEEDED NOW	
Financial support	All kinship carers should receive the financial support they need, including a non-means tested financial allowance that matches the current minimum fostering allowance. They should also be entitled to kinship care leave (on a par with adoption leave) when the child first moves into their care.
Information and advice	All kinship families should have access to independent information and advice, including free legal advice, from the point they are considering becoming kinship carers. Access to this information and advice should be available for as long as the family needs.
Practical and emotional support for kinship carers and their children – including peer support	All kinship families should have access to all the support they need. This support should include health, education, and therapeutic support for the children. It should also include: preparation and training; practical, emotional, and therapeutic support; peer support; and support with contact for the carers.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Hunt (2020).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Nicol Economics (2020) Kinship Care: The Opportunity A Report by Nicol Economics for Grandparents Plus. London: Grandparents Plus.

A FUTURE FIT FOR KINSHIP CARE	
Robust research and data collection	Data and research is needed to know how many kinship families there are, their demographics, and what their level of need is. More research is needed to help understand the best ways to support kinship families. This will enable the development of evidence-based support services.
Legal rights for all kinship carers	Kinship carers have very few legal rights. All kinship carers should have the legal right to: legal aid for any legal proceedings for the child; a role in legal proceedings; and the support they need.
Kinship care aware policy making and public service delivery at national and local levels of government	All decisions that affect children and families at both a national and local level should specifically take into consideration the needs of kinship families. All public services that have direct contact with kinship families should have policies in place explaining how their services are able to meet their needs.
An ambitious plan to raise awareness of kinship care	More must be done to raise awareness of kinship care among the professionals who work with them and among society more generally.
Workforce development	Every local authority should have specialist kinship care teams with specially trained practitioners. All professionals from other agencies who work with kinship carers should have a basic level of training on kinship care. To achieve this, relevant qualifying programmes should cover kinship care and there should be continuing professional development courses on kinship care for professionals working directly with kinship families.

We are at a crossroads. Kinship care is finally being recognised as an important part of the children's social care system. It offers a positive alternative for children who cannot live with their parents to live with people they know and love. However, without the right support, planning, and investment, kinship care will continue to be the poor relation of foster care and adoption.

Well-supported kinship care works. The recommendations in this report will improve the circumstances and outcomes for kinship families now and build a system that works for kinship families and reduces pressure on children's social care into the future. This will lead to more children being able to live in stable homes with people they know and love.

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ABOUT KINSHIP

Kinship is the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We're here for all kinship carers. The grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, other 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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