



Response to the independent review of children's social care call for evidence by Kinship

Introduction

Kinship (formerly known as Grandparents Plus) is the largest charity for kinship carers and the children they care for in England and Wales. Kinship provides support for all kinship carers. During April 2020 – March 2021, our advice service supported over 3,000 kinship carers. Our specialist support services are currently commissioned in 77 local authorities in England and 6 in Wales. These services have provided intensive one to one support to over 1,000 carers in the last year. We are piloting a kinship family activity programme, funded by Sport England. We also facilitate a kinship care professionals' network with over 900 members and a researchers' network with over 40 members.

At Kinship we actively support research projects with universities and other research organisations. We also carry out our own research projects including an annual survey of kinship carers, and discreet projects on specific areas of interest.

In which areas of kinship care is there robust research?

There is a growing body of research into kinship care which has developed over the last 20 years. However, there are significant gaps and these will be identified later in this report.

Prevalence and characteristics of kinship care

The main study identifying the extent of kinship care in the UK is an analysis of the 2011 census data by Dinithi Wijedasa (2015). Link here:

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

Support needs of kinship carers

There is strong research evidence about the issues kinship carers and their children face and their unmet support needs. Professor Joan Hunt (2020) has recently completed a literature review into the UK research on kinship care over the last 20 years for the cross-party parliamentary task force on kinship care. Link here:

<https://www.frg.org.uk/images/e-publications/Overview-research-kinship-care.pdf>

Although Hunt (2020) gives a good overview of this, Selwyn et al's (2013) study gives a more detailed examination of the experiences of kinship carers. Link here:

<https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/projects/the-poor-relations-children-and-informal-kinship-carers-speak-out>

Our surveys, including our annual Kinship Care: State of the Nation survey, give insights into the experiences of kinship carers. We undertake regular surveys focusing on discrete issues, for example we carried out three surveys in 2020 to understand how kinship carers experienced the Covid-19 pandemic. Links are here:

https://kinship.org.uk/for-professionals/resources/kinship_surveys/

The views and experiences of children and young people – and their outcomes

Although there is little research about the views and experiences of children in kinship care, a ground-breaking study by Wellard et al (2017) included the experiences of 53 young people who had been in kinship care as well as their carers. It compared the outcomes in early adulthood of young people who had grown up in kinship care against those in the general population and those in the care system. Link here:

https://kinship.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/GUIKC_Full_Report_FINAL.pdf

All the above studies comment on the outcomes for children in kinship. The largest review on the outcomes for children was completed by Winokur et al (2017) which systematically reviewed 102 international studies. This study found kinship care provided significantly better outcomes for children than foster care. This study is only available through Sage Journals but a copy is attached.

Paul Shuttleworth from the University of Sussex is undertaking a PhD on children's experiences of kinship care which is due for completion during summer 2021.

Special Guardianship

There is a growing body of research into special guardianship orders (SGOs), which are a legally secure permanent form of kinship care. There are two key studies into SGOs. Wade et al (2014) which can be found here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/377442/DFE-RB372_Investigating_special_guardianship.pdf

and Harwin et al 2019 can be found here:

https://www.cfj-lancaster.org.uk/app/nuffield/files-module/local/documents/HARWIN_SO_SGO_FinalReport_V2.1_19Mar2019.pdf

All these studies identified that kinship carers have significant support needs and research consistently finds that these needs are not being met.

Evaluations of kinship care programmes and economic analysis

Over the years Kinship has used our experience and expertise, feedback from kinship carers, and the available research base to develop support services for kinship carers. An evaluation into the Kinship Connected support programme by Starks Consulting Ltd and Ecorys (Starks and Whitley 2020) is currently the only independent evaluation of an intervention specifically designed for kinship carers. The evaluation included a cost analysis for Kinship Connected. The evaluation can be found here:

<https://kinship.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Kinship-Connected-Evaluation-FINAL-Sept-2020-1.pdf>

The scale-up of Kinship Connected was supported by Nesta, and this work included cost analysis by Nicol Economics which can be found here:

https://kinship.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Final_economic_case_text.pdf

The experience of professionals in kinship care

New research for Kinship by Joan Hunt (due for publication in Summer 2021) explores the experiences of social workers and other professionals who are working with kinship carers. It highlights the need for a shift in understanding and provision of services, as well as workforce development.

Key findings of this research

Kinship care is a unique alternative care option for children who are unable to live with their parents. The children in kinship have usually experienced abuse and neglect in the care of their parents and if they were not in kinship care most would be in the care system. Their profiles are largely similar to children in foster care. These experiences mean the children are at increased risk of psychological and developmental problems as well as mental and physical health difficulties. These issues mean the children can often be challenging to care for.

Kinship carers are often vulnerable themselves. They are generally older, more likely to have a disability or chronic health issue, live in poverty and deprivation, be insecurely housed and be socially isolated than any other parenting group. They often have to manage complicated family dynamics with the children's parents and other family members, whilst also caring for the children.

The complexity of kinship care means most kinship carers have times when they need support to enable them to meet the needs of the children they care for. Commonly kinship carers' support needs include financial support, information and preparation about becoming a kinship carer, information on how to parent children who have experienced abuse and neglect, managing contact between the children and their parents, how to support kinship children's identity development, therapeutic support for the children and carers both individually and together, and educational support for the children. However, a consistent finding in all research is that kinship carers and their children do not receive the support they need, and they get a fraction of the support offered to foster carers and adoptive parents.

Despite the high level of need of the children, the vulnerabilities of the carers, and the general lack of support, the outcomes for the children in kinship care are generally good, especially when compared to children in foster care. The only evaluation of an intervention focused specifically on kinship carers has demonstrated the benefits of well supported kinship care. Children in kinship care generally experience a stable loving home with people who know them for as long as needed, often into adulthood. Kinship care is now acknowledged as a positive placement option for children who cannot live with their parents.

Worryingly, kinship care research often identifies that social work practice does not prioritise kinship care. Kinship carers often report being treated in an oppressive way by local authorities. Some feel coerced into taking the care of the children, and many feel abandoned once the children are living with them. Kinship carers usually feel that social workers and local authorities do not understand their situations or their needs. Most feel each stage of their interactions with social workers from being identified as potential carers and assessed, to the provision of support, is fundamentally flawed. Research on professionals working with kinship carers often identifies that social workers feel unable to work with kinship carers due the systems and processes they have to work under. The research indicates that kinship care is a successful placement option for children despite, rather than because of, local authority processes and support.

Gaps in Research

As mentioned previously, there are significant gaps in the research into kinship care in the UK and Hunt (2020) identified the majority of these. Research on alternative care for children over the last 30 years has generally focused on children in foster care and adoption.

There is no centralised data on the extent of kinship care. Currently the statistics on kinship care are not gathered in the same way as they are for foster care and adoption. There are no centralised statistics on the extent of kinship care, or the demographics of the carers and the children. There are some statistics gathered on SGOs by the Department for Education, but these are only in the context of children leaving or coming into local authority foster care, which means they are limited and should be used with caution.

There is a lack of longitudinal studies on kinship care. This includes the long-term impact studies examining how kinship care affects the children, kinship carers, parents and professionals. There are no studies looking at the outcomes for older adult who were in kinship care as children. Without these studies it is impossible to fully know the long-term success of kinship care or how to properly support kinship care families.

There is a lack of theoretical understanding of kinship care. The research on kinship care has generally been either quantitative or thematic in nature. This has helpfully identified key issues in kinship care. However, the theoretical understanding of kinship care is still in its infancy. The development of a theoretical understanding of kinship care will help to develop a stronger evidence base on which to build systems, services and support for kinship carers, their children and families, and the people who work with them.

Conclusion

It is the view of Kinship that all kinship care should form a significant part of this review.

The review is an opportunity to transform the care system by investing differently. By improving support for kinship carers, we can prevent children growing up in the care system which should lead to better outcomes for the children and savings to the public purse.

The family and friends of children who are involved in children's social care often play a significant, but undervalued role. They are often involved in the lives of the children before children's social care intervene and they commonly support the children and parents during the child protection and court processes.

Kinship carers offer more children a safe home when they are unable to live with their parents than any other alternative care option and the care they offer does not end when the children reach 18. They are more likely to remain with brothers and sisters. They often to remain with their carers until they are ready to move on to independence at a time that is right for them, and to continue to be supported by their carer for as long as they need it. The research on outcomes (Wellard et al 2017, Winoker et al 2017) suggests stability, continuity and commitment leads to better outcomes.

However, the research highlights that kinship carers need access to more support. Kinship welcomes the inclusion of kinship care in the review and recommends that support for kinship carers and the children they care for should be a priority consideration.

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