



National Kinship Care Strategy

Briefing for Westminster Hall debate led by Alistair Strathern MP
4.30 – 5.30pm on Wednesday 6 March 2024

Summary

- The first ever National Kinship Care Strategy provides welcome recognition of and new support for kinship families, but the overall investment and commitments made do not deliver the urgent help which kinship families need today nor build a kinship care system fit for the future.
- As a priority, the Government should accelerate plans to roll out financial allowances beyond a limited pilot and introduce paid employment leave for kinship carers.
- It makes sense to invest in kinship care: it delivers better outcomes for children and families and cost savings for local authorities. It is vital that improving support for existing kinship families is prioritised before incentivising greater use of kinship care.

What is kinship care?

Kinship care is when a child lives full-time or most of the time with a relative or family friend, usually because their parents are not able to care for them. Estimates suggest there are [more than 130,000 children in kinship care](#) in England – nearly three times the number in mainstream foster care. Grandparents most commonly kinship carers, but they can also be older siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins and family friends.

[Click here to learn more about kinship care](#)

National Kinship Care Strategy

In December 2023, the UK Government published the first ever National Kinship Care Strategy – [Championing kinship care](#) – which set out the Department for Education’s ambitions for encouraging and supporting kinship care, including new commitments and £20 million investment over 2024-25.

Headline commitments made in the Strategy included:

- a four-year pilot of financial allowances for special guardians in up to 8 local authorities, backed by £16 million investment in the first year;
- a £4 million extension of the Virtual School Heads role to support the educational progress of children in kinship care; and
- new guidance for employers on supporting kinship carers at work.

[Click here to read a summary of the Strategy’s commitments](#)

Our verdict

At Kinship, [our response to the Strategy](#) welcomed that there was now more recognition of and support for kinship families than ever before, but warned that the investment and commitments made in the Strategy fall far short of what is required to ensure all kinship families get the urgent support they need today and to build a kinship care system fit for the future.

Below is a summary of our verdict and what we think should happen next following key commitments made in the Strategy. For more information on other commitments, please visit our [kinship care policy tracker](#).

[Click here to visit our kinship care policy tracker](#)

✓ Financial allowances

Instead of equalising financial allowances between kinship carers and foster carers as recommended by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, the Strategy only commits to a four-year pathfinder in up to 8 local authorities to test out delivering a financial allowance (equivalent to the fostering allowance) for special guardians caring for previously looked after children. Previously, *Stable Homes, Built on Love* had committed to "exploring the case" for mandating a national financial allowance in all local authorities.

This doesn't go far enough to end the unfairness which denies financial support to kinship families and plunges many unnecessarily into poverty. 67% of kinship care households are [deprived in at least one dimension](#), and kinship carers are more likely than any other group raising children to be unemployed or in low-income employment. The cost of living crisis is crippling many kinship families: our [Breaking Point report](#) revealed that **1 in 10 kinship households had run out of food and couldn't afford to buy more in the last two weeks**.

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. This is a barrier to permanence; the system perversely incentivises kinship carers to become foster carers as this is the only route they can access guaranteed financial support, even though this often isn't in the best interests of the child or their family.

The pathfinder must not paralyse progress towards a wider rollout to all local authorities and to all types of kinship family. It makes sense to invest in kinship care: our [Economic case for kinship care report](#) finds that **for every 1000 children looked after in well-supported kinship care rather than local authority care, the state saves £40 million and increases the lifetime earnings of those children by £20 million**. Last week, Kinship's #ValueOurLove campaign steering group wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury calling for additional investment in the Spring Budget in order to move further and faster – [read their letter here](#).

Recommendation

The Government should accelerate its plans and commit to legislating and funding a wider rollout of financial allowances to all kinship carers in all local authorities. In the meantime, the Government should also support local authorities to deliver non-means tested financial allowances given the evidence this [improves outcomes for children and families](#) and delivers cost savings for local authorities.

✓ Kinship care leave

The National Kinship Care Strategy did not introduce a statutory right to employment pay and leave for kinship carers, as recommended by the Independent Review, and instead only delivered new guidance for employers on how to support kinship carers in the workplace. Previously, the Government had committed to "explore additional workplace entitlements" for kinship carers.

Unlike most adoptive parents, kinship carers do not have a right to a period of paid leave from employment. The result is significant and often permanent unemployment and underemployment for kinship carers; our [Forced Out report](#) found that **more than 8 in 10 kinship carers had to leave work permanently or reduce their hours after taking on their caring role**, leading to increased financial hardship, ill-health, and instability.

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 home after experiencing trauma, separation and loss, but would also create immediate financial stability for kinship families at a time of immense turbulence and reduce dependency on welfare benefits. It would also prevent kinship carers, who are overrepresented in vital sectors including healthcare, education and adult social care, from having to leave the labour market unnecessarily.

Last year, we launched our [Kinship Friendly Employer](#) scheme which has to date supported leading employers including Tesco, John Lewis Partnership and Card Factory to introduce their own paid leave policies for kinship carers – but employers of all sizes are telling us they can't go as far as they'd like without efforts from the Government introducing a new statutory pay and leave offer.

Recommendation

The Department for Business and Trade should work alongside the Department for Education to introduce a new statutory pay and leave offer for kinship carers on a par with adoption pay and leave.

✓ Educational support for children in kinship care

The Strategy committed to extending the remit of Virtual School Heads to include children in kinship care through £3.8 million investment over 2024-5. However, entitlements to advice and information continue to be restricted in inconsistent ways to particular cohorts of kinship families, undermining what we know about the similar needs, experiences and strengths for children growing up across all forms of kinship care.

Recommendation

The Government should equalise support between children in kinship care and those in local authority care, including extending eligibility for Pupil Premium Plus and Designated Teacher support, amending the School Admissions Code, and improving support for kinship children pursuing further and higher education.

✓ Therapeutic support for kinship families

The Strategy rebranded the Adoption Support Fund as the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, recognising that only 13% of applications to the Fund are from eligible special guardianship families despite more children leaving care to special guardianship than adoption each year since 2019. Although welcome, this however misdiagnoses why many eligible families do not access the Fund; it is designed with adoptive families rather than kinship families in mind and there is little understanding and capacity in local authorities to support kinship families to access therapeutic support tailored to their unique circumstances.

Recommendation

The Government should establish a bespoke whole-family Kinship Support Fund with all types of kinship families in mind, not just those secured by a legal order or where the child was previously in care, and extend the scope to include wider emotional support which helps children in kinship care with their mental health and navigate complexities around contact, identity and family relationships.

✓ Information, training and support for kinship carers

In the Strategy, the Government reaffirmed their existing commitment to invest in a national training and support offer for kinship carers. Kinship has been awarded a £3 million contract to deliver a comprehensive programme of online and in-person support and training from Spring 2024 for all types of kinship carer. This follows our success establishing more than 140 peer support groups across England over the past two years and developing [Kinship Compass](#) – our independent online information, advice and support hub.

This new investment is welcome and should help to ensure many more kinship carers, including informal kinship carers, receive consistent and high-quality support, including peer support. Our [Breaking Point report](#) highlights that **more than one third of kinship carers are caring for a child on their own and nearly 1 in 5 say they feel lonely often or always**; peer support can help to improve kinship carers' emotional wellbeing and reduce isolation. 25% of kinship carers rated the support provided by their local authority as 'very poor' and more than one third (35%) said the information provided about kinship care by the local authority was 'very poor', emphasising the importance of trusted, independent advice and guidance through their journeys.

Recommendation

The Government should ensure all local authorities signpost to Kinship Compass and the forthcoming national training and support offer, and reaffirm in forthcoming kinship care statutory guidance the requirement for all local authorities to publish an accessible policy outlining their approach to supporting all kinship families.

For more on what's happening now, our verdict, and what should happen next for other areas of kinship care policy (e.g. family justice and legal aid, a definition of kinship care, improving local authority practice etc), please visit our online [kinship care policy tracker](#).

[Click here to visit our kinship care policy tracker](#)

Feedback from kinship carers

As the leading kinship care charity, we were uniquely placed to gather feedback from kinship carers following publication of the Strategy last year, and utilised our wide reach with the thousands of kinship carers we support and campaign alongside to deliver a short feedback survey. Key headline findings were:

- Kinship carers widely welcomed the publication of a dedicated kinship care strategy, finally seeing **recognition and representation** of their role. But they saw this as a first ‘step in the right direction’ and felt it **did not go far enough**, especially around financial support. Some felt that the commitments made would not impact them, or it was too late for them to see any benefits from the Strategy.
- The majority of kinship carers had concerns about the financial allowances pilot continuing to perpetuate a postcode lottery of support. Some kinship carers expressed **confusion and anxiety** around the new pilot of financial allowances given the lack of early information on how pilot areas will be selected and how kinship carers already in receipt of a financial allowance might be affected.
- Carers were concerned about the continued **inequalities** involved in restricting support to those with a legal order, unfairly locking **informal kinship carers** out of vital support; they wanted the similarities across all types of kinship carers to be recognised. Too many crucial commitments continue to rely on the child being previously looked after, perversely incentivising entry into local authority care.

Key talking points and suggested questions

MPs should use the debate to welcome the Government’s new focus on kinship care, but push the Minister to accelerate plans – particularly around the provision of financial allowances and kinship care leave as inaction here carries the greatest and most urgent risk for kinship families and the public purse.

1. Kinship’s [Breaking Point report](#) found that 12% of kinship carers are concerned about their ability to continue caring for their children in the next year if their circumstances don’t improve, owing often to financial pressures and a lack of financial support compared to groups such as foster carers. The alternative for most of these children would be local authority care, risking devastating consequences for children, families and the public purse if urgent action isn’t taken. Does the Department believe that a four-year pilot of financial allowances in only 8 local authorities is enough?
2. The evidence is clear that it makes sense to invest in kinship care: it delivers good outcomes for children and long-term savings for local authorities. For every 1000 children looked after in well-supported kinship care rather than local authority care, the state saves £40 million and increases the lifetime earnings of those children by £20 million. The Government’s [local government finance settlement](#) says councils should “invest in areas that help place children’s social care services on a sustainable financial footing. This includes... expanding kinship care”. How will the Department support local authorities beyond the eight pathfinder participants to introduce financial allowances for kinship carers and ensure the pilot doesn’t paralyse others from taking action today?
3. Kinship’s [Forced Out report](#) found that more than 8 in 10 kinship carers had to leave work permanently or reduce their hours after taking on their caring role, pushing kinship carers out of our hospitals, schools and communities and into the benefits system. Why wasn’t a right to statutory pay and leave committed to in the National Kinship Care Strategy, and what are the barriers to the Department for Business and Trade working alongside the Department for Education to introduce this?
4. While this new recognition of kinship care is welcome, Kinship has said the level of investment and the commitments made in the National Kinship Care Strategy does not go far enough to ensure kinship families get the financial, practical and emotional support they need. What are the Department’s priorities in the next Spending Review for kinship care and how will they ensure the vision articulated in the Strategy is realised?

#ValueOurLove campaign

Every child needs love. That is why when parents can't look after a child, it's often best if they can be brought up by a grandparent, uncle, aunt, sibling or a family friend. Someone they know, who can provide and stability children need, rather than grow up in the care system. This is kinship care.

Kinship's [#ValueOurLove campaign](#) is calling on the UK Government to:

- Equalise allowances between foster and kinship families.
- Equalise access to training and support between kinship carers and foster carers.
- Equalise leave between adoptive and kinship families.
- Equalise support between children in kinship care and those in care.



[Click here to learn more about the #ValueOurLove campaign and how you can support](#)

About Kinship

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 want every kinship family to have the recognition, value and support they need and deserve.

Learn more about [our policy and research work](#) and [Kinship Compass](#): our independent advice, information and support hub for kinship families in your constituency.

Contact

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