



Kinship

Response to the Welsh Government's draft Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy consultation

June 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. The best evidence we have suggests there are at least 11,000 children living in kinship care in Wales¹ – more than double the number in foster care².

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.³

Summary

- Children in kinship care, regardless of legal status or their journeys into kinship care, have typically experienced similar trauma, loss and childhood adversity to looked after children. Evidence shows they have poorer emotional and behavioural outcomes than children in the general population. In addition, kinship carers are likely to experience challenges with their mental health and report feeling lonelier and in worse health than those in the general population.
- Given the evidence on mental health needs amongst kinship carers and kinship children, any consideration of specific population groups in greater need of support or currently underserved must include kinship families. It is vital this recognises *all* kinship families (including informal) and the unique needs, strengths and experiences of children in kinship care.
- As part of its work to progress the Strategy, Welsh Government should look at the specific mental health and wellbeing needs of kinship carers and children in kinship care and consult with them and organisations that work alongside and support them.

¹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) [Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021](#) Released 26 September 2023, ONS website, article.

² Welsh Government (2023) [Children looked after in foster placements at 31 March by local authority and placement type](#)

³ 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/>

1. Evidence on kinship care and mental health and wellbeing

Kinship carers

- 1.1. Survey evidence indicates that kinship carers are far more likely to have a disability or chronic health condition than unrelated foster carers⁴, and Census analysis shows that kinship households are more likely than parental households to contain people who report long-term physical or mental health conditions or illness that limit their day-to-day activities.⁵
- 1.2. In our 2022 annual survey report – *The Cost of Loving* – over half (56%) of kinship carers across England and Wales told us they had a long-term health condition or disability with nearly a quarter (23%) needing but not receiving professional support for this. Only 15% said they had ever received therapeutic support to help them with the kinship carer role.⁶
- 1.3. The self-reported health of Welsh kinship carers who responded to our 2023 annual survey was significantly worse than for the general population in Wales. ONS analysis of responses from Census 2021 show that 47% of people in Wales report very good health.⁷ For Welsh kinship carers, this figure was just 5% – lower than for the overall England and Wales survey cohort (9%). 5% of Welsh respondents said their health was very bad, compared to just 1.6% of the general Welsh population.
- 1.4. Over one third of Welsh respondents to our 2023 annual survey were caring for a kinship child (or children) on their own without support from a spouse or partner. This is a greater proportion of lone carers than for foster carers: in a recent survey of foster carers across the UK, 75% were fostering with their partner or other adult.⁸ Kinship carers commonly report that friendships fade as their time becomes focused on ensuring the safety and wellbeing of their kinship child (or children), leaving them isolated and with little opportunity to connect with friends and other loved ones who may struggle to understand their new circumstances
- 1.5. Nearly 1 in 5 respondents (19%) to our 2023 annual survey across England and Wales said they felt lonely 'often or always'. This is considerably higher than that recorded within the ONS' August 2023 wellbeing survey (8%) for the general population across Great Britain.⁹ Reported loneliness was understandably higher again for kinship carers who were caring for their kinship child (or children) by themselves: over a quarter (26%) of respondents caring alone said they felt lonely 'often or always' compared to 15% of those caring alongside a partner or spouse. Welsh respondents to our survey reported similar levels of loneliness to the overall survey cohort across both England and Wales.

"Me and my wife used to have a great social life until we took our granddaughter in. We're in our late 60s and we're looking after a 5 year old, we can't go out in the evenings anymore. We've lost most of our friends." Grandfather and kinship foster carer, RCT

⁴ Farmer, E. and Moyers, S. (2008) *Kinship care: Fostering Effective Family and Friends Care*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

⁵ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) [Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021](#). Released 26 September 2023, ONS website, article

⁶ Kinship (2022) [The Cost of Loving: annual survey of kinship carers 2022](#)

⁷ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023b) [Ethnic group by age and sex, England and Wales: Census 2021](#). Released 23 January 2023, ONS website, article

⁸ The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation's Foster Care: 2021 report](#)

⁹ Office for National Statistics (2023) [Dataset: Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: personal well-being and loneliness: 6 to 17 September 2023](#)

"I'm feeling quite lonely at the moment and as if I don't have many people to talk to who understand." Grandmother and special guardian, Caerphilly

"I feel very isolated. My family treat me like I am the enemy for taking my sister's children in." Aunt and kinship foster carer, Caerphilly

Children in kinship care

- 1.6. In our 2022 annual survey, 3 in 5 kinship carers (59%) across England and Wales believed their children had long-term physical or mental health needs, but only 30% had received a formal diagnosis. Carers said that accessing mental health support wasn't easy; 65% said accessing this was either 'Difficult' or 'Very difficult' compared to 48% for those accessing physical health support. The results illustrated that there is significant unmet demand for mental health support in particular for children growing up in kinship care, and that even where this support is being provided, kinship families are struggling to access this easily.¹⁰
- 1.7. Other research evidence suggests that children in kinship care are likely to have poorer emotional and behavioural outcomes than children in the general population.¹¹ Our *Growing Up In Kinship Care* study found that young people who grew up in kinship care had a prevalence of mental health disorders and learning difficulties similar to care leavers.¹²
- 1.8. Children in kinship care, regardless of legal status or their journeys into kinship care, have typically experienced similar adversities to looked after children. In a study of informal kinship families or families secured by a legal order made in private proceedings, drug or alcohol misuse was a reason for kinship care in as many as 68% of families.¹³ For more than a third (37%) domestic abuse was involved, whilst more than a quarter (26%) of children had experienced parental mental illness or parental death. Two thirds of the carers said that the child had been abused and/or neglected, some over a considerable period.

"People think it's just taking your loved one in and getting on with it. They don't understand about the trauma they've [the children] been through and how difficult it is for us." Grandmother with child arrangements order, Caerphilly

"My niece spends every day in isolation in school because they can't cope with her behaviour in class. If they [the teachers] understood a bit more about trauma then they could try something different with her." Aunt and kinship foster carer, RCT

¹⁰ Kinship (2022) [The Cost of Loving: annual survey of kinship carers 2022](#)

¹¹ Hunt, J. (2020) Two Decades of UK Research on Kinship Care: An Overview. London: Family Rights Group

¹² Wellard, S., Meakings, S., Farmer, E. and Hunt, J. (2017) [Growing Up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood](#). London: Grandparents Plus.

¹³ Selwyn, J. Farmer, E., Meakings, S. and Vaisey, P. (2013) [The Poor Relations? Children and Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out](#), University of Bristol/ Buttle UK

2. Recommendations for policy and practice

- 2.1. The draft Strategy notes several population groups who may require additional support in protecting their mental health, and which will be considered as actions are developed across Government, including babies, children and young people who are care experienced and unpaid carers.
- 2.2. However, the current definition of 'care experience' outlined on page 72 of the extends only those children currently or previously looked after. The majority of kinship children will not be included within this definition, despite their similar needs, strengths and experiences. Only 1660 children are looked after in foster care with relatives or family friends, representing about 23% of all children in kinship care in Wales.¹⁴
- 2.3. Similarly, kinship carers are not included within the draft Strategy as a group likely requiring additional support or consideration in the equity of access, experience and outcomes through impact assessments or other means.
- 2.4. **Given the evidence on mental health needs amongst kinship carers and kinship children, any consideration of specific population groups in greater need of support or currently underserved must include kinship families. It is vital this recognises *all* kinship families (including informal) and the unique needs, strengths and experiences of children in kinship care.**
- 2.5. **As part of its work to progress the Strategy, Welsh Government should look at the specific mental health and wellbeing needs of kinship carers and children in kinship care and consult with them and organisations that work alongside and support them.**
- 2.6. This should align with other Welsh Government priorities, including the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework and recent commitment to ensuring care experienced children and young people can access trauma-informed therapeutic support¹⁵, the Child Poverty Strategy¹⁶, and the Connected Communities strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation¹⁷.

"We could do with more help. We're dealing with their [the kinship children's] social and emotional difficulties and extreme sibling rivalry. They are very aggressive and violent towards me and my husband....we love them but it's very hard at times not to want to give them back to social services"
Grandmother and special guardian, Newport

¹⁴ Welsh Government (2023) [Children looked after in foster placements at 31 March by local authority and placement type](#)

¹⁵ <https://record.assembly.wales/Plenary/13407> see para 507

¹⁶ Welsh Government (2024) [Child Poverty Strategy for Wales 2024](#)

¹⁷ Welsh Government (2020) [Connected communities: a strategy for tackling loneliness and social isolation and building stronger social connections](#)

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.

Contact

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