

Kinship Care

This “In focus” briefing considers the importance of kinship care and highlights some examples of best practice in the area of kinship care being promoted by local authorities across the UK.

1 Introduction

It has been suggested that there are as many as 300,000 children and young people living in kinship care arrangements in the UK. [Research has shown](#) that the majority of kinship carers are aged between 45-59, and almost three-quarters are the grandparents of the children for whom they are caring. Statistics also show that 1 in 3 kinship carers are not in receipt of child benefit and 3 out of 4 face financial hardship. In September 2015, the [Scottish Government allocated an extra £10.1m of funding](#) to councils enabling them to raise kinship caring allowances to the same level as those given to foster carers.

2 Policy and Context

In the absence of suitable parental care, kinship care is generally considered to be a preferable alternative to entering the traditional foster care system. Research conducted over the last decade suggests that children in kinship care are more likely to have better mental health and behavioural outcomes compared to those children who are fostered by people who were previously unknown to them; and that this is in part because of the increased emotional and practical stability which comes from living with a known person. Kinship care allows children to retain their known associations and often remain within the same communities,

preserving friendship connections and knowledge of their neighbourhoods, as well as retaining their personal identity and maintaining family ties.

However, research conducted since 2000 has consistently highlighted that the vast majority of kinship carers are unknown to the care system. Many kinship carers enter into informal care arrangements with parents, with many often taking on the role without receiving any of the additional support or recognition which formal kinship carers or foster carers receive. This is the case, despite the fact that [they save social service budgets between £23,000 and £56,000 per year](#).

Formal and informal kinship carers are entitled to some benefits, to help with the increased financial burden of taking on a child. Carers will also still be entitled to any benefits they were receiving before taking care of the child, including Universal

Credit payments. However, unless they are recognised as formal foster carers, kinship carers are not entitled to any of the ‘wage’ foster carers receive from local authorities. Payments called a kinship care allowance can be paid, but often these are not to the same value as the support formal foster carers receive.

England and Wales

In England and Wales, the understanding of kinship care is taken from the 1989 Children’s Act. In England, the law recognises four types of kinship care, where a child may be:

- > fostered by a relative or friend;
- > subject to a residence order;
- > subject to a special guardianship order; or
- > living with family or friends in network support.



Northern Ireland

In 2014 the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety produced a set of [Minimum kinship care standards](#) for Northern Ireland. Designed to be implemented alongside the requirements of the 1995 Children Order and the subsequent implementing role of HSC trusts. Similarly to the changes to legislation in the rest of the UK, the changes were designed to provide increased support for Kinship carers, to put the child at the centre of the decision making process with regards to placements and clarify the importance of care plans, training for staff and monitoring and review.

Scotland

In Scotland, kinship care and practice is [underpinned by the children's health social care and education model, GIRFEC](#) (getting it right for every child). The founding principle of this model is to place children at the centre of the approaches and decision making processes. Children are included in the planning and long term strategic outcome decisions that will directly affect them, and as a result they do, if it is deemed appropriate, have some input into the decision to pursue a kinship care approach.

[In 2015 the Scottish government acted to remove what was seen as an 'inequality' between foster and kinship carers](#), and announced new funding was to be made available for kinship care payments. In addition, changes were made to guidance and practice regarding informal kinship carers, so that they too are visible to the social care system and receive the necessary financial support.

3 Differences between kinship care and foster care

In kinship care arrangements, the carer will be known to the child and is usually a member of their extended family or a close family friend. This often means that when there is more than one child, they are able to stay together as a family unit, and will often be able to stay in the same area and at the same school. In comparison to alternative care arrangements, kinship care children often benefit from better

physical health and do better in school. Kinship care [arrangements are generally stronger and last longer](#) than other types of placements.

In a foster care arrangement, a child is placed by the local authority with someone other than their family on a short or long-term basis. Anyone can apply to become a foster carer, but only those who complete a strict assessment process and are approved by the local authority will have children placed with them. Foster carers will almost always be unknown to the child and may live outside the local area.

Unlike kinship care, foster carers receive a fee for looking after the children that are placed with them.

Case Study: Children 1st

In Scotland, the charity [Children 1st](#) was commissioned by the Scottish Government in 2011 to develop and implement a national service for kinship carers and their families. The service aims to help kinship carers find their voice, providing emotional and practical support through a free and confidential helpline (ParentLine Scotland) and training, outreach and capacity building.

In addition Children1st produced a comprehensive analysis of the position of kinship carers. Following the publication of the results of a number of surveys into the views and situations of both the carers and the children being cared for, the charity continues to lobby on behalf of kinship carers to evoke debate about policy and provide more tailored individual support in the form of local group sessions, factsheets and hotlines kinship carers can call.

The level of change which they wish to enact concerning kinship care covers a variety of legislative jurisdictions including social services, health, welfare, education and criminal justice. Children1st works with other charities and national bodies throughout Scotland to lobby for changes to legislation to improve kinship care, increase the support given to kinship carers and enhance the outcomes for carers and children.

4 Improved outcomes for children

There is a significant and consistent volume of academic work which has identified the benefits of keeping children in the stable and loving care of known family members, rather than in foster or residential care. Much of the literature on fostering and kinship care focuses on the links to psychological theory, such as the [IRISS briefing](#) on looked after children. They consider the prevalence of attachment disorder, separation anxiety and other neurological issues affecting children who have suffered early-life traumas and parental separation.

In some cases, keeping children within families can also be an effective way to preserve access between a parent and child. Maintaining contact can be helpful for the child and can also act as an incentive to parents to change their behaviour in order to regain guardianship of their child, strengthening the possibility of returning the child to their birth parent(s).



5 Local authority policies and responsibility

Local authorities have responsibility for the care of a child living in formal kinship care, just as they do for looking after children living in other arrangements such as fostering. This means that the local authority has a duty to assess the needs of looked after children and put plans in place outlining the services and supports the child will receive.

In 2010, the UK government [introduced statutory guidance for local authorities](#) in England and Wales on family and friends care. The statutory guidance sets out the requirement for a local authority to publish a family and friends care policy. The guidance also included detailed guidelines on what the policy should address and the need for a senior manager in each authority to have overall responsibility for the family and friends care policy.

A 2015 report by the Family Rights Group examined local authority policies in relation to [family and friends care](#). The report found that 17% of local authorities do not have a published policy setting out their approach towards promoting and supporting the needs of children living with family and friends carers, and as a result failed to comply with statutory guidance which required them to have a published policy by September 2011.

Of the policies in place, more than half did not provide information about universal services available to family and friends carers and the children they are raising. The report also highlighted that only 13% of policies analysed indicated that the authority has a dedicated worker or team to support friends and family carers, and of these only two indicated that this is available to all friends and family carers, rather than just formal kinship carers who are classed as foster carers.

6 Social work and kinship care: improving practice

It is widely recognised that the burden on social workers is significant. However, some studies in relation to kinship care have been [critical of social work departments](#). Research and interviews which highlight the [personal experiences](#) of kinship carers and social care experts

themselves have suggested that [social workers are reluctant to recognise kinship carers as foster carers and are often not forthcoming with information, particularly regarding financial and mental health support](#). This is, the interviewees suggest, because the social workers have been told not to highlight the support. They suggest that this is possibly because of the impact it would have on cost and expenditure, or because social workers themselves are not aware that the entitlement exists for carers who are not registered foster carers. They suggest that if this is the case there should be greater focus on training to allow practitioners to be aware of all possible avenues of support. So what can be done within social work departments to improve approaches towards kinship care?

Organisations such as [Citizens Advice Scotland \(CAS\)](#) have reported that in [the five years they have been funded to support kinship carers](#), local authorities have also made use of their services, attending training days and using advice and evidence from CAS to support their work in practice. CAS also stores locally comparable data which can be used to help support good practice within Scottish local authorities. They also help to advise on the financial situations and support available to kinship carers. One of their [reports](#) has observed that local authority kinship care allowance payments can be vital for many kinship carers. Additional

[research has shown](#) that significant numbers of these are not in employment, have given up their jobs to accommodate for the extra caring responsibilities or are unable to work. This financial lifeline can help alleviate significant hardship and lead to better outcomes for the children and young people being cared for.

In some instances, local authorities employ designated kinship care social workers. Although this is not a statutory requirement, and is not a service provided universally, it is something which local authorities could consider to ensure that social workers are trained in the complexities of formal and informal kinship care arrangements and aware of how this affects both the responsibilities of the local authority and the support given to carers.

A number of guides and studies have been published on applying theories around kinship, anxiety and separation, assessment and kinship cases, and these may be useful to practising social workers. In addition, studies which outline and make recommendations for practice may also be helpful in increasing the understanding and [evidence base around kinship care within social work departments](#). These are highlighted in the further reading section of this briefing.

Case Study: Kinship Care Alliance

Established in 2011 the aims of the Kinship Care Alliance are to:

- > prevent children from being unnecessarily raised outside their family
- > enhance outcomes for children who cannot live with their parents and who are living with relatives
- > secure improved recognition and support for family and friends carers

Composed of a variety of third sector bodies, charities and think tanks, the alliance aims to influence policy and practice in relation to kinship care. Members include Cardiff University, The Fostering Network, Family Rights Group, Siblings Together and The Grandparents Association.

A similar body is in operation in [Scotland](#).





Where now?

Projections suggest that the numbers of children in kinship care could increase over the coming years. However, there is also hope among experts that kinship care, as a result of its increased profile, will be pushed higher up the policy agenda and tackled as a key strand of social care provision, rather than being regarded as the 'Cinderella' of child placement options.

It is also hoped that there is recognition of the significant contribution that informal kinship carers make to health and social care budgets and that this will be suitably reflected in a restructuring of financial and emotional support.

As has been highlighted, this has already begun in Scotland with the announcement last year of an increase in budget funding to allow formal kinship carers to receive the same level of financial support as formal foster carers. However, it is clear that in terms of recognition and allocation of support there is still a long way to go across the whole of the UK.

Further Reading

Could do better... must do better: a study of family and friends care local authority policies (2015) http://www.frg.org.uk/images/Kinship_Care_Alliance/could-do-better-must-do-better-report-march-2015.pdf

Fostering and adoption (2014) <http://fosteringandadoption.rip.org.uk/topics/placement/>

New study finds significant increase in children being brought up by relatives in England (2015) <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2015/october/kinship-care.html>

Your family your voice: growing up with relatives or friends (2015) <http://www.buttelk.org/research/your-family-your-voice-growing-up-with-relatives-or-friends>

A review of kinship carer surveys The "Cinderella" of the care system? (2015) <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/sites/default/files/publication-documents/cfca-paper31.pdf>

Using complexity theory in kinship practice, IN Child and Family Social Work, Vol 20 No 4 Nov 2015, pp407-414 (Ref no: A56315)

An investigation of the needs of grandparents who are raising grandchildren, IN Child and Family Social Work, Vol 19 No 4 Nov 2014, pp411-420 (Ref no: A52587)

Responding to the call: a conceptual model for kinship care assessment, IN Child and Family Social Work, Vol 19 No 3 Aug 2014, pp355-366 (Ref no: A51274)

Relative poverty; family and friends care in London (2013) <http://www.frg.org.uk/relative-poverty-family-and-friends-care-in-london>

Developing kinship care: a case of evidence based social work practice? (2013) <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/45652/>

It's just not fair! Support, need and legal status in family and friends care (2013) <http://www.frg.org.uk/its-just-not-fair-support-need-and-legal-status-in-family-and-friends-care>

Forgotten children: children growing up in kinship care (2013) <http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Forgotten-Children-0613-4.pdf>

Family and friends care: raising children within family and friends as an alternative to care (2012) http://www.frg.org.uk/images/Policy_Papers/kca-briefing-11th-june-2012.pdf

Understanding family and friends care: local authority policies- the good, the bad and the non-existent (2012) <http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/FFC-report.pdf>

The kinship care alliance (2011) http://www.frg.org.uk/images/Policy_Papers/aims-and-objs-kca.pdf

Family and friends care: statutory guidance for local authorities- England only (2010) <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Family%20and%20Friends%20Care.pdf>

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