

# **Doing the right thing: A report on the experiences of kinship carers**

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## Summary

This report considers the experiences of kinship carers i.e. friends and relatives who are raising children who are unable to safely live with their parents. The report is based on an analysis of data from two sources:

- Calls by kinship carers to Family Rights Group Advice Service in the financial year 2014/15.
- An online survey of 579 kinship carers conducted by Family Rights Group in 2015, with support from members of the Kinship Care Alliance.

The report's key findings:

- Almost half (**49%**) of kinship carers have had to give up work permanently to care for the kin child, and a further **18%** had to give up work temporarily.
- **22%** of kinship carers' households had 3 or more children aged 18 or under, suggesting that the Government's proposed limit on child tax credits will have a detrimental effect on kinship carers.
- **80%** of kinship carers felt that when they took on the child, they did not know enough about the legal options and the consequences for getting support to make an informed decision.

## Key recommendations

### 1. That the Government introduces the following new duties on local authorities, and funds them accordingly:

- i. To ensure potential kinship placements are explored and assessed for suitability before a child becomes looked after (except in any emergencies), including through the offer of a family group conference<sup>1</sup>;
- ii. To publish a kinship care policy and have a named, designated senior council officer for kinship care;
- iii. To establish and commission kinship care support services; and
- iv. To assess the support needs of children in kinship care who cannot live with their parents.

### 2. That the Government:

- Adequately funds free, specialist independent legal advice and information services to kinship carers;
- Recognises that children in kinship care have often suffered similar prior adversities to those who are adopted, and introduces equivalent entitlements to support, including a kinship care passport and the extension of the following provisions:

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<sup>1</sup> Family group conferences are an approach in which the young person and their wider family are supported to take the lead in making a plan at a meeting which addresses local authority concerns about a child. To read more go to <http://www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/family-group-conferences>

- a. Pupil Premium Plus
- b. Free 2 year childcare
- c. Priority school admissions
- d. Extension of post adoption support fund.
- Introduces a new period of paid employment leave for kinship carers who are permanently raising children, equivalent to that provided to adopters.
- Exempts kinship carers from Welfare Reform and Work Bill proposals including
  - a. The limiting of child tax credit to two children
  - b. The benefit cap
  - c. The extension of work conditionality rules to carers of children aged under 5.

## 1. Introduction

This report considers the experiences of kinship carers i.e. friends and relatives who are raising children who are unable to safely live with their parents (they are also often referred to as family and friends carers). The report is based on an analysis of data from two sources:

- An online survey of 579 kinship carers conducted by Family Rights Group in 2015 with support from members of the Kinship Care Alliance.
- Calls by kinship carers to Family Rights Group Advice Service in the financial year 2014/15.

It also refers to the University of Bristol's analysis of the 2011 census (Wijedasa, 2015).<sup>2</sup>

### Family Rights Group

Family Rights Group works with parents in England and Wales whose children are in need, at risk or are in the care system and with members of the wider family who are raising children unable to remain at home. We advise more than 6000 parents, grandparents, other relatives and friends every year about their rights and options when social workers or courts make decisions about their children's welfare. We campaign for families to have a voice, be treated fairly and get help early to prevent problems escalating. We champion family group conferences and other policies and practices that keep children safe within their family network.

### Kinship Care Alliance

The Kinship Care Alliance is an informal network of organisations working with kinship carers which subscribe to a set of shared aims and beliefs about kinship care. Since 2006, members have been meeting regularly to develop a joint policy agenda and agree strategies to promote shared aims which are:

- To prevent children being unnecessarily raised outside their family;
- To enhance outcomes for children who cannot live with their parents and who are living with relatives; and

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<sup>2</sup> Wijedasa D, The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in the UK: Briefing Paper 001 (University of Bristol)

- To secure improved recognition and support for kinship carers. The Kinship Care Alliance is serviced by the charity Family Rights Group.

### **Kinship care – the context**

Analysis of the 2011 census found that there were at least 152,910 children aged under 18 years in England living with relatives who were not their parents (Wijedasa, 2015). This figure is a rise of 9,543 since 2001. It does not include children not living with parents, who are raised by friends. 2011 census data on children in kinship care in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is not yet available. However, it is reasonable to estimate that around 200,000 children are being raised by kinship carers across the UK.

Wijedasa's 2011 census analysis also found that:

- 51% of children in kinship care were growing up in households headed by grandparents and 23% in households headed by a sibling.
- 15-18 year olds were more likely to be in a kinship care household than other age groups but there had been a 21% rise in 0-4 year olds and a 15% rise in 15-18 year olds in kinship care households since 2001.
- 2.7% of black children were being raised in a kinship care household, a higher percentage than for other ethnicities; 1.2% of white children were being brought up by a kinship carer.
- Children in Greater London and North East England are more likely to be raised by kinship carers than in other regions.
- Local authority areas with the highest rates of children in kinship care are: Brent, Lambeth, Newham, Sandwell and Blackburn with Darwen.
- 40% of all children living in kinship care in England live in the 20% most income deprived areas in England.

Our analysis of the survey and advice data found that, typically, children are unable to live safely at home due to domestic abuse, parental mental ill health and alcohol or drug misuse or death. Other factors include parental disability, imprisonment and homelessness. As evidence from the Centre for Social Justice shows<sup>3</sup>, these factors can have severely limiting effects on children's life chances.

95% of children being raised in kinship care are not 'looked after' by the local authority. By safely keeping children out of the care system, these carers save the taxpayer billions of pounds each year in care costs.

Previous studies of kinship care arrangements have demonstrated that, despite having suffered similar adversities to children entering the care system<sup>4</sup> and being raised by carers who receive little, if any, support, most children in kinship care are

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<sup>3</sup> Rethinking Child Poverty, Centre for Social Justice, 2012

<sup>4</sup> Farmer and Moyers (2008) Kinship Care: Fostering Effective Family and Friends Placements London, Jessica Kingsley; & Hunt, Waterhouse and Lutman (2008) Keeping them in the family: Outcomes for children placed in kinship care through care proceedings London, BAAF

doing significantly better than children in care<sup>5</sup> – in particular they feel more secure and have fewer emotional and behavioural problems and are also doing better academically.

This report provides information about the experiences of kinship carers and the children for whom they are caring. It demonstrates that these families are often struggling against the odds to raise children, who have suffered tragedies and trauma, often at great personal expense to the carer's own emotional and physical health. The report proposes a series of urgent policy recommendations in order to enable children raised by kinship carers to thrive. It also calls for kinship carers to be exempted from welfare reforms proposed in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015. Without such an exemption, many kinship carers will be pushed into greater poverty. The reforms, if unamended, will also act as a significant barrier to some relatives coming forward to take on raising children in the future, resulting in more children entering the care system.

## 2. Methodology

An on-line survey of kinship carers in England and Wales was conducted in September 2015 by Family Rights Group. The survey was promoted by Family Rights Group via its on-line discussion board for kinship carers, social media and in newsletters and by others members of the Kinship Care Alliance and kinship care Facebook groups. It was completed by 579 kinship carers, therefore making it the largest kinship carer survey in the UK. The survey has some limitations, not least because of the use of on-line methodology.<sup>6</sup> However, the large number of respondents provides an important snapshot of the experiences and circumstances of kinship carers and the children they are raising. The survey findings help to reduce the significant paucity of data on children in kinship care and their carers.

Family Rights Group records on its contact management system data about callers to its advice service, including the relationship of the callers to the child and the underlying reasons why they have contacted the service. Analysis of the database

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<sup>5</sup> Selwyn et al (2013) *The Poor Relations? Children & Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out* (University of Bristol)

<sup>6</sup> The survey has some limitations. i) Carers who were not involved in one of these support networks or in touch with any of the kinship care support organisations would not have been recruited; ii) An internet survey is by its nature restrictive, excluding those who don't have easy access to the internet and/or are not familiar with computers/the internet. This is likely to particularly affect certain sections of the community, including much older and impoverished carers. Thus there can be a bias in the results. iii) The length of the survey could have deterred carers including some for whom English was not their first language. iv) An internet survey also carries its own constraints, compared to research which is based on interviews: there is no opportunity for dialogue, so that where the participant finds a question unclear, or where the researcher feels that the participant's answer does not provide the requested information, there is no opportunity for clarification through discussion. v) Some groups of kinship carers are under or overrepresented in this survey. For example, sibling carers make up a small proportion; this could be because they constitute a younger group of carers, who may be less engaged in the formal support networks and the agencies or voluntary organisations through which the survey was advertised.

records for the period 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015 also provides important contextual information about kinship care.

### **3. Results of the survey and caller analysis**

#### **3.1 Survey respondents and the children they are raising**

- 579 kinship carers completed the survey. They were raising 895 kin children.
- 62% of kinship carers were raising only one kin child (355 children), 25% were raising two kin children (282 children) and 13% were raising 3 or more kin children (249 children). However, the data shows that the majority of children in kinship care (531 of the 893 children) were living with one or more kin children in their household.
- Some kinship carers were also raising their own birth children alongside the kinship carers. 22% of kinship carers households had 3 or more children aged 18 or under.
- 90% of those who responded were female, 10% male.
- 78% of respondents were grandparents. This is an over-representation compared to 51% in the 2011 census analysis. There was a significant under-representation of sibling carers at 1% compared to the census analysis of 23%. Those who completed the survey as 'other relatives' interestingly included 15 great aunts, 9 step grandparents and 4 great grandparents.
- 54% of kinship carers were aged 35 – 54, 32% 55 – 64 and 11% over 65. Only 3% were under 35. Their partners were slightly older: 44% were 35 – 54, 36% were 55 – 64 and 11% were over 65.
- 94% of the kinship carers were white British which is likely to be a significant over-representation, compared to the wider kinship care population. Only 2.2% were black or black British which is a significant under-representation.
- 35% of kinship carers were single carers, compared to 65% who were living with a partner.
- 6% of the kin children were babies under 1 year old, 28% were 2-5 years old, 40% were aged 6-10, 19% aged 11-15 and 8% aged 16 to 18.
- 51% of the kin children were female and 49% were male, which is very similar to the percentages found in the kinship care population in the 2011 census.
- 50% of kin children in the survey had some form of long term illness, special needs and/or special educational needs. A staggering 43% were judged by the kinship carers to have emotional and behavioural problems.
- Over half of the children (55%) had been with their kinship carer for 4 years or more while 18% had been living with the kinship carer for 1 year or less.

#### **3.2 Callers to Family Rights Group's advice service**

Family Rights Group advised 6,250 families in England and Wales during the financial year 2014/15. Our advice service is primarily used by parents, who made

up 65% of categorised callers in 2014/15. Wider family and friends comprised 31% of callers who we advised. These were primarily kinship carers, including grandparents and older siblings who are raising children unable to live with their parents. Practitioners comprised the remaining 3% of those we advised.

Our analysis found that 55% of the kinship carers who we advised in 2014/15 were grandparents. Other kinship carer callers were mainly aunts and uncles (18%), friends (12%) and siblings (4%)<sup>7</sup>.

### 3.3 What are the circumstances in which kinship carers take on care of children?

The survey data found that 56% of the children had come to live with the kinship carer straight from the parents' home and that 27% had been in unrelated foster care prior to living with the kinship carer. This indicates the effectiveness of kinship care in preventing children entering or remaining within the care system, to the benefit of the child and savings to the public purse. It also raises questions as to whether more, earlier work could have been done by children's services, such as offering a family group conference, to avert the need for some children to be placed in unrelated foster care/have multiple placements.

The kinship carers who responded to our survey commented on the difference they feel they have made to the children they took on, including the importance of the children being loved and raised within their own family, often by familiar relatives who had known them all or most of their lives:

*They are growing up within their own family, being aware of who is related to whom and where they fit within the family tree. They know their cousins, aunties, uncles and grandparents. They do not have to find out who they are or where they come from later on when they become adults. Their position in the family is solid and they are given a sense of importance within the family structure.*

*We feel we have given the children a secure, loving environment and a sense of belonging to a family.*

*Gave him a loving, caring environment with a family that love him.*

*If we had not taken them they would have been adopted and lost to the wider family.*

*No trauma, more stability, he has friends to stay and he goes to friends' houses. Been on holiday, can now swim and ride a bike.*

*A safe and clean home to live in. They are loved and cared for the same as my other child, kissed, cuddled. They laugh and muck about like kids should, the older one is now a child and not the dad to his younger brother.*

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<sup>7</sup> Rounding means that the numbers are slightly over 100%

*I have provided stability and ongoing links and support from family, encouraged a sense of belonging and being wanted and loved. Answered questions about family that only family can.*

We also examined our advice caller data to explore the underlying problem that had resulted in the kinship carers taking on, or considering taking on, the care of the child, leading to them contacting our service for advice. Our data shows the following:

- **Domestic violence** was the highest underlying issue at 31%.
- **Parental mental ill health** was the second highest underlying issue at 21%
- **Parental drug misuse** featured as an underlying issue in 19% **and parental alcohol misuse** featured in 16% of kinship carer callers contacting us
- **Death of a parent** was the reason in 10% of cases.

We also examined in more detail our caller data on the types of advice that kinship carers (or potential carers) were seeking. Common themes were the complexity of the child welfare and family justice systems and the lack of support for kinship care.<sup>8</sup> Callers sought advice about:

- **Care proceedings/care system** comprising 32% of categorised calls. This indicates that some potential kinship carers are involved at a late stage in the child protection process, after care proceedings have been initiated or once the child was with unrelated foster carers in the care system.
- **Family Support** comprising 29% of all categorised calls. Within this category, the main query raised was about financial support (40%).
- **Child protection** concerns comprising 25% of categorised calls).
- **Private law** comprising 18% of categorised calls. This category includes kinship carers seeking advice about what legal orders would give them parental responsibility and put them in be in a position to make key decisions about the child, such as agreement to medical treatment and who can be in contact with them.
- **Voluntary accommodation** (under section 20 of the Children Act 1989) comprising 15% of categorised callers. This is where children have been accommodated by the local authority with the consent of their parents.

### 3.4 What information do kinship carers need in order to make informed decisions?

Relatives and friends who step in to care for children who cannot remain at home with their parents may have four key needs:

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<sup>8</sup> In some cases there may be more than one key reason for calling, for example the child may be currently subject to care proceedings but the family member wishes to apply for a private law order, such as a special guardianship order (hence the percentages below add up to more than 100%).



- i) To be able to make decisions about how the child in their care is raised. This can include everyday matters such as signing for school trips or agreeing to medical treatment;
- ii) To be supported to protect the child, for example, knowing who can remove or have contact with the child and in what circumstances;
- iii) To provide securing legal permanence for the child; and
- iv) To have financial and other support to care for the child.

There are different legal statuses for children raised in kinship care. The main ones are:

- **Private arrangements**<sup>9</sup> whereby children are living with family and friends carers as a result of a private arrangement between the parents and the carer. This can include private fostering and there may be no order for the child;
- **Private law orders** - children live with relatives or friends under a **child arrangements order or special guardianship order**;
- **Local authority care** - children are **looked after** by the local authority (whether under a care order or in voluntary accommodation, with the consent of the parents) and placed with relatives or friends who are approved as local authority foster carers on a short or long term basis.

There are consequences for the kinship carer's ability to make decisions, the child and carer's entitlement to support and the legal permanence for the child, arising from these different legal statuses. Research has found that financial and practical support is often determined by the legal status rather than the needs of the child.<sup>10</sup> In the main this is because when children are *looked after*, local authorities must support them and when they are not, local authority support is largely at the council's discretion. Only 5% of children in kinship care are looked after children<sup>11</sup>.

It is therefore critical that potential and actual kinship carers have access to free independent legal advice to be able to understand their options and make informed choices about how best to secure permanence for the child and promote their welfare. However, the survey shows that kinship carers (or potential kinship carers) often struggled to get the advice they required.

Family Rights Group's unique free, open access, confidential advice service offers specialist legal and child welfare advice to such callers. However, funding constraints, combined with rising demand, means that we answer fewer than 40% of

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<sup>9</sup> Carers could also be testamentary guardians if they were appointed by the parents/special guardians in writing (often but not always in a will) to raise their child after they die, the parents have now died and the appointment has taken effect (s.5 Children Act 1989); or they could also have adopted the child. In both cases they have parental responsibility, giving them the right to make decisions about how the child is raised and the child will not be looked after by the local authority unless this has occurred subsequently. However, since these statuses occur relatively rarely in family and friends care, we have not included the detailed legal provisions which would apply but further information about this could be obtained from Family Rights Group free confidential advice service on 0808 801 0366 open 9.30-3.00pm Mon-Fri or [read](http://www.frg.org.uk) our advice resources [www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)

<sup>10</sup> Hunt & Waterhouse 2013 *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Wijedasa (2015); DfE Looked after children statistics, March 2015

callers. Moreover, Department for Education funding for the service is only secure until 31 March 2016.<sup>12</sup> This is despite the evidence (Featherstone, 2012) that the service saves the public purse £10.80 in care costs directly avoided, for every £1 invested<sup>13</sup>.

Where, kinship carers instruct a solicitor or apply to court, the legal costs (court fees and solicitors' costs) can be significant. This may act as a disincentive to some kinship carers therefore applying for a legal order, particularly when they are ineligible for legal aid, for example because despite being on a low income, they own their own home.

- 53 kinship carers who responded to the survey said they had incurred more than £2,500, and in some cases more than £15,000 in legal costs, which often pushed them into significant debt.
- The survey data showed that almost 80% of kinship carers said they did not know enough about their options or the consequences to make an informed decision.

**Table 1: When you took on the care of the kin child/ren, did you feel you knew enough about the legal options and the consequences for getting support, to make an informed decision?**

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	15.0%	77
No	79.5%	408
Don't know	5.5%	28

<sup>12</sup> Department for Education funding for the Family Rights Group advice service has been cut for 2 years in succession. Demand continues to rise despite no promotion of the service. In January-December 2014 it was 17% higher than the year earlier. Government funding for the service ends in March 2016, and it is as yet unclear what if any process will be in place to apply for renewed funding. Without funding from the government the service will have to close.

<sup>13</sup> An independent study found that every £1 invested in FRG's Advice and Advocacy service saved the public purse £10.80 in care costs directly avoided (Featherstone et al 2012<sup>13</sup>). This independent evaluation found:

- 71% of parents said our advice helped them immediately understand how they could improve things for their child
- The service helped families to cope: on a 1-10 scale, those coping at 5 or above rose from 43% before the call to 85% after the call
- 80% of families said it enabled them to comprehend the law

The advice and advocacy service assisted parents to understand what they needed to do for their child and 83% of kinship carers said it helped their family to stay together.

## 4. Survey results - What is the impact of taking on the care of a family member's or friend's child?

### 4.1 Employment

Kinship carers, unlike adopters, are not entitled to a period of paid leave to enable the children to settle in. Yet the survey showed that:

- Only 33% of kinship carers in the survey were in paid full-time or part-time work at the time of the survey; and
- 49% of respondents had to give up work permanently as a result of taking on the care of the kin children, a further 18% had to give up work temporarily and, in addition, 23% had to reduce their hours temporarily or permanently. The situation was particularly difficult for single kinship carers, 52% of whom had to give up work permanently and 21% temporarily.

*I have had to give up my profession as a teacher at a time in my life when this has had a detrimental effect on my future pension prospects. I had to give up working for 2 years with the 2nd child because he had severe detachment issues just when he was starting school.*

### 4.2 Financial repercussions

Unsurprisingly, the survey shows that there was a substantial impact on kinship carers emotionally and in terms of their lifestyle when they took on the kin child, especially when they had very little time to prepare for this. There were also serious and immediate financial consequences, both as a result of having to give up work to take on the child (see 4.1) and because of the additional costs of having a child or children living with them.

*Much reduced disposable income and lost one wage earner.*

*I had to stop work, move into social housing. It's like surviving instead of living.*

*Massive, we lost 2 small breaks away and 2 wages, we had to divide a room for baby and bought everything. Legal costs, we have struggled to keep our heads above water.*

*At the beginning social services were very oppressive and told me either I managed or they would put the boys up for adoption. With a wry smile the service manager even said she'd have no problem having them adopted as they were such good*

*looking kids!!! I struggled totally on my own to meet their needs. I used my credit cards and got an overdraft. To this day I haven't managed to pay them off.*

*I am a widow and would have retired by now and bought a smaller house. I would never have envisaged bringing up my grandson but I love him and the alternative would have been adoption.*

The survey shows that kinship carers faced additional immediate costs of the child/ren coming to live with them and ongoing expenditure (e.g. school trips, clothes, higher utility bills). This was alongside the legal bills that some kinship carers incurred (see section 3.4).

- Kinship carer respondents to the survey said they had faced additional expenses at the time the child came to live with them. 82% had to buy a bed, nearly 88% had to buy bedding, 92% bought clothing, almost 80% shoes, 83% bought toys.

<b>Table 2: What things did you need to buy when the child(ren) came to live with you? Please tick all that apply</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Clothes	92.0%	486
Bedding	87.9%	464
Toys	83.0%	438
Bed	82.0%	433
Shoes/trainers	79.5%	420
Nappies	64.0%	338
Other furniture	63.3%	334
Other baby equipment	54.9%	290
School uniform	54.5%	288
Items to help the child keep up or start an activity or hobby (e.g. music or dance classes)	44.5%	235
Holiday	41.7%	220
A different or a bigger car	36.6%	193
Items to meet child(ren)'s special needs	17.6%	93
None	1.1%	6
Other (please state)		79
<b>answered question</b>		<b>528</b>

Kinship carers responding to the survey reported that:

- They had to make significant changes to their homes as a result of taking on the kin child/ren. 71% decorated or refurbished a room, 10% had to extend their house and 20% moved to a bigger home. 80% had no help with these costs from the local authority.

- 32% had no financial help of any kind from the local authority towards immediate or ongoing costs towards raising the kin child/ren. Of those who did get some financial help, the most common was the Special Guardianship Allowance (43% of survey respondents).

### 4.3 Benefits and welfare reforms

- In our survey, 57% of kinship care households were receiving child tax credit and 30% housing benefit. The following table gives further details.

<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Child benefit	76.9%	405
Child tax credit	57.1%	301
Council tax benefit	34.9%	184
Housing benefit	30.0%	158
Guardian's allowance <sup>14</sup>	28.3%	149
Carer's allowance	18.6%	98
Working tax credit	18.2%	96
Disability living allowance for the child/ren	16.7%	88
Disability living allowance/attendance allowance for yourself or your partner	13.7%	72
Income support	11.8%	62
Employment and support allowance	6.6%	35
Pension credit	3.6%	19
Jobseeker's (no hyphen) allowance	3.8%	20
Incapacity benefit	0.9%	5
None	9.1%	48
Other (please specify)		46
<b>answered question</b>		<b>527</b>

Regulations to the Welfare Reform Act 2012 exempt kinship carers from work conditionality requirements for a year after they take on the care of a child. This was a significant step towards recognising the particular circumstances that kinship carers face, and the valuable contribution they make.

However, new measures in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, unless they are amended will:

- Extend the age at which the responsible carer for the child will be need to be available for work: kinship carers of a child aged 3 or 4 will be subject to all

<sup>14</sup> This appears to be an overestimate given the narrow criteria of those who can received guardian's allowance. It is possible some kinship carers receiving special guardianship allowance from the local authority in error answered this in the positive.

work-related requirements; the carer of a child aged 2 will be subject to a work-focused interview and work preparation; and the responsible carer of a child aged 1 will be subject to work-focused interview requirements. Analysis by Wijedasa D (2015)<sup>15</sup> of the 2011 census found that 26% of children in kinship care in England was under the age of 5 years old. Given that kin children often have severe needs (equivalent to those in care) including insecure attachment, it is likely to be detrimental to their welfare for their kinship carers to be subject to such conditions.

- Limit child tax credit to 2 children and lower the benefit cap. This is very likely to adversely affect many kinship care households. 22% of kinship carers in the survey had 3 or more children aged 18 or under in the household. Our further in-depth examination of the data found that 63% of these households currently receive child tax credit. 34% of these households receive housing benefit. New kinship care households in this situation will also be affected by the proposed two child limit to child tax credit. We fear that these measures will adversely affect kin children, deter some kinship carers from coming forward, particularly where they already have children of their own, and could plunge others into severe poverty and debt, potentially having to move home and away from their own children's school and support network.

Survey respondents commented on some of the difficulties they have had with the current benefits system:

*Granddaughter (was ill and husband was caring for her whilst I got some sleep after 3 days without any. We tried to notify job centre and were unable to get through. He got to job centre late and they stopped a week's job seeker's.*

*ESA stopped because DWP deemed I was fit for work having had both hips replaced*

*We had to fight to prove that our home is not under-occupied. Children's Services advised that the children should have separate bedrooms because of the history of sexual abuse. We were allocated the house with separate bedrooms for each of the children on that basis. Yet the local authority insisted that we were under-occupying because that is the way the law is written. It was only accepted that they needed separate bedrooms when they started to receive DLA.*

*I was on job seeker's allowance and was threatened many times with sanctions as I couldn't do the work programme when the children were off school. It was a constant worry.*

*But just before my daughter dies she was sanctioned (supposedly fit for work) and then her appeal against sanctions, which I pursued on her behalf, was refused on the grounds that she did not turn up to the appeal 2 weeks after her death even though they had her death certificate. When they said they needed new medical*

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<sup>15</sup> Wijedasa D, The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in the UK: Briefing Paper 001 (University of Bristol)

*evidence I said I thought a death certificate might be sufficient... final nail in her coffin... (sobs silently)*

#### 4.4. Practical support

- Almost 42% of kinship carers responding to the survey said they got no help for themselves or the child. In many cases this is made even more complicated because there may well be two local authorities involved – the local authority where the kinship carers live and the local authority where the child originated. Sometimes these are hundreds of miles apart.

*I had to insist that someone help me through self referral. Now the help is fragmented or non existent unless I strongly protest about my ability to cope.*

*We have no help, no one to contact, nothing!*

*Older child attends CAMHS - not given any help where we live because it is a different authority so not allowed access to any local support.*

*We have struggled to get help as our SGO was granted in (county A), but we live in (county B). So (county A) responsible for paying for services we need for 3 years. It has been VERY hard to get (county B) to put us in touch with people. Our G/daughter has behaviour problems, which school have been trying to help us with and have badgered (county A) for support. This is now starting, but we have now got (county A) dealing with finance and contact and (County B) dealing with care and education. Why does it make a difference which authority we come under? There should be a universal system that deals with all the same.*

The following table indicates the types of support, some kinship carers have received.

<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Regular contact with child(ren)'s social worker	30.9%	151

Training courses	22.1%	108
Support group specifically for kinship carers	18.8%	92
Regular contact with your own social worker/link worker	18.4%	90
Help with child(ren)'s behaviour/emotional difficulties	16.4%	80
Counselling for children	13.1%	64
Support with managing child(ren)/family contact	9.8%	48
Someone working directly with the child(ren) e.g. on life story	9.0%	44
Other support group	5.3%	26
Respite care	3.7%	18
Mediation with other family members	3.9%	19
Counselling for carer	2.2%	11
Assistance with prison visits	0.2%	1
No help	41.9%	205
Other (please specify)		113
<b>answered question</b>		<b>489</b>

- 68% of kinship carers responding rated the help received from children's services as very poor or poor. Only 13.8% rated it good or very good.

**Table 5: On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very poor and 5 is excellent, how would you rate the help you have received from children's services?**

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
1	47.0%	234
2	21.1%	105
3	18.1%	90
4	9.2%	46
5	4.6%	23
<b>answered question</b>		<b>498</b>

- The survey asked kinship carers whether there was any support they had not received that would have made a difference. Responses included emotional support for themselves (43%) and meeting other kinship carers (30%), highlighting the isolation and struggle many face alone. They thought that the lack of help with the child's emotional or behavioural problems (43%) and the absence of counselling and life story work for the child had been detrimental. These responses reflect the unmet needs of children who have suffered similar adversities as those who are in care or adopted.





**Table 6: Is there any support you did not receive but which would have made a difference?**

<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Emotional support for kinship carer	43.5%	189
Help with child(ren)'s own behaviour/emotional difficulties	42.6%	185
Counselling for children	37.1%	161
Respite care	36.4%	158
Someone working directly with the child(ren) e.g. on life story	34.6%	150
Support with managing child(ren)/family contact	31.6%	137
Contact with other kinship carers	29.7%	129
Training courses	28.3%	123
Counselling for kinship carer	21.4%	93
Mediation with other family members	17.7%	77
Regular contact with child(ren)'s social worker	17.1%	74
Regular contact with your own social worker/link worker	11.3%	49
No additional help or support needed	9.4%	41
Assistance with prison visits	3.0%	13
Other (please specify)		50
<b>answered question</b>		<b>434</b>

## 5. What needs to change?

### 5.1 A presumption of kinship care

In order to promote permanence and stability for children who cannot live with their parents, the following recommendations are designed to ensure that such children have the opportunity to remain safely within their wider family wherever possible and that these arrangements are adequately supported.

**We recommend that** wider family should be explored as the first port of call to avoid a child entering care, taking account of children's wishes and feelings. This will require

- A new duty on local authorities to ensure potential kinship placements are explored and assessed for suitability before a child becomes looked after (except in any emergencies)
- A new duty on local authorities to offer all families the opportunities of a family group conference prior to a child entering care (except in emergencies) to allow kinship carers to come forward and the family members themselves to work together in the best interests of the child/children
- Minimum standards for viability assessments with which local authorities would need to comply in order to fairly assess whether a family member is a potentially realistic option to care for the child. At the moment how assessments are conducted varies significantly between local authorities.

### 5.2 Recognise and meet the needs of children in kinship care

Local authorities should recognise and meet the needs of children in kinship care by providing practical, emotional and financial support, with adequate government funding to support this. It is wrong that at the moment support is determined by legal status rather than the kin child's needs and that the burden for such gaps in provision falls largely upon the carer's shoulder and can put some kinship placements at risk of breakdown. **We recommend:**

- A new regulation to require local authorities to publish a kinship care policy and have a named designated senior council officer for kinship care. Although statutory guidance issued in 2011 requires this, there is evidence that local authorities have not complied with it, and even when they have, their policies are often not based on any assessment of local needs/the local population.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See [Could do better...Must do better: A study of family and friends care local authority policies by Mercer A, Lindley B and Hopkins A. Editor: Ashley C, 27 March 2015](#)

This report reveals that 26 (17%) English local authorities, including 30% of London local authorities are failing to comply with the most basic requirement of statutory guidance issued in 2011, to have a published policy setting out their approach towards promoting and supporting the needs of children living with family and friend carers. Only 66% of local authority policies made reference to a designated kinship care manager. An analysis of a sample of 53 policies found:

- A new general duty on local authorities to establish and commission kinship care support services.
- A new duty on local authorities to assess the support needs of children in kinship care who cannot live with their parents.
- The collection and publication of data about kinship carers and the children they are raising.

### 5.3 Access to support

**We recommend that** support for kinship carers and the children they care for should be made available in the same way as support is available to adopters and adopted children. There should be:

- A kinship care passport for kinship carers raising a child for more than 28 days where there is court, local authority or professional evidence that the child/ren can't live with their parents modelled on adoption passport
- The same entitlements as are provided to children who were adopted from care i.e.
  - Pupil Premium Plus;
  - Free 2 year childcare;
  - Priority school admissions;
  - Extension of post adoption support fund.

### 5.4 Access to information and advice

In the light of the 80% of survey respondents who did not have information about their options and the implications of these when taking on the child, it is vital that independent advice is widely available to kinship carers and to potential kinship carers; it can result in considerable savings to the public purse and it is better for children.

**We therefore recommend** that the Government should adequately fund free, specialist independent legal advice and information services to kinship carers who are considering or have taken on a child.

### 5.5 Support to remain in work

Kinship carers are often forgotten in the context of welfare reform. Our survey shows that by becoming the full-time carer of a child or children, often in an emergency, kinship carers faced significant additional costs and very few got any help with these costs. Their family size increased overnight. Unlike adopters, they

- 
- 74% were not based on good demographic and needs data
  - 75% were not produced in collaboration with local partners
  - There was no evidence in 63% of policies of any consultation with children, carers and parents.
  - 32% of policies were produced by a company or companies who sell policy writing services to councils

are not entitled to a period of paid leave for the children to settle in, despite the children having suffered similar prior adversities.

**We therefore recommend** that kinship carers should be supported to remain in the labour market and Government should act to prevent children ending up in poverty by:

- Introducing a period of paid employment leave and protection to kinship carers who are permanently raising children, as adopters are entitled to
- Exempting kinship carers from proposed Welfare Reform and Work Bill reforms including:
  - The limiting of child tax credit to two children;
  - The benefit cap;
  - Work conditionality rules that have been extended to carers of under 5s.