

# **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH ON THE VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF SIBLING CARERS AND THE CHILDREN THEY ARE RAISING**

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## **1. Introduction**

The data in this study derives from: interviews about twelve sibling care arrangements; a web-survey questionnaire that was posted on the Family Rights Group website; and postings on the charity's family and friends electronic discussion board.

There is in-depth information about the twelve sibling care arrangements which draws upon interviews with eleven sibling carers or their spouses and one interview with a kinship care team social worker who described a sibling care arrangement she was supporting. Potential interviewees for this study were identified from a number of different sources: sibling carers who had sought advice from Family Rights Group's advice service and declared that they would be willing to be contacted for research purposes; sibling carers who used Family Rights Group's online discussion forum for family and friends carers; sibling carers who responded to an advertisement on the Family Rights Group website and sibling carers who responded to suggestions by practitioners who were working with them that they might like to be interviewed. Apart from those actually interviewed, there were others who were interested in the study but simply could not make space in their busy lives to be interviewed.

Some further information is provided from a web-survey of sibling carers. This was posted on the Family Rights Group website for a month and drew seven responses from sibling carers.

Additional insight into the challenges being faced by sibling carers is presented in some quotes from sibling carers who have posted on the Family Rights Group internet discussion forum, describing their circumstances and seeking advice from other family and friends carers.

## **2. Research methodology**

The one-to-one interviews were conducted in person or by telephone, according to the availability and location of the sibling carers. A standard script was used for the interview, so that all the sibling carers interviewed would be asked a broadly similar range of questions about their experiences. The aim of the interviews was to allow the sibling carers to tell their own story, in their own words, as far as possible, and then to use the interview script as a guide for asking for any additional information which their story had not covered. The interviews were intended to cover the background of how the sibling care arrangement had started in the first place; the involvement of the local authority in setting up the arrangement; what was the legal basis for the arrangement, and how had this developed over time; what support had been provided by the local authority, other agencies, and other family members and friends; the difficulties and rewards of being a sibling carer and how being a sibling carer had affected their lives; whether they could have been better supported and how; plans for the future and what advice they would give to anyone else who was thinking of becoming a sibling carer.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo data analysis software, allowing the experiences of the sibling carers to be collected, collated and compared. However, the relatively small numbers of carers whose experiences are examined and the way they were identified through being in contact with Family Rights Group or their local authority's children's services department, means that they cannot be taken as being a representative sample of all sibling carers. Therefore, although some statistical information is presented about the sample interviewed, the main focus of this study is a qualitative presentation of the stories and the experiences of this very distinctive group of carers.

The web-based survey was drawn up and analysed using the software Survey Monkey.

### **3. Demographics on sibling carers in this study**

The demographic information in this study derives from two sources. One source is the in-depth interviews about and with 12 sibling carers. These consisted of interviews with 11 sibling carers and/or their spouses, and one social worker. There is additional information from seven sibling carers who responded to a survey which was posted on the Family Rights Group website.

#### **3.1 The sibling carers**

Of the twelve sibling carers whose information is derived from interviews, nine were sisters and three were brothers. In the web-survey the proportions were not dissimilar, with five being sisters and two brothers. An interesting feature of this survey has been the amount of respondents who are 'half-siblings', ie who share only one parent. Of the twelve 'interview' sibling carers, only four shared both parents. All of the eight siblings who shared only one parent had the same mother and none had the same father. The position was slightly different in the web-survey, where two of the seven sibling carer respondents shared both parents with the sibling they were raising. Of the five who shared only one parent, three had the same mother and two had the same father.

Of the 'interview' carers, six were single and six were part of a couple, all the couples being heterosexual. Of the three brothers in the 'interview' sample, two were living with a spouse or partner. Of the nine sisters, four were part of a couple who were living together. However, from the six carers who answered this question in the web-survey, only one was living with a spouse or partner.

Within the interviews, none of the three brother-carers in the study was the main interviewee. Information about one of the brother-carers was provided by the link social worker who supports him. For the other two brother-carers, the brother's spouse was the main interviewee, with the brother in one instance being interviewed for a short while at the end of his wife's interview. This means that most of the information about brother carers did not come directly from the brothers themselves. Conversely, all the information about sister-carers came directly from the sisters themselves in their interviews.

With regard to ethnicity, two of the sibling carer were African-Caribbean and two were of mixed parentage. The rest were all white British. All the brothers in the study were white British. The web-survey did not ask about ethnicity.

Six of the 'interview' sibling carers described themselves as Christian and six were of no religious faith. None of the sibling carers described themselves as having a disability.

The age of the 'interview' sibling carers at the time they were interviewed varied between 21 and 38. The average age was 27. This is similar to the ages of the sibling carers responding to the web-survey where three of the seven carers were aged between 26 and 29, two were between 23 and 25 and one was aged 30-34. One of the 'interview' sibling carers was living with a partner the same age as themselves in one instance the information wasn't collected, and in all the other couples, the partner was older than the sibling carer by a gap of between one and six years. Sibling carers living with a partner generally stressed the importance of the support and involvement of their partner. Indeed, in two instances already cited, the sibling carer's wife was the main interviewee and both of these wives made very clear in their interviews that they fully embraced their responsibilities as carers for their brother or sister in law.

There was a greater variety of legal arrangements among the 'interview' sibling carers than among the web-survey respondents although in both cases, a Residence Order was the commonest legal arrangement. Three of the seven web-survey respondents held a Residence Order and four out of the twelve 'interview' carers held Residence Orders although one of these was an Interim Residence Order, granted while the carer's application for a full Residence Order went through the court process. One of the web-survey respondents was fostering their siblings under a Care Order which was also the case for two of the twelve 'interview' sibling carers, with another of the 'interview' carers fostering siblings who were accommodated. One carer had a special guardianship order for her two younger siblings. Two of the 'interview' sibling carers had been named as legal guardians for their siblings in the will of a deceased parent and two were looking after their siblings as a private family arrangement and had no legal order for the children, as did one of the web respondents. All of the 'interview' sibling carers were clear about the children's legal status whereas two of the web-survey respondents stated that they were not sure.

The twelve 'interview' sibling carers had looked after or were looking after a total of 20 children. Only one of these placements was no longer continuing. This was a girl who had gone to live with her older sister four times, due to her mother's mental health problems and had returned to her mother as part of a plan made by the local authority's children's services department. Six of the sibling carers were raising one sibling, five were raising two siblings, and one was responsible for four siblings. Of the six sibling carers who responded to this question in the web-survey, five were looking after one child and one was looking after four children.

Six of the 'interview' carers were raising children of their own in addition to their siblings. Of these six, two had one child of their own and four had two. Among the sibling carers with two children of their own was the carer responsible for four siblings. She was also jointly the youngest carer in the sample, at age 21. She was with a partner who was six years older than herself. Three of the web-survey respondents were also raising their own children.

The ages of the siblings being raised ranged between one and seventeen. The average age was twelve. The length of time children and young people had been living in the sibling care arrangement ranged from 5 months to 13 years. The average length of placement at the time of interview was 3½ years. The age gap between the children and their carers subject to the interview study varied between three and twenty-four years and most often, there was quite a significant age gap between them. For half of the children, the age gap was between ten and twenty years. For six of them it was less than ten years, and for four it was over twenty years. The average age gap was 14.9 years.

### 3.2 Children living in sibling care arrangements

The web-survey did not ask for detailed information about the children the sibling carers were raising and so the information in this section refers only to the children being raised by the carers who were interviewed. There were 20 children and young people being cared for by older siblings in the sample, of whom thirteen were female and seven were male. Ages of the children/young people ranged between one and seventeen with an average age of twelve.

With regard to ethnicity, four of the children were African-Caribbean and five were of mixed parentage. The rest were white British. Although eight of the sibling care arrangements involved half-siblings, who only shared one parent, there was only one instance where the children and carers, sharing the same mother, had fathers of different ethnicities. In this instance, two sisters of mixed white British and African parentage were being raised by an older sister whose ethnicity was solely white British.

Seven of the children and young people were described as Christian, the remaining thirteen as being of no religion.

Two were described as being disabled, both white teenage boys, being raised by different carers. One of these had multiple problems, and was described as being dyspraxic, and having hypermobility and bilateral developmental dysplasia of the hip (abbreviated as DDH). The other had behavioural issues, and had been issued with a statement of special educational needs in school.

### 3.3 Reasons why the siblings were raising their younger brother or sister

The sibling carers interviewed in this study became the carers for their younger brothers and sisters, due to a wide variety of circumstances. Previous research has demonstrated that family and friends care arrangements in general are often made against a background of family difficulties and tragedies<sup>1</sup> and this is true for all of the sibling care arrangements in these interviews. Table 1 shows the frequency with which different factors were described as being present when the sibling care arrangement began.

**Table 1**

<b>Family problem at time of placement</b>	<b>No. of times cited in interviews (n=12)</b>
Death of parent	6
Parent's use of alcohol	5
Parent's mental health	4
Domestic violence	4
Poor parenting	2
Physical abuse of child	2
Neglect of child	2
Family's poverty	1
Suspected sexual abuse of child	1

<sup>1</sup> Farmer & Moyers (2008) Kinship Care: Fostering Effective Family and Friends Placements London, Jessica Kingsley

One of the children whose sibling was interviewed had experienced the death of both parents. A further seven had experienced the death of their mother and four, (a sibling group) the death of their father. Of the twenty children in the interview study there were twelve who had experienced parental bereavement.

In the web-survey, four carers were raising their younger siblings because of the death of the parent with responsibility for the child. Parents' alcohol consumption was mentioned by four carers and the following factors were mentioned by one carer: parents' drug use, parents' mental health, parents' neglect of the child, parents' abandoning of the child, parents' illness, parental poverty and a parent in prison.

### **3.4 Contact with family parents**

With regard to the children's contact with their parents, it must be recalled that from our interview group of twenty children, there was one who had been reunited with her mother and one whose parents had both died, leaving eighteen living separately from their parents but with one or both parents alive. Of the seven children whose mother was deceased but not their father, only the two whose father was in prison were having contact with him. The sibling group of four whose father was deceased were not having contact with their mother. There were seven children with both parents still alive. Of these, three were having contact with their mother but not their father and a further three were having contact with both parents, although in one instance the contact with the father was by telephone only.

## **4. Sibling carers' stories**

The data in this study derives from twelve interviews, eleven with sibling carers or their spouses, and one with a social work practitioner who was working closely with a sibling care arrangement. In order to put the data and the quotes from sibling carers into context, this chapter presents a summary of the stories behind the twelve sibling care arrangements which form the basis of this study. The ages of the carers and their siblings and circumstances they describe, are presented as they were at the time of the interview. There have been some changes to some of the situations described since the interviews but these are not covered in this report.

### **4.1 Marcia, Yvonne and Sandra: Marcia interviewed December 2009**

Marcia, age 37, has been raising her two younger sisters, Yvonne (14) and Sandra (13) for the last six years. Marcia is the oldest of the nine siblings in her family and Yvonne and Sandra are the two youngest.

Six years earlier, Marcia had been living in her own one-bedroom flat, while her mother was raising the girls and their teenage brother Emanuel. They were living in a temporary hostel, awaiting re-housing but, unknown to Marcia, her mother had been ill with fluid on her lungs. The hostel staff phoned, asking her to go there because her mother had been taken to hospital. When she got there, they told her to sit down, before telling her that her mother had died. Yvonne and Sandra, who were six and seven at the time, had been on their own with their mum and had been the ones to find her and raise the alarm.

The family talked to decide what to do about the girls but Marcia already felt she would be the one to take on responsibility for them: her sister Antonia is just a year or so

younger but Antonia was already raising her own three children: *"I knew in my heart that it would be me who was going to take responsibility – I just knew that. We didn't speak about it but I just knew ... We called the family around because I knew everybody was coming down and there were different arguments, talking about what was going to happen to the little ones? So then I said 'Antonia, I'm going to take the responsibility.' That's how it came about."*

The girls moved into Marcia's one bedroom flat with her, and they were to remain in this overcrowded accommodation for the next four years. Marcia approached her local authority's children's services department to see if they would be able to help her but she was told that it was time her family learned to stand on their own feet. She turned down an offer by them to give her a £30 payment, as it seemed to be just a token amount and wouldn't go far towards providing the help they needed. She asked if they could help her be re-housed to larger accommodation but was told that given that at that stage she did not have a legal order for the girls, there would be a concern that if she was offered a bigger flat she would then not keep the girls with her.

Marcia decided she would have to apply for Residence Orders for her sisters. She was working, so she didn't qualify for legal aid and paid the £700 in legal expenses herself. The girls' father, who had not been involved in their lives, objected and became involved in the proceedings, which led to the court process being dragged out for around two years, as they went to mediation, to which he often failed to show up. Marcia felt that he was not behaving responsibly enough to demonstrate that he would be able to raise the girls, as he claimed he wanted. He was also being quite critical of the way Marcia was raising the girls and when the judge in their case suggested he might want to thank Marcia for what she was doing, he could not bring himself to do so.

The girls' school was very helpful, getting them free school uniforms, helping Marcia find a childminder and giving them places in the breakfast club. The school also involved social services again but she found the social worker to be unhelpful to her and over-sympathetic to the girls' father and feels this may have been because he shared the same African origins as the girls' father.

Marcia has found it incredibly rewarding to raise her two younger sisters, though they have had their ups and downs together, with the girls, particularly Yvonne, sometimes finding it hard to accept that Marcia has stepped into the role that their mother used to occupy, especially when she has to make decisions about how late they can stay out or what they should and should not do when they are out with friends. The girls do like to show Marcia that they love her but they do sometimes seem a bit embarrassed that they are being brought up by a big sister and not their mum.

Marcia has received most help with raising the girls from her younger sister Antonia, who will sometimes take Yvonne and Sandra on holiday with her or take the girls for the half-term holidays to give Marcia a breather. Members of Marcia's church have also been very supportive: *"I've had parenting advice, somebody has taken the girls off my hands for a couple of hours or taken them out to Starbucks. One particular lady has taken them out to Starbucks three times and has sat down and talked with them. Asked them questions, asked them how they feel, and she has given me some feedback as well. I've had people invite us round for dinner. I've had people pray with me about my sisters. That's really been helpful to me knowing that God is using people to help me raise my two sisters."*

Marcia and the girls have also attended a support group for bereaved sibling carers. As well as being a member of this group, which meets six-monthly, the girls have also been able to meet individually with the project's counsellors to talk about their bereavement, which Marcia feels has been particularly helpful for Yvonne.

Marcia's employers have been understanding. She gets no financial support to help her raise the girls, other than child benefit and child tax credit, but when the girls first came to Marcia a sympathetic manager at her workplace arranged for her to be given two months leave on full pay in order to help them settle in. Her manager was also happy for her to rearrange her working hours, to allow her to take her sisters to a pre-school childminder before coming in to work.

Marcia prefers not to dwell on the things that she may have had to forego by bringing up her sisters as she feels that the girls have enriched her life: *"I think since I've had my sisters I've done more than I could ever imagine. Things that I didn't think I could do, I've done. My sisters have taught me so much. I think for my sisters to have come into my life, it's been a really good thing."*

#### **4.2 Linda, Sandy and Anne: Linda and Sandy interviewed January 2010**

Linda (age 34) and Sandy (30) are a married couple, raising Sandy's younger sister Anne (13). They are also raising their own son Robert (5), who was two when Anne came to them three years ago. Despite the seventeen year age gap between them, Sandy and Anne are their parents' only children.

Anne came to live with them after both of her parents died within two years of each other. Firstly, her mother died of cancer and then, two years later, her father died while undergoing kidney dialysis. His death was unexpected because although he was ill there had been no deterioration in his health. Linda described how she and Sandy immediately took Anne in with them: *"We had to pick her up and tell her that her dad had died and we literally had to get some clothes from the house and she had to come and sleep at our house because there was nobody else to look after her apart from us ... We said to Anne, 'You will come to our house,' and she said, 'You won't send me anywhere else?' and we said 'No, you can live with us,' and then my mum travelled straight down to help us out because this was like 6 o'clock at night and obviously we were completely shell shocked."*

Linda and Sandy contacted their local authority's children's services department, to see if they could get any assistance with bringing up Anne. They were told that if things had happened differently and social services had been involved in placing her with them, then they could have received some help. But as they had gone to collect her, then they were not entitled to any sort of help, and Linda and Sandy have not received any type of support from children's services with raising Anne.

Both Sandy and Linda are working, doing reasonably well paid professional jobs, but they have had to stretch their financial resources more in order to accommodate Anne. For example, they had to move to a larger home, with substantially increased mortgage payments over a longer term, as well as having the additional expense of raising a teenage girl. The only additional financial support they receive is the guardian's allowance of £12.50 per week. Although they are not living a deprived lifestyle, they do have to juggle financially a lot more than previously.

Sandy and Linda have a Residence Order for Anne. They did not go through any sort of assessment for this, other than a visit with Anne to the CAFCASS offices, where a CAFCASS officer interviewed them and Anne separately, making sure that they all understood the commitment that a residence order involved and that everyone was happy with the arrangement. No one came to their home to see how Anne was living with them or check on their home living circumstances.

Sandy and Linda try to set the same rules for Anne that they would for a child of their own. This means that Anne has had to adapt to a way of life that is quite different to the one she had become used to when living with her dad: *“She never had a bed time at all and if she wrote a Christmas list she’d get everything on it or if she asked for a DVD she’d get it and sweets and crisps. I don’t buy sweets and crisps very often and we have a rule in the house that we have to ask for them, partly because she’s been overweight. She’s lost a lot of weight and she’s happier now. She didn’t have regular meals before and now she does and she was used to having pretty much everything she wanted but we can’t do that.”*

They found Anne’s school quite supportive and the school actually arranged for Anne to receive six months counselling to help her deal with her bereavement. Afterwards, Anne was able to tell them a bit more about what living with her dad had been like: *“She said that he used to hit her and that she was scared of him but that she still loved him and felt guilty saying it. He was seriously ill and obviously not coping.”*

The main source of support has come from Linda’s family and Linda’s mother was there for them starting from the day Anne came to live with them.

Both Sandy and Anne have struggled at times to adapt to the way their relationship has changed from their old brother-sister relationship. Sandy admits that he finds it hard having to be the one who lays down the rules to Anne when he still sees her as his little sister. Anne does sometimes seem resentful that they are telling her what to do, when they are not her parents.

This has been quite a stressful period for the family, with the death of Sandy and Anne’s mother while Linda was pregnant, the death of their father two years later, the massive change for everyone of Anne coming to live with their family and then the death, a year later, of Sandy and Anne’s nan. It has put a strain on Sandy and Linda’s relationship at times.

Despite any difficulties, Sandy and Linda would not have done anything differently: *“People say “Oh, I don’t know how you do it” and I say what would they do if it was their sister or brother? We didn’t even hesitate that day. The first thing I did was go and get her. You don’t leave somebody that you love to suffer.”*

### **4.3 Althea, George and Colleen: Althea interviewed January 2010**

Althea, age 26, is the special guardian for her younger sister Colleen (17) and brother George (12). Althea was 24, had left home and was pursuing a professional career, when her mother died unexpectedly from a heart attack, 27 months ago. She immediately decided to move back home so she could look after Colleen and George, who were 15 and 10 at the time, in the family home: *“It was extremely difficult at the time because I had the pain of losing my mother but then I also had this additional major adjustment overnight where at one point my mum was head of the family and there for us all and then suddenly she was gone. I went from being someone who had chosen not to have*

*any kids yet, had been to university, working full time and no responsibilities other than that, to all of a sudden overnight having the responsibility of my brother and sister and the running of a four bedroom house.”*

Althea contacted social services to see if she could be assisted at all. A social worker came to visit them and said that Althea could be paid an allowance as a kinship carer and left saying that she would be in touch with Althea. However, when several weeks had passed and the social worker had not made contact, Althea phoned her to find out what was happening. The social worker told her that it would not, after all, be possible to pay her as a kinship carer, on the unusual grounds that Althea was a close blood relative of the children and because the children had not been displaced from their home. When Althea pointed out that she was struggling financially, as she now had to provide for three on a salary that had until now only been used to provide for herself, the social worker suggested that she give up work and claim benefits for the children.

Althea asked whether, as they were coming up to Christmas, she would be able to get any help with providing for her siblings for Christmas. The social worker told her to come to her office and some financial help would be arranged. Althea went to the office just before Christmas and was kept waiting for two hours, even although there was nobody else being seen. She called the social worker’s direct line and was told by a colleague that the social worker was on her way down to see her. Another 20 minutes later, the social worker arrived with £40 to help Althea provide for Colleen and George’s Christmas.

Althea contacted Family Rights Group’s advice line, and realised she could apply for Special Guardianship Orders for her two siblings. The local authority’s assessment of her to be a special guardian took some time to be completed and she was visited by four different social workers during the assessment. The first two left or were taken off the case and the second of them lost all of the papers, containing a lot of highly personal information. The local authority did pay Althea’s legal expenses for the application but she felt that again she had to go through a struggle before the local authority agreed to do this. However, the court was very sympathetic to the situation Althea, Colleen and George were in and insisted that the local authority should commit to paying Althea a weekly special guardianship allowance. The orders were granted seven weeks before our interview and Althea had not, at this time, received any of this allowance.

George at his primary school, and Colleen at her secondary school, were both offered counselling to help them deal with their bereavement. Althea would have liked to be offered counselling as well and she has been pushing for this to be included in her special guardianship support plan although, so far, without success. When Althea applied for the Special Guardianship Orders, her main reason was in order to access support services and she was quite surprised to find out about the financial support that could be provided.

All three of them had to adjust to the new relationships that their new living arrangement required, with Colleen being particularly testing at times: *“It was difficult at first for me to sort out, especially with Colleen because she would question a lot of what I did and it would make me so tired and drained. Now it’s a lot better because she listens to me because she understands that I won’t have her disrespect me in the house, especially in front of George, because whenever she decides to fly the nest, he is still going to be there and he’s still going to have to listen to me. I had to acknowledge that I was the one in charge.”*

However, their mum had brought Althea up so that she would be able to manage the home: *“My mum did raise us quite independently so cooking and everything else was quite easy for me, even to balancing the bills. Because I was working full time and my mum wasn’t working when she passed away, so I had to organise chores etc. because I wasn’t there during the day to do the things that everyone had forgotten to do. So chores had to be put together because it was making me really tired having to remind certain people of what they had to do. But again, little things like that they couldn’t understand and I had to explain that we all had to put things in to make it work.”*

Althea has found the support she receives from some of her close friends invaluable although she has had to cut off some other friends who were unable to understand that her new responsibilities would mean that their friendship would become different.

Althea’s views on being a sibling carer: *“It’s extremely difficult. You are made to feel that you’re the only one out there doing what you are doing and you’re not. There is so little support out there for sibling carers and you have to fight for everything ... we shouldn’t have to fight for support.”*

#### **4.4 Sylvia and Bob: Sylvia interviewed September 2009**

Sylvia is 21 years old and taking responsibility for bringing up her 13 year old brother, Bob. They live with their 80 year old grandmother, whose health problems mean she is unable to manage Bob or take care of him and a 19 year old brother, Henry, who is just starting university and also does not help Sylvia much with Bob. Sylvia herself is in her second year at university.

The three children lived with both parents until Sylvia was nine, when her parents separated and her father returned to his home country in Europe. He left their mother with £40,000 worth of debt and a drink problem. Because of their mother’s drinking, Sylvia always played a major role in bring up Bob, increasingly so as she grew older. Life at home was quite difficult. There were fights between their mother and Henry after their father had left and when the police became involved they made a referral to children’s services. Sylvia thinks that Bob’s name was put on the child protection register at this time.

Sylvia and Bob eventually went abroad to live with their father but they found him very difficult to get along with and decided to come back to the UK after six weeks. They couldn’t return to living with their mother so they decided to move in with their nan, who lived in a different local authority area.

Sylvia arranged a place for Bob in a school near their new home but he was constantly getting into trouble there for losing his temper and fighting. Sylvia approached various official bodies for help: housing to see if they could be re-housed, the education service for support with managing Bob and children’s services because of their previous concerns that Bob was at risk but she found them all quite discouraging. Their move between two local authorities made it even more difficult to access the assistance they sought, as the two authorities wanted to shift the responsibility onto each other. However, after a few weeks they were provided with a worker from Family Support, who visited for six weeks, but did not offer the kind of support that Sylvia was seeking.

Getting Bob to go to school was a major problem for Sylvia as he would resist by punching and kicking her. She got him into school whenever it was physically possible

but she would sometimes be left bruised and marked by the struggle. Despite making the school aware of these problems, Sylvia was threatened with being fined over the level of Bob's non-attendance at school. Sylvia also found that Bob had been walking out of school and going to visit his mother. Sometimes his mother would cover for him by phoning the school to say he was sick. In the end, Bob's school was changed after he had been badly beaten by another pupil.

Sylvia has maintained her place at university while all this has been happening and is proud that her academic performance has not been too badly affected. However, the whole experience of being a sibling carer has been very stressful for her and she has felt extremely unsupported. She has felt that hardly anyone has shown any understanding of the situation she is in and the pressures she is under. She feels that a lot of the officials she has dealt with have behaved so as to put her under even more pressure. There was one Housing Officer whose manner was particularly unpleasant towards her.

Despite the difficulties, Sylvia feels strongly that she has done the right thing by taking on responsibility for Bob: *"I hope that what I have said didn't come over as it being all negative and all stressful because that is a big part of it and I know that most of the sibling carers are in the same position as me. The reason why they are doing it is because they don't want their brothers or sisters to end up in care because they love them. They should be really proud of themselves for doing that."*

#### **4.5 Hermione, Richard and Eric: Hermione interviewed January 2010**

Hermione and Richard are both 37 years old and they have been raising Richard's younger brother Eric (age 16) for the last 14 years. The couple have their own two daughters, aged 10 and 3. Although Richard and Eric have the same mother, they have different fathers. The brothers also have an older sister who has cut her links with her family.

When Eric first came to Hermione and Richard, they were a young couple, not yet married, who had just bought their first home together. Initially, Eric just came to them for a short stay while his mother went into hospital for 10 days to have an operation for cancer. Unfortunately, the operation revealed that there were secondary cancers and she died within six months.

Hermione has had a close bond with Eric since he was born. Eric was in special care for the first four months of his life as he was born with a medical condition which required, and still requires, operations on both his legs and also means that his knee joints dislocate very easily. His mother was depressed after he was born and Hermione used to look in to visit him in hospital every day.

Becoming responsible for Eric meant Richard and Hermione had to make some changes to the way they had been living: *"We were a typical young couple – Richard was just starting up his own business, I had my own career in advertising and media which was going great guns. We were going out and having fun, taking holidays and building our home together."* However, Hermione's employers were not understanding about her need to work more flexibly now that she had taken on responsibility for a young, disabled child and she gave up her job in the media to work in her family's business. This has meant that, as well as having the extra financial responsibility of caring for Eric, they also had a lower income than they would otherwise have had. When they came to have their own children, they have twice had the extra expense of building extensions to their home, to make more space for the children to have their own bedrooms.

Hermione and Richard have also had a difficult relationship with Eric's father who was separated from Eric's mother. Eric went to stay with his father for a week, after his mother's funeral. However, this was a difficult week for Eric as his father's partner did not want him there. Later on, after his father had not shown up a couple of times when he had arranged to come and see Eric for contact, Hermione and Richard arranged a meeting with him. The upshot of this meeting was that it ended with Eric's father threatening them when they told him that if he wanted to play a part in Eric's life he would need to keep to a regular commitment and that they would be opposed to Eric going to live with him.

Hermione and Richard were named as Eric's legal guardians in his mother's will. However, they have been taking steps to apply for a Residence Order, in order to make certain that they do have legal responsibility for him, even though he is now quite close to being an adult.

When Eric first came to them, Hermione and Richard approached their local authority for help. The local authority did agree to pay half of his nursery fees and the paperwork at the time records that they did so because he was a looked after child. However, they took no other steps to treat Eric's living arrangement with Richard and Hermione as being a looked after placement and carried out no checks on whether they were suitable people to be raising Eric. Recently, Hermione and Richard began to enquire again about whether the local authority could support them with raising Eric and contacted their MP. They have started to receive an allowance of £40 per week.

In addition to the medical problems already mentioned, Eric has also been diagnosed as dyspraxic, which affects his co-ordination and reading and writing. Hermione and Richard have started to receive the higher rate Disability Living Allowance for him. However, he has not been categorised as a 'child in need' by the local authority and they have not been supported at all by the authority's disabled children's team.

Eric has been with them for so long that it now feels to Hermione and Richard as if they are raising a child of their own. Although Eric is aware of being Richard's brother and therefore Hermione's sister-in-law, he does refer to her as mum and to her parents as nanny and granddad. Their own two children look on Eric as an older brother.

Taking in Eric meant that Hermione and Richard had to adjust to the lifestyle of a family with children, instead of a couple on their own together, a lot earlier than they would otherwise have done. They had planned to start their own family when they were in their thirties but took in Eric when they were both 23, then had their own first child not long afterwards. Hermione lost the opportunity of the career she wanted to pursue. However, they have no regrets at all about deciding to take in Eric and do not feel that they could have done anything else. Their only regret is not getting advice at the time about their legal situation and about the support they could have requested from the local authority.

#### **4.6 Anita and Elizabeth: Anita interviewed January 2010**

Anita is twenty-three years old and lives with her partner Philip and their three year old daughter Amanda. Four times Anita has looked after her six year old sister Elizabeth for a period, owing to their mother's mental health problems. Anita's mum, Alice, was diagnosed as being bi-polar and having obsessive-compulsive disorder but as Anita's father, Cameron, was around for most of her childhood, Anita did not find her mother's unusual behaviour too noticeable at the time. However, after Alice and Cameron

separated, Alice became involved with Iain, Elizabeth's father, who was an alcoholic who lived quite a chaotic lifestyle. He did not actually move into the family home.

When Anita was 18 and Elizabeth was about 18 months old, Anita began to be quite worried about her mum's mental health and spoke to the Community Psychiatric Nurse. In September 2003 her mother was forcibly admitted to hospital, ie 'sectioned'. Anita stayed on in the family home to look after Elizabeth. She asked her mum's social worker whether a nursery place could be arranged for Elizabeth, as she was working, but a panel turned this request down. Alice left hospital after four weeks. Anita's relationship with her mum became quite difficult as Alice seemed to hold her responsible for her hospital admission and Anita moved out and rented a flat with her boyfriend Philip that was a 10 minute drive away.

In March 2005 Alice was arrested, having drunk a lot of alcohol when she was in charge of Elizabeth and then attacked one of the police officers who were called in. Elizabeth was placed with an uncle whom she hardly knew and he asked Anita to take her. Alice was again forcibly admitted to a psychiatric hospital and Anita and Philip were visited by a social worker who asked them whether they had criminal records. Social services was originally going to convene a child protection case conference, but then decided that as Elizabeth was safe with Anita and Philip they would call a 'child in need' meeting instead. Anita told the meeting that she was struggling to manage financially, as Elizabeth had hardly any clothes and they needed a bed for her to sleep on. She was also at this time in the early stages of pregnancy. She was told that they would receive a regular financial allowance to help out but during the three months Elizabeth was with them, Anita only received two payments of £25. This time, children's services did fund a full time nursery place for Elizabeth. Children's services suggested that Anita should claim the child benefit for Elizabeth. However, Alice did not want to sign her agreement to this and said she felt that Anita was trying to steal Elizabeth from her.

When Alice left hospital in June, she went to live with her mum, Anita and Elizabeth's nan. Elizabeth went to visit her mum and nan for an overnight stay and they decided not to return her to Anita. Alice then moved back to her own home with Elizabeth. Anita's nan was siding with Alice in blaming Anita for Alice's hospital admissions and seemed to be under the impression that Anita was receiving a fostering allowance for Elizabeth. Anita was accused of looking after Elizabeth for the money.

Around the time Anita's baby was due, Alice started to behave strangely again and as Anita was worried about Elizabeth, having been told by the health visitor that Elizabeth was underweight, she contacted the community psychiatric nurse again. The nurse arranged some joint visits with a social worker but as nobody answered the door they simply went away and did not pursue an assessment of Alice's mental health, even although she had by then removed all her furniture out into the street. Nothing more happened until eleven days after Anita's daughter Amanda was born, when the community psychiatric nurse brought Alice and Elizabeth round and suggested that Alice should leave Elizabeth with Anita. Despite the fact that this was a plan the community psychiatric nurse had agreed with social services, it was treated by the local authority as a private arrangement and Elizabeth did not become a looked after child. Anita was advised that if her mother tried to remove Elizabeth she would have to allow it, as Alice retained parental responsibility. However, when Alice did try to remove Elizabeth, Anita was so concerned about Elizabeth's safety that she called the police who, when they arrived, persuaded Alice to leave Elizabeth with Anita. Eventually, Alice was again forcibly admitted to hospital.

The local authority still maintained that this was a private arrangement between Anita and her mum. One manager she spoke to told her that she was entitled to receive £45.12 per week but she received only a few such payments. The local authority encouraged her to apply for a residence order. This time Alice stayed in hospital for several months but took Elizabeth back again when she left hospital.

It was a whole year after Alice left hospital before Anita started to worry about her mother's mental health again. When Anita attended the mental health assessment of whether her mother should be returned to hospital, the social worker asked her to look after Elizabeth. Anita assumed that because she had been asked by the social worker to look after Elizabeth, this would mean that she would be better supported by the local authority this time. However, the local authority informed her that this would not be the case as the request to look after Elizabeth had been made by a social worker from adults' services, not children's services. She had been told by the social worker that if Alice was admitted to hospital again, the local authority would begin care proceedings. However, after it had happened they changed their minds and instead suggested that Anita should apply for an Interim Residence Order. Anita was understandably reluctant to make this application as her mum was already under the impression that Anita was trying to take Elizabeth away from her and also she could not afford the legal costs of a Residence Order application. She formally complained about the way the local authority had dealt with her and an independent investigator upheld four out of her five complaints.

After four months in hospital, Alice was discharged but this time with the mental health team administering her medication by injection. After another four months, Elizabeth was able to return to her and since then she has been able to stay on with her. Anita has had to rebuild her relationship with her mum and nan, who still blames her for Alice's hospital admissions and accuses her of trying to take Elizabeth.

Anita was quite young when she began looking after Elizabeth and feels that she had to grow up really quickly. Despite the difficulties and the splits in her family, she is really pleased that she could be there for Elizabeth when she needed someone to care for her but she still remains concerned about Elizabeth's long-term future. Despite her unhappiness with the way local authority social workers have dealt with her, Anita is thinking about studying to be a social worker. She wishes she had been better informed, particularly about legal arrangements, when Elizabeth was first placed with her.

#### **4.7 Melissa, Dwayne and Siobhan: Melissa interviewed February 2010**

Melissa is 29 years old. She has been raising her younger brother Dwayne (age 14) and sister Siobhan (11) for the last 10 years. During that time, she has met and married her husband Walter and they have their own two children, Scott (5) and Florence (2). Melissa has the same mother as Dwayne and Siobhan but a different father. She began to look after them because of the unexpected death of their mother. Melissa was only 19 at the time and still living at home. Her mother was just 41 and had no known health problems. She went to bed one night with a headache and did not wake up.

The family was known to children's services, who had placed Dwayne and Siobhan's names on the child protection register because their father was a violent alcoholic. A social worker visited the family on the evening after their mother's death and agreed when Melissa said she would look after the children for the time being. However, when Melissa said she wanted to keep the children and raise them herself, the social worker said that the local authority would be opposed to this and that they wanted to place the

children in foster care. Children's services said they were concerned both about Melissa's youth and the danger that the children's father might take them from her.

However, Melissa consulted a solicitor and applied to court for a Residence Order which was granted after children's services had assessed her and decided that there were a lot of factors in favour of her raising the children and having legal responsibility for them. The children's father opposed her application and while the court did find in her favour, the court also decided that the children should stay with him every weekend. This has not been able to happen regularly, partly because he has been in and out of prison for the last 10 years and, in fact, at the time of my interview with Melissa he was facing a substantial prison sentence. Throughout this time, Melissa has felt she has had to be quite careful not to upset the children's father because of his capacity for being violent when he is drunk.

Melissa has not been supported at all by children's services, who closed her case not long after she got the Residence Orders. Although there have been times when she would have liked some assistance, for example in managing the children's contact with their father or helping the children deal with their grief and the loss of their mother, Melissa did not approach children's services. She was worried that, because they had initially been opposed to the children coming to her, a request for assistance would be seen as evidence that she was not managing. Melissa receives a £12.50 guardian's allowance for the children, but has never had any financial support from the local authority.

Melissa met her husband about a year after her mother's death and she feels lucky to have met someone who had no hesitation about accepting her, complete with her two young siblings, and who understood that this meant they would not be able to go out and enjoy the same sort of social life as many other young couples in their twenties would expect.

Melissa feels they are very settled as a family. Although Dwayne and Siobhan don't call her husband 'dad', he does everything with them that a dad would do and he does have a fatherly relationship with them. Their own two children have just grown up seeing Dwayne and Siobhan as being like a big brother and sister and they have never known anything different. The biggest difficulty comes from the children's father: *"Even though I am their sibling carer and I am in charge, I still feel that their father has still got the power over me. He always reminds me that they are his kids and not mine. I question myself a lot on whether I'm being too hard on them or too soft on them. I think, 'Would I be doing this if they were mine?'"*

Melissa finds it rewarding that by raising her younger siblings she has been able to keep the family together: *"I wear my heart on my sleeve and I suppose you have to do it. You get more attached to the children. It is hard and it is something you need to think about it. I would still do the same thing again. I think it helped that they were so young and they didn't come to me with problems. They've been pretty good."*

#### **4.8 Jill, Cathy and Beverley: Jill interviewed January 2010**

Jill is 27 years old and she lives in an all-female household where she is raising her two younger sisters, Cathy (age 10) and Beverley (8). She shares the same mother as the girls but has a different father. Jill was raised by her grandparents since she was about four or five and moved out from their home to her own flat when she was 17.

Jill started to care for the girls about 18 months before our interview. She was living in another part of the city from her mother and working in a demanding managerial job. When she tried to phone her mother, she was told by Cathy and Beverley's father Cleveland that her mother had been admitted to hospital two weeks earlier because of some problems with her memory. Cathy and Beverley had gone to live a couple of hundred miles away with Cleveland's brother. Jill spoke to Cleveland's brother and then to the girls' social worker, who said that the girls would be going into care as Cleveland's brother could no longer look after them. A foster placement was being lined up for them.

Jill went to a meeting and said she wanted to look after the girls. The social worker said they might need to go into care for a couple of days while social services assessed Jill but Jill objected to that and an agreement was reached that the girls would stay with Jill while she was assessed. Jill agreed to move into her mum's home so the girls could continue at the same school. The conditions in her mum's home had become quite squalid. The social worker gave Jill a weekend to redecorate and clean and tidy up. All the girls' clothes but the ones they were wearing and a lot of items in the house such as bedding and the cooker, had to be thrown out. The social worker told Jill to keep a list of everything she spent and she would be refunded. She spent hundreds of pounds but did not receive anything back.

Jill was also working long hours so she had to make childminding arrangements for the girls at the beginning and end of the day. She asked if she could be helped financially, for example by being made the girls' foster carer, but was refused any financial assistance. The social worker gave her a fostering information pack and bizarrely suggested that she apply to the fostering team to become a foster carer, without revealing that she had the girls with her.

The girls were both subject to a child protection plan as their father had been violent to their mother, who used to drink, and there had been concerns they were being neglected. The girls were both quite troubled and had been referred for therapy but 18 months on this has still not started although Jill has been able to receive some advice on how to raise them and manage their behaviour and their feelings. The older of the two girls had become used to looking after her mother as well as her younger sister and Jill has been trying to help her let go of feeling that she needs to be like a parent and instead just go back to being a child again.

A few weeks later, Jill's mum was preparing to leave hospital to return home and her social worker told Jill that she and the girls would now need to move out of her mother's home, as the girls could not be around their mother. Jill moved back to her own flat, which was some distance away and has only one bedroom. The social worker said that social services would pay transport costs for the girls to attend school but this was never provided and Jill arranged instead for the girls to go to a school near where she lives. This was an upheaval for the girls, who liked their old school. It took them a long time to settle into their new school.

Meanwhile, Jill was struggling financially. She was taking a lot of time off work in order to be there for the girls and although her employers were sympathetic she had to hand in her notice after a few months. Her landlord had also gained a possession order for her flat because her rent had fallen into arrears.

The situation only improved when a Family Group Conference was held which was attended by the manager of the Kinship Care Team which had not until then been

involved. The manager declared herself shocked at the way they had been treated and asked to hold another meeting to rectify the situation. At this meeting, they agreed to start paying Jill as a foster carer right away and to carry out a fostering assessment. They also agreed to make a payment of £2,000 to compensate her for the lack of support she had received up until then. Jill has been approved to foster the girls and been allocated her own linkworker to provide her with social work support. The girls now have a different social worker from the one who was originally involved and Jill feels a lot better supported than she did before.

Jill's mum is still suffering from short-term memory loss but she is living at home and is happy that the girls are with Jill. When she wants to come and visit Jill and the girls, Jill lets children's services know and they arrange the transport to bring her over and return her. Jill is well supported by her grandmother, who raised her, and she takes the girls round to visit their grandmother every couple of days.

The girls are still accommodated which means that their mother is still the only person with parental responsibility for them. Jill is considering whether to apply for Special Guardianship Orders but is concerned that it might mean she becomes less well supported than she is now.

Despite the initial problems, when she was not well supported by the local authority, Jill is glad she has been able to look after her two sisters: *"It's nice to know that you've given the kids a chance to have something much, much better than they could have had. They went to Cleveland's sister first but she couldn't look after them so she took them to the brother, then the brother said they couldn't look after them and they were just going to go into care. I think they felt they were so let down by their own family. I'm delighted that I was able to give them the chance."*

#### **4.9 Harriet, Yvette and Sophie: Harriet interviewed February 2010**

Harriet is 23 years old and is raising her two younger sisters Yvette (age 4) and Sophie (15 months). There is a fourth sister, age 13, who is still living at home with their mother. Harriet is white but her two younger sisters are of mixed parentage, since their father is African.

Harriet's mother has suffered from bi-polar disorder for about 10 years. Harriet does not remember this being too problematic when she was growing up but after Yvette was born her mum also suffered from post-natal depression. She stopped taking her medication and started to drink. Yvette was taken into local authority care. Harriet was 18 and she had moved out of the family home but when she offered to look after Yvette she was told she was too young. Their mum, Antonia, was in hospital and Harriet used to visit Yvette every day in her foster placement.

Yvette was in local authority care for a year and then returned to her mother. This arrangement lasted for a year but fell apart when the family members who had been supporting Antonia went away on a week's holiday and she started drinking again. The police became involved because of reports that Yvette was being neglected and Yvette ended up in foster care again although not with the same foster carer she had been with previously. This time, she stayed in foster care for 26 months, until she could move in with Harriet. Harriet still saw Yvette every day, picking her up after school and taking her home to her foster carer. This meant that Harriet and Yvette became close, which helped Yvette to settle when she moved in with Harriet. It also helped Harriet to form a close

relationship with Yvette's foster carer, which she still has. The foster carer still takes Yvette out sometimes to give Harriet a break.

When Sophie was born, the local authority applied for a care order right away and Antonia and Sophie went into a mother-and-baby unit for assessment where Harriet visited them both several times a week. Although Antonia was seen to provide good quality care in the unit, there were still concerns about her long-term mental health and the decision was taken that Sophie could not stay with her.

Meanwhile, Harriet was being assessed to be a foster carer and it was decided that she could be approved as a family and friends foster carer for both girls. Sophie came to stay with Harriet first, about eight months before our interview, with Yvette joining them three months later, at the conclusion of care proceedings. Harriet was encouraged by social workers to apply for Special Guardianship Orders for the girls but she decided that as she was still a young and inexperienced carer, she would prefer to foster them as that was the legal status which entitled her to the most support. She receives the full fostering allowance for the girls and is visited regularly by her linkworker from the kinship team. There are fewer visits by the girls' social worker. She has also attended training courses for foster carers, including courses dealing with bonding and attachment, first aid, and managing stress. Harriet may apply for a Special Guardianship Order in future, when she feels less in need of social work support.

Harriet's relationship with social services has improved over the years. She knows all the social workers in the kinship team and feels happy to talk to the other workers if her own linkworker is out. She feels comfortable with them and well supported.

Harriet has enjoyed looking after her little sisters so much that she is working towards an NVQ level 3 in childcare and she is considering a career in childcare once both the girls are at school. She is optimistic about their future together: *"The next year all I can see is us having a nice summer, going on holiday together and in the future I can see just happiness for the girls."*

#### **4.10 Charmaine and Pauline: Charmaine interviewed January 2010**

Charmaine is 27 years old and she has been raising her 15 year old sister for the 2½ years before our interview. Charmaine is herself a mother of two daughters whose ages are 9 years and 18 months.

Charmaine recalls her early childhood years as being unremarkable, other than that they moved around a lot. However her mother and father separated and her mother entered into a relationship with Pauline's father. During this relationship, her mother was diagnosed as having mental health problems and Charmaine recalls her mother twice having to be admitted to psychiatric hospital before Pauline was born. These problems continued after Pauline was born and after her mother had separated from Pauline's father. Charmaine remembers having to live with a family friend for four weeks while her mother was hospitalised, with Pauline going into local authority foster care for six weeks. Her mother suffered a relapse when Pauline was about three or four and had to return to hospital. Charmaine was 16 by then and had been taking on a more motherly role with Pauline so the local authority agreed this time that she could look after Pauline as long as there was adult supervision. A family friend helped out by providing this.

Charmaine had her own daughter at 17 years of age and moved out of her family's home. When her mother had to go into hospital again, Charmaine again took Pauline in to live with her. However, four years ago, when she had to move away from the area because of her partner's work, it meant she was no longer available to support her mother as much as she had been doing. Her mother seemed to find it hard to cope with everyday life without having someone on hand to prompt her to do things like paying her bills. Charmaine contacted the local authority because she was worried, and they assessed Pauline, who was thirteen at the time, to be a carer for her mother. Pauline was under a child protection plan at the time because of concerns that she was being neglected.

Eventually, Charmaine's mother had to go back into hospital and Pauline returned to live with Charmaine. At first it was not clear how long this would be for as her mother initially went into hospital for only 28 days. However, her stay was extended for another six months and a diagnosis of possible early-onset Alzheimer's was made which, if confirmed, would make it difficult for her ever to resume full-time responsibility for Pauline. Eventually it was confirmed that she would not be able to live independently again.

The local authority pressed Charmaine to decide whether she could make a commitment to keeping Pauline with her. Her partner was more reluctant than Charmaine to make this commitment but he agreed Pauline could stay with them when he realised the only alternative would be for her to enter the public care system.

Charmaine has been approved as Pauline's foster carer but she is applying for a Residence Order. The local authority is supporting this application and is paying the legal costs involved.

Charmaine described some of the ways the family dynamics of the household have been affected by the arrangement: *"I haven't wanted to replace my mum because we've got our mum and we see her weekly now. I don't want to be her [Pauline's] mum – I'm her sister and her guardian and play a motherly role in that I guide her. I've got parental responsibilities for her as well as for my own children so I have to guide her and set daily routines and set boundaries and things like that. There are times when it has been difficult – it hasn't all been great. There have been occasions when there has been sibling rivalry between my daughter and her because they are just like normal sisters."*

Charmaine explained why she wants to be there for her younger sister: *"I haven't got a father figure around. I haven't got a mother figure around and a lot of children need that and that's why I want to be there for Pauline to give her something that I haven't had. Everyone, no matter what age you are, needs someone to turn to."*

#### **4.11 Yolande, Wesley, Dahlia, Colin and Marisa: Yolande interviewed March 2010**

Yolande is age 21 and lives with her partner Martin, age 27. They are raising their own two children, Ruby (3) and Stewart (4), as well as Charlene's four younger siblings, Marisa (17), Colin (14), Dahlia (12) and Wesley (9).

Yolande had been looking after her four siblings for nine months when I spoke to her. The children had been raised by Yolande's father on his own for six or seven years after her mother had moved out and left him as their sole carer. Yolande herself had also moved out some four years earlier, to live with a boyfriend. Yolande remembers that it was a very difficult household to grow up in. There was violence and hostility between her parents and an older sister was being detained long-term in a psychiatric hospital. Social services

were in and out of her family home during Yolande's childhood. Things did improve after her mother moved out – there was some re-decorating and the house was kept cleaner. However, her father suffered a broken ankle and during the treatment for this he was diagnosed with the coronary heart disease from which he was to die.

Yolande's mother distanced herself from the children after she moved out and Yolande's father wrote a will naming Yolande as the sole carer of the children, in order to make sure that they didn't go to their mother in the event of his death. On the day her father died, Yolande took the children round to her own home. She phoned her mother to inform her of her father's death. Her mother hung up on Yolande and then sent her a text message saying she did not want the children and Yolande should look after them. Yolande made arrangements with the council for them to move back into her father's home, so they would have more space – though even with four bedrooms it is still a bit of a squeeze. Yolande had kept in close contact with her younger siblings after she had moved out so she was already effectively a part-time carer for them and was like a mum to Wesley, the youngest and the least disturbed of her siblings.

Yolande phoned social services when her father died and they did become involved for a few months. A family group conference was called but none of the nine aunts and one uncle from her father's side who were invited came to the conference. However, others who did come included her older brother and half-brother, her boyfriend's parents and sister and some of the parents of her siblings' friends. Although mostly people did not stick to the help they offered, Yolande does feel that at least there are people she can turn to if she needs help.

Before becoming a sibling carer, Yolande had spent some time working in a residential home for older people, and she had planned to undertake an NVQ in residential care. She has had to put those plans on hold for now. The family has been struggling to manage financially. Yolande's partner has had to work long hours to try to earn enough to tide them over Christmas. They have received no financial support from the local authority other than £50 towards the £160 cost of a skip to clear her father's house and £18 per week towards Ruby's playschool.

There have also been some tensions, particularly involving Colin, the second-oldest of the siblings they are raising. Colin was picked on and treated differently by their father and was 'statemented' as having some additional educational needs. There have been some clashes between Colin and Yolande's partner, when he saw Colin apparently being threatening when he was towering over Yolande and shouting at her. The possibility is being considered that Colin might have to leave the family and enter the care system as they are finding it hard to meet his needs within the family.

Yolande has found being a sibling carer quite stressful. She felt caught in the middle of the clashes between Colin and her partner. In addition, Dahlia has some quite serious behavioural problems. The difficult behaviour of her siblings has had its effect on her own children and at one point Ruby was prescribed sleeping medication by her doctor. The children have been referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service for therapy but they have since discovered that the local CAMHS is not accepting any new referrals.

Yolande has felt best supported by Colin's special needs worker at school who has been happy for Yolande to ring her any time for advice and has, on occasion, helped out financially. In general, Yolande feels that social workers and support services have not

taken her seriously on account of her young age while at the same time considering her to be old enough to be responsible for all these children.

Despite the difficulties, Yolande's advice to others would be to go ahead if the need to consider being a sibling carer ever arose but to do so with caution: *"I think it would be to do it because it is quite rewarding, but not to jump in feet first like I did. Make arrangements first and take each day as it comes and do it slowly."*

#### **4.12 Keith and Andrew: information from an interview with their social worker, March 2010**

Keith (age 22) and Andrew (16) are brothers who are living together, with Keith having been approved as Andrew's foster carer. The brothers have the same mother but different fathers and do not live with anyone else. They do have an 18 year old sister who has a learning disability and who lives with unrelated foster carers.

While they were all still together, the family used to move around and saw social workers from different local authorities. Over a period of many years, social workers were concerned about domestic violence in the home and the children being neglected. Andrew was out of school a lot, some of which was due to sickness and some due to exclusions. The physical care that their mother Janet was providing for Andrew was poor and she seemed to find it difficult to set boundaries for his behaviour. Andrew's diet and health were poor and his temper seemed to be on a short fuse. At one point, the records show a concern that Andrew may have been sexually abused. Social workers were concerned that Janet did not seem to be working with them to try to make things better and she would often be out when they arranged to visit. It was being noted six years ago that the only person who seemed to be able to control Andrew was his older brother Keith.

Eventually, in 2007 the local authority took out care proceedings for Andrew. His mother's first reaction was to disappear with him for three months but when she returned, Andrew was placed in foster care. Andrew was very emotionally bonded with his mother and found being in foster care very difficult to accept, to the extent that he refused to eat or sleep in the foster placement.

Social services next placed Andrew with an aunt but he was unhappy there and ran away. At Keith's suggestion, Andrew went to stay with him in his flat. Because Andrew had been unhappy in two places that had been arranged for him but seemed to want to be with his brother, the local authority accepted that he could stay with Keith while they carried out an assessment of Keith to be Andrew's foster carer. This happened two years ago.

Keith is quite a shy young man who dislikes talking about personal matters. However, his assessment was carried out using Family Rights Group's family and friends assessment form, which includes a significant amount of space for carers to write about themselves and Keith was far more comfortable with this way of communicating than with verbal discussions. The result was an assessment which is *"very eloquently and carefully written"*, which *"gives a real insight into the family's circumstances."* Keith was also able to give some insight into the positive values which as children they had taken from their mother which might, otherwise, have been missing because the local authority's focus was largely on her poor parenting and the family's social problems.

The outcome of the court proceedings was a Care Order for Andrew with a care plan that he was to be fostered by his older brother Keith. It does remain true that Andrew is

only living with Keith reluctantly as he would prefer to be living with his mother. However, since he can't be with her, then staying with Keith is his next best option.

Keith has put some of his own plans on hold in order to look after Andrew. He is a bright young man with the ability to design computer programmes. He was due to study this at university but he has delayed his degree course while Andrew stays with him.

Although he is approved as a foster carer, Keith doesn't really see himself in that light. He just sees himself as Andrew's big brother. He has never attended any of the training or support groups that the local authority organises for family and friends carers. He does accept the routine visits and annual reviews which are required of any foster carer.

Keith and Andrew have a number of shared interests: *"they go to the gym together, they go to the cinema together, they do their computers, they are both learning to play the guitar – so Keith's social life, if you like, revolves around Andrew and Andrew's needs and interests."* Keith is a strong believer in the value of education and he has been able to get Andrew back into regular education, though only part-time, and make this part of a routine for Andrew.

Keith and Andrew's mother does drop in to see them several times a week and phones up every day. Under the right circumstances, the local authority would be willing for Andrew to return to live with his mother but at the moment he is not allowed to visit her for overnight stays. The current arrangement, although considered imperfect by the family, seems to be suiting everyone as the best arrangement available although it seems likely that at some point in the future, hopefully when he is a little less vulnerable, Andrew might decide to return to live with his mother, regardless of what anybody else thinks or wants.

## **5. Sibling carers speak**

### **5.1 Becoming a sibling carer**

Of the carers subject to the interview study, six ie half, of these sibling care arrangements took place in the immediate aftermath of the death of the parent who was caring for the child. It is perhaps worth noting that in all twelve cases the parents of the child or children who became cared for by a sibling had separated, other than two where the caring parent was already widowed. The sibling care arrangements all began when the child was being raised by a lone parent who either died or was no longer able to manage. It is also worth noting that, although drug use by parents has proved to be quite a common background factor in other family and friends carer research, it was not mentioned in any of the interviews conducted for this study.

Other family problems cited in the interviews included parent's use of alcohol, parent's mental health, domestic violence, poor parenting, physical abuse of child, neglect of child, family's poverty and suspected sexual abuse of child. Despite the problems listed, not all of the families were involved with local authority social care services, whether children's services or adult services, at the point when the sibling care arrangement began. In four of the twelve interview sibling care arrangements, the family had not previously been involved with the local authority. These were all cases where the sibling care arrangement started following parental bereavement.

Sibling carers here describe some of the problems their families were going through before the sibling care arrangement began. In some instances, they were already clearly taking on a lot of responsibility for their younger siblings, well before becoming their full-time carer.

*"I was always taking him to school. More so when I got a bit older into secondary school when I was about 14 and then I became much more. My mum used to drink and we used to just stay in our room together, made our own dinners, things like that – so that was difficult. Then later on, I don't know what happened – there was an anonymous call to social services." - Sylvia*

*"Mum has always suffered with mental health problems really. As I was growing up she was diagnosed with manic depression and obsessive compulsive disorder. To be honest growing up with my dad being there, it was never so extreme that we'd notice. Elizabeth was born in 2003 and when she was about eighteen months old in the August or September time (I had just turned eighteen and I was living with my mum at the time) and I noticed that she just started acting quite strangely from my point of view and was quoting references out of the bible and just being quite strange ... In the September I had been in quite a lot of contact with my mum's community psychiatric nurse and my mum's condition was deteriorating and as I hadn't witnessed it before, I didn't really know what was happening. In the September the community nurse had obviously become quite concerned himself and my mum was actually sectioned under the Mental Health Act. I think her doctor had come out to the house and there were two social workers (myself and Elizabeth were present at the time) and I think the police came to make sure my mum went to the hospital quietly. Elizabeth was left at home with me. She was eighteen months old and I had just turned eighteen and she was just left in the house under my care." - Anita*

*"Yvette was just four weeks old when she was put into care because my mum was suffering from post-natal depression along with her condition, plus she wasn't taking her tablets, plus she was drinking. All of that meant she wasn't really caring for the baby very well." - Harriet*

*"Throughout my childhood we moved around a lot. I did experience more of an unsettled childhood than Pauline did simply because I was there to take on a motherly role to Pauline and I didn't have that guidance. I was the one making sure things were done correctly whether it was physically or mentally making decisions for us as a family. There was a responsibility to make sure mum was making the right choices and we were making the right choices as a family. My mum always needed a second opinion. She was never really able to make decisions on her own." - Charmaine*

*"It was quite a violent and hostile sort of place to grow up. There was lots of sort of abuse coming from everyone so when my mum left, my dad tried to pick up the pieces but then it sort of fell back, the house started to get messy again ... when I was younger I can remember social services in and out constantly." - Yolande*

A social worker who was involved with one of the sibling care arrangements described a long list of social difficulties that were facing the children:

*"The concerns were around domestic violence towards Andrew's mum by Andrew's birth father and there were concerns that mum was neglecting the children in the household. There were significant concerns about Andrew's education. There were*

*long periods of school non-attendance, sickness for periods of time, exclusions from school. There were concerns about neglect and Andrew's physical care and in particular mum's difficulty in putting boundaries around Andrew and his daily routine. For example, it got noticed that Andrew slept long hours during the day and was awake most of the night. Lots of concerns about his poor diet and health. Non-cooperation with health professionals and there was also concern about Andrew's temperament and it's documented that on a number of occasions when he was very angry towards his sister who has learning difficulties and towards his mum, Andrew was very aggressive. Those concerns escalated and the family became at risk of becoming homeless because mum had not worked with the housing authority and the conditions in the home were very, very poor." - Doris, social worker*

Some of the sibling carers described the shock of the bereavement which led to them taking on the responsibility for raising their younger brother or sister. Their experiences emphasise that sibling carers may themselves be dealing with the shock of their parent's death, at just the time when they have to make a major decision about whether to take on responsibility for their younger brother or sister. Like many other family and friends carers, taking on this responsibility was something these sibling carers did as an instinctive, caring act towards a vulnerable child they were close to, often without pausing to think about practical matters such as what the legal arrangement would be or what sort of support they might need. This can have later consequences for them.

*"I found out later that my mum had fluid on the lungs and that she wasn't well. At the time I didn't know. It wasn't an ongoing illness that we knew about. In 2003 my mum was sick and she was in hospital and I had to go down and see her. It was the guy from the hostel who phoned me and said I should go to the hostel and he would give me more information on my mum. When I got to the hostel, they sat me down and said 'Oh your mum has passed away.' And that was that." - Marcia*

*"Anne's mum died of cancer in 2005 when I was eight months pregnant and because her dad had kidney failure, we were quite involved in helping to keep her at school, helping to look after her and to make sure that her dad could still go to the hospital then suddenly and unexpectedly, on the 15th January 2007, we had a phone call from the hospital to say that her dad had died while she was at school. It was completely unexpected – obviously he had kidney failure and we knew he was ill but he hadn't deteriorated. He hadn't got any worse. He just went to dialysis on the day and died having dialysis. Anne used to go to her friend's house three times a week when her dad was at the hospital and there was nobody else to pick her up. We had to pick her up and tell her that her dad had died and we literally had to get some clothes from the house and she had to come and sleep at our house because there was nobody else to look after her apart from us." - Linda*

*"[Our mother] just went to bed and didn't wake up again. There was nothing wrong with her at all. She went to bed with a headache and my uncle was staying for the weekend because he was in the army and I'd gone out with my friends to the pub and my uncle phoned me and said I should go back. He'd gone to wake her up because he had cooked her dinner and he couldn't wake her up ... That night when I came back to the house all my family were here and I just took Dwayne and Siobhan and went to stay at my mum's friend for the evening. My dad was with me and he stayed with me. That night social services came round and I said that I wanted to keep hold of the children for the time being and they said ok as long as they had somewhere to be. I then said I wanted to take care of the children full time and social*

services didn't want me to because I was so young and they were going to put them in a foster placement." - Melissa

"On the day that my dad died I had a phone call from my sister. She said that she found him on the bathroom floor and he was blue. I raced round and the ambulance was already here. He wasn't declared dead on the scene but when I asked the ambulance driver how it was looking, he just shook his head at me. I told the children to get some stuff and come to my house. On the way I spoke to my mum on the phone and I told her dad had died and she hung up on me and then she texted me saying 'I don't want them – you look after them.'" - Yolande

## 5.2 Help and support

The following table reflects the views of sibling carer respondents to the web-based survey as to where they received assistance or support. Three highlighted the importance of social workers and a similar number mentioned the education service. However, one respondent stated that they had received support from no-one and another stated that she had met with significant hostility from the local authority.

**Table 2**

**Who has assisted or supported you to raise your siblings?  
(please tick all that apply)**

answered question	5	
skipped question	2	
	percentage	No.
Local authority social workers	60%	3
Education Service	60%	3
Other siblings	20%	1
Parents	20%	1
Grandparents	20%	1

Table 3 is also drawn from the web-based survey sets out the main support carers had received. Five of the seven carers highlighted social work visits, only two answered that they received regular financial support.

**Table 3****What sort of support have you received? (please tick all that apply)**

answered question 6		
skipped question 1		
	percent	Count
Social worker visits	83%	5
Financial support	33%	2
Counselling for your siblings	17%	1
Mediation with other family members	17%	1
Training courses	0%	0
Support groups	0%	0
Counselling for you	0%	0
Respite care	0%	0
Legal advice	0%	0
Support with managing your sibling's family contact	0%	0
Assistance with prison visits	0%	0

Section 5.3 goes into greater depth about local authority support that carers requested, although unfortunately, didn't necessarily receive.

### 5.3 Local authority support

At the point when they became sibling carers, the interviewees were aged between 18 and 30, with the average age being just below 23. Finding themselves in the position of having assumed the major responsibility of raising one or more of their younger siblings, many of them wondered where they could get advice and support with what they were doing and approached their local authority children's services department. Unfortunately, most found that the initial response at least was unhelpful. All four of the sibling carers who came from families that had not previously been involved with children's services found that when they did contact this department to see if they could be assisted, the response was unhelpful or seemed to be aimed at minimising the local authority's involvement.

*"I went to social services because I was living in a one-bedroomed flat and I was asking if there was anywhere I could go to ask if I could get a bigger apartment. They were saying no, and all they wanted to know (because my mum was on the social security books for quite a few years) and all they kept saying 'It's about time that your family stood on their own feet.'... because she thought that my mum had just been taking from the government for years. I didn't see my mum scrounging off the government – she worked, she did her little bits and pieces. She taught us nine children well." - Marcia*

*"We tried to get some advice from the city council but they didn't want to help. They just fobbed us off and said it was our choice because we picked her up that day. That it was all our choice ... I asked if they could appoint a social worker for her because of*

*the situation that she was in and they basically said that we needed to get a Residence Order.” - Linda*

*“My mum passed away in late October, so very quickly our first Christmas without our mum was approaching and I realised there was a lot of financial pressure, I didn’t know how I was going to do this long term and I needed help. If I felt that if I wasn’t there doing what I was doing that social services would have had to provide my brother and sister with some sort of service and it would have cost them money and time. Instead I was providing the service but yet they weren’t supporting me in any way ... But social services said they weren’t displaced – they didn’t go from the family home into care and then to me. Basically because their lives weren’t disrupted as much as they could have been, I couldn’t be considered as the kinship carer.” - Althea*

*“At the beginning of 1997 when social services contacted us by telephone and we asked them for assistance with Eric’s nursery – because we were both working and we needed to put him into nursery full time – and they agreed to pay 50% of his nursery fees because, to them, he was classed as a looked after child ... they put on the same sheet in the file that they had to continue offering support to this family – financially and to ensure that Eric stays within the extended family during this time ... they never came out, they never met us, it was a couple of telephone calls and then in June 1997 they contacted us again and said they’d be in touch and we never heard from them again.” - Hermione*

The sibling carers whose families were already known to the local authority also often reported that they had some difficulties in getting the local authority to agree to assist them:

*“I would have liked more support from the Social Services in the sense that when I phoned, I wasn’t really assisted, I don’t think. Imagine if I wasn’t an appropriate candidate to look after him. And I feel like Bob has been lost through the net and there are Government things like Every Child Matters and I feel that he doesn’t matter. Even my Home Support worker – she didn’t really know what to say, where to help me.” - Sylvia*

*“As I remember there was nobody from social services. There was a social worker who I spoke to on the phone on a couple of occasions. I think at the time SureStart was just setting up and it was a postcode lottery. I phoned [the social worker] to see if there were any nursery places that I could take her to while I was at work and she said that she’d take that to panel and that wasn’t approved. My mum had been sectioned for a month and so during that time I didn’t even meet the social worker, just spoke to her on the phone.” - Anita*

*“At the child in need meeting I had asked for any financial support because we were finding it difficult because she only had the clothes on her back. She didn’t have a bed to sleep on that they wanted us to have. I think we had been given two payments of £25 during this time – from March to June/July. They said that was going to be paid regularly.” - Jill*

*“Social services said the children could stay with me until the funeral and then I should get a solicitor so that’s what I did. The day after my mum’s funeral, social services said they were coming to take the children the next day but that was the day of my appointment with the solicitor. I went to my appointment at the solicitors and I told her what had happened and she managed to get me into court that day and I*

*was granted an interim residence order. Even though I was young, there wasn't any reason why they were in danger, they were fine with me. I'd lived at home with them and I knew everything about them and as soon as I got the interim residence order social services couldn't take them away." - Melissa*

*"On the 27th August we had a meeting and I had originally said that I wanted to take the girls and [the social worker] said they might have to go into care for a couple of days while social services did an assessment on me and I wasn't happy with that. I went to a meeting and we all came to an arrangement that the girls could come with me and [the social worker] drew up an agreement that the girls would come with me for four weeks and I would be assessed while they were with me. At this time I had to move to my mum's address because the girls' school was there and I stayed there for quite a long time. When we moved up to the house it was in such a state that when the police went there (when my mum went into hospital the police went to the house to check something) they said the kids were living in squalor because it was in such a state because my mum's memory had gone and the house had just gone to pot and [the social worker] gave me and my partner a weekend to tidy the house. She said we had to gut it, take everything out, all their clothes etc. and all I had for the girls was the clothes they were wearing. We went to the house, took everything out, washed it and painted it. [The social worker] said I must write a letter and list all the stuff I would need, and that social services would replace it all. I did this and [the social worker] kept promising they would replace it all and I never got one thing back from social services. I had to replace the bedding, I had to do everything. It was lucky I was working at the time because I had a little bit of income ... It was hundreds and hundreds of pounds. That was in August and the girls were going back to school in September and I had to buy all new school uniforms, plus I had to replace all their other clothes and loads of other stuff. I told [the social worker] that the cooker wasn't working and she saw that it wasn't." - Jill*

*"I phoned them up myself after my dad died because I didn't know what to do. They came out and were just helping me with the physical side of things which was funding for things and furniture for the house ... we did have a social worker for a couple of months and then we got a different social worker for a couple of months and then they said they were closing the account." - Yolande*

One of the sibling care web respondents commented

*"(The) local authority did not support me to care for my brother other than residence order allowance which they did not want to give to me until the courts asked why. They did not want me to be my brother's carer, for the reason of myself being a looked after child. Their view was that I could not put my brother's needs before my own without evidencing this or making any observations of my ability to care. They stereotyped me because I was a foster child."*

Although most of the sibling carers reported initial difficulties with children's services, for some this did improve over time. This was more likely to happen if a specialist family and friends care team became involved with them.

*"They (the kinship care team) asked if they could hold a meeting to rectify the problem so that I could give them a chance to put things right and they held a meeting and said that there was clearly no evidence that the local authority had given me any support whatsoever that I was entitled to or should have had and they offered to give*

*me the kinship fostering straight away and that was from the 9th June and to do the assessment which I had after and then I went to the panel and they agreed for me to be a short-term fosterer which is up to three years. They gave me £2,000 as a pay-off.” - Jill*

*“At first I didn’t like social services. As an eighteen year old girl they took my little sister so I was quite rude ... Social services have just done what they had to do but I didn’t like the fact that over the years they had turned me down twice. It was the third time last year when I was finally accepted and social services said that if I didn’t get accepted then I would never stop my sister being adopted. But social services aren’t really involved. Only my social worker [from the kinship team] is really involved. The children’s social worker doesn’t really get involved at all.” - Harriet*

*“The six monthly reviews we have when a chairperson comes in to check whether social services are doing their job properly have been a great help. There have been a few pointers that have come out of those meetings. Without the whole system there, this could have broken down anyway, so overall I could say that social services has been a great help but they could help much more if they would give more information. There hasn’t been a lot of outside help from family and friends.” - Althea*

*“I asked to get a different social worker as we just clashed all the time and he wasn’t listening to what I was saying and social services kept on saying I had to have him until we got a report done ... so in the end they got another social worker and this guy was very nice. He understood what we were talking about like when the girls had mediation and contact with their dad, some things were distressing to them and he wrote all these things down.” - Marcia*

However, with some other sibling carers, either children’s services has pulled out of supporting them or the carers have decided that they found the initial response so discouraging that they did not want support from that source. Others feel that, where the local authority does provide support, it only does so grudgingly or minimally.

*“One time he (the social worker) came to the flat to interview me and my sisters and I noticed he had a big bag and we were talking and I asked what was in the bag. He said he was going to record the conversation. He was a nightmare that social worker. It was funny because I said to him ‘You haven’t even offered us any funding for bedding, clothing or anything for my sisters.’ He said ‘Well, you know, there are other people.’ They didn’t care, all they kept moaning about was shoes in the passageway and my flat was really small. If you’re really concerned about their health and their safety surely being in a small cramped place was not healthy for any of us.” - Marcia*

*“Social services didn’t want anything to do with it. Every time we rang they gave us a different number and I remember speaking to one person who really, really annoyed me and I got quite angry because I said I didn’t think a ten year old girl and a two year old boy should be sharing a bedroom and he said that lots of brothers and sisters share bedrooms. I said they weren’t brother and sister – they were auntie and nephew. When we applied for residence, CAFCASS got involved and the lady recommended that they slept in separate bedrooms. She said she couldn’t force social services, but she also felt that because of what Anne had been through, she should have some privacy. The court also said they could recommend them having separate bedrooms but couldn’t force social services.” - Linda*

*"I was awarded a Special Guardianship Order for my brother and they were ordered to make a payment of £130 (after deductions) a week to me by the court. You can imagine what a help that would be to me – I could even consider being able to save a bit towards my studies. To this day I have not received a penny from them and I have been chasing and chasing. This is two months down the line. Nobody has told me when I can expect to start receiving that payment. I have no idea as to when I will start to receive payments from them." - Althea*

*"One of the social workers came round to talk to us about financial support and means testing. Because I had copied my letter to my local MP, he had had written to [the local authority] and said 'You need to contact this family.' I don't think they would have bothered if it hadn't been for his interference. When the social worker came around and immediately – as happens so often – she sort of looked at us and because we had a nice home and were a nice family, she said the allowance was means tested and the most they could offer us would be £2000 a year and it would be reviewed annually and that was all we were entitled to." - Hermione*

*"On a couple of occasions when we asked for money, we just got this £25 in an envelope. But it was only after we raised a complaint that we were told that we were entitled to £45.12 a week and that was during the third time we had Elizabeth. On the fourth occasion we were just told to claim the child benefit and the tax credit and I asked for additional money because we had to pay for school lunch and Elizabeth had to attend the after school club three times a week because we were both working. I also asked for help with buying Elizabeth's clothes and I was told to buy the clothes and hand in the receipts and they gave me about £100 towards the clothes." - Anita*

*"Once the order was made I didn't really hear from them at all. They backed right off. I think they knew the children were fine and they just didn't care. The social worker we had went off on maternity leave and I didn't see another one for months and then she only came around once and that was to check that I was ok and said that if I didn't need them anymore they were going to sign us off. When the children first came to me, I felt that social services just wanted to take them away from me and I really felt they should have seen that I did need some support from them." - Melissa*

*"At the beginning they (children's services) brought around a food hamper. Also at the beginning we needed to get a skip to clear out dad's house and the skip cost £160 and they gave me £50 towards it. They paid for my little girl to go to a playschool – it would have been about £18 a week – and that's about it, really. They offered funding for Colin's army cadet camps and things like that and then after they had offered it, when I mentioned it another time they said they were a bit tight with funding and had to check with the manager. They never got back to me so we had to foot the bill ourselves." - Yolande*

Some of the sibling carers felt that when they approached the local authority because they were stressed or having genuine problems, they were simply not taken seriously:

*"I'm old enough to look after all of these kids – the social workers have made it pretty clear that they think I'm capable of looking after the children – but then I'm not always taken seriously when I'm telling them that I can't cope with Colin." - Yolande*

*"I feel like the local authorities listen more when it's coming from a third party, rather than me going directly to social services like I did. It didn't seem to carry any weight.*

*But if I had gone to a doctor and told him exactly the same thing, it would have carried much more weight.” - Sylvia*

*“I think being young, I don’t think I was taken seriously. I was perceived as being responsible for looking after Elizabeth but when it came to knowing the legalities and that, social services don’t inform you enough.” - Anita*

Four of the seven sibling carers who responded to the web-based survey stated they had received no financial support at all from the local authority, and no carer had received help with legal costs.

**Table 4**  
**What financial assistance have you received from the local authority?**  
**(Please tick all that apply)**

answered question      7		
skipped question      0		
	Response percentage	Response Count
None	57%	4
Single one-off payment	14%	1
Occasional one-off payments	0%	0
Weekly or fortnightly allowance	29%	2
Payments on special occasions, eg child’s birthday, Christmas, eid, etc	14%	1
Assistance with court costs and legal fees	0%	0

Sibling carers as part of the web-based survey were also asked what help which they didn’t receive, would have made a difference. Whilst financial matters are mentioned, importantly so are services, such as counselling for the carer as well as for the child, assistance with managing contact and mediation, support groups for carers, legal advice and respite. One respondent also wanted assistance with supporting their sibling’s transition to independence.

**Table 5**

**Is there any sort of help or support that you didn't receive, but which would have made a difference? (please tick all that apply)**

<b>answered question</b>	<b>7</b>	
<b>skipped question</b>	<b>0</b>	
	<b>Response percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Counselling for you	71%	5
One-off payments for particular items	71%	5
Support with managing your sibling's family contact	71%	5
Support groups	57%	4
Weekly allowance	57%	4
Respite care	57%	4
Legal advice	57%	4
Counselling for your siblings	43%	3
Social worker visits	29%	2
Mediation with other family members	29%	2

#### **5.4 Support from other agencies/organisations**

The sibling carers often felt better supported by other organisations or agencies that were involved with them than by the local authority. These organisations often seemed more sympathetic to their circumstances:

*"Their school was fantastic – they gave them free school uniforms, they helped me get a child minder, helped me get them into breakfast club. I was really blessed with the help and support that I got." - Marcia*

*"It was social services that told us about the Candle Project. It's funny that the social worker never came round to see if she was ok. Social Services just said that the Candle Project should be able to help us and I never realised that they had a sibling carers' group. I thought it was just for Yvonne so that she could get some counselling. When I phoned up they said there was a long waiting list but then a week later I got a letter asking me to come in and we've been on the list ever since. That's how I got help." - Marcia*

*"My boss was giving me hell – this guy I was working with – and when I told the overall boss, she said she would give me full pay for two months and when I was sorted out I could go back to work. I was really fortunate, plus they changed my hours to 8.30 so that I could take them to babysitters or whoever and then come to work." - Marcia*

*“I went to Children’s Information Service at one point because one of the major things that I found very stressful was the school holidays and they were great. They were able to sit down with me and speak to me about various child care providers, some of which were free within the area. That was very helpful. It would be good to know more people who would sit you down and tell you what is available out there.” - Althea*

*“My brother received counselling at his primary school which was great for him. My sister received counselling at secondary school but she will say it wasn’t great but I think at least she had the chance to do that. I’ve received no counselling and that is one of the things I am pushing again for social services to provide me with a family support plan because I think it’s really important.” - Althea*

*“They (the university) have been the best support. I don’t know what I would have done if I wasn’t at university because all my lecturers have been really understanding. Once I had to apply for mitigating circumstances – that was fine – due to my circumstances.” - Sylvia*

*“As of August last year he’s been in receipt of disability living allowance. I didn’t know that his conditions were classed as a disability to be perfectly honest. It was his consultant, when Eric was going in for his first operation, said that we should be getting DLA for Eric and he put us in touch with the correct authority so now we get high rate disability allowance for Eric.” - Hermione*

*“Family Rights Group was actually very helpful. The lady I spoke to sent me a letter to send into social services saying that they still had a duty of care to Elizabeth even though it was a private family arrangement. The letter said that if I hadn’t been there then Elizabeth would have had to be accommodated or placed in foster care. Social services seemed to acknowledge me a bit more and I think that was because the letter made them realise that we had spoken to someone who knew all the legalities. I wrote a letter to the assistant director of children’s services and enclosed that letter ... Just talking to Family Rights Group and going on the Discussion Board made me realise I wasn’t the only one. I got a bit downhearted wondering what I had done so wrong that social services are treating me like this but when you realise it had happened to a lot more people, it makes you think that social services are getting away with it and are just taking advantage of the fact that you are related to the child.” - Anita*

*“The person who I feel has helped me the most is Colin’s special needs worker at school. She’s just lovely – I’ve got her mobile number and I can phone her up any hour of the day that I want to talk to her about any of the kids – she’s helped us out financially, for example when Colin needs something urgently for school and I haven’t got the money, she has gone to the shop and bought it.” - Yolande*

## **5.5 Support from family and friends**

Several sibling carers also mentioned the support they had received from their extended family and friends network.

*“There was my dad and my step-mum who supported us really. Financially as well, at times we kind of managed to get by on the basics, but they would ask if we’d like some money to take her to the zoo and things like that and that was great really. Philip’s mum would bring us bits of shopping round and come and play with Amanda*

*and Elizabeth and take some of the stress off. Morally as well, they were supportive by telling us we were doing the right thing.” - Anita*

*“It’s the family dynamics – it changed my family for the future, forever. My parents became grandparents to Eric very quickly. They’ve now got all these grandchildren and the only grandson they’ve got is Eric who isn’t their biological grandchild.” - Hermione*

*“My best friend, for instance, her and I meet up. Luckily because my brother and sister weren’t that young, I can leave Colleen in charge of George at home while I go and see her but also she will come round. I went on holiday this year and I left her in charge of my brother and sister and they all got on very well and she was able to look after them for a week, which was great. It’s your own network and who you feel comfortable with, really because there will be people who think they are helping you when actually they are causing you more stress.” - Althea*

*“The main support we had was from my family. The day it happened my mum came down to Birmingham – her husband brought her and dropped her off here. She stayed in a hotel because she said we had too much to deal with in the house and she stayed and helped us trying to get through the first few days. My uncle and my granddad both sent us some money to pay for court fees and to just have a treat.” - Linda*

*“I’ll be honest with you – the most support I had was from my family. Especially Antonia. She really came alongside me and then Daisy is my other sister up north and she really helped out a lot with babysitting, giving me some time off to have a breather and stuff like that. My family have been really supportive ... Antonia has been wonderful because she would take them for the six weeks holiday to give me a bit of a breather. Or when it’s half term she would take them.” - Marcia*

## **5.6 Housing**

When the sibling care arrangement began, three of the sibling carers were still living at home with their sibling and the caring parent. The other nine were living in their own accommodation, five of them living alone and four with a spouse or partner. Although when interviewed, six of the siblings carers were raising their own children as well as their siblings, at the point when they became sibling carers only three of them were already parents.

Four of the sibling carers have been raising the children in their parents’ home and in all cases this has involved the group of siblings living in the home of a deceased parent. Three of these four sibling carers had already left home but moved back into the parental home so they could raise their siblings there. Seven of the sibling carers are raising the children in the carer’s own home although for two of the carers, this followed a period where they lived in their parents’ home with the children. One sibling carer has been living with her grandmother while she raises her younger brother. Housing has been a significant concern for many of the sibling carers:

*“At the time I wasn’t really applying for a residence order. I was just saying to social services could they help us out with other accommodation and they were saying to me ‘If we give you a flat you may just get rid of your sisters and keep the flat for yourself.’” - Marcia*

*“I was sleeping in the sitting room, the girls had my bedroom and it was just a very small flat ... there was no room to move. We were just in each other’s faces. It was*

overwhelming. [Being re-housed] really has helped. The girls have got their own space and I've got my own room now so I can just go off in there. It has made it a lot less stressful." - Marcia

"Buying a bigger house, our mortgage tripled. We were paying £300 for our mortgage before and now we are paying about £800 so that was a big jump." - Linda

"I felt really uncomfortable going in [to the Housing Department]. He was asking for really personal documents. I showed him the passports and he said 'I would also like to see the birth certificates so that I can see that you've both got the same parents.' It was just one thing after the other and I was really upset to the point where I said 'Forget about it. I don't want to go on it.' He'd say things like 'You know when you work it out in full, it's going to cost you £20,000 a year?' I said, 'How can it possibly cost so much? I'll go and speak to the housing benefit department upstairs.' She was nice. She wrote to me saying it wouldn't be anywhere near that. I don't understand why he was like that. I did complain to his manager after I'd spoken to the housing benefits lady because she said 'It's taxpayers' money that gives him his wages, you demand to have someone else.' I was so upset and I explained to the manager but he said 'Give him another chance. I'll speak to him and he won't talk to you like that again.' I said 'I'm not being rude but I have replied to every question he's asked, given him everything he's asked for but I feel uncomfortable. I feel like he's judging me. I'm doing my best here. Do you know how much money it costs for a child to remain in care?' I don't know why he felt like that towards me. So I ended up just saying 'Forget it.'" - Sylvia

"We were lucky because it was a housing association house and the housing company let me keep it ... we are really cramped." - Melissa

"The next thing is that we need a bigger house and I think that plays a big part in the way they act now. Even myself, you need your own space at times and we are very limited. So my aim for this year is to get a new house and to get settled." - Jill

## 5.7 Assessment

Sibling carers were raising their younger siblings under a variety of different legal arrangements: four have residence orders, three are fostering younger siblings who are 'looked after' and one is a special guardian. All of these legal arrangements would have required an assessment to be carried out of their suitability to be the child's caregiver. For the sibling carers with residence orders, this would have been a report for the court making the order but with no legally specified format. For the sibling carer who is a special guardian, there would have been a court report which provided the information that is required in the schedule to the Special Guardianship Regulations, 2005. The sibling carers who are foster carers would have gone through a fostering assessment which would have been presented to the local authority's fostering panel. All of these assessments would have the purpose of assisting with a decision as to whether the sibling carers were suitable people to be raising their younger brothers and sisters. Additionally, even where there was no legal order in place or the children were not looked after, the sibling carers may have been assessed by the local authority using the Common Assessment Framework, a standardised government approach to assessing what services children and young people need.

The sibling carers themselves were often not aware of the distinctions between the different types of assessment that they went through, just describing being visited by a social worker who asked them questions about themselves, so they could decide whether their little brother or sister could stay with them or not. These are some of the comments of the sibling carers about their experiences of being assessed:

*"Nobody else has checked us or anything. They asked Anne who she wanted to live with and she said us and the CAF/CASS officer recommended to the court that Anne come and live with us ... we had to go to an office. We took Anne out of school one day and that is the only contact that we have had ... They interviewed Anne separately. When they interviewed us they asked if we were willing to take on the responsibility and we said yes. They pointed out that we would be taking the place of Anne's parents and that it would be our responsibility to make decisions to do with Anne." - Linda*

*"In terms of the assessments we had, in total, four different social workers coming to our house on different occasions. The first one who was supposed to have done the assessment basically left the house crying after I went into some of the details around how it all came about. My brother and sister were upstairs and they witnessed her leaving in that state. The second person stuck at the case and he did a lot of work on assessments etc. and then he left and I know he tracked certain things because he sent emails telling me things had been tracked because he didn't want all the work that had been put in being lost and the majority of the work that he had put together was lost. I remember being very angry because there was a lot of personal data in amongst that. So the data was lost from all the assessments that were done. Our final social worker was able to start from scratch and complete the process and provide the court with the assessments." - Althea*

*"I remember they came round and asked me questions. Like what does a child need and stuff like. I replied food, love and things like that, giving them the right answers. I just said whatever came naturally to me and that obviously was alright. I know that they were in contact with Dwayne's school because at the time he was in reception as he had just started, and they said Dwayne was a lovely child and that he always came in on time and was clean and everything. Siobhan was only three and she was at nursery and social services also contacted them. The health visitor was involved for a while and I think she did the same ... I've got [the report] here somewhere. It showed that there were 'for' and 'against' factors for the children coming to me and the one 'against' was the fact that I was so young but at the end it said that social services recommended that I look after the children." - Melissa*

*"It wasn't easy and we had a few tears through the assessment because of the things we had to talk about so it's quite personal. My assessor was brilliant and she helped me get through it." - Harriet*

*"The social workers did [an assessment], I guess. Each time they came round they just sort of asked questions about the kids and I got an assessment back saying the case was closed. I got all the assessments back and they seemed to be about the kids' progress and that." - Yolande*

*"I think there have been basic assessments done where they took mine and Philip's names and dates of birth and just made visits to the house to check on Elizabeth. They've never actually sat down and said they were doing an assessment on our suitability to care for Elizabeth." - Anita*

Because family and friends carers are such a distinctive group of carers whose relationship to the children they are raising differs from foster carers or adopters who were previously unknown to the child, Family Rights Group has devised a form which is designed to assess the suitability of family and friends to raise a specific child. The form is designed to encourage the social worker and the carer to work collaboratively to produce the assessment report. Two of the sibling care arrangements that were the subject of this study were assessed to be foster carers using the Family Rights Group form. Comments on assessments using this form come from one sibling carer and one social worker:

*“I did a lot of it with [the kinship social worker] – he was a great help. Sometimes he would come here and be here for three hours and we would do the forms and he’d talk to the kids so we all understood. The assessment was done in great detail and it does go into every bit of your life but in the end, it’s good and it helps them to understand who you are and it helps you to answer things about yourself that you didn’t even think about. It was a long process but it was good.” - Jill*

*“The forms, I found, as being very much centred, I think, on what strengths potential family members can promote and strengths that might be different in related carers. With Keith, the assessment that I did was very painful for him and obviously the assessment asked quite a lot of personal questions about family and social history which Keith found very difficult. I think that the actual assessment forms promote working **with** prospective carers so for me the assessment felt like I was doing that **with** Keith rather than an assessment which was being done **to** him and I did that assessment quite creatively with Keith because I quickly discovered that Keith did find it very difficult to talk openly. He’s a man of very few words – he’s quite a shy person – and he found the questioning part of the assessment very difficult, so what we decided to do was I asked Keith if he would find it easier for him to do his own individual profile without my input and Keith said he thought that would be helpful if he could put it in his own words and so, basically, much of that assessment is Keith’s self-reporting of family history and his own views about his parents and what Andrew needs and I think that that makes the assessment even more child focused and you get a sense of the shared history of this family and these siblings ... I think the fact that the assessment was a very personal assessment, people learned a lot about Keith as a person, Keith as a carer. I felt it was very well received and I was complimented on the report. The fostering panel found it very powerful.” - Doris*

The sibling carers who became foster carers were able to attend personally the fostering panel, the local authority body which makes a recommendation about whether or not they can be approved as foster carers. The experience of going in front of the panel, which is a group of up to ten people making major decisions about people’s lives and futures, can be quite unnerving but the sibling carers who went found it ultimately rewarding:

*“I went to the fostering panel and [the social worker] came with me. He was really supportive ... It was a bit scary at the beginning. It is a huge responsibility, what you are taking on ... They were all so great and approved me straight away. They asked a few questions about what support I needed. They could see that I had given up work to look after the girls.” - Jill*

*“I went on my own with the social workers and the assessors. It was the scariest day of my life! I remember sitting there all sweaty but it was only ten minutes then we were sent*

*out and then when we went back in we were told that by a unanimous decision the answer was yes. It was so nice and I felt proud of myself for what I had done.” - Harriet*

## **5.8 The changing nature of the sibling relationship**

Becoming a sibling carer meant that the older siblings who took on that role had to change the nature of their relationship with their younger siblings. While some of them already had experience of caring for their younger brothers and sisters, others were not experienced at taking on that sort of responsibility and instead were used to a more relaxed relationship. If the children were babies or in their early years when they went to live with their older siblings, it could be easier for them to accept the older sibling's new role as their carer. If they were older, this could be more difficult, particularly if they had been through a bereavement or experienced other sorts of traumatic events in the family.

*“When mum was alive I used to always go there and take them gifts and different things and they just remembered me as a loving sister all along but when I took them on, I became a terrible monster! I couldn't understand it because I was really stressed out with a lot of things. I was in a lot of grief and I'd had two major operations. I don't even know how it came over. We've had a lot of tears, a lot of arguments. They are going to argue back because I'm not their mother, I'm their sister. I am aware that I'm not their mother. I'll get 'You're my sister, not my mother, you can't tell me that.' That still goes on sometimes now but not as bad as it was. I think with Yvonne, more than with Sandra, there was a lot of pain and a lot of anger and that's understandable. Also I feel some things I could have handled better but I'm still learning every day how to deal with my sisters. It was me on my own for such a long time and then to have two young girls, everything just changed.” - Marcia*

*“She's never turned round and said 'Well, you're not my mum,' but she has said that she has thought it.” - Linda*

*“It's hard because [Sandy] wants to be her brother so it's harder for him to lay down the rules rather than for me. Anne will sort of be more cheeky to him than she will be to me, and I will say 'You can't speak to him like that,' but she treats him like she always did when he was at home but it's different now.” - Linda*

*“There was also the adjustment because I enjoyed just being a sister and you almost have to say goodbye to that sister relationship, or the majority of it, because you then become their guardian and responsible for them so you have to give up some of that friendship that you had to be seen as a guardian or an authoritative person.” - Althea*

*“My relationship with Bob – we still have a really strong bond. I guess it's difficult for him because I am having to discipline him, really discipline him, and tell him off all the time and I'm irritable all the time because of the situation. I get irritated when he does things wrong or when he's demanding – that is another problem, he wants, he wants, he wants. Like every teenager he has to have it now.” - Sylvia*

*“I think Richard finds it extremely hard now because he wants to do all the brotherly things with Eric and they do have a really good relationship but I think there are times when Richard doesn't want to discipline him anymore. He just wants to be his big brother and have fun with him.” - Hermione*

*“I've gone from being a student to being a mum overnight, and having everything else*

*to deal with at the same time. It was really hard but after a few months I settled and by the next year it was just normal to me and they felt like they were my children. They don't call me mum but we've always been fine. It was what I wanted to do." - Melissa*

*"In the beginning it took time for us to get to know each other because they were set in their routines they had with mum and one of the questions one of them asked me was 'Where were you? Why weren't you there when mum was ill?' ... That was a really difficult question for me because obviously I felt I had let them down but it was different in that she wasn't just round the corner and I could pop in. She was far away and I would speak to her on the phone and she would just be different sometimes but she just sounded normal most of the time so I didn't really pick up on it." - Jill*

*"Luckily she is a good teenager. In the beginning when she first came to me, she was still in quite a lot of need in terms of health and nutrition and schooling support. She wasn't confident in her school work and she wasn't very street-wise, not that that's a necessary requirement. She just wasn't overall confident as most teenagers are, that you come across these days. It was a task for me to get her confidence back up but I had the assistance of the school and social services. We are quite a fit and active family anyway and she fitted into our routine. Although I was her sister, I had played a motherly role to her already so I just continued that on. I haven't wanted to replace my mum because we've got our mum and we see her weekly now. I don't want to be her mum – I'm her sister and her guardian and play a motherly role in that I guide her." - Charmaine*

*"At the very beginning, Colin was very angry and very quiet. He would just sit in the kitchen by himself. A friend of mine's dad took him out for a walk in the forest to walk a dog and she came back to me and said that Colin had told her that he was angry with himself because he was happy and he didn't know why because his dad had only died a week ago." - Yolande*

Some of the sibling carers did feel that it helped them to be accepted in their new role if the child was young when they came to live with them:

*"I think that was the key factor that he was so young. Had it happened when he was a couple of years older, I think that's possibly when you start having problems." - Hermione*

*"I think because she was so young she was quite accepting of that. When she was at my mum's she had little rules and boundaries and we maintained those. I think the circumstances around why she came to us made her glad to get to us to have a nice, safe house." - Anita*

## 5.9 Making the rules

Part of stepping into the shoes of being a parent has involved the sibling carers having to establish the rules of the house: what is bedtime, who is going to do the dishes, what time can children stay up until, how late can they stay out with their friends? In some cases, the younger siblings were being brought up in chaotic homes where there were few clear rules and guidelines on how they were expected to behave, so their sibling carer has had to introduce these boundaries into their lives. While it is important for younger siblings to accept that their older brother or sister has the authority to make these rules, they do sometimes express their resentment at this being done by someone who is not their parent.

*"The eldest one wanted to run up and down the streets with her friends, so that's going to be a no. My elder sister would back me up on this so it wasn't just me. They know that there's no gallivanting up and down the street. I never did that when I was young so it's not happening to them. If they want to go to the cinema, if they want a little birthday party, I'm free for that. At the same time they've got to understand that I need to know who their friends are and I'm not just going to let them go off with anybody. They do understand that. I think I must get on their nerves sometimes, but then I think that it didn't hurt me when I was younger." - Marcia*

*"She has to follow the rules that we would give to our own son if he was that age so she's got a bed time. We are up against a battle at the moment where some of her friends are allowed to go into [the city] but we're not happy with that and we've talked to her about it and we have said that we will let her go to local towns but we won't let her go to [the city] because we don't think she's ready. We have said, 'You live in our house so you have to obey the rules,' but she's at that age when her friends are doing it." - Linda*

*"I think in some respects it was easier to start because she wasn't at that age where she was trying it on but after a year she started questioning us. Now that she's a teenager 'I want my freedom,' but she's still only thirteen. Sometimes she'll say, 'I'm going swimming,' and I say 'But you have to ask permission,' and she does find that hard. I think she got away with quite a lot at home. Sandy said that quite often he would pop around and she'd got the day off school because she said she didn't feel well whereas we are quite strict about her being in school as it's very important. We are stricter and she doesn't like that." - Linda*

*"I just find it hard knowing how to deal with certain things. With your own children you grow with them and they are used to your rules from day one. They will argue with you but they've never known any different whereas with Anne, I feel we are at the point where we are up against somebody else's rules in the background." - Linda*

*"It was very difficult because they were used to my mum doing things a particular way. The main thing was that I wasn't their mum." - Althea*

*"We knew that we were responsible for Eric, we had to become his parents and take on more of a parental role and really I don't know how we managed. I don't think we ever stopped to think, back then, what was going on. We just got on with it. It was a case of doing the practical things – getting him up, giving him breakfast, taking him to nursery, that sort of thing. Disciplining has been hard. That was the hardest thing when he was younger because you've got to discipline children for them to be loved and in a stable environment. It's very hard when it's not your own flesh and blood and since I've had my own daughters I've noticed that there is that slight difference. I'll quite happily tell Penny off, whereas with Eric when he was younger, he kind of pulled on our heartstrings." - Hermione*

*"I don't have any problems with Dwayne regarding that but I think Siobhan sometimes feels, 'Well, you can't tell me'." - Melissa*

*"You can only be their friend to a certain extent and I do feel bad at times because I think maybe I should be more fun." - Jill*

*“Before it was all fun and games and me taking treats for her at contact and now me being her sole carer and telling her what not to do and giving her boundaries can be a little bit tough sometimes.” - Harriet*

## **5.10 Parents, family and contact**

Of the twelve sibling care arrangements described in this study, there is one where both of the children’s parents have died and one where the girl who was being raised by her older sister has returned to live with her mother. This leaves ten sibling care arrangements where the children are living away from parents who are alive.

In four of these ten sibling care arrangements, the mother of the children being raised has died. In five of the remaining six arrangements, the children are having contact with their mother and there is only one arrangement where the children are not having contact with a mother who is alive and in this instance, it is the mother’s choice. In four of the ten sibling care arrangements, it was reported that the children were having contact with their father although for two of them the contact is by telephone only; one with a father who is in prison and the other with a father who lives abroad. One of the other fathers has died and the whereabouts of four of the fathers is unknown. Another father is considered by the children’s sibling carer to be living a lifestyle that would make it unsuitable for him to have contact with them since he is in and out of prison, even if he was interested in seeing his children. In both of the sibling care arrangements where children are having direct contact with their father, they are also having direct contact with their mother.

Behind these figures about who is and isn’t having contact with their parents, there is clearly the potential for contact to become an extremely difficult issue, particularly where it might involve a sibling carer coming into conflict with their own parents or the child’s parents, over contact. Sibling carers might well find themselves having to stand up to pressure from people who consider themselves to be in a position of parental authority towards the children. In fact, some of the fathers who are no longer in contact with the children have chosen to cease their contact after such a conflict with the sibling carers over plans for the child, such as who the child should live with.

In some cases, it has been possible to resolve the issue of the children’s parental contact quite amicably. This seems to be most likely to happen where the parent has accepted that they will be unable to raise the child themselves and has accepted the sibling care arrangement as the best option for keeping the child in the family although even here, the contact is not always problem-free:

*“With my mum he really struggles not seeing her because even though I did most things for him anyway, he really misses his mum. I know that accounts for half the time he was taking off school. I was being blamed for that as well: ‘Does he see his mum, is he allowed to see his mum?’: ‘Yes, he’s allowed to see his mum but not during school.’ I will take him on the weekends to see her.” - Sylvia*

*“The last time my mum came down to stay was over Christmas and then a few weeks ago my mum’s brother came down and took the kids up there on a Saturday for me. To have her here is difficult because she’s in a different sort of pattern herself and she smokes a lot (I also smoke but not in the house) and my mum will sit up the whole night – one night I slept on the sofa and woke up at three o’clock and my mum was still up - by the time she goes to bed it could be 4a.m. and then soon after, the*

*kids are getting up. I'm not blaming her because she can't help it owing to her sleep patterns so it's just difficult for all of us."* - Jill

*"My mum still has parental responsibility for the children but she doesn't have the capacity to look after them but I think the main part of that is for her to still feel she is involved with the children. If the girls go on trips – like they sometimes go away in the holidays on trips to Sussex and do water activities and stuff like that – she still has to sign the permission slip. She always has to know what the children are up to which is good ... She's really happy that they are with me."* - Jill

*"We usually meet in [town] and my mum comes and helps me with the shopping and then helps me bring it home and unpack and then she might stay for a cup of tea. We went to my mum's for Christmas dinner and that was okayed by social services ... my mum's really happy. She knows I'm doing a good job and she's even said to my sister that the girls are better off with me which is hard for her to admit."* - Harriet

*"To begin with my mum was based in hospital for a year and we were based in [another region]. We used to drive down and my mum was always happy to see us and we were happy to see her. Over Christmas my mother has come to stay with us and we have had to notify the authorities of what was happening. As Pauline is now a teenager and leading a sociable life, she doesn't necessarily want to go and visit my mum every weekend but we do still go when she wants to."* - Charmaine

One carer described the problems of contact with a mother who has mental health issues:

*"On the first two occasions before Amanda was born and my mum was sectioned, I just took Elizabeth to the hospital to see her. I was told that on all occasions it had to be supervised by myself or someone else. During the hand over time when my mum came out of hospital, contact had to be supervised until social services were satisfied. It was quite hard because my mum wasn't very responsive at times and she would walk out of the room and things which I felt wasn't fair on Elizabeth as she was so young. On the third and fourth occasions after we'd had Amanda, I said that I wasn't going to take Elizabeth, let alone my own baby, to a mental health unit to sit with my mum while she was acting daft with mental health issues."* - Anita

Sibling carers described conflicts between themselves and the children's fathers. Sometimes this was a legal conflict which was part of a court process but sometimes the conflict was not part of any legal process.

*"I would take the girls there and there would be supervised contact and he didn't really like that so there was a lot of fuss about that. There were times when he was allowed to take the girls out and then bring them back. I think it moved on and I didn't really have problems with him taking them out and bringing them back but he was just very critical and didn't like certain things ... and that really hurt me because I would never ask him for money and he hadn't put anything into them and he was also attacking my character and saying they weren't going to have a good education but then I want them to have the best. Even now, I'm still fighting for them to have the best at school so it's not to say that I wanted them to grow up being nobodies ... Well this is the thing because we all went to the courts – he was lovely, Judge Crichton. He said to the dad, 'Don't you think you should thank Marcia for what she has done?' and the dad just wasn't having any of it. The judge gave the dad parental responsibility and he gave me parental responsibility but I got the residence order and that's the thing that he was fighting for."* - Marcia

*“Just around the time of the funeral he promised us that he was going to play a big part in Eric’s life and that he was going to support us – not financially, just emotionally – and he was going to have Eric for holidays and weekends and he had him for one week just after the funeral and Richard and I went away for a week and when we got back we realised that it was probably one of the worst things that we could have done because his partner who he was with then, didn’t want Eric around so it was in Eric’s interests not to go to his dad’s again. To be honest, he started messing around – he would say he would come around on Friday and then not turn up and Eric would be sitting waiting for him. This happened a couple of weekends in a row and then in the end he demanded to see me and Richard and we went to a meeting with him and I said that Eric was a vulnerable little boy who needed stability and his dad decided then he couldn’t commit to regular contact and he said that he was going to fight for custody in court. I said to go ahead as we would win hands down after looking after Eric for so long and he got really angry and upset because he thought it was all down to money. I said if he couldn’t commit then it was basically better for all parties that he didn’t play a part in Eric’s life. He told me I should look over my shoulder for the rest of my days and threatened the two of us and I decided Eric was better off without him in his life. That was in late 1997 and we haven’t seen or heard from him since.” - Hermione*

*“I know the police were involved with him when the children were there. One time the children were staying the night because he had a wife. He met this woman who actually turned out not too bad and she was a nice woman. I was trying to ring so that I could go and pick the children up and his ex-wife answered and she said that she had been called to go and pick Dwayne and Siobhan up – she had taken them somewhere else and he was in prison. Nobody had told me that this had gone on. At that point I made it clear to the police that if anything ever happened I needed to be called, not anyone else ... He’s in prison now. I think he’s in for about ten years for threatening to kill someone with a gun – he actually had a gun. This is what I am up against all the time. I have to try and keep on the right side of him all the time and it’s really hard. Even now that I’ve got a husband and I’m not on my own anymore, it’s still hard because we don’t want to mess Bill about or say the wrong thing because I’m a little intimidated.” - Melissa*

*“I went to the CSA once and asked for maintenance because Dwayne wanted to do football and I didn’t have the money. You needed to pay a £50 joining fee and then £5 a week. Even as an alcoholic, Bill used to work full time. My application from the CSA came back that all he could pay was £40 per week and then Bill phoned me up and said he would rather give his job up than pay me anything and that’s what he did. He said that if we could afford to go away on holiday we didn’t need any money from him.” - Melissa*

In general, the sibling carers did not report problems around contact with other family members such as grandparents or other siblings. Although some family members, particularly aunts and uncles, seemed to have distanced themselves from the sibling care arrangement, where there was contact with other family members, it was able to take place in a fairly natural way, without any particular arrangements having to be made to safeguard the children. One carer movingly reported that following her mother’s death, a family split had been repaired:

*“We didn’t see our gran, on my mum’s side, for about twenty years, so when my mum passed away I had to go and find her to tell her the bad news ... It’s funny that I kept on dreaming of where my gran lives now and that was before my mum passed*

*away. It was really weird. The girls love it because our gran is always hugging them and laughing and joking ... My mum and my gran just cut the ties and it was sad that it took my mum passing away to bring us together again ... My mum used to take us around there and our gran used to look after us. When I had to find her, I looked her up on the electoral roll and then went there to find her.” - Marcia*

Sadly, one sibling carer did find herself being blamed by her grandmother for her mother’s hospitalisation:

*“My nan at this time was just blaming me completely for the fact that she thought I somehow had the powers to section a basically sound-minded woman and that it was my fault and for some reason she felt that I needed or wanted to take Elizabeth off my mum, that I was doing it for the money which was laughable really because we had received hardly anything for the time that Elizabeth had been with us. My nan presumed that we were getting some kind of foster care allowance for Elizabeth.” - Anita*

### **5.11 A different way of life**

All the sibling carers reported that becoming a sibling carer had made a huge difference to their way of life. Many were already in work or in further education when they became sibling carers and had to make life-changing decisions about whether to continue with these or not. The carers were all young people themselves, aged between 18 and 30 at the point when they decided to take responsibility for their younger sibling(s), and apart from considerations of work and education, many were leading the typical life of a young person in that age range, enjoying holidays and the company of friends, without having too many responsibilities. Five of the sibling carers had already left home and were living alone while a further four were living with partners, of whom three already had children of their own. Three were still living at home. In deciding on whether to become a sibling carer, they had to make decisions about where they would live – for example, would they return to the home where a parent had just died or take their sibling(s) in to live with them in an overcrowded flat?

*“I think the only thing that is difficult is with going to work, collecting them from after school club and managing the time if they were sick or I was sick. As they’ve got older, in some ways it’s been easier. The girls are fantastic because they will cook, they will clean. I’ve taught them how to cook so they know how to cook a proper meal. They do their washing and ironing but sometimes I help out.” - Marcia*

*“Every couple of weeks there would be something that came up and she went through a number of issues that made it difficult for me to continue my work and continue at home as well. There was a lot of pressure – I was still adjusting to what I had to do – but on top of that, she became a more difficult child to raise because of what she had gone through.” - Althea*

*“I feel a significant amount of pressure on me now that I’ve got full time carer responsibilities. When I was at my mum’s I was helping her trying to get him to school, doing this, taking him there. It was still my mum having to deal with the school and my mum having to deal with the authorities and social services etc. But now it’s me, it’s like, ‘We are going to fine you, that’s the next stage, you could possibly end up in court.’ So I do feel a lot of pressure, I feel a lot of stress and I can’t really do as I want ... there’s no time really for me right now. I do notice that if they [other students] are going out for drinks after lectures I’ll think ‘Oh no, I can’t go, I’ve got to see to Bob*

or I've got to cook the dinner.' and it's just stress because it's the night and he's going to start." - Sylvia

"I worked for a massive media publishing house and I went into work in the June to say that in September I would need to have a couple of weeks part time when Eric started school. I was perfectly happy to take it unpaid because I needed to get Eric settled into school and during the first two weeks they were going half days and during that time I was going to try and sort out a child minder. They weren't at all accommodating at work and said because I was a manager, I was needed there and to cut a long story short, I handed in my notice. That's when I gave up my career and aspirations and dreams of working for big glossy magazines. At that point I kind of fell into working in the family business, purely for that reason and now it's a little more than a part time job but it does fit in around the children. So in that sense, when you become a sibling carer you do have to give things up. I've given up my career and I don't regret it now, not for one moment." - Hermione

"I was working full time and they just made it quite difficult because they weren't aware of what was really happening and I suppose that, with no legal status for Elizabeth and they weren't very understanding of the fact that I was going to work full time and that suddenly I had the responsibility of this toddler. I left there in the end and I found a part time job thinking that when my mum came out of hospital she would need more help." - Anita

"I was living in my mum's house because she was away and I was looking after my thirteen year old sister but it's been a bit hard on her and my relationship because she was very close to me before but now we don't really get to see each other because she's not really allowed to stay over much. I was only working in the supermarket and I didn't go out a lot because I liked being at home with my family. To be honest, it's made my life a lot happier and I've made their lives happier, so I've loved doing this." - Harriet

"I've been looking in the papers and things but everywhere wants qualifications and that's what I need to get and I don't have the time anymore." - Yolande

"One of the things that struck me about the difference in the sibling placement is that at the time that Andrew was placed with Keith in 2008, Keith had been accepted on a three-year degree course. Keith is an absolute genius with computers – he designs computer programmes – and because Andrew went to live with him, Keith put those plans on hold. I think that really struck the fostering panel that Keith had made quite a big sacrifice – his dreams, what he wanted – for Andrew." - Doris, social worker

## 5.12 Others in the household

Of the twelve sibling carers described here, four were living with a spouse or partner at the point when they became a sibling carer and of those, three already had children of their own. The situation later on, when the interviews took place, was that six of the carers were living with a spouse or partner and all six now had children of their own although one of the six had stopped being a sibling carer when her sister had returned home to live with her mother. None of the sibling carers was raising a child of their own without the support of a spouse or partner living with them. In addition to these six carers, one of the remaining six sibling carers was living with her grandmother and another sibling. The other five were living in households which consisted solely of them and their siblings.

The interviews with the sibling carers explored the relationships that the children they were raising had with others in the household. What was the relationship like between the siblings being raised and the carers' own children? What was the relationship like between the siblings being raised and the carers' partners? How had being a sibling carer affected their ability to meet a partner and form a relationship – and was it even a consideration for them?

In two instances, the sibling carer's spouse was the main interviewee. Both of these women explained why entering into the sibling care arrangement had been such a positive decision for them:

*“People say, ‘Oh, I don’t know how you do it,’ and I say what would they do if it was their sister or brother? We didn’t even hesitate that day. The first thing I did was go and get her. You don’t leave somebody that you love, to suffer.” - Linda*

*“It’s having unconditional love. It’s seeing what kind of child he’s turned out to be although he’s becoming a young man now. I’ve done my absolute best by him and it’s worked. It’s just knowing that we’ve done something so selfless and so wonderful for somebody else. I’ve got a son that I would never have had. We’re a very, very close-knit family. It made me mature very quickly; it’s taught me a lot of life’s lessons.” - Hermione*

However, they both also reported that the sibling care arrangement had led to some difficulties, including in their relationship with their partner:

*“Richard went into his shell and it was a couple of days before the funeral and he said he wouldn’t go to the funeral directors or the solicitors because he didn’t feel like it and he was obviously grieving for his mum and he went off with his friends for a drink. When he came back he’d had a bit too much to drink and I was upset because I had had to do everything and I just said to him, ‘I just can’t do this anymore,’ and I walked out and went to my mum’s. I took Eric with me and then the following morning I took Eric to nursery, I went home and I just said to Richard, ‘That’s it. After the funeral I’m gone. I want to go back to my mum’s.’ Something just snapped in me but we carried on that day and then we organised the funeral and did what we had to do and Richard was most apologetic. I just felt totally the pressure was all on me. I picked Eric up after nursery that day and I put him in the car seat and I sat there and just cried and cried. I remember saying to him ‘I’m not letting anyone take you away from me. I’m here for the long run,’ and that was it. I think it was Eric. I just thought I couldn’t leave and if I went anywhere I would take him with me. There have been moments over the years when I have thought, ‘Why am I doing this?’ but it’s because I care.” - Hermione*

*“I wouldn’t advise against becoming a sibling carer because I think it’s instinct to do it but I would say to try and talk to somebody and be honest about it because I have found that when we didn’t talk about it and bottled it up, it became almost too difficult to cope with. I think there are some relationships that wouldn’t survive it because it can be so difficult.” - Linda*

*“It’s put a strain on our relationship and we have had a few arguments about it but we’ve got through it.” - Sandy*

*“The relationship between you and the child [is] changing and it’s constantly changing even now. There are days when Eric wants me to be mum and I feel like mum and*

*there are days I feel like a complete outsider – because Richard and Eric have this blood link and Eric and I haven't got that.” - Hermione*

One sibling carer did have to work through some initial reservations with her partner over making a long-term commitment:

*“I was quite emotional about the situation and quite unsure about what was going to happen. At the time I did say that I was being pressured by social services to make a long-term decision and I did have to take into consideration the feelings of my partner as well. He was willing to supply boarding and lodging. He doesn't take any independent role as a father to her but he has been supportive in acknowledging that she is my sister and he wouldn't want to see her placed in the care system and if being with us was the only option other than going into the care system, then he was supportive of that. He did want to know what other options there were and there weren't any other options. I said that as we were quite a young couple (twenty-seven and twenty-eight) and his career was one where we moved around quite a lot, we would have to consider if it was the best thing for our family. We had one child at this time and I was planning another child so there was a lot to consider and we just needed that time. We couldn't just decide straight away. By the end of that six month period we were more confident in how it was going to work long-term.” - Charmaine*

Sibling carers described the difficulties they experienced with finding a partner or getting involved in a relationship, when they already had responsibility for a younger child who had not been born to them. Some sibling carers who were not involved in a relationship, had deliberately avoided bringing someone else into the household. Other carers who were involved with partners had decided that it would be easier if the partner did not move in with them.

*“I never have any male friends coming round here unless they know me really well. I wouldn't have just anybody coming here. I've had a few people who have come and approached me but then they'd have silly questions like, 'If we were to get married, what would happen to your sisters?' I want the girls to be of a certain age before I have a relationship with anybody. Sandra's thirteen and I want her to be about sixteen/seventeen. When they are a bit more settled then maybe I can look at my own relationships.” - Marcia*

*“At the moment, and at the time, I had a boyfriend. We've been together seven years now. He and my brother and sister get on really well and they did do before my mum passed away. Over the last two years, there have been plusses in that he can come to mine and also going to his as well but then I just think that for him it's quite difficult because it's two different properties and not one that he can say is his home and I can't leave to go and be with him. We can't go and set up anywhere because financially that's not an option. It limits us quite a bit. What planning we may have been looking to do in the next couple of years – I'm twenty-six now – isn't limited but just a little bit more complicated.” - Althea*

*“Philip has always been fantastic. He has accepted everything and we've done it together like a family. Philip finds it hard when my mum and nan have been so hard against me. In his eyes we were doing my mum a favour and without us, Elizabeth would have had to go into the care of the local authority.” - Anita*

*"I must admit it was difficult when I met my partner. I was a girl and I had two children that weren't mine. I wasn't working because Siobhan was still young and the last thing she needed was to be put into day care. Luckily Walter was fine with it all and we've been together nine years. It was quite difficult like when he wanted to go out and we couldn't." - Melissa*

*"He [Laurence]'s got a son anyway who he's looked after since he was a baby and he's always had to support that. Because he's had Jack, we've always done family things on the weekend so I've been used to having kids around and before I had the girls, Laurence and Jack and myself would go up there and take the girls out so they knew about that ... our time together is spent with the children so it's more of a family unit, so that's fine. He may come at night during the week when his son is with his nan and the girls are in bed and then we'll spend the weekend together and then we all do something together. It's important that none of the children feel left out." - Jill*

*"I'm not allowed to have anyone stay over and if I was to get into a relationship with someone they would have to have the CRB check but I'm really not looking to get into a relationship with someone for a long time ... that's my choice anyway, to be on my own." - Harriet*

*"My boyfriend and Colin clash badly because Colin is taller than me and my boyfriend Steve – he's the one who saved me from my ex and helped me to be who I am now – and if he sees my little brother towering over me sort of raising his hand to me and shouting at me, he gets angry and then I'm stuck in the middle and it's really stressful." - Yolande*

Sibling carers also discussed the relationship that their younger siblings enjoyed with their own children. In some cases, the sibling carers already had children when their younger sibling came to live with them but some children were also born after the younger siblings arrived in the household. Children whose birth relationship with each other was as aunts and uncles with nephews and nieces had effectively become each other's siblings because they were being brought up together.

*"Most of the time [Robert and Anne] get on alright, but they're at an age now where they argue. He's trying everything out. He's just in his second term at school. Anne treats him as if he's really young because she's known him since he was a baby and he gets cross with her. He doesn't call her Auntie Anne, he just calls her Anne because she's lived here for most of his life. I don't think he can remember anything without her here ... He will say 'That's my auntie.' He knows what an auntie is because he's got my sister as well ... If Anne goes to stay with her auntie or a friend, he doesn't seem too bothered that she's gone. When she comes back he's not bothered either. I guess that's because things have always been like that." - Linda*

*"I don't tend to talk about this a lot but most women, when they go home with their first born, they can just lollop around for a few weeks with their newborn but when I came home from hospital with my first baby, Penny, I couldn't have that because I had a six and half year old to look after who happened to be Richard's little brother. That was really difficult and Eric had to go from being our be all and end all to having to share us with this little person." - Hermione*

*"I had a little bit of an issue at school not so long ago where she told one of the teachers her uncle had hit her and the school called me in and said that that was not*

appropriate. When I explained to them that she meant Eric and that they had had a sibling argument, they were quite understanding then. Penny had thought it was really cool to go to school and say she had had a fight with her uncle.” - Hermione

“I’d think that Amanda is not getting as much as she would have because we had another child to care for. Elizabeth got more attention because of the situations that she’d been in and it was really important to get Elizabeth into routines and then it was hard to carry that on with Amanda.” - Anita

“There are times when it has been difficult – it hasn’t all been great. There have been occasions when there has been sibling rivalry between my daughter and her because they are just like normal sisters. As in any other household, they argue about who’s going to do what – just normal day to day things. I don’t actually set out tasks for them to do. At one stage I did set out tasks for them to do but then Pauline was comparing anything she had to do with what my daughter had to do and I’ve had to break that down and explain that because my daughter is younger, she will have different things to do.” - Charmaine

“Wesley is really good with the younger ones. This sounds really nasty but Wesley is the only normal one out of the three. Dahlia has got serious behaviour problems and she crawls around at school pretending to be a dog at school and that sort of thing. Then Colin with his attitude and his special needs, Wesley is just a normal child. Stewart and Ruby settled really well with him ... My little girl, Ruby, ended up being given sleeping medication by the doctor. She still goes through it now but I’m not giving her the medicine anymore because I don’t want her to get immune to it. She really clings to me and the only reason she sleeps now is because I bought a blow up bed and put it in the living room and since they have moved in she won’t let me out of her sight. It’s almost like she’s scared they would take her mum away.” - Yolande

The carer who is living with her grandmother described the effect that this has had on her relationship with her grandmother:

“With my nan, it has really affected our relationship in a negative way. She moans – I would have had a hard afternoon at university and I come back and Bob will have done something and she’ll start moaning at me and go on and on and I’ll snap. I feel really bad afterwards because she’s old. I love my nan but sometimes she drinks and if Bob sees anyone drink he’ll start, he’ll wind her up ... It’s a shame because I used to be really close to my nan. With old age she’s started to lose her memory and that’s really difficult as well.” - Sylvia

The same carer also feels that her younger brother, who lives in the household with them, could be more helpful:

“My middle brother is on board. He could help me more – a lot more – but he’s like, ‘No, you wanted to do this. You should have left him [with his father]. It’s your fault.’ That kind of attitude. Don’t get me wrong – sometimes he will help me, but he gets so fed up any way.” - Sylvia

### 5.13 Challenges and rewards of being a sibling carer

Sibling carers were asked in their interviews whether there had ever been times when they had felt like giving up being sibling carers. Although some admitted to having felt

this at some point, all were glad that they had persisted with raising their younger siblings. They spoke very warmly of their love for their little brothers and sisters and described how important it had been to them to keep the family together. All were able to describe some challenging times they had experienced as sibling carers but they all felt these were outweighed by the rewards of staying together.

Sibling carers explained that they had been kept going by their commitment towards the children and the support they had received from other people.

*"Many times I've thought, 'I can't do this anymore, I just can't take it.' ... Friends, family [kept me going]." - Marcia*

*"I think sometimes I've found it harder than Sandy and sometimes he's found it harder than me and you wish you weren't in this situation but you wouldn't do it any other way. What would have happened to her? Sometimes you think, 'Oh, I wish it was back like it was,' and then you feel guilty for thinking that. But then you don't have anybody supporting you through it. That's what I found hard because nobody wants to know. I think that was the biggest thing we found all through this. Nobody's interested. Nobody cares. Everybody is shocked at the situation you're in and they're shocked that we don't get any finance or help but then it's not them having to deal with it, so it kind of goes out of their minds but to us we have to think about how we can deal with it every day. I think with your own child or children you just do it naturally and obviously Anne has had ten years of living with somebody else's rules and then has had to come and live with ours. That's hard because it's not like she was so young that she can't remember what it was like." - Linda*

*"I wouldn't ever see my sister go into care. There are some times when I've wished that there was a father figure or grandparents just because of my own personal needs, let alone Pauline's." - Charmaine*

The sibling carers also outlined the ways in which they felt they might have been better supported. There was a strong feeling among the sibling carers that they could have been better supported by children's services, particularly at the start of their younger siblings' placement with them. The actual nature of the support they would have liked varied but included advice, legal information, re-housing, respite care, and in some cases, just being taken more seriously:

*"To be honest, I think the housing. That was the worst thing because if someone is still grieving and looking after two young children it's just crazy living in a one bedroom flat but we managed. We had friends come over and we went out different places." - Marcia*

*"I think what would have been quite nice for me would have been to talk to someone who is about my age who has been through it because then you could talk about your problems and they could advise and tell you if there is any help. Three years down the line we are a lot more used to it ... I think people need advice and somebody to talk to. That is what we couldn't get and we needed it." - Linda*

*"It would have been nice if we could have moved house much earlier on because it was extremely difficult for Colleen to stay on there after the death of my mother. It would have been great if social services could have supported a claim to the housing association for a transfer or something." - Althea*

*"I wish I had been provided with more information about where I could get support. I don't really know what support they could give me because everything I've basically asked for they've turned me down. Just having that information about finances because I could maybe have sorted that out earlier and not have had as much stress about it." - Sylvia*

*"I wish I had pushed social services for more help. If it was today and it happened to one of my friends, I would know exactly what to do. I wish that I'd got my solicitors to sort out a proper legal status for Eric with social services. I wish I had got the proper financial support and the emotional support. I wish I had sorted out bereavement counselling for the three of us. I wish we hadn't stayed in the house. I wish the three of us had moved and made a fresh start. Definitely I wish that somebody had said to me, 'Right, if you go here, this is where you can get help and support' because I think that would have made a huge difference in the early days." - Hermione*

*"I wish I'd known a lot more about the legalities and what social services take into account to remove a child and what all the different terms like 'child in need', 'child protection', 'case conference', etc actually meant. It was very confusing. If we'd known more about all those terms at the time, we would have gone about things differently." - Anita*

*"Maybe someone to take them for a few days. It's not so bad now but when they were younger it would have helped." - Melissa*

*"The only ones I've never had support off are the local authority. The best people who have ever given me support are the Family Rights Group and the people from the Family Group Conference and [the kinship care team leader] who came to the meeting and then from June my new [kinship care team] social worker. Since I've had their support it's been fine but the only lack of support has been from the local government." - Jill*

*"Although I coped really well with Yvette moving in, I think I could have been given a little more support instead of it being three or four weeks until I spoke to anyone. It was always me having to ring them. I was really quite annoyed about that." - Harriet*  
*"I feel as though I've had to question a lot. I'm not the most academic person but I am sensible and I do have a lot of common sense. I don't think, overall, that social services would have provided us, as a family, with information/assistance if I had not requested things or thought about things myself." - Charmaine*

*"I don't know if it's just me expecting more than what I am meant to get but sometimes I'm still kind of put out about Colin because of the way they handle it. Because of my age I feel like they are not taking me seriously – that my teenage hormones are rambling down the phone at them – and it's hard because I've been saying the same thing to them for two weeks solid now and each time, I hope that they can see that these things happen. They still talk to me like I'm a teenager and it annoys me sometimes." - Yolande*

## 5.14 Looking to the future

Despite the difficulties they had experienced, most sibling carers felt that in raising their younger brothers and sisters, they had done something very worthwhile and felt optimistic when they looked to the future.

*"I just want my sisters to grow up and be happy. I would like them to do well in their schooling, to be balanced, not to be too wild, to be able to handle themselves and manage things themselves. They can be quite headstrong at times and that's a worry. I just want them to achieve their dreams; to be happy with themselves." - Marcia*

*"I'd like to support Colleen for as long as she needs me to be there, as long as she doesn't make that too difficult for me. Whether she's living in the house or not living in the house is completely up to her. When she needs me, I'll be there for her. With George, just continue to support him and be that contributor to his life and ensure he has all the options that I had – that's really important – and just for him to do well at school and for Colleen to complete her A Levels; just for everyone to be really settled." - Althea*

*"I would love to achieve a 2-1 in my degree so that I can get a good job to carry on supporting him. I'm hoping that this new school that he's going to be going to will be able to give him the support and encouragement he needs to want to go to school and to just get on with it because that'll be a big weight off my shoulders. I just don't want that stress on me and I hope Bob can settle down. That's why I really feel that if he could have a social worker it would really benefit him because at the moment I don't really think he knows where he stands." - Sylvia*

*"It's going to be kind of strange in a few years time when Eric decides to fly the nest. I'm not sure how I'm going to cope with that. It's no different to anybody else when their eldest decides to leave home. I'm ok with the idea of him going off to university but not too keen on the idea of him leaving home yet! I would like to think that he's got an established future ahead. Like all teenagers, he just needs steering in the right direction every now and again." - Hermione*

*"I hope that if my mum does have another episode, that Elizabeth would come back to us, but I don't know how it would be arranged – if it would be another private family arrangement or if the authorities would bring her to us. It would be very difficult to go to court and fight my mum to have Elizabeth placed with us." - Anita*

*"In the future I hope they will go to university and do well for themselves and be normal, stable people." - Melissa*

*"I'd like the girls to get their therapy and for them to be happy. No matter what they've been through, they are not sad children but they have been through so much." - Jill*

*"I'd love to move to a bigger house so the girls could each have their own bedrooms. The next year all I can see is us having a nice summer, going on holiday together and in the future I can see just happiness for the girls ... This is it! I will never mess up because I would never let myself do it. This is where they will be forever." - Harriet*

*"I would just like to continue the relationship we have got and just be as we are really and for her eventually to become independent. Just to be there for one another in the future, whatever road she decides to go on, whatever she decides to do work-wise, career-wise or family-wise." - Charmaine*

*"I'd like things to end up where Colin's doing what he wants to do and goes into the army and that Dahlia just ends up being a normal girl as a thirteen year old girl should be. I'd like Wesley to carry on being the way he is and for Stewart and Ruby to carry on being my two babies and not change too much with all the older children's influence." - Yolande*

## 6. Sibling carers using Family Rights Group's online discussion forum

Family Rights Group hosts an online discussion forum for all family and friends carers. Once registered, family and friends carers are able to use this forum as an arena for discussions about life as a family and friends carer. Often carers describe problems that they are going through, and receive advice from other forum users, based on their own experiences, as well as from Family Rights Group's expert advisers. Because the regular contributors to the forum get to know each other quite well, carers also often bring each other good news such as, the granting of a court order at the end of proceedings or a child's contact with parents that has gone well.

Sibling carers have been occasional contributors to this discussion forum. Most do not become long-term contributors. Reading the interviews with the sibling carers who took part in the research, shows just what busy lives most of them are leading so it is hardly surprising that they do not invest too much time in an internet discussion board.

When they have contributed to the discussion forum, the sibling carers have often presented a summary of their own situation before asking for some advice about a particular issue. This section of the report presents, in their own words, descriptions by sibling carers of the situations they have found themselves in and the advice they have sought. Within the following posts, there have been some corrections for spelling and grammar but the wording of the posts is all as originally placed on the discussion board. The first poster took on the caring responsibilities for two brothers, following parental bereavement but quickly ran into financial difficulties.

I have a residence order in place for my 2 brothers, due to our father passing when they were 14 years old. At the time I was employed and earning enough to support myself, my daughter and the boys and owned my own properties. I approached my local authority 2 months later in June when I had been made redundant from my job and was suffering extreme financial stress, having a mortgage as well as household bills and a social worker came round. We had a chat and I explained my situation and that I was in danger of losing both my properties as I could not afford to maintain the family any longer. I explained I had a residence order in place until they were 16. The social worker went away and sent me a letter 2 weeks later saying there was no help available. I then spent the next few months stressed, going through court hearings etc for repossession and in September I lost both my properties and had to move into rented accommodation, much too small. In October I did some research around residence orders and came across residence order allowances. I contacted my social worker again and asked for someone to attend my house. They did and I asked about residence order allowance. This social worker said she had never heard of it but would look into it. I went through Christmas with no money for decent prezies etc. for my daughter as well as my brothers and as this was the first Christmas without their dad, it was very soul destroying. I constantly chased the social worker regarding the decision of my assessment (which I had been advised would only take 8 weeks) and she just kept saying we will contact you as soon as we have a decision.

I finally got this decision in June and payment commenced. I queried the back-pay I should receive at least from December, when the decision had taken longer than the estimated 8 weeks. I think I should get it from last June, when the first social worker said there was no further help they could offer. Am I correct? My answer was they don't do back-pay and it is at their discretion to pay it!! I am appalled at the level of

service I have been given and a solicitor has written to them asking them to reconsider but they have just repeated that it is discretionary and their social workers did their jobs correctly.

- Sibling Carer

The next sibling carer had her five year old sister placed with her by the local authority when she had become accommodated by local authority at her mother's request. This clearly evoked a lot of memories of her own difficult childhood.

I'm wondering if anyone can help me out. I'm 23 years old and was in care myself from the age of 12 years old. I now have 2 children of my own and have never had social services involved with either of them. Unfortunately, my mother who is alcohol dependant, has placed my 5 year old sister in social services care under section 20. I now have her living with me under friends and family. Social services basically just dumped her on my door step, bless her, she came with half a carrier bag of clothes and a pair of jelly shoes, which, with it raining, they are not very practical! She had no socks and little underwear. I have had to buy her, at my own expense, a bed, clothes, socks and underwear, toys and social services are still not paying me for any of it or for having her here. My mother is still getting her benefit, which I'm told she is entitled to for up to 6 weeks after the child has left the house, so whilst I'm sat struggling with 3 children on my own, she is swanning off up the country getting drunk with her little internet buddies. It's like watching my life all over again!! It makes me very mad.....my mother placed me under section 20 and continuously played PUSH ME PULL ME with my life, she disowned me many times and more than I can remember to be honest. I have another brother and sister. The youngest was 3 when she walked out on them. If it wasn't for their father sticking by them, they would have been put in the care system too!! There was no one there for me when I went into care...that's why I'm adamant to be there for my sister. My mother has been drinking for over 18 years. She blamed her drinking on my sister's death back in 1990 but she was heavily drinking whilst pregnant with her and whilst she was dying in hospital. She has mentally and emotionally chewed up ALL of her children and spat them out; the 2 that live with their dad are undergoing counselling and they don't even live with my mother! My 12 year old sister was sleeping with a knife under her pillow in case my mother's partner came to kill her dad!!! Yes there is a history of violence and my mother's husband is currently in prison but will be released on tag in November! Police have been called to my mother's house 23 times in total in the last 2 years, twice in one night and that's when they took my sister. They wrote a report on the state of the house to social services stating the house was dirty and so was my sister and if this is what she is subjected to on a daily basis then they would call it serious neglect. I also found out that neighbours had been feeding my sister too as mother was always drunk and my sister would go and knock their door and tell them MUMMY HAS BEEN DRINKING DRUNK STUFF AGAIN....how sad is that???? How can I stop my mother having any contact with my sister.....I've been there and I know the game she is playing....surely I can prove she is unfit???? I'm thinking about having her sectioned and then maybe rehab.....can anyone advise me on how to do this please?

- Sister carer

The same carer later described how she felt unsupported by the local authority which had placed her sister with her:

I have absolutely lost any tiny bit of faith that I had in the social services. I am supposed to be obtaining a residence order for my half sister and the social services

told me that they wanted it done and dusted by the time she started high school. Well she starts next week and I haven't heard a thing from social services for 3 months! We had a meeting in early June and I said that I wasn't going to go to court until they put in black and white what I was going to get for an allowance and that seems to have made them forget about us. They give me a very very small amount every week that I have to go and collect and usually wait up to 45 minutes for it. The social services have told me and my husband that they don't want us to foster (I wonder why?), it is causing a lot of problems between myself and my husband as we cannot manage financially. I have tried ringing my social worker several times but she is never available. I don't know where to go from here, can anyone please advise?

- Sister carer

Another sibling carer felt that while the local authority had originally offered her different options for her half sister's legal arrangement, they later seemed interested in only one option. She is concerned that they won't be well enough supported if they apply for the residence order which is the local authority's preferred option:

I currently have my half sister living with myself, my husband and my daughter. She has been with us for 5 nearly 6 months now as our mum passed away 5 years ago and her father has problems so the social services think its best that she lives with myself and family.

At the start the social services said that I could decide which routes I could go down, regarding taking on my sister, none of which were explained in great detail. After many discussions with my husband we decided that we would foster her and we thought this would be our best option. I then attended a meeting without my husband, ready with our decision, only to be told by social services that they would like us to get a residence order. Now I feel like I am being told to do this and I have no choice!

Obviously financial matters come into this as I have got this near-teenage-years little girl who needs looking after financially and apparently until something is signed in black and white, the social services tell me I'm not entitled to any financial support for her because she is my sister. I hope there is someone out there who can please advise me as soon as possible, as my next meeting is this week.

- Sibling carer

One sibling carer, already the mother of two girls, took on the care of four younger siblings, following parental bereavement. Her view is that her local authority has not only failed to provide the support she needs, but has actually seemed uncaring:

To briefly explain my situation, I am a 27 year old mother of two girls (7 & 2), and since my mother died of a very brief but agonising battle with bone cancer in January, I have taken on the role of carer for my 4 half-siblings, 1 boy (13) and 3 girls (7, 10 & 11). I have obtained sole parental responsibility for the kids - since they had not seen their own father for 5 years. I got parental responsibility in June & was advised by my barrister to apply for special guardianship as she was shocked that my local authority children's services had given my family nil assistance, not even a home visit although they had received plenty of notice of my mum's death & were aware the kids had no-one legally responsible for them. The barrister seemed to be of the impression that special guardianship would ensure that the social services had a duty to assist me with resources to enable me to care for these 4 kids.

I feel completely out of my depth, I have no previous experience with social services and feel that they do not care one iota for the welfare of these 4 kids who have endured so much in their lifetime ultimately the death of our mum. I DO CARE, but I realise that concern alone will not feed and clothe them for at least the next decade. PLEASE CAN ANYONE GIVE ME ADVICE ON WHAT MY NEXT MOVE SHOULD BE?

There are kids' happiness on the line here and I want to know I'm making all the right decisions. MANY THANKS FOR YOUR TIME.  
- Sibling carer

The experiences described by these four sibling carers place them squarely with the sibling carers interviewed for the research. They have taken on responsibility for younger brothers and sisters at a time of family crisis or tragedy when the parent who was raising the children has either died or been unable to continue to provide the care the children needed. The sibling carers have looked to their local authority's children's services department for some assistance with managing their new responsibilities but have ended up feeling very disappointed and let down when the support they need has not been provided. The carers' sense of desperation is almost tangible in what they have written in these posts.

## 7. Conclusion

The stories told by the sibling carers, or those who know them, for this study have been moving and inspirational. Every story told has been unique. The sibling carers come from different backgrounds and each has followed a different route to becoming the primary carer for younger brothers or sisters. At the same time, there is a lot of common ground in the sibling carers' experiences. Many have encountered obstacles as they looked for support and assistance with their new responsibilities and felt they were not being taken seriously. The recommendations which conclude this report are a response to the problems described by these carers as they struggled with the new role they found themselves fulfilling.

It was noticeable how many of the experiences that have been ascribed in other studies as applying to family and friends carers in general, could also be applied to this specific group of family and friends carers, though with some interesting variations:

- **Age discrimination** is a charge that is sometimes levelled at agencies dealing with grandparent carers or older family and friends carers. Some sibling carers also felt that they were dismissed or not taken seriously, but on account of being younger rather than older.
- **Poverty.** Farmer and Moyers<sup>2</sup> found that 75% of the family and friends carers in their study were living in poverty. Many of the sibling carers in this study also reported financial difficulties and, as a result, faced problems such as repossession orders on their homes. Even carers who were not living in abject poverty faced the 'double whammy' of the considerable extra expense of raising their siblings at the same time as experiencing a loss of income if they had to change their job or adjust their working hours in order to be available for their siblings.

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<sup>2</sup> Farmer & Moyers Ibid.

- **Housing.** Farmer and Moyers found that overcrowding was a problem for over a third of the family and friends carers in her study.<sup>3</sup> Overcrowding was certainly a serious issue for many of the sibling carers interviewed. Even those who had successfully been re-housed had sometimes endured overcrowded conditions for several years.
- **Change of plans.** In the same way that some grandparent carers had to adjust their plans for retirement, sibling carers also found that the life they had mapped out for themselves had in some cases to be changed or postponed. Carers' career plans or intention to study at university or college, had to be revised.
- **Change of relationship.** Just as grandparents or aunts and uncles can find that they have to change their relationship with a child from one of benevolent friendship to one of parental authority, so sibling carers also have to change from being a friendly big brother or sister to actually being responsible for their younger siblings, and ensuring that they observe boundaries and follow routines.
- **Affected by parents' problems.** Grandparents or aunts and uncles who become family and friends carers may feel hurt or disappointed that their son or daughter or brother or sister has been afflicted by the problems which made this arrangement necessary. The perspective of sibling carers will be closer to that of the child they are raising when, for example, they may feel that their parent has let them down.
- **Previous caregiver.** Just as other family and friends care arrangements are more likely to be successful if the carer has previously looked after the child<sup>4</sup>, so sibling care arrangements where the older sibling has a history of taking responsibility for their little brothers and sisters seemed to have a good chance of working well. Where the sibling care arrangement is made following the death of a parent, the siblings are likely to share a sense of grief.

It is worth making some additional observations about sibling carers as a group, based on the views they expressed in their interviews:

- The level of commitment showed by these sibling carers towards their younger siblings and towards staying together as a family, was extraordinary. Despite the many difficulties they faced, such as severe overcrowding, lowered income, hectic schedules, threats of homelessness, the disruption of their own life plans and intimidation from their own parents and stepparents, these young people were devoted to their younger brothers and sisters and absolutely intent on keeping them out of the care system.
- Although two-thirds of the sibling carers were 'half siblings' who only shared one parent with the younger siblings they were raising, this seemed to make no difference to the level of commitment or sibling attachment.
- Many of the sibling carers had put important aspects of their own life on hold. Although they were all in the 18 – 30 age range when they became sibling carers, an age when many young people are concerned with meeting a partner or pursuing a career, the sibling carers were willing to put off their studies, personal relationships or careers until their sibling carer responsibilities had ended. Some who were already involved in relationships had put off taking those relationships a step further and decided not to move in with their partner.

<sup>3</sup> Farmer & Moyers Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Hunt, Waterhouse & Lutman (2008) Keeping them in the family: Outcomes for children placed in kinship care through care proceedings London, BAAF

- Sibling carers felt that local authorities did not provide them with information which would have helped them, such as the implications of different legal arrangements under which they could raise their younger siblings. They felt social workers were not sympathetic to their situation although this could change if they were dealt with by a local authority's specialist family and friends care team.
- Sibling carers found that other agencies, voluntary organisations or specialist services could be more helpful and sympathetic. Several carers reported that the education service had provided the children they were raising with bereavement counselling. The sibling carers' experience of employers was mixed, however.
- Several carers observed that although bereavement counselling had been offered to their younger siblings, it had not been offered to them and they would have appreciated it being offered.
- Most sibling carers were interested in meeting others who were in a similar situation to themselves, e.g. in a support group.
- Despite the many problems they had faced, at a very young age, sibling carers remained overwhelmingly optimistic about the future and aspired towards a better future for their younger siblings.
- The sibling carers often mentioned that things had been particularly difficult right at the start. They felt that the local authority did not take them seriously at first or that they were not provided with support, advice or information that would have been useful. Even carers who had ended up managing well felt that initially, things had been made harder for them than they needed to be. This does raise the question of whether sibling carers might be used more often if local authorities took them more seriously as potential carers, when children were unable to continue living with their parents. Bearing in mind that some sibling carers felt they were not being taken seriously on account their young age, it may be that when local authorities investigate potential family and friends placements for children, the possibility of children being raised by a highly committed older sibling is being overlooked. If more support was available to assist, particularly at the beginning of sibling placements, it might be that more such placements could be made.