

Briefing for the Deputy Social Care Minister's appearance before the Children, Young People and Education Committee on 14th September on children's social care

Summary

- It makes sense to invest in kinship care. It delivers better outcomes and experiences for children by keeping them within their loving families, and is good value for the public purse.
- Yet despite caring for children with very similar needs and experiences to those in care or who are adopted, kinship carers typically receive far less practical, emotional and financial support than foster carers or adopters, and their children are often ineligible for statutory support with their education and health needs.
- Our evidence shows that kinship carers are experiencing financial hardship due to the lack of support and the rising cost of living. Welsh Government's commitment to ensuring financial parity for kinship foster carers and mainstream foster carers is welcome, but the review of allowances should also look at financial support for all kinship carers, regardless of legal status.
- More widely, there are financial benefits and other supports currently available for looked after children and adoptive families that could be easily rolled out to kinship care families.
- As part of the Child Poverty Strategy (currently in draft form), Welsh Government should review where financial and other supports could be expanded to include kinship carers and children and young people in kinship care.
- Welsh Government's focus on reforming children's social care is welcome and they are taking some steps to improve support for some kinship carers. As the various reform programmes continue, there is an opportunity to take a more holistic view of the support needs of kinship carers and the children living in kinship care arrangements to ensure the best outcomes.

If not now, then when? Radical reform for care experienced children and young people

Kinship welcomed the publication of the Children, Young People and Education Committee's report '*If not now, then when? Radical reform for care experienced children and young people*'.

In particular we were pleased to see the Committee highlight calls for increased support for kinship carers in line with mainstream foster carers. The report also noted the perverse incentive in the current system for families to continue in a kinship foster care arrangement, where the child is 'looked after' in local authority care despite living with their kinship carer, in order to continue to receive financial and other support, where

a special guardianship order might be more appropriate, by providing the kinship carer with parental responsibility and the family arrangement greater permanence.

The Committee recommended that the Welsh Government should consult widely to better understand the extent to which kinship care is being increasingly used as an alternative to placing children in foster or residential care, the experiences of children in kinship care, and the support needs of kinship carers. It also recommended that Welsh Government should “explore the potential of amending by regulations the criteria that kinship carers are required to meet to be entitled to the same financial support as foster carers.”

In their response, Welsh Government:

- underlined its commitment to ensuring kinship foster carers and mainstream foster carers receive the same level of financial support said that their current review of fees and financial allowances for foster carers will be looking to ensure that kinship foster carers can also access enhanced allowances where they meet the relevant criteria;
- committed to reviewing the regulatory framework to determine if changes need to be made for the assessment of kinship foster carers;
- set out its intention to expand the remit of its expert group reviewing support available for those with a Special Guardianship Order to look at the use of and support available for kinship foster carers; and
- said its commitment to foster carers through Foster Wales for training and support also applies to kinship foster carers.

During the debate in Plenary on 12th July, Deputy First Minister Julie Morgan said that the Welsh Government “greatly values kinship care, and this is one of the areas that we are developing.” She reiterated the establishment of the special guardianship expert group. She also highlighted the work of Foster Wales and the package of support they had developed for all foster carers, including kinship foster carers.

While these steps are welcome, from our work with kinship families in Wales, we believe that there are significant further steps Welsh Government needs to take to support the nearly 10,000 children living in kinship care in Wales and their families to make sure the kinship arrangement is a success.

The Minister’s appearance before the Committee to discuss further the Welsh Government’s response to your report provides an opportunity to understand further Welsh Government’s plans for improving support for kinship care families across Wales.

What is kinship care?

Kinship care is when a child lives with a relative or friend because their parents aren’t able to care for them. Most children growing up in kinship care are living in households headed by a grandparent¹, but many other relatives including older siblings, aunts, uncles, as well as family friends can also be kinship carers. Analysis of census data from 2011 shows that **at least 9,500 children in Wales are living in kinship care**.²

The vast majority of kinship care arrangements are ‘informal’ – where a family member has stepped in to look after a child without intervention from social services or the courts. In addition, there are around 1,600 kinship foster carers in Wales. This means that a child with ‘looked after’ status has been placed by a local authority with a friend or family member, who will go through an assessment and approval process as a foster carer. Other formalised kinship family arrangements include those secured by a legal order such as a child arrangements order or special guardianship order which can be made either via public law at the end of care proceedings or via private law with less involvement from children’s services.³

Research shows that children in kinship care, regardless of legal status, have experienced similar adversities to those looked after children who are placed in mainstream foster care or residential care. For example, in

¹ Analysis of 2011 Census data found that 60% of kinship households in Wales were headed by a grandparent: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/documents/kinship/wales-kinstast-briefing-paper.pdf>

² Ibid

³ <https://compass.kinship.org.uk/advice-and-information/what-is-kinship-care/>

Selwyn et al's 2013 study of informal kinship care, parental drug or alcohol misuse was a reason for kinship care in as many as 68% of families. For more than a third (37%) domestic abuse was involved, whilst more than a quarter (26%) of children had experienced parental mental illness or parental death. Two thirds of the carers said that the child had been abused and/or neglected, some over a considerable period.⁴

What support is available for kinship families?

Most kinship families do not receive any financial, practical or emotional support. For some, typically only those families with formalised kinship care arrangements involving local authority children's services and the family court, there may be some financial and practical support available. However, the availability of this support varies considerably across local authorities and typically depends both on presence of a legal order securing the family arrangement and the child's journey into kinship care. Families in informal kinship arrangements may be unknown to local authorities and ineligible for any kind of support, despite experiencing similar needs.

The love and sacrifice of kinship carers saves the public purse millions a year by preventing children from going into the care system. For every 1000 children raised in kinship families rather than in local authority care, the state saves £40 million and increases the lifetime earnings of those children by £20 million.⁵ It clearly makes sense to invest in kinship care. Yet, in a survey of over 100 kinship carers we carried out last year, 28% per cent of respondents said that the lack of support may mean that have to stop caring for their child in the future.⁶ This would come with devastating consequences for children and families, and for the state, as the only alternative for those children would likely be local authority care.

What do kinship families in Wales need?

Financial support

"We don't do it for the money, but without the money we can't do it."

Kinship carer

Taking on the responsibility to raise a child costs money. Kinship foster carers, a small number of the overall cohort, are the only group of kinship carers who are guaranteed financial support. It is welcome that Welsh Government is working to ensure parity for kinship foster carers with mainstream foster carers. However, it should be noted that the difference in legal order between kinship foster carers and other types of kinship carers does not mean there will be any difference in their financial support needs.

Moreover, at population level, kinship carers tend to live in more deprived areas and are generally poorer than mainstream foster carers. While an estimated one in 67 children in Wales are growing up in the care of relatives, this rises to one in 46 children living in the poorest 20% of areas. For kinship families, the unexpected addition of an extra family member or members as a result of a family emergency is only going to add strain to the household finances. Indeed, in a survey we carried out last year of over 100 kinship carers in Wales **almost 6 in 10 said they did not always feel able to meet their children's needs in their current financial situation.** Nearly 6 in 10 also told us that over the last year they were going into debt or selling possessions to help make ends meet.⁷ Targeting all kinship carers with financial support would therefore also help Welsh Government in its aim to tackle child poverty, targeting some of the most vulnerable households.

Practical, emotional and educational support for kinship families

Kinship carers in Wales tell us they would benefit from greater access to peer-to-peer support and clearer information on their options at the beginning of their kinship journey. They also talk about the need for training and workshops to help them to better support the children in their care as well as direct therapeutic

⁴ https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/190043151/Full_report.pdf

⁵ <https://kinship.org.uk/news/the-economic-case-for-kinship-care/>

⁶ <https://kinship.org.uk/cost-of-loving/>

⁷ <https://kinship.org.uk/cost-of-loving/>

support for their children and extra help/awareness at school. In many cases, they want the equivalent support that is offered to foster families and to children with looked after status, including access to the Pupil Development Grant.

A further **expansion to the Special Guardianship Expert Group to look at the support needs of all kinship carers** (and not just kinship foster carers, as per the response to your report) would help Welsh Government identify where the support is most needed and the best ways for it to be delivered in Wales. Extra resource and clear prioritisation of this work will be needed alongside any expansion to the remit to ensure that reforms can be pursued at the pace needed. We would also like to support Welsh Government to look across its programme of reform of children's social care to identify **how its reforms could be adapted to ensure that kinship carers, regardless of legal status, get the help they need.**

During the debate on the Committee's report, Mental Health Minister Lynne Neagle put on the record the Welsh Government's commitment to ensuring that care experienced children and young people could access trauma-informed therapeutic support. While we welcome this commitment, not all children living in kinship care will be defined as care experienced. Yet, as outlined above research shows that children in kinship care, regardless of legal status, have experienced similar adversities to looked after children. It is therefore clear that **children living in kinship care should be able to access the same therapeutic support as care experienced children** and we would expect this to be reflected in the forthcoming mental health strategy.

In addition, as part of the **mental health strategy**, the particular emotional and mental health needs of children and young people in kinship care as well as the specific needs of kinship carers who are having to deal with the wider impact of the family crisis that has resulted in the child or children coming to live with them needs full consideration.

Key questions to ask the Minister

- What action will Welsh Government take to ensure that all kinship carers can access the financial support they need?
- Will Welsh Government consider using the opportunity of its review of fees and financial allowances for foster carers to look at the needs of all kinship carers, regardless of legal status?
- What consideration has Welsh Government made to both expanding its Special Guardianship Expert Group to reviewing the support needs of all kinship carers and ensuring this work has sufficient resource?
- How will Welsh Government ensure the reforms it is taking forward within children's social care also support kinship families, regardless of the legal status of the arrangement?
- What discussions is the Minister having around how the draft Child Poverty Strategy can be amended to better reflect the needs of kinship carers?
- What can the Minister tell us about her discussions with the Mental Health Ministers about any plans to include the needs of children in kinship care and kinship carers in the forthcoming mental health strategy?
- Has the Minister discussed with the Education Minister the need to ensure Pupil Development Grants are available to support children in kinship care?

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Kinship is the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We offer kinship carers financial, legal, practical, and emotional support and understanding from the moment they need it, for as long as they need it. We want every kinship family to be recognised, valued, and supported. For more information about our policy and research work, please visit kinship.org.uk/policy-and-research.