

Kinship Carers 21 March 2022

Attending

Elena Whitham MSP
Jeremy Balfour MSP
Miles Briggs MSP
Emma Roddick MSP
Susan Hunter KCASS Project Co-ordinator
Carer A
Carer B
Carer C
Carer D
Carer E

Introductions

- Susan is the KCASS project coordinator and oversees the advice and information provision for kinship carers and is chair of advisory group for kinship carers
- Carer A was a kinship carer now adopted the two children she cares for
- Carer B kinship care for granddaughter and a member of the advisory group
- Carer C is a foster carer and has been a kinship carer for 13 years
- Carer D has been a kinship carer for 25 years and cared for five grandchildren, and is member of the advisory group
- Carer E has cared for her two granddaughters for five years

Support for kinship carers

Carer E didn't know anything was wrong at the parents' home until social work phoned to ask her to look after her two grandchildren for a couple of days. She was given two hours' notice of their arrival. She was told they would be in touch but there was no follow-up. Carer E had no support for a whole year. She couldn't find helpline numbers and only found support by chance. She had just bought her house and it was a building site; not in a fit state for the children. Her 18-year-old child had to move out of the house before they were ready to leave as the bedroom was needed for the grandchildren. Her grandchildren had arrived with nothing and were half dressed on arrival.

She wasn't even aware she was defined as a kinship carer and found out by chance through internet searching.

After 3 months Social Work did get in touch with Carer E to tell her she had to get the house sorted and they had been told they would get help with the costs. They got no financial help and nearly lost their house as they had to spend money to do it up. Her husband was made redundant over the stress

of the situation. She got the feeling from authorities that if we own our house we are well off, but we're not. She is disabled. When calculating financial support, they took into account her husband's army pension and they didn't get anything. "Very much a case of here you go you get on with it." There was no check in to see how they were doing or whether the children needed anything.

Carer C said that if you're a foster carer you have support immediately. Having looked after status gives you access to follow up support. Though she said social work don't always have the information we need, for example "What's a lac [looked-after children] review? If you struggled' financially you were left to follow it up.

Susan said it is hoped a new booklet would make a difference, but for it to be successful it would need buy in from local authorities and practitioners working with Kinship families. A lot of feedback from kinship carers is about the lack of information.

Status of kinship care arrangement

Carer C said if a relative steps-in before crisis it's classed as private affair.

Carer B advised as she has a Residency Order [also referred to as a Kinship Care Order in the case of kinship carers] her grandchild no longer has looked after status, so she loses support. This has knock-on impact as she has to fight for support, e.g. a CAMHS appointment as social work will only see us for a 6-month financial review and if house is suitable. "You've got to fight for everything and it really wears you down."

Carer D told us social work services placed her granddaughter with her. Originally, she got kinship carers allowance and then when more kinship carers came forward, they cut the support and she is now receiving £20 week.

Their experience was that frontline social workers tried to help where they could but often management advise they can't give out support. They thought that's why so many social workers leave the role. Carer A has seen five social workers leave in the three years she has been a kinship carer. They said support is part of the Promise. If you want these children to do well give the kinship carers the tools. Having to beg for support "eats away your dignity".

One kinship carer said she used to help people to get a Residency Order. Now if you take residence orders "they'll be left without a penny". Carer D mentioned that one of her grandchildren is not looked after status while the others are, and this leads to her feeling different and rejected.

Susan explained some local authorities have a policy of trying to get kinship carers on to residency orders. She said there were huge difficulties associated with these orders. They can affect payments. In some local authority areas where a residence order is in place Payments stop at age 16 yrs. There may be no child plan in place, so what happens when the child hits

puberty etc might need social work input at that point. Also, could stop carers getting discretionary payments i.e. birthday celebrations. Impacts on Universal Credit too, as if the child has looked after status the kinship carer doesn't have to work. If there's a residency order in place, then you may be subject to the work-related requirements once the child is 5 years old. The child would also not be entitled to continuing care support.

Carer A has adopted two kinship care children. With the first child they had two weeks to prepare for the newborn baby. They were told a month before the birth that they were being considered as kinship carers but were given no other information or support. We had savings set aside for travelling and that went to getting stuff for the newborn. We got her in November and got first payment in January. We weren't given any support with childcare and there was no statutory leave from employer. In the end employer allowed her to drop seven hours and partner's mother helped looking after baby. In 2019 she had her own son and in 2020 she became kinship carer again for baby boy. That was three children under 4yrs.

Carer A said her experience with her 2 Kinship Care children was completely different. The first time it was a maternity social worker who supported her and although she didn't know lots about kinship care she was passionate about helping and would find out answers and information for things she didn't know. The second time it took two months to be named as a relevant person with the second child. It was frustrating as there was no continuity. Felt "you have to beg, borrow and plead to get any support" There wasn't a lot of kinship care social workers, so she reached out to her MSP for help. There were only five social workers for 300 kinship families. Now there are only three social workers. Her social worker from Kinship Team also worked part-time so it took months to get answers. Mental health support would have been invaluable and help to support carers sharing with children their life stories.

Adoption cuts all support except that offered by the adoption team. No way to recoup costs. Carer A had asked numerous times if there was any financial aid for legal costs and told no, so was very surprised to be told by the Council one month before adoption that they would cover our legal fees. We had already taken certain financial decisions to afford it.

On the day she took on kinship care of her grandchildren Carer E said one child had to sleep in the same bed as them as there wasn't room and one grandchild had to wear her husband's T-shirt as she had no nightie. Social work eventually checked in with them again two years later to do an assessment to see if they were fit people - she told them it was "a bit late". Both her and her husband had disclosure certificates. They had no birth certificates for the children but managed to get them into school. She felt she had had to bare her soul to people – felt like she was a failure – "if they had listened to my son I wouldn't have been a good person".

Local authority implementation of legislation

Susan advised the legislation is complex as it's not all in one place. on part 13 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 can be interpreted differently by local authorities. There are different categories of approach to payment by local authorities: some pay right from start, other months down the line, or some pay no support. It would be fantastic to have separate kinship carers legislation. Via the helpline we hear from Kinship Carers that local authorities will state that they were not involved in placing the child so there will be no entitlement to the allowance, in some circumstances the Police have brought the children to their relatives and social work would have been made aware of this. Kinship carers continually tell us have had to fight for everything.

Definition of kinship carers

Everyone thought a single definition of a kinship carer would help.

Carer E told us her grandchildren had moved from Fife to Perth to be with her and asked if local authority responsibility could be moved with them but was told no as that meant kinship care support would have to be paid by the new authority.

It was easier for social work managers to draw back from providing support as it would save councils a huge amount of money.

Carer D said local authorities use the guidance to their advantage to avoid paying. She didn't know the implications of what was being suggested when her grandchildren were being moved from one Order to another. She remembers there being issues since 2007 when Adam Ingram MSP was the Minister, there was also a legal challenge by the Scottish Human Rights Commission in 2015 – "it's been going on a long time". [Carer D] said "It needs sorted and needs sorted right so we don't come back here in 5-years-time saying please help us".

Local authority best practice

Susan explained they have a practitioners' forum which shares best practice. Currently they are working with Falkirk, North Ayrshire and North Lanarkshire councils to help them develop their policies. She said some councils' policies are out of date, so can't be meeting Part 13 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act [to report on children's services provided by the local authority] as each local authority should be providing information. It's difficult to find as it's sometimes hidden within foster or adoption webpages – "if we can't find it how are kinship carers going to find it".

Examples of disparity between local authorities' payments were provided by the carers. Glasgow had paid out £400 grant to kinship carers and a few other councils had followed suit, whereas Aberdeen held a party for the kids.

Carer B questioned the level of knowledge of local authority teams. Renfrewshire had a kinship carer team, but she had to tell them what to do and where to look for information.

Miles said some councils have a kinship carer champion?

When her daughter was pregnant Carer B was told if she didn't take the child it was going into care – she said it was like being “black mailing”. She was given no legal advice, couldn't access counselling and as she was working had to find childcare. She ended up being off on sick leave.

Care status and benefit entitlement

Carer C said kinship carers should have the same status as foster carers but with less form filling. From her experience she'd advise against kinship carers getting a Residence Order [often referred to as 'kinship care order' in the context of kinship carers], better to have a Permanence Order as it helps with transition as the child get older moves into independence, to university etc.

It was noted that the approach taken in England where you need to be trained to the same level as a foster carer would put people off and would end up with more children in care, she said “I just want to be their gran”.

Breakdown of kinship care placements

Susan said through the practitioners' forum anecdotal evidence suggests placement breakdown tends to happen less in kinship care, though a lot of families are pushed to breaking point before they eventually get through it.

Miles thought some kinship carers don't contact authorities as the children might be taken away from them.

When asked whether kinship carers might not contact authorities for help because their cared for children might be taken away, all the carers responded “yes” it's a fear. One carer added if a mental health issue was on record it could impact placement. Another added she was physically disabled and suffering chronic depression and was struggling with the extra washing. She had to help her grandchild who couldn't play and would instead tidy the living room. Eventually, having sought help she got a cleaner once a week. However, she explained she lost her and a further two cleaners as the local authority would forget to make the payments and she couldn't afford a cleaner without assistance.

Elena recognition for how much money kinship carers save the country.

Carer D said it was very cruel to make people beg for financial and mental support.

Carer A said she couldn't even go to her family as they either didn't step in initially or were too worried about her brother. She explained that they

adopted the children to ensure the children's wellbeing and to make sure the brother didn't turn up 10 years later when the children didn't know them. Carer A said "our situation is a golden egg" for services but many people don't want to adopt as they lose any support provided. Taking on kinship care is not attractive to younger people.

Financial impact on kinship carers

Jeremy wondered if it is mostly grandparents?

Carer C spoke about financial difficulty as she was just above the benefit threshold and was told 'you'll be fine'. Her income was double that of partner, he went from working 50 to 70 hours per week to try to survive. They went into debt, which then took five years to get out of. The three girls need a separate bed so they now needed a four bed house. Others stated they were still paying off debt incurred by becoming a kinship carer.

Carer D sold their house to pay off debt but finds council tax being high and increasing, is causing her difficulty.

Training

Carer C, as a foster carer, has undertaken lots of training. She felt that kinship carers should have access to training, but it shouldn't be mandatory as not all training would be applicable to all kinship carers and could put people off. Attachment training for Kinship carers would be very beneficial.

When you ask local authorities for training they tell you that as you're not a foster carer they don't have any obligation to provide any.

All agreed they would have welcomed the chance of training with areas such as no training to help kids get through trauma being cited as a concern.

Contact with parents

Carer B's grandchild ended up under a Kinship Care Order which enforced a contact order with the dad. The child didn't want to go to contact and it transpired later the dad was hitting her during the contact in a contact centre. Carer B felt she was having to force her to see him as she could be reported to the sheriff for not complying with the order. Contact can be used as a weapon. It has been 3 months since contact stopped and things are much better but she worries about if it's going to happen again. Carer B added if she had had training and information on Kinship Care Orders she would not have went for it.

One of her grandchildren would have panic attacks about contact and Carer E eventually refused to make her go following which she was told to attend a panel meeting. It seemed that social workers are often too focussed on the parent's needs rather than the needs of the child.

About refusing contact Carer C said you lose family members as you look like you are being bad keeping children away from the parents when you are trying to safeguard them.

Carer E has lost contact with her other grandsons as her daughter can't understand why her granddaughters receive different treatment at times now they are her parental responsibility. She is hopeful her grandsons will understand when they are older.

Susan explained that a kinship order can be challenged 6 months after being granted and there is no limit to the amount of times it can be brought back to court. Carer A adding that while most birth parents will get legal aid, kinship carers have to pay legal fees.

Raising awareness of kinship care

Carer E said a booklet would have helped her. I would have found the phone number. It would have been my saving grace, as I was having to deal with anger and upset – “it's like a bereavement. Not having to wait to be found or to be noticed by somebody. That book would have empowered me”.

Kinship carers thought that more could be done to tell the public about kinship care. Carer C gave some example like posters in schools, libraries and doctors surgeries, without having to go online as it's a lot of grannies and grandads doing this who may not have online access.

Carer E told us about a man who had been kinship caring for four years with no help. He, noticing her dropping her grandchildren at school, whispered it to her when he spoke. She now knows of another two families since then in her local community. There's a stigma. Many grandparents fear others knowing they're a kinship carer as feel people will judge their parenting. Even when social work come to see how they are getting on the children don't want to be involved with authorities. She added that children are often being retraumatised through contact with their parent.

Kinship care children moving between local authorities

Miles asked how can you link into support if your council is saying 'X' council is responsible? Link worker?

Susan said this is still an issue and some kinship carers do come to the helpline where both local authorities say it's not their responsibility.

Emma asked what else can be done?

Carer D felt a national campaign was needed so everyone knows. Not just left to the local authorities.

Carer E said we should get it on the television.

Carer C said at the moment it's word of mouth there was eight of us in small village and I was the only one who knew about kinship care.

Carer A felt more formal opportunities to get word out there by speaking about it. At kinship care week I got a chance to do a presentation and blog in my company. Got lots of feedback. Should put information out to larger employers so they can get it out to employees. Adoption out of kinship care is seen as a private adoption. It took several months of discussion with HR and legal to get leave. In the end the company paid for 2 months leave out of their own pocket as not supported through employment law. Taking on kids with trauma can mean having to leave work.

Susan said there was currently a private members bill in the UK Parliament on employment leave for kinship carers.

Jeremy noted it's all women round the table.

Susan advised it was predominantly woman who were kinship carers or the main identified carer, but not always. It was noted that kinship care can put a strain on their personal relationships sometimes leading to break ups.

On supporting families taking on a kinship care role it was suggested something akin to baby boxes might help. Elena mentioned a past initiative which gave foster carer children a package, unsure if this went to kinship carer children too. All attendees agreed that getting the basics would be a great help as children are often going into kinship care without anything: no clothes, toys, or toothbrushes.