

Kinship carers during coronavirus

Report produced on behalf of the
Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care
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About the Family Rights Group

Family Rights Group is the charity that works with parents in England and Wales whose children are in need, at risk or are in the care system and with members of the wider family who are raising children unable to remain at home. We advise parents, grandparents, other relatives and friends about their rights and options when social workers or courts make decisions about their children's welfare.

We campaign for families to have their voice heard, be treated fairly and get help early to prevent problems escalating. We champion policies and practices that keep children safe within their family and strengthen the family and community support networks of children in the care system.

The charity convenes a kinship carers' panel, runs a freephone specialist legal advice line for families involved in the child welfare system, hosts and moderates an on-line discussion forum for kinship carers and has extensive advice resources for kinship carers on its website. It also conducts research on kinship care, and provides the secretariat, including legal and policy support to the Kinship Care Alliance and to the Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care (in conjunction with Catherine McKinnell MP's office).

Cross-party Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care

The Cross-Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care aims to raise awareness about, and support for, children in kinship care and to highlight the importance of this option for children who cannot live with their parents.

Kinship Care Alliance

The Kinship Care Alliance is made up of organisations which subscribe to a set of shared aims and beliefs about family and friends care. The KCA believe that children and young people are best placed with family and friends where it is in the child's best interests and safe to do so, and that these families should receive support and help to do this.

What is kinship care

Kinship care (also known as family and friends care) is any circumstance where a child is being raised by a friend or family member other than their parent. Kinship carers are commonly grandparents, but they can also be brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, or close family friends. Kinship carers have stepped in to take on the care of a child, who is unable to live with their parents due to tragedy or trauma. Around 200,000 children in the UK are being raised by kinship carers.

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Introduction

Kinship carers' experiences during the latest lockdown

Ten months into the pandemic, and the impact on children, families and communities has been dramatic. Many kinship carer households in particular were already facing significant challenges.

In April 2020, during the first UK wide lockdown, the Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care commissioned a survey, conducted by the Family Rights Group, into the views and experiences of kinship care households. The study revealed that the pandemic was increasing the pressure on kinship care families and made a series of recommendations to Government for immediate action.

Following the reintroduction of lockdown measures across the countries of the UK in late December 2020 and early January 2021, Family Rights Group and the Parliamentary Taskforce undertook a new survey to find out how kinship care households are coping in the latest stage of the pandemic. 605 kinship carers raising 889 kinship children responded to the survey and we are very grateful for their time and feedback.

This report is an analysis of the survey data and includes a number of recommendations for immediate action for the UK Government and the Scottish and Welsh Governments to consider. It will inform the work of Family Rights Group, the Parliamentary Taskforce, and the Kinship Care Alliance. We hope that it will also influence the kinship care policies, practices and services of local authorities and other public agencies. We also aim to raise awareness of kinship care amongst the public.

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to all the kinship carers who took the time to complete the survey. We would like to express our thanks to both the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and the John Ellerman Foundation, whose generous funding made our research possible.

Kinship carers

There are around 200,000 children in the UK who are not living with their parents but are being raised by relatives, such as grandparents or friends¹. By stepping in and keeping children within family and friends networks, kinship carers are a vital element of our children's social care system. They are akin to foster carers and adopters although often without comparable recognition for their contribution to the welfare of children and the money they save the taxpayer. Central to work of the Parliamentary Taskforce is the principle that, where it is safe to do so, family should always be the first point of call for children who cannot live with their parents.

In the present crisis, the demographic characteristics of kinship carers make them especially vulnerable. Around half of kinship carers are grandparents and a proportion are over the age of 70. Kinship carers of all ages are more likely to be suffering from chronic health conditions than the wider population. Moreover, the children they are raising have often suffered tragedy or trauma. We know from previous surveys that more than half of kinship carers have had to give up work as a result of taking on the care of kin children. They are more likely to be poorer and more isolated than the wider population.

In September 2020, the Parliamentary Taskforce published a report, 'First Thought Not Afterthought'², containing new research and a vision for a children's social care system where more children can safely thrive in kinship care. It made a series of recommendations for government, local authorities and other public agencies to better support kinship care and the needs of carers and their children.

¹ Analysis of the 2011 census by Wijedasa found that 180,000 children in the UK were being raised by relatives. This figure does not include children being raised by unrelated kinship carers, such as family friends. The census data found that the numbers of children raised in kinship care rose between 1991, 2001 and 2011, it is likely to have continued to rise since 2011. Wijedasa D (2015) The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in England. University of Bristol https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/190703751/Briefing_Paper_001.pdf

² https://www.frg.org.uk/images/Cross_party_PT_on_KC/KinshipCare_parliamentary-report-September20.pdf

Methodology

The survey was designed in partnership with kinship carers, who helped to focus the questions on the key concerns affecting their lives. It was adapted from the survey used in April 2020, with additional questions to reflect the circumstances at the latest stage of the crisis.

Survey Monkey on-line platform was used to host the survey in order to make it accessible to as many kinship carers as possible, and for ease of analysis. Respondents could choose to answer all, or some, of the questions.

The survey was open for a week from Friday 8th January until noon on Friday 15th January 2021.

The survey was promoted on Family Rights Group's website and on the social media feeds of members of the Parliamentary Taskforce, Family Rights Group and other organisations within the Kinship Care Alliance. It was also posted on a number of kinship care Facebook groups and shared on Facebook by kinship carers. The survey consisted of more than 40 questions and Excel and Survey Monkey software were used to analyse results.

The report is laid out to enable responses to each (closed) survey question to be easily read. Where open survey questions were asked, the report provides illustrative quotes or quantifies the results. Under each question, it sets out the number and percentage of respondents answered the question.

The survey results were analysed by Cathy Ashley, Jordan Hall, Jessica Johnston and Samuel Martin from the charity Family Rights Group.

Summary of key findings and recommendations

The survey heard from 605 respondents, who are raising 889 kinship children and a further 238 birth children. Most respondents are grandparents raising their grandchildren and nearly 4 in 10 are single households.

Significant needs and additional responsibilities:

- A quarter of kinship carers said that they have a limiting long-term illness or disability.
- Over a third (36%) have other caring responsibilities outside of the home, a large number of which were for elderly parents or parents in law.
- Almost half of children being raised by kinship carers (49%) have special needs or disabilities. Almost one in three kinship children has an Education, Health and Care Plan demonstrating their significant levels of additional needs.
- Almost a quarter (23%) of kinship carers are raising birth children alongside their kinship children.
- More than half of kinship care placements have come about as a result of parental drug or alcohol misuse. 4 in 10 cited parental mental ill health as the reason.
- 23% of kinship carers indicated that they have been required to shield during the course of the pandemic.

Support:

- A third of respondents have received no support during the course of the pandemic.
- 87% stated they had not received any support maintaining contact between the children and parents/family members.
- The three biggest worries of kinship carers during the latest stage of the pandemic are their child/children's emotional and mental wellbeing (71%), concern for what will happen to them if the carer gets the virus (65%) and the child/children's education (58%).

Financial:

- Almost 4 in 10 respondents are facing financial hardship.
- Almost a third of respondents are living in inappropriate or temporary housing for their family.

Education:

- Two thirds of families had been offered a school place during this latest lockdown. 10% had not been offered a place but indicated that they would like one.
- A third (32%) of kinship families indicated they would find support with equipment for remote learning helpful but had not been offered it. 37% expressed the same wish for help with access to broadband/data for remote learning.
- Half of kinship carers believe their child/children need additional support to catch up on education.

Legal:

- We echo the findings of the Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care's report published in September 2020 in respect of access to legal support. That report highlighted that three-quarters of kinship carers feel they did not have enough information about legal options to make an informed decision when taking on care of their kinship child. Moreover, 58% incurred legal costs and 4 in 10 of those received no financial help with this.

We welcome the measures the Government have hitherto introduced through the course of this pandemic to support the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families. We believe there are further steps the Government could now take in order to ensure kinship carer families are properly supported and children can reach their potential. Without support, placements may break down and more children would enter the care system, at a much greater cost to the child, family, society and the public purse. We propose:

Educational support for kinship children

- Ensure all kinship children can access equipment and data for remote learning.
- All children in kinship care, where there is professional evidence of additional need, should be included within the remit of the National Tutoring Programme.
- Consider extending the remit of Virtual School Heads and Pupil Premium Plus to all children in kinship care.

Access to therapeutic support

- Extend the Adoption Support Fund to all children being raised by kinship carers, who are unable to live with their parents.

Financial support

- Consider how welfare flexibility can prevent kinship care families from being pushed into severe poverty. This should include the under occupation penalty ('bedroom tax'), the Benefit Cap, Universal Credit including the Covid-19 uplift, and Pension Credit.
- Consider how the right of adopters to paid employment leave and protection could be extended to kinship carers.

Access to justice for kinship carers

- For the Ministry of Justice to deliver the promised extension of legal aid to special guardians in private law proceedings as a matter of urgency.
- Consider how to address the comparable gaps in legal aid provision in public law and pre-proceedings.

Vaccination programme

- All carers, including foster carers and all kinship carers, regardless of the child's legal status, should be prioritised in the vaccination programme by being classed as keyworkers.

Legal context and frameworks

There are different legal arrangements under which a kinship carer may be raising a child. The type of legal arrangement will affect whether and how the kinship carer is assessed and both the child's and carer's right to support. Whether a kinship carer has parental responsibility³ for a child will also depend on the type of legal arrangement in place. Having parental responsibility enables the carer to make key decisions for the child, such as agreement to a medical operation.

Types of kinship care arrangements:

- **Informal kinship care – private family arrangements**

Some kinship carers step in and take on the care of a family member's child without the prior involvement of children's services and without the matter being considered by the Family Court. When a close family member takes on the care of a child in this way, it is known as a 'private family arrangement'. In this scenario, there will be no assessment of the carer or the child.

Without an order or the prior involvement of children's services, there is no duty on the local authority to provide the child or kinship carer with any specific support, save for the general duties that all local authorities in England have under section 17 of the Children Act 1989⁴ to safeguard and promote the welfare of 'children in need' in their area.

- **Private fostering**

A private fostering arrangement arises where someone who is not a close relative of the child⁵, and is not already approved as a local authority foster carer, looks after a child for 28 days or more. Children's services have specific duties to assess a private foster carer and to visit the child. They should be informed of any private foster care arrangement at least six weeks before it is due to start (or immediately if the arrangement is due to happen sooner)⁶. Once informed, children's services then have a duty to visit and speak to the child, their parents, the private foster carer and anyone else living in the foster carer's household. Suitability checks (including DBS checks) must be done on everyone in the household over the age of 16. Children's services must visit the child every six weeks for the duration of the placement.

- **Kinship care under private law court orders**

The court orders which most commonly formalise kinship care arrangements are private law orders. This includes 'lives with' child arrangements orders (previously known as residence orders), and special guardianship orders. It is rare for children placed in kinship care arrangements to be made subject to adoption orders. The making of either of these orders grants parental responsibility to the kinship carer, though a special guardianship order provides the kinship carer with 'enhanced' parental responsibility which in some circumstances can be used to the exclusion of the parents.

- **Special guardianship**

A special guardianship order secures a child's long-term home with someone who is not their parent. It lasts until the child turns 18. The order restricts the birth parents' rights but does not permanently end them. It is therefore particularly appropriate for kinship care arrangements, as the legal link to the birth family is retained.

There is a general duty on local authorities to make provision in their area for a range of special guardianship support services. These support services are set out in the Special Guardianship Regulations 2005, and include

³ Parental responsibility is defined in law as 'all the rights, duties, powers, responsibility and authority that, by law, a parent has in relation to their child and their child's property' (section 3 (1) of the Children Act 1989 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/3>)

⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/17> a child will be 'in need' if s/he is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for her/him of services by a local authority, or if s/he is disabled. In Wales, the 'child in need' framework does not apply, and there are separate support provisions set out in the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014.

⁵ Close relative is defined in the Children Act 1989, section 105 as a grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt (whether full blood or half blood or by marriage or civil partnership) or step-parent' <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/105>

⁶ The Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005, Regulation 3. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/1533/made>

financial help and help with contact arrangements. If the child had not been in the care system immediately prior to the special guardianship order being made, then whether the local authority conducts an assessment of their need for support is discretionary, as is largely whether and what support is provided.

If the child was in the care system immediately prior to the order being made, then children's services must assess their need for support (including financial help), but this does not mean children's services are obliged to provide such support. Children in this situation are entitled to certain help, such as pupil premium plus or to apply for therapeutic support under the Adoption Support Fund.

Therefore the level of support that a child or their special guardian receives can vary significantly.

- **Child arrangements orders**

A 'lives with' child arrangements order will state that the child is to live with the kinship carer named in the order. The carer will share parental responsibility for the child with the parents. Children's services have a discretionary power (not a duty) to pay a means tested child arrangements allowance. Children who were in the care system and are now under a child arrangements order are entitled to certain supports, such as Pupil Premium Plus.

- **Kinship foster care**

If children's services have a role in placing a child with a relative or friend, then that person should be assessed as a family and friends foster carer – also known as a kinship foster carer. For example, if in an emergency situation a social worker asks a family member to care for the child, then children's services would have been instrumental (i.e. have had a role) in making that placement. A kinship carer does not acquire parental responsibility when they become a foster carer for a child in their family and friends' network, but the child is a 'looked after' child and therefore entitled to certain support services, including leaving care services.

A kinship carer can be approved as a foster carer on a temporary basis once basic checks have been undertaken. This allows a child to be placed in their care immediately, rather than first having to spend time in unrelated local authority care. A full assessment of the kinship carer must be conducted within 16 weeks of the child moving to their care (this may be extended for a further eight weeks in exceptional circumstances). Anyone who is approved as a kinship foster carer should receive a fostering allowance for the looked after child in their care. This applies equally to carers who have temporary approval and those who are fully approved. Kinship carers are entitled to be paid at the same rate as unrelated foster carers.

In addition to the provisions which relate to different kinship care arrangements, English local authorities are required, by statutory family and friends care guidance⁷, to have a published and up to date family and friends care policy. This should set out their approach to meeting the needs of children being raised in kinship care. Local authorities should also have a designated and named senior manager with responsibility for implementation of the family and friends care policy

More information about any of these legal arrangements and the implications for decision making, assessment and support, can be found on Family Rights Group's website. This information can be found in their advice sheets www.frg.org.uk. Kinship carers (or potential kinship carers) who need legal advice, can also contact Family Rights Group's freephone advice line on 0808 801 0366 or register and post on Family Rights Group's on-line family and friends carers' forum <https://www.frg.org.uk/FandFCForum/>

Legal framework during the COVID-19 pandemic

Assessment of potential and current kinship carers during the pandemic, have primarily taken place remotely, by telephone or video. These assessments concern whether or not a prospective kinship carer may take on the long-term care of a child within their family and friends network, and the support they might receive to care for the child. The impact of not being able to participate effectively in these important meetings could be significant for the child and their family.

⁷ Family and friends care: Statutory guidance for local authorities (2011) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/288483/family-and-friends-care.pdf

The family justice system also had to meet the challenge of remote justice, with hearings in the Family Court moving to take place via telephone or video conference, often without the advice and support of a lawyer. The President of the Family Division has recently published a message in which he anticipates that there will continue to be a “significant proportion of remote/hybrid hearings over the next six months”⁸.

The result from this latest survey demonstrate that there is still significant variation across the country in terms of local authority and court practice. Some respondents to the survey highlighted the need for support during legal proceedings at this time. For example in applying for a special guardianship order for the child who has been placed with them during the pandemic. As set out below, kinship carers and potential kinship carers have very limited access to legal advice and representation and are often left to face the assessment and court process unprepared or to self-represent in court proceedings.

Legal aid and help with legal costs

The results from this survey demonstrate the importance, accentuated even more in remote hearings, of kinship carers needing access to legal advice and representation from the outset so that they understand how best to secure the child’s future with them, and as circumstances change. Without legal advice, some family and friends do not know how to secure the child’s future with them, or do not understand the legal ramifications of the court order that they are entering into and so cannot make the best decision for the child and their family.

Under the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, virtually all private family law issues were removed from the scope of legal aid. There are limited exceptions to this, including where the applicant for legal aid has evidence of either domestic abuse, or child abuse by the person who will be the respondent in the case. This ‘gateway evidence’ (see below) will bring the case back into scope for legal aid. However, the applicant for legal aid still then needs to pass a means test and a merits test. Where a kinship carer or prospective kinship carer is seeking a special guardianship order or a ‘lives with’ child arrangements order in private law proceedings (not care proceedings), they must be able to provide evidence that the child has suffered abuse at home. Gateway evidence would include evidence that the child is on a child protection plan, or a letter from children’s services confirming the concerns and reasons why they may support the child going to live with the kinship carer. However, many prospective kinship carers will not have the relevant gateway evidence and so cannot secure legal aid. This may be because the local authority has, for example, decided that as long as the child is living with the carer, then the child does not meet the threshold for a child protection plan.

In the context of care proceedings, if a kinship carer is joined as a party to the proceedings, then they can apply for legal aid to be represented in the proceedings. However, many kinship carers are not parties to proceedings, or do not have access to early legal advice such that they know that this may be an option. Outside of court proceedings, legal aid for kinship carers is similarly limited. When children’s services are contemplating care proceedings and initiate the formal ‘pre-proceedings’ process in accordance with the Public Law Outline, parents will be eligible for legal advice via non-means and non-merits tested Legal Help. But where a kinship carer is already caring for a child in this scenario, or is being assessed pre-proceedings as a prospective carer for the child, they would not have similar access to Legal Help advice pre-proceedings.

Because prospective kinship carers commonly cannot access legal aid, many local authorities make some funding available for kinship carers to obtain legal advice. However, whether or how much legal help a local authority is prepared to fund varies and is often not made public. Typically, advice is made available only to prospective carers who the local authority is proposing as a long-term care option for the child. This model of funding is also limited and may constitute no more than a one-off, one hour meeting with a solicitor.

⁸ The Family Court and Covid 19 – The Road Ahead 2021 <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Road-Ahead-2021.pdf>

Main survey findings

The kinship carers

This section sets out the demographics of the respondents.

Under each question, is set out how many kinship carers have responded.

Q1 Where kinship carer lives in the UK

	Respondents	% of respondents
England	539	90%
Wales	25	4%
Scotland	37	6%
Northern Ireland	1	0%
Total respondents	602	

Q2 If kinship carer lives in England, which region do they live in?

English region	Respondents	% of respondents	% of population of England living in those regions ⁹
East of England	40	8%	11%
East Midlands	29	6%	9%
London	43	8%	16%
North East	54	10%	5%
North West	85	16%	13%
South East	121	23%	16%
South West	62	12%	10%
West Midlands	38	7%	11%
Yorkshire and Humber	48	9%	10%
Total respondents	520		

The table sets out the number and proportion of respondents living in each of the English regions. The third column reflects the percentage of the population of England living in each region. There was a disproportionately low response to the survey from London.

Analysis by Wijedasa¹⁰ of 2011 census data has previously found that London and the North East have the highest proportions of children in kinship care compared to the rest of England.

⁹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/294681/population-england-united-kingdom-uk-regional>

¹⁰ Wijedasa D (2015) The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in England. University of Bristol https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/190703751/Briefing_Paper_001.pdf

Q3 Age of kinship carer

Age of kinship carer	Respondents	% of respondents
18-24 years old	2	0%
25-34 years old	26	4%
35-44 years old	77	13%
45-54 years old	184	32%
55-64 years old	216	37%
65-74 years old	67	12%
75 years or older	5	1%
Prefer not to say	3	1%
Total respondents	580	

17% of kinship carers who responded are under 45 years of age, 69% are aged 45 – 64 years. 13% are 65 years old or over.

Q4 Does kinship carer have a limiting long term illness or disability?

Illness or disability	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	146	25%
No	398	69%
Prefer not to say	36	6%
Total respondents	580	

A quarter of kinship carers who responded said they have a limiting long-term illness or disability. Many of these carers will be at great health risk from the virus due to their health conditions.

Q5 How many kinship children under the age of 18 years are you raising as a kinship carer?

This does not include respondents' birth children.

Number of kinship children being raised by carer	Respondents	% of respondents
1	360	62%
2	146	25%
3	52	9%
4	15	3%
5	3	0%
6	0	0%
More than 6	1	0%
0	5	1%
Total respondents	582	

In total, the 582 kinship carers who responded to this question are raising at least 889 kinship children aged under 18 years old. Where the respondent stated 0, this is because the kinship 'child' or 'children' they are raising is now 18 years old or above.

Q6 Relationship to the kinship children you are caring for?

Relationship to kin child	Respondents	% of respondents
Grandmother	342	58%
Aunt	93	16%
Great Aunt	39	7%
Grandfather	32	6%
Friend	17	3%
Cousin	6	1%
Uncle	4	1%
Sister	3	0%
Great Uncle	2	0%
Brother	3	0%
Other	41	8%
Total respondents	582	

64% of those who answered are grandparents. Analysis by Wijedasa¹¹ of the 2011 census found that 51% of kinship carers related to the child were grandparents and 23% were siblings (it did not include non-relative kinship carers, such as a family friend). Analysis of the survey respondents who answered 'other' is interesting in that it includes: step-grandparents, great grandparents, a brother-in-law, and distant cousins. It also includes family friends, godparents and people distantly connected to the family, and in one case a vicar on whose doorstep the child had been left.

Q7 Kinship carers also raising at least one birth child aged under 18

Birth child under 18	Respondents	% of respondents
0	446	77%
1	66	11%
2	38	7%
3	18	3%
4	9	2%
5	0	0%
6	1	0%
More than 6	0	0%
Total respondents	578	

23% of kinship carers responding to the survey question are also raising birth children under 18. These 132 kinship carers are raising 238 birth children aged under 18 years old alongside the kinship child/children. At a time when families are stuck at home, managing home schooling alongside other commitments and without access to support networks, many kinships are juggling a lot of responsibility.

¹¹ Wijedasa (2015) ibid

Q8 Do you have a wife or husband/partner living with you?

Wife or husband or partner living with kinship carer	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	365	63%
No	215	37%
Total respondents	580	

Nearly 4 in ten kinship care respondents are single.

Q9 Are there other adults in household?

Other adults in household	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	155	27%
No	427	73%
Total respondents	582	

Over a quarter of kinship care households also have another adult living with them who is not the carer's partner.

Q10 Kinship carers were asked more detail about the other adults in the household (excluding a husband/wife or partner)

154 of the 155 kinship carers who had answered yes to Q9 answered this question by describing their relationship to these other adults in more depth:

- 131 kinship carer households have 180 birth children aged 18 or over living with them;
- 23 kinship carer households have 26 kinship 'children' aged 18 or over living with them;
- 36 kinship carer households have 43 other adults living there (who are not the carer's partner/wife/husband).

Q11 Do you also have caring responsibilities for anyone who is not living with you?

187 (36%) of respondents stated that they were also caring for someone who was not living with them.

This included:

- 106 respondents caring for their own parents or their parents-in-law, many of a whom were in their 80s or 90s and disabled.
- 43 caring for their adult child
- 30 caring for another grandchild
- 31 caring for other relatives, such as siblings
- 9 caring for a family friend or neighbour

Many of those for whom the respondent was caring for were very vulnerable and were heavily dependent upon the kinship carer.

"My 25 year old son has epilepsy and regular seizures. He has a range of other physical and mental health needs."

"We remotely support our other adult son who has mental health and addiction problems."

"My sister is my 85 year old mother's full time carer but three or four times a month I have to fill in for her as mum's in a wheelchair on oxygen with heart failure and can't be on her own all day."

"We have one 90 year old parent, and two in their 80s."

The kinship children

Q12 Ages of kinship children

The percentages in this table represent the percentage of kinship children in each age category

Age (years old)	Respondents	% of respondents
Under 1	12	2%
1–2	33	4%
2–3	69	9%
3–4	71	9%
5–9	259	35%
10–15	245	33%
16–17	43	6%
18+	14	2%
Total respondents	576 raising 746 kinship children	

576 kinship carers answered this question. They were raising 746 kinship children, including 14 aged 18 or over. 24% of the kinship children were aged under five years old, 35% were aged between 5 and 9 years old, 33% between 10-15 years of age. 6% were aged 16 or 17 years old.

Q13 Main reasons the kinship child/children are unable to live with their parents

The percentage figures in the table below reflect the proportion of respondents who ticked each option. Carers could tick more than one option so the total percentages add up to more than 100%.

Reasons child can't live with parents	Respondents	% of respondents
Parental drug or alcohol misuse	309	55%
Parent could not cope/child was neglected	273	49%
Parental mental ill health	227	40%
Parental domestic abuse	162	29%
Child was subject to physical abuse at home	77	14%
Parental abandonment or parent relinquished child	69	12%
Very young parent	42	7%
One or both parents have died	48	9%
Breakdown in relationship between parent and child	16	3%
Parental illness or disability	25	4%
Parental imprisonment	33	6%
Child or adolescent behavioural difficulties	13	2%
Parents' separation	27	5%
Parent/partner is a sex offender	18	3%
Exploitation outside the home e.g. gangs, sexual exploitation or county lines	2	0%
Other (not specified)	37	7%
Don't wish to answer	12	2%
Total respondents	562	

More than half the kinship carers cited parental drug or alcohol misuse and four in ten kinship carers cited parental mental ill health as the main reasons why the children were unable to live with parents. Almost one in three kinship carers stated that domestic abuse was the reason the child could not live with their parents. This demonstrates the severity of the situations that result in kinship placements being necessary, and points to the trauma that many kinship children have experienced.

Almost one in two kinship carers said the child had been neglected or their parent could not cope. Other reasons included parental death, the safety of the home due to inappropriate parental partners, and the parents having special educational needs and disabilities.

Domestic abuse is the main reason that callers to the Family Rights Group advice line cite as to why children's services are involved with their family. This was mentioned by 28% of callers between July and September 2020 (compared to 25% in 2019/20). There were 40% more callers advised in October 2020 where domestic abuse was a factor, than in the same month a year ago.

FRG's advice service is also hearing from an increasing number of kinship care arrangements which have come about as a result of the death of parents due to Covid-19.

Q14 What race/ethnicity best describes the kinship child/children?

Ethnicity	Number of children	% of children
White British	415	81%
All Other White	24	5%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	25	5%
Asian/Asian British	1	0%
Mixed/Multiple Ethnic groups	35	7%
Other ethnic group	0	0%
Prefer not to say	10	2%
Total respondents	398	
Total children	510	

1 in 5 of the children being raised by kinship carers responding to this survey are non-white. Wijedasa¹² analysis of the 2011 data found that children from Black and Minority Ethnic communities were more likely than the rest of the child population to be raised by kinship carers: almost a third (32%) of children in England growing up in kinship care were non-white. Therefore, there is an underrepresentation of kinship carers of non-white children in this survey sample.

There is clear evidence from multiple sources that Covid-19 does not affect all ethnic groups equally. Public Health England's review into the disparities in risks and outcomes found that people from Black ethnic groups were most likely to be diagnosed and that death rates are highest among people of Black and Asian ethnic groups.¹³ An ONS study¹⁴ – which accounted for other sociodemographic characteristics like age, disability and deprivation – concluded that people of Black ethnicity are 1.9 times as likely to die as white people, 1.8 times for Bangladeshi and Pakistani men and 1.6 for women.

¹² Wijedasa D (2015) The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in England. University of Bristol https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/190703751/Briefing_Paper_001.pdf

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-review-of-disparities-in-risks-and-outcomes>

¹⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/coronavirusrelateddeathsbyethnicgroupenglandandwales/2march2020to10april2020>

Q15 Do any of the kinship children have special needs or disabilities?

Kinship child has special needs or disabilities	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	272	49%
No	284	51%
Total respondents	556	

Almost half of the kinship carers surveyed responded that at least one or more of the kinship children they are raising have special needs or disabilities. Kinship carers were asked to provide more details of the child's additional needs, and the responses, which are summarised below, demonstrate how significant those needs are.

- 88 kinship carers stated that at least one of the kinship children in their care was on the autistic spectrum or was being assessed for autistic spectrum disorder.
- 73 respondents mentioned that children in their care have an attachment disorder, or otherwise mentioned that their child suffers with issues relating to attachment. These children will be particularly impacted by any change in their care, for example if their carer becomes ill and they have to move in an unplanned way.
- 66 stated that at least one of the kinship children in their care had or was being assessed for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- 25 respondents mentioned that at least one of the kinship children in their care had foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. These children are likely to have additional needs as a result of this condition.
- A significant number of kinship carers described their kinship children as having learning disabilities or difficulties, for which they require additional special educational support. For example, 21 kinship carers stated their kinship child had developmental delay (including global developmental delay), and a further 37 indicated that the child had learning difficulties and required extra support.
- A number of respondents are caring for children with chronic health needs, who require regular access to medication and/or medical care. Some have very significant care needs. Conditions include severe asthma, severe allergies, weakened immune systems, cystic fibrosis, Duchenne muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, quadriplegia, and epilepsy. One child had suffered multiple limb loss due to meningococcal septicaemia.

Q16 Do any of the kinship children you are raising have an Education, Health and Care Plan (known as EHC Plan)?

Kinship child has an EHC Plan	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	171	31%
No	332	59%
Don't know	56	10%
Total respondents	559	

An EHC plan is a legal document that describes a child or young person's special educational, health and social care needs. Although the plan can include health or social care needs, the child will not get a plan if they have only health or social care needs that do not affect their education.

EHC plans are for children and young people whose special educational needs require more help than would normally be provided in a mainstream education setting (a college, school, nursery). An EHC plan is drawn up by the local authority after an EHC needs assessment of a child or young person aged between 0 and 25 years. The plan explains the extra help that should be given to meet those needs and how that help will support the child or young person to achieve what they want to in their life.

In 2019, 2.1% of 0-24 year olds in England had an EHCP¹⁵, or one in every fifty children. Almost one in three children covered by this survey has an EHCP which demonstrates the significant level of needs of many children in kinship care.

Guidance related to school attendance during the latest lockdown makes provision for school places for all children with an EHCP, with schools expected to use their best endeavours to meet the children's needs. This is a welcome development from the first lockdown when many children with an EHP were unable to attend school.

However, of the 272 kinship carers who indicated their kinship children have additional needs, only 143 (53%) also said that at least one of the children has an Education, Health and Care Plan. Therefore, more than 4 in 10 do not have access to the support afforded by having an EHCP.

The impact of the latest lockdown

Q17 Has your household been required to shield during the pandemic, due to someone in your household having an underlying health condition? If yes, what are the main difficulties you are facing as a result?

Kinship child has special needs or disabilities	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	124	23%
No	394	72%
Unsure	27	5%
Total respondents	545	

Almost a quarter of kinship carers indicated that they have been required to shield during the course of the pandemic.

"No respite, either away from home or at school as clinically extremely vulnerable. Both children at home, and trying to split myself to homeschool both children. First child requires someone with her 24 hours a day/seven days a week so as a sole carer I get no sleep or any break at all."

"Whilst my partner works during the day I am unable to leave the house with a child who is shielding. Entertaining the children within the home. Homeschooling three different age groups."

"Grandad has heart condition but children were still going to school and college."

¹⁵ Department for Education (2019) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statements-of-sen-and-ehc-plans-england-2019>; Mime Consulting (2019) <https://www.mimeconsulting.co.uk/dfc-data-release-breakdown-ehcps-in-england/>

Q18 What is most worrying you or are you finding hardest to deal with during the pandemic?

Tick all that apply

	Respondents	% of respondents
The child/children's emotional and mental wellbeing	388	71%
If I get the virus, what will happen to the child/children	354	65%
The child/children's education	320	58%
My emotional wellbeing	263	48%
Having no break or respite	257	47%
The child/children's behaviour	240	44%
If the child/children gets the virus	210	38%
Managing contact between the child/children and parents or wider family	179	33%
Feeling isolated and/or lonely	177	32%
Financial hardship	170	31%
Accessing therapeutic support for the child/children	117	21%
Pressure balancing work responsibilities	113	21%
Accessing food, medicines and other essentials	77	14%
Ongoing local authority assessments	31	6%
Court proceedings about the child/children	31	6%
Other (please specify)	25	5%
I have no worries or concerns	12	2%
Total respondents	548	

Some kinship carers explained their concerns:

"In October Social Services closed their files and have not been back in contact. Since then we have all contracted Covid-19 and have felt isolated."

"That the damage this and the previous lockdown will have permanently on our child's ability to function in life."

"Feel I haven't had much support before or whilst the pandemic. Knowing what we are entitled too this would be great benefit. Instead I feel mostly like I'm going round in circles and getting nowhere or I'm having to fight for every little thing to help raise these children."

"We feel so isolated and unsupported."

Q19 What support have you or your kinship child/children received during the pandemic?

Tick all that apply and please give details.

	Respondents	% of respondents
Free school meals / food vouchers	182	34%
I have received no help	173	32%
Emotional and practical help from family and friends	128	24%
Support from kinship child/children's school or nursery	126	23%
Participating in a support group with other kinship carers	105	19%
Support from your kinship child/children's social worker	69	13%
Practical help with shopping and other supplies	45	8%
Counselling or therapeutic support for the child / CAMHS	42	8%
Counselling for yourself	15	3%
Support managing child/family contact	15	3%
Legal advice from Family Rights Group or another charity or solicitor	12	2%
Respite care	6	1%
Total respondents	539	

The most common form of support kinship families have received during the pandemic is by way of food vouchers with a third of families accessing this form of help. Other common sources of assistance include family and friends, the child/children's school or nursery, and support groups with other carers.

A third of respondents have received no support during the course of the pandemic.

Q20 Have you received any support to help maintain a relationship (e.g. remote or face to face contact) between the kinship child/children and the rest of their family during the pandemic?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	72	13%
No	466	87%
Total respondents	538	

87% said that they had no support during the crisis with maintaining the kinship's child's relationships with their parents or other family members. Where respondents left feedback, some were content to not have assistance but for others they wished for this support.

"We have gone to supervised contact in a contact centre with a professional present to me supervising contact virtually in our home, this has raised some issues."

"We have had to do this ourselves — one birth parent (father) has been very receptive to alternative arrangements. Other birth parent (mother) has not."

"We are going through court case with mum, the pressure if anything has increased due to assessments and representing ourselves."

Where support had been provided, it tended to be a social worker or the contact centre advising or supervising remote contact.

"Friends and family team social worker continues to support and arranged supervised contact with individual parents."

“Support re. contact with maternal family members who can be difficult. I do video contact with them.”

For some, access to technology continues to be a challenge. Even when computer equipment was provided, some are still having difficulties accessing data.

“Chromebook received for but parents have no data half the time to video call”

“New computer from Family fund (Thank You) due to court order for video contact”

“After the Judge insisting matters were to be handled differently, the then social worker ensured my daughter (the children`s mother) was provided with a smartphone which she was allowed to use once a week for half an hour to use on a whatsapp photocall to see and speak with the children, who remained with us.”

Some kinship carers expressed concerns about face to face contact, which had in some cases gone ahead despite worries about safety:

“Contact via telephone and one visit which I did not want due to Covid-19 and parent does not adhere to social distancing.”

“They haven’t supported as such just advised that video can go ahead. However been made to feel very guilty about not wishing to promote face to face — I am currently eight months pregnant.”

Q21 Is there any other practical support which you would find helpful?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	130	24%
No	95	18%
Unsure	308	58%
Total respondents	533	

130 kinship carers respondent yes to this question and 119 left further details on the kind of practical support they would like.

- 24 indicated that they would like respite:

“Prior to Covid-19 additional respite was provided by extended family.”

“Contact person in social services to reach out to if struggling or cannot cope. Exception of lockdown to allow relieve/ respite. Exception to allow the children to see the bio families.”

- 15 raised financial support.

- 13 wanted assistance with technology:

“Help with laptop for older child”

“Right now we do not have home internet which makes home-schooling very difficult”

“The lessons and contact with everyone are online I just am no good on computers the school assumes everyone understands and I do not.”

- 11 mentioned advice and support on contact

- 10 expressed a wish for greater therapeutic support for children with additional needs disabilities:

“Immediate access to counselling. Have been trying to get child a counsellor for five years.”

“I need sensory equipment. I need more help for therapeutic input and I would like to understand what the city proposes to do for severely disabled, nonverbal children to help with their mental health and well-being post covid? We have talking therapies for verbal children but what about children with no receptive or expressive language? Because their mental health matters too.”

"I have spent many months trying to get therapy/counselling for my child and have not been able to find a social worker willing to take us on as we are not an immediate safeguarding issue. Actually trying to find someone to talk to and get answers from has been impossible."

- Other suggestions included more remote support from schools, access to support groups, for their children to have interaction with others, for someone to call to check in on how they're doing, more flexibility on support bubbles, assistance on what to do if the carer becomes ill, and support with stressful and expensive court proceedings.

Education

Q22 In the latest lockdown, has your kin child/children been offered a school or childcare place?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes and they have taken up this place	235	46%
Yes, but we have decided the child/ren should not continue to attend	119	23%
No, but I would appreciate this support	53	10%
No and I would not wish the child/ren to attend during the pandemic	105	21%
Total respondents	512	

A higher proportion of kinship carer children in this lockdown have been offered a school place (69%) compared to the previous lockdown (37%).

"Grandson wanted to go to school and he would not have coped at home or done any schoolwork. He would have been totally isolated and his mental health would have severely dropped."

"The school have been fantastic and very supportive."

"Both myself and husband are key workers, also as a high tariff child I feel the routine of going to school is so important and it is much smaller numbers, which makes it a much better environment for him as he was so isolated from the other children and his education because of his extremely difficult emotional well-being and being unable to cope."

The responses from kinship carers reflect the dilemma that many individual carers face between sending the child to school for their educational and emotional wellbeing, and the fear that in doing so they may be placing themselves or their household at significant risk of Covid, with potentially devastating effects.

Some kinship carers declined the offer of a school place due to the risks, whilst others asked for a school place for the kin child but have been denied this despite the child's needs.

"Mainstream primary school are unable to meet need, still waiting for local authority to find an appropriate provision. Only support offered is worksheets/online learning which child will not engage with without aggression or violence."

"Child is classed as vulnerable so was offered a place in school last week before schools closed. For both our health and wellbeing I decided to decline offer and continue home schooling."

"Social services have taken the decision out of our hand and will not allow the children to attend school despite our asking for it."

The recurring point that kinship carers made was that their views about the child and household's best interest should be reflected in decisions about the child's education during lockdown.

Q23 Has your kin child/children been offered equipment to support remote learning, such as a laptop or tablet?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes, very helpful	97	18%
Yes, but not sufficient to meet their needs	27	5%
No but this would be helpful	166	32%
No we do not need it	236	45%
Total respondents	526	

32% families indicated they would find support with equipment for remote learning helpful but had not been offered it.

"I was only given this for this lockdown, and that was after I kept phoning up asking for it as I had seen on the news laptops had been sent out to schools. I didn't get any support during the first lockdown and my children had to have hard copies of work and write everything down, if I hadn't kept phoning it would have been the same this time!"

"My council kinship team member only contacted me after several weeks of lockdown. I asked about a laptop as child was struggling with schoolwork on phone no laptops available. Given a tablet but without keyboard difficult to type up lengthy essays etc as child doing Nat5 work. Often feel forgotten."

"We missed out on a laptop before. But having any equipment would be beneficial."

Q24 Have you or your kin child/children been offered free broadband or free data to support their learning?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes, very helpful	18	3%
Yes but not sufficient	5	1%
No but this would be helpful	199	37%
No, we do not need it	311	58%
Do expand on your response, if you wish		
Total respondents	533	

37% expressed the same wish for help with access to broadband/data for remote learning.

"We only have mobile broadband and use it as a hotspot but often not reliable."

Q25 Do you have enough space in your home for your kinship child/children to study?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	394	74%
No	94	18%
Unsure	42	8%
Total respondents	530	

Three quarters of kinship carers surveyed felt that they had enough space in their household for their children to study. However, for almost 2 in 10 carers this was a problem.

"My house is only two bedrooms and I sleep on the sofa and therefore we are really short of space which has a particular effect on the children."

"My granddaughter of eight and daughter share a room which makes it harder to revise."

Q26 The pandemic has been disruptive to children's education. Do you think your kin child/children need additional support to catch up?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	269	51%
No	125	24%
Unsure	135	25%
Total respondents	529	

Half of kinship carers believe their child/children need additional support to catch up on education. However, depending on the child's legal status, children in kinship care typically have no clear route to greater educational support.

"Both children are behind at school due to behaviour issues and for the one at home it is really hard to get him engaged in home learning. He is probably only completing about 10% of the work set"

"Already difficulties with learning and behind peers but due to lockdown even further behind. Concerns about transition to high school in September and vulnerabilities are very high"

"As already behind before the pandemic, further support is greatly needed"

"Mental & physical stimulation as my grandson has become almost agoraphobic as a result of lockdowns. It is impossible to get him to go outdoors & exercise or get fresh air especially as he feels embarrassed at being outdoors with an 'old crinkly' like me."

Child welfare processes and procedures

Q27 During the pandemic have you had experience of local authority processes (such as a kinship care assessment, child protection conference, looked after children review)?

During the pandemic have you experience of local authority processes?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	170	33%
No	333	64%
Unsure	19	4%
Total respondents	522	

Q28 Those who answered that they had experience of local authority processes during the pandemic, were asked how did you participate?

The percentage figures in the table below reflect the proportion of respondents who ticked each option. Carers could tick more than one option so the total percentages add up to more than 100%.

	Respondents	% of respondents
By phone	91	54%
By video	104	61%
In person	29	17%
Other	9	5%
Total respondents	170	

Local authority processes can have significant ramifications for the child and carer. They include assessments of the suitability of the carer to raise the child temporarily or long term, and what support the child and carer might need and receive. How the carer and child participate in such processes and have their views heard is of key importance.

Half of kinship carers who had been involved in local authority processes during the pandemic, stated they had taken part in at least some child welfare processes by phone.

One carer wrote:

"It was arranged for me to participate by telephone at a looked after child review meeting but this did not happen due to a failure with the link. The looked after child review went ahead without my input and I'm currently still waiting on the minutes of this meeting which I requested weeks ago."

Another wrote:

"A visit for health and safety stating full PPE is used and they turned up in just a mask!!"

Q29 Those who answered they had experience of local authority processes during the pandemic, were asked did you receive any support to help you participate in local authority processes?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	35	21%
No	109	64.5%
Not sure	25	15%
Total respondents	169	

Two in three kinship carers who had participated in local authority processes during the pandemic, said they'd received no help to do so.

Some kinship carers described feeling excluded from such processes:

"I was issued codes to join a zoom meeting without any further instruction or advice on how to participate. I was unable to join the meeting despite following the instructions."

It's the 24/7 constant without any respite and just an odd phone call from social workers then following a major incident the lack of support follow up. It all falls back to you to sort it out yourself."

The local authority was inflexible about using Zoom or WhatsApp. All the participants — independent therapists etc as well as us — had to install the platform used by the local authority. I don't know how this is going to work at the EHCP review later this month, as CAMHS uses Zoom. It was no different from the usual

Child In Need meetings — overdue, no agenda, nothing circulated in advance of meeting, no progression of issues agreed at previous meeting, no minutes etc. Appalling really. Social worker is very nice woman — very pleasant — but clearly used to working in a system not fit for purpose, and it's all totally normalized. EHCP review later this month is over a year overdue.”

“The actual Child in Need meeting was OK but a practical difficulty was having our child at home, and therefore my husband had to look after him so couldn't participate in the meeting. It must be impossible for single carers.”

“I was issued codes to join a zoom meeting without any further instruction or advice on how to participate. I was unable to join the meeting despite following the instructions provided.”

“The platform that was used was awful. Couldn't hear what was being said.”

“Social services did not adhere to our initial wishes and I had to sell my home to move in with my daughter so losing my independence

Some kinship carers expressed empathy for the workloads of children's services staff.

Social services have pretty much, left us to it. Only real communication, is when I initiate it. I feel that I do a good job and they are busy helping the families that are not coping so well.

A few kinship carers went out of their way to praise a social worker or other local authority staff.

“The local authority made sure I knew what I was doing and I was able to call whenever I needed to”

Some expressed the contrast in the support that different children they were raising had received or between different practitioners

“Child 1 — dealing with draft Education Health and Care Plan - reasonably good process and experience with local authority special educational needs staff. Child 2 — trying to access Adoption Support Fund funding for therapy. Nightmare experience with local authority special guardianship order Team. Clueless about this process for the most part. We are waiting on a youth worker, we are top of the list , but could be six months wait , which is difficult when my wife is ill.”

“The Independent Social Worker who did our Court-directed second Assessment was and is wonderful — big contrast from the first one.”

A few kinship carers spoke glowingly of the help they had received

“The local authority made sure I knew what I was doing and I was able to call whenever I needed to.”

“My supervising social worker offered support.”

“Our local authority social workers have been great and the EHCP process was really good - he got an enhanced package.”

“School were very understanding and helpful.”

Legal or court processes

Q30 During the pandemic have you experience of legal or court processes?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	69	13%
No	439	85%
Not sure	6	1%
Total respondents	514	

Q31 If you had experience of legal or court processes, did you get legal advice?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	47	68%
No	21	30%
Not sure	1	1%
Total respondents	69	

Three in ten kinship carers did not get legal advice despite their involvement in legal or court processes. Yet as set out earlier, there are significant ramifications to different legal arrangements in relation to decision making for the child, contact, permanence and support.

Q32 Who was this legal advice from?

	Respondents	% of respondents
A solicitor from a law firm	43	80%
Family Rights Group	7	13%
A law centre	1	2%
Other	5	9%
Total respondents	54	

One kinship carer stated that whilst she did get some legal advice, it was inadequate - the local authority had funded her for just one hour of legal advice from a solicitor.

"It is extremely complex and there is so much advice to research and learn about, not least timescales, procedures, legalities and what is law and what are recommendations and what is and is not enforceable and what is available and how to access support."

In a stark reminder that kinship carers may be involved in other legal proceedings, alongside potential family law cases, one grandmother described the support that she had received from the charity Inquest and legal aid lawyers in relation to the inquest into her daughter's death

Q33 Have you participated in a court process during the pandemic, and if so, how?

52 kinship carers reported that they had direct experience of the court process during the pandemic. This included where the kinship carers had been in court to secure a special guardianship order for the child, in some cases with the support of the local authority, in other cases the local authority plan had been to place the children elsewhere or the child to be adopted.

Q34 Kinship carers involved in court proceedings were asked, how did you participate in the hearing(s)?

The percentage figures in the table below reflect the proportion of respondents who ticked each option. Carers could tick more than one option so the total percentages add up to more than 100%.

	Respondents	% of respondents
By phone	29	49%
By video	25	42%
In person	8	14%
Other	7	12%
Total respondents	54	

Nearly half of kinship carers who had experience of the court process during the pandemic had to participate by phone. Where the respondent had stated other, this was either because there had been multiple hearings and the carer had participated in different ways in different hearings or because the hearing had not yet taken place.

"Had children's court hearing via video but the link for the chair kept breaking."

"The phone conference could have been better explained by the court. Having to answer questions you weren't really expecting was a bit of a shock and I forgot to say things. Also you haven't got a clue what happening through most of it. And can't ask anyone as you are on the phone."

Q35 Were you legally represented?

Those kinship carers who had participated in a court hearing(s) during the pandemic, were asked whether they were legally represented

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes, for all	14	27%
Yes for part of the court process	6	12%
No	32	62%
Total respondents	52	

Only around one in every four kinship carers who participated in a court hearing were legally represented throughout and nearly two thirds were not represented at all.

"Lack of access to legal aid and representation makes proceedings very difficult."

"I had to pay for a solicitor."

Housing

Q36 Is your current housing suitable for your household during the crisis?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	386	77%
No, it is overcrowded	79	16%
No, it needs refurbishment	37	7%
No, we are in temporary housing	1	0.2%
Total respondents	503	

Almost a third of respondents are living in inappropriate or temporary housing for their family.

Providing further detail, one respondent said:

“Six people in a three bed semi when at home 24 hours per day is overwhelming. The children constantly bicker due to lack of personal space. We only have one bathroom so there is always someone waiting for the loo! It is simply not practical to be here constantly.”

“We have slept in the sitting room for five years waiting for bigger accommodation.”

Finances and benefits

Q37 Do you receive any of the following benefits or tax credits?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Child benefit	366	79%
Child tax credit	183	39%
Council tax benefit	123	27%
Housing benefit	120	26%
Disability Living Allowance for the child you are raising	112	24%
Carer’s allowance	110	24%
Universal Credit	97	21%
Disability Living Allowance/Personal Independent Payment (PIP)	75	16%
Working tax credit	58	13%
Other (please specify)	58	13%
Employment and Support Allowance	33	7%
Income support	31	7%
Pension credit	19	4%
Guardian’s allowance (NOT local authority special guardianship allowance)	14	3%
Bereavement/widow’s benefit	6	1%
Total respondents	464	

Previous research has shown that more than half of kinship carers have to give up work or reduce their hours in order to meet the care needs of the children. Inevitably, this means that many have to rely at least in part on the benefits system, yet some find themselves penalised for taking on the care of additional children, particularly when they also have birth children in the household.

This survey data demonstrates the importance of child benefit and child tax credit to kinship care families. It also shows that almost a quarter are in receipt of Disability Living Allowance for the child they are raising. 1 in 5 are also in receipt of Universal Credit.

Q38 Are you currently affected by the bedroom tax?

Since April 2013, someone who claims housing benefit and is living in social housing or in private rented accommodation can have their housing benefit reduced or restricted if they have more bedrooms than the council says they need for their family/household. Two children of different genders are expected to share a bedroom until age 10. Two young people of the same gender who are under 16 are also expected to share a bedroom.

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	30	6%
No	463	91%
Not sure	16	3%
Total respondents	499	

"Was left paying bedroom tax for kinship child that was staying in the room."

"We pay £13 a week towards rent as we have a spare bedroom as son moved out. This is adapted and due to lockdown we are not in a position to find other suitable accommodation and are struggling to find how to appeal this."

"I have two children from a traumatic background they need their own space and I'm paying for that out of the children's money."

Q39 Are you currently affected by the benefit cap?

The benefit cap puts an overall limit on the amount of benefit income the household can receive from housing benefit, universal credit, child benefit, tax credits, income support etc. If the cap affects you, your housing benefit or universal credit is reduced

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes	26	5%
No	360	74%
Not sure	100	21%
Total respondents	486	

Some kinship carers who are affected by the benefit cap, described the impact during the crisis:

"I had to cope with 20% salary reduction for almost a year on furlough (March - Oct 2020). I have been unemployed since then to present and the cap reduces my living standard to below the breadline so I have had to seek food and other support to clothe and equip my child. I am a zero hours contract worker without shifts, a sole adult senior carer, trying to recover from extended illness after Covid."

"I was affected until I received DLA creating large amount of debt as had to give up job during first lockdown to deal with younger child massively dysregulating due to routine change."

"We live very frugally & the benefits we get don't allow us to heat the home enough through winter without worrying."

Q40 Have you received any extra financial help during the crisis?

The percentage figures in the table below reflects the proportion of respondents who ticked each option. Because carers could tick more than one option, the total percentages add up to more than 100%.

	Respondents	% of respondents
No	266	53%
Yes, food vouchers because the child/children are entitled to free school meals	187	37%
Yes other (please specify)	46	9%
Yes, I have been furloughed from my workplace	32	6%
Yes, I have received help because I am self employed	20	4%
Yes, help from a voluntary organisation hardship fund	13	3%
Yes, help from the local authority hardship fund	4	1%
Total respondents	499	

Almost four in ten kinship carers receive food vouchers because the children were entitled to free school meals. This highlights the importance of such support for kinship care households to help them get by during the pandemic.

Over half of respondents have not received any additional financial help during the pandemic.

Q41 Are you suffering financial hardship?

	Respondents	% of respondents
Yes but no worse than before the crisis	75	15%
Yes and the crisis has made things much harder	109	22%
No	260	53%
Not sure	51	10%
Total respondents	495	

37% of kinship carers stated they were facing financial hardship. Some described how the pandemic had made their financial situation much harder.

“Non-essential business have to remain closed so we’ve been unable to open. Open less than a year so no financial help.”

“Being furloughed is less wages, children not in school = more electricity being used with all online learning, more gas being used for heating and a lot more shopping needed.”

“Extra heating expenses. Plus as SEN child at home more, lots of breakages and extra food costs. Extra costs of activities e.g. art paper books videos etc.”

One carer stated

“No to hardship, using savings. Ask again when savings are gone and we reach retirement age.”

Q42 Kinship carers were asked what difference would their household being vaccinated make to them

This was an open question to which 412 respondents gave their views.

338 kinship carers (82%) indicated that they felt their household receiving the vaccine would lead to a positive difference.

40 carers used the phrase 'peace of mind'. Many others expressed a similar sentiment, indicating that having the vaccine would make them feel safer and less worried.

"It would give me peace of mind as my biggest fear is catching Covid 19 & the implications for my kin child."

"A big difference - due to our age nearly 60 and 60+ would give confidence in being able to provide long term care for our two and three year old grandchildren."

"An enormous difference. Having to still take two young ones to school and have them continue contact with parents is a worry — it is contact with other people that I cannot avoid. It would be absolutely reassuring to have the vaccine."

"On a daily basis we individually are part of 5 bubbles, working in education I'm mixing with dozens of other children as are my children in schools... The new variant is spreading faster which worries me... I feel it is essential for us as foster carers to be vaccinated in order for us to lead a 'normal' life."

Another common theme mentioned was that it would be positive for their children, particularly allowing them to return to school:

"Huge difference! We would send her to school which would be so much better for her. We need to be further up the vaccine list than we are now!"

"Freedom to take my son out. His sensory problems make him anxious. Then he gets overwhelmed and can hit out at us. He is worried we will die and he will be taken back to his birth parents."

For other carers, they thought it would allow them to access support networks

"Access family support, mental wellbeing"

"I just want to be able to attend support groups again. I do not like online meetings plus they're impossible with the children."

"Would give us both reassurance and enable us to support elderly relatives as well as being able to see other grandchild living in kinship care with another part of the family."

Q43 What three steps could the Government take at the present time to improve your life and that of the children you are raising?

384 kinship carers responded to this open question, of which:

- 155 kinship carers (40%) recommended that they would like additional financial support to support their role as kinship carers.

"Make SGO Allowance uniform across the country. Give SGO children access to the same support as adopted and LAC children. Give SGO holders access to the same support as foster carers."

"Financial aid, with free access to good educational materials."

"Make kinship carers allowance the same for everybody across all LA's especially when going to SGO. You shouldn't have to fight for it. Also have support for the life of the SGO too if needed."

- 90 kinship carers (23%) requested access to the vaccine for kinship carers.

"Getting the vaccine done 24/7. If someone said to me come at 3am I'd be there."

"Give us the vaccination as protection if we die who will take care of our grandchildren."

"If we can be on the list for the vaccine as we are the only ones that care for these children and will be devastated if anything happens to us carers."

- Greater recognition of kinship care was requested by 85 kinship carers (22%). Respondents wished for the role of kinship carers to be valued and many want to see a parity of esteem and support between kinship care and foster carer, regardless of legal status.

"We seemed to have slipped though the radar they think because we give the kids a safe home that support is not needed."

"Stop treating kinship children and their families as a weird anomaly and afterthought."

"Recognise kinship carers in the same way as adopters. It is so hard bringing up a child when older and this could make the difference of being able to give up work rather than juggling so much and feeling exhausted most of the time. Advise schools not to make us feel guilty when taking up a space. Allow everyone to access the £500 payment for self isolating!"

"It's not all about money. But I feel people with SGOs should get the same as foster carers. And our looked after children should get the same care as in help with paying for after school clubs, holiday clubs, therapy etc. Their needs don't suddenly go away or change because an SGO has been granted."

"Proper recognition for the role that kinship carers provide especially in the workplace i.e. kinship carers do not get the same entitlement as someone adopting if a kinship carer proceeds with a guardianship order."

- 68 kinship carers (18%) want additional education support for their kinship children. 17 kinship carers requested help with technology, particularly for home learning.

"Provide more funding to schools to recruit and train more teaching personnel — enhanced one-to-one support will be needed once they go back."

"Remove the word 'might include' from the guidance that a child on an SGO or kinship be entitled to a school place in lockdown, it just means that schools are refusing them, often as they have additional needs."

"Note that the most vulnerable children (eg those who are living with very elderly or clinically extremely vulnerable carers/guardians, or those who are being kept off school because their special schools cannot meet their needs in the current crisis) will need more support than others to re-integrate into education after the crisis is over. They are also — having previously experienced loss and trauma — highly likely to be worrying an awful lot about losing their carers to Covid. This additional stress and vulnerability should be acknowledged and the DfE should take steps to ensure that the gap between kinship children and others is not allowed to widen in both mental health and education."

"Ensure kinship children have devices to access school work."

- Many carers (24) mentioned the need for greater mental health support and therapeutic measures for their kinship children.

"More practical support when presented with children with difficulties (physical, social, emotional, behaviour, mental health etc)"

"Support with accessing and even offering mental health support for kinship kids in general or any looked after child would be the biggest thing that would help regardless of the pandemic!"

- The emotional strain on carers was also recognised, with 12 carers raising a need for extra support to support their own mental health and 17 carers requested some respite. 12 requested more flexibility for them and their children to meet friends and access support groups to address isolation.

"Although I know the restrictions in place are to keep people safe but allowance for normal contact between siblings would be positive for my child and for clubs to be able to start up again. That is all I can think of, just getting back to some kind of normal would improve things."

"Keep making provisions for mental health, therapeutic support, respite and short breaks in COVID guidance."

“Easier access to mental health support and counselling.”

- Other practical suggestions included clearer information and advice for kinship carers (17), help with contact arrangements particularly during the pandemic (21), help with housing including overcrowding and adaptations (16).

“Provide comprehensive online support for kinship carers in one place, to help access further help, support and even other carers in the area — who may just need to talk to someone else going through the same thing. To feel included in decisions/legislation/benefits kinship carers have been left out for too long.”

- 8 carers requested support for legal proceedings, including the need for access to free independent legal advice, for example, in applying for a special guardianship order for the child during the crisis.

Recommendations for action to support kinship carers during the latest stage of the pandemic

Kinship carers have done the right thing by the kinship children they are raising, ensuring they can remain within their family network and providing them with a safe and loving home.

The results of our survey demonstrate that a significant number of these carers are balancing a great many challenges and responsibilities. Long term illnesses and disabilities are prevalent among both carers and children, with some children having very significant care needs. Many kinship carers also have additional responsibilities raising birth children and caring for others outside of the home. They are dealing with these challenges alongside shielding, managing home learning, financial hardship, and the overwhelming worry about what will happen to their children if they become ill with the virus. Some have the pressure and expense of local authority court processes and legal proceedings to navigate too. These challenges are difficult enough at the best of times but the pandemic has increased the struggle.

We welcome the measures the Government have hitherto introduced through the course of this pandemic to support the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families. We believe there are further steps the Government could now take in order to ensure kinship carer families are properly supported and children can reach their potential.

Educational support for kinship children

There is widespread concern about the impact of the pandemic on the education of children and young people. Of the kinship carers who responded to this survey, half of the kinship children have additional education needs and disabilities. Yet depending on the child's legal status, children in kinship care typically have no clear route to greater educational support.

Our data suggests that during the latest lockdown, a higher proportion of the kinship children with additional needs have been given the option to attend school compared to the earlier stages of the pandemic. However, there are some carers who would still value the option if it had been made available to them.

In order to protect the kinship carer where health risks are greater, many families have chosen to keep their children at home. However, there are limits to home learning and digital poverty is a barrier to many children effectively accessing learning resources. The accelerated provision of equipment and data access during the latest lockdown and investment in a National Tutoring Programme are both welcome initiatives. However, kinship carers without digital skills themselves are finding it challenging to manage remote learning and some children with exceptional needs are not being catered for. Half of kinship carers believe their kinship children will need catch up support to make up for lost learning. Legal status or having not spent time in the care system should not be a barrier to accessing vital educational support.

We urge the Government to ensure all kinship children can access equipment and data for remote learning. All children in kinship care, where there is professional evidence of additional need, should be included within the remit of the National Tutoring Programme. We also suggest consideration is given to extending the remit of Virtual School Heads and Pupil Premium Plus to all children in kinship care.

Access to therapeutic support

We welcome the extension of the Adoption Support Fund to 2022. We also recognise the greater flexibility introduced by the Government during the pandemic in respect of how the Adoption Support Fund in England can be used for those children who are eligible (i.e. adopted children and those on special guardianship orders, who were previously in the care system). This has facilitated valuable remote provision for those kinship carers who

are eligible. However, there is evidence of a significant level of unmet need, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic, among kinship children who have suffered tragedy and trauma.

We propose the Government go a step further and extend the Adoption Support Fund to all children being raised by kinship carers, who are unable to live with their parents. Regardless of whether or not the children were in local authority care, many of these children have faced significant adversities, their anxiety levels may have considerably increased during the pandemic and some of the children and their carers are in desperate need of therapeutic support.

Financial support

Financial hardship was a challenge faced by a significant number of kinship carers before the start of the pandemic, with more than half having to give up work or reduce their hours in order to meet the care needs of the children. Inevitably, many have to rely at least in part on the benefits system, yet some find themselves penalised for taking on the care of additional children, particularly when they also have birth children in the household.

The results of this survey indicate a continued level of financial difficulty faced by many families. Over a third of respondents say they are facing financial hardship and one in five of all respondents have seen that hardship exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. Almost 4 in 10 survey respondents have received free school meal support and 1 in 5 are in receipt of Universal Credit.

Given the level of need and the pressure that this is placing on families who have stepped up to raise children who may otherwise be looked after in the care system, we urge the Government to consider how welfare flexibility can prevent kinship care families from being pushed into severe poverty. This should include the under occupation penalty ('bedroom tax'), the Benefit Cap, Universal Credit including the Covid-19 uplift, and Pension Credit.

Moreover, just as the system already recognises that adopters need support to manage an often difficult transition when adopting children from the care system, we urge the government to consider how a comparable right to a period of paid employment leave and protection to kinship carers, could be introduced.

Access to justice for kinship carers

Kinship carers and potential kinship carers have very limited access to legal advice and representation and are often left to face the assessment and court process unprepared or to self-represent in court proceedings. Some spend thousands on legal fees and have ended up in debt, just to secure parental responsibility for a child who might otherwise enter the care system. We have heard from prospective kinship carers struggling in the pandemic without access to legal advice, with their assessments being halted, stalling placement decisions for children. The vast majority of Family Court hearings are now being heard by telephone or video conference facility, and so kinship carers will not even have the option of attending the court building to make enquiries of the judge, or to easily ask for permission to sit in court.

We welcome the Ministry of Justice's pledge in the Legal Support Action Plan 2019 to bring forward provisions to extend the scope of legal aid to special guardians in private law cases. We also note the Ministry of Justice's reaffirmed commitment to delivering this, as set out in response to a recent parliamentary question by Andrew Gwynne MP.¹⁶ However, we also urge the Government to consider going further and addressing the lack of legal aid provision for kinship carers in the context of public law, and in the pre-proceedings stage of work with families.

¹⁶ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-01-12/136465>

In public law proceedings, most proposed special guardians do not receive legal aid within the context of the proceedings. Where a local authority has positively assessed a relative or friend of the parents during proceedings, the authority may pay for the proposed special guardian to receive legal advice but where this happens (and it often doesn't) the provision is often limited to one to two hours of advice. If the local authority does not support the placement, then the kinship carer is unlikely to be able to access free legal advice to challenge what could be an inadequate assessment. Ultimately, if all options of family and friends care are not properly explored, a child could end up in the care system or even adopted. In public law proceedings all parents/those with parental responsibility are entitled to non-means, non-merits tested legal aid.

The pandemic is exacerbating existing challenges for kinship carers in accessing legal advice.

We call on the Ministry of Justice to work to deliver the extension of legal aid to special guardians in private law proceedings as a matter of urgency. We also urge consideration for addressing the comparable gaps in legal aid provision in public law and pre-proceedings.¹⁷

Vaccination programme

The findings of this survey demonstrate the high prevalence of long term health conditions and disabilities among kinship carers, their kin children, and those for whom they have wider caring commitments. Loss and trauma are already central to many kinship care placements, and we are seeing examples of kinship arrangements transpiring as a result of the death of parents from Covid-19. Indeed, concern for what will happen to the children if the carer becomes unwell, was the second biggest worry of kinship carers responding to this survey. Therefore, on multiple levels, there is a clear urgency to protect families who are already dealing with a great many challenges.

While kinship carers with the most severe health needs, putting them at greatest risk from the virus, will already be included in the early stages of the vaccination programme, many others in poor health will not. In the guidance published by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation on 30th December, unpaid carers were added to Priority Group 6, in recognition of the danger to elderly or disabled people whose welfare may be at risk if the carer contracted COVID. The Fostering Network have been campaigning for foster carers, and social workers, to be included in the vaccination programme as key workers, supporting children in the care system.

We propose that all carers, including foster carers and all kinship carers, regardless of the child's legal status, should be prioritised in the vaccination programme by being classed as keyworkers.

¹⁷ Family Rights Group with other interested legal practitioners and organisations, including the Law Society, Resolution and Association of Lawyers for Children have drawn up a paper setting out realistic changes that could be made to the legal aid regime in respect of potential special guardians, that could have an immediate significant impact. It can be viewed here: <https://www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/reforming-law-and-practice/family-and-friends-care-enabling-children-to-live-within-their-wider-family>

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