

Kinship Support

Special Guardianship Orders

Overall Aim and Purpose

Children enjoy more positive outcomes when their future is secured and where they are claimed. Care planning for the child or children placed with the kinship carer will always look to achieve this goal and if it becomes clear that a child cannot return home, we must explore alternative care options .

Children who grow up in kinship care often have better outcomes than children who grow up in other types of non-parental care. Evidence shows that, compared to these groups, children in kinship care:

- are more likely to have stable, permanent homes
- achieve higher levels of employment later in life
- have better social and emotional wellbeing and better long-term physical health compared to children in foster or residential care
- are more likely to be kept with their siblings compared to those in foster care
- are more likely to report that they feel loved

Strategic purpose

- The proposal aimed to merge support for Connected Carers and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) carers into a single Kinship Support Team within the Fostering Service.
- This aligns with the 'Championing Kinship Care' strategy (2024) and seeks to secure permanence for children in care.

Kinship Strategy

Launching a kinship financial allowance, paid at the same rate as the fostering allowance, beginning in up to 8 local authorities.

- Expanding the Virtual School Head's role to promote the education of children in kinship care.
- Ensuring more eligible kinship carers are aware of their ability to access the £48 million Adoption Support Fund, by renaming it to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, as well as analysing the fund's applications and the therapies provided.
- Producing government guidance for employers on how kinship carers can be supported at work. This will include advice on adapting HR policies, signposting to workplace entitlements carers can access and creating a culture of support.
- Introducing a kinship leave and pay entitlement for Department for Education staff (subject to discussions on the detailed arrangements between the department and employee representatives).
- Establishing a training, information and advice offer that all kinship carers will have access to.
- Sustaining the delivery of peer support groups across England for all kinship carers.

Empower kinship families by

- Creating a new Kinship Care Ambassador role, to work with local authorities and kinship carers to raise standards and share best practice.
- Improving the availability of advocacy services for children in kinship care by updating guidance and standards.
- Establishing the National Kinship Care Advisory Board and extending the Department for Education's Kinship Carer Reference Group.
- Partnering with Foundations - the What Works Centre for Children & Families and the sector to work towards every family being offered high quality family group conferences at pre-proceedings stage.
- Using digital innovation to help social workers have a greater understanding of kinship families.

Context

164 Connected Care placements existed in Stockton. (November 2023)

- A review in late 2023 found many carers were open to SGOs but reluctant due to:
- Loss of Supervising Social Worker (SSW) support.
- Financial dependency on fostering allowances.

Review

- Review undertaken of all Connected care arrangements.
- Identification of all arrangements where the child or young person did not require the continued oversight of remaining a Child in Our care .
- Development of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) Panel to review all children in connected care arrangements and consider conversation to SGO . The panel included HOS for Children in Our care , Service lead for children in Our Care , Team manager for the independent Review unit , Team Manager for the Connected Care team ,Lead Practitioner for the Family work team Social workers, Team Managers, Supervising Social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers .

Proposed Changes

- Convert up to 100 Care Orders to SGOs, reducing the Children in Our Care (CIOC) population.
- Create a Kinship Team by renaming and restructuring the Connected Carers team.
- Integrate support for both Connected and SGO carers under one team.
- Add a Link Worker to provide out-of-hours and one-to-one support.

Barriers to SGO Conversion

Carers identified

Lack of:

- Ongoing SSW support.
- Training and peer support.
- Financial parity (SGO payments are means-tested).
- Clarity on post-18 support.
- Housing and contact management support.

Implementation Plan

- Timetable for SGO conversions to be reviewed fortnightly
- SGO carers to retain their SSW if desired.
- Virtual School support for SGO children from Sept 2024.
- Access to Adoption Support Fund for SGO carers.
- Access to inhouse therapeutic services
- Keeping-in-touch service for low-need SGO families.
- Financial assessments completed based on individual needs of children
- SGO support groups
- Continued program of training for SGO carers
- Development of front facing online offer for Kinship carers

Anticipated Benefits

- Improved permanence and stability for children.
- Reduced statutory intervention
- Lower CIOC numbers, easing pressure on social workers and IROs.
- Cost savings from fewer court proceedings and reduced care costs.
- Alignment with national kinship care strategy.

Progress to date

- Developed the new Kinship Policy
- Developed Practice Guide for Social workers
- Developed up to date information for Parents , Carers ,children and young people
- Liaised with Citizens advise Service
- Set up comms sessions with connected carers to support them to understand the offer
- Developed the training offer for SGO Carers
- Set up SGO support groups
- We worked with Foundations around the Kinship Offer

Foundations UK developed the Kinship Care Practice Guide alongside the DFE

Stockton were selected as one of 10 Local authorities across England to take part in the project and within this selected one of the 5 key principles to work on in expanding our offer to Kinship families :

Key Principle 3: Kinship families need to be made aware of the support they are entitled to, and local authorities should actively work to address barriers to accessing support

This has supported in the development of :

- Guidance for Carers, Parents ,Children and young people
- Starting to develop our online information site
- Set up of Comms sessions

Figures to date

In the financial year 2024/2025 the Family Work Team has continued to support children and young people being transitioned to SGO arrangements .

20 children have transitioned to SGO arrangements and 4 have been made subject to Child Arrangement Orders (CAO)

At the beginning of the financial year 2025 / 2026

There are 168 connected care arrangements of these 41 are in proceedings and 127 are children subject to Section 31 CA1989

41 children in the process of transition to SGO with Social workers completing SGO assessments and court paperwork.

27 are not able to covert at this time as children need continued oversight under CIOC

42 need further work competing with current carers to enable a transition to SGO

41 children are currently subject to Proceedings where the outcome could be step down to SGO

17 Children have twin tracked plans of reunification