

Making the most of kinship care

Kinship care, where children live with extended family members, is the best alternative for many children who can no longer live with their parent(s). As Scotland debates how it can ensure better life chances for vulnerable children and faces difficult issues such as parental drug and alcohol misuse, kinship care is, and should be, at the forefront of that debate.

This paper sets out what needs to happen now if we are to make the most of kinship care in Scotland.

Key points

- Children should not have to become 'looked after' in order to receive adequate financial and social supports.
- Children have a right to have their wider family considered as a first, and best, alternative for them when their parents cannot safely care for them.
- Local Authorities have a responsibility to ensure that the practical supports that they provide for families meet the needs of the growing numbers of kin carers e.g. home helps, free school meals, respite services, holiday schemes, family support programmes.
- Children in kinship care who have undergone traumatic experiences such as bereavement or violence, should be able to access therapeutic recovery services when they need them.
- There should be a national non-means-tested benefit for kinship carers.
- Family Group Conferencing ensures that professionals engage the wider family positively to ensure children's future care.

Kinship care must be explored as the primary option for all children who cannot live with their parent(s)

On 31st March 2007, there were 7873 children in Scotland who were no longer able to live at home with their parent(s) and were 'looked after' by their local authority. It is important that the first option in these circumstances is for the child to live within their extended family, many of whom are already

involved in a child's care – 80% of children in Scotland are cared for by their grandparents at least occasionally, with 20% of children being looked after by their grandparents almost every day¹.

We know that stranger-based care brings many problems and negative outcomes for children, such as poorer mental health, less educational attainment, and increased likelihood of offending². However, research³ in Scotland shows that there are many benefits for children in living with their extended family such as increased stability, better inclusion in education, regular experiences of fun, and a sense of belonging. Alongside the significant shortage of foster carers in Scotland, strengthening and supporting kinship care makes good sense.

CHILDREN 1ST is pleased that the Scottish Government has therefore stated that family-based care should be considered as the primary option for all children and we urge the Government to ensure that this principle is implemented in practice for every child.

There is already an established and effective approach to enabling full consideration of wider family care through Family Group Conferencing (FGC). Family Group Conferencing is an innovative approach to involving the wider family network in making decisions about the care of a child. Extended family such as aunts, uncles, grandparents and family friends, as well as the child and their parents, are brought together in a family meeting where they make a plan for the child's future care and safety. This approach can help a family fully explore and support any kinship care options.

CHILDREN 1ST believes that an FGC should be offered whenever a major decision is to be made about a child's life. FGCs are currently not available (or being developed) in East or North Ayrshire, West or East Dunbartonshire, West Lothian, Stirling, the Shetland Isles, Perth and Kinross, East Renfrewshire, Clackmannanshire, or Argyll and Bute, and CHILDREN 1ST calls on these Local Authorities to take steps towards its introduction.

In the 20 other Local Authority areas where FGC is already used or being developed, many of these areas need to consider how its use can be embedded as a core aspect of decision-making for children who need alternative care. Local Authorities should review what resources, guidance and training are required in order to offer an FGC to every child at risk of going into care, and should include provision of FGCs in their Single Outcome Agreements.

¹ Scottish Executive (2007) Research Findings No.4/2007 Sources of Formal and Informal Support for Parents of Young Children

² For example, as found in: Scottish Executive (2004) The Mental Health of Young People Looked After by Local Authorities in Scotland, and HMIE & SWSI (2001) Learning with Care

³ Aldgate, J. & McIntosh, M. (2006) Looking After the Family: a study of children looked after in kinship care in Scotland

Increase practical support for kinship carers

The support services routinely offered to kinship carers across Scotland are woefully inadequate and in many cases, non-existent. Practical support such as access to clothing grants and free school meals, leisure passes, holiday club spaces, befriending support, housing priority status, amongst others would make a significant difference to the ability of families to offer kin care and to the wellbeing of children living in kinship care. Such services would also support care in all families, but particularly those in poverty and adversity.

Local Authorities, working together with kinship carers in their area, should therefore review the supports that they make available to kinship carers and the children who live with them. ParentLine Scotland, the free national helpline for parents and carers, provides support for many kinship carers around issues such as contact and family relationships – this service should be strengthened so that this valuable resource is accessible to all carers at their point of need.

Better support for kinship children

Many kinship children have undergone traumatic childhood experiences, not least being uprooted from their parental home, but also including problems such as bereavement, violence, abuse, repeated abandonment, and homelessness. As a result, many need therapeutic services such as counselling to help them to recover. There is a considerable shortage of such services across Scotland, with lengthy waiting lists and delays hampering access. We call on the Government to take steps to ensure that every child has access to therapeutic recovery services when they need them.

Financial support for all, not just some, kinship carers

CHILDREN 1ST welcomes recent steps by the Scottish Government to improve the financial support available to kinship carers. We are concerned that there are considerable difficulties around the prerequisite of 'looked after' status for children before their kinship carers can receive financial payments. This has led to children being drawn unnecessarily into this system, bringing added bureaucracy and increased workload for already-overworked social workers. 7,000 out of the total 9,000 children who live in kinship care are also not 'looked after'⁴, leaving their kinship carers without the extra financial help that many of them need. Many of these carers are grandparents living on small pensions. Kin carers should not be expected to take on an unreasonable and unmanageable financial burden when they take on the care of a relative.

CHILDREN 1ST therefore recommends that the Scottish Government and COSLA set up a task group to review the best means of ensuring practical financial support to kinship carers. Furthermore, we recommend that the

⁴ Scottish Government (2006) Extent of Kinship Care: Analysis of Scottish Household Survey 2005-06

Scottish Government work with the Westminster Government to urge the introduction of a national non-means-tested benefit, in addition to child benefit, for kinship carers who look after a child for more than 28 days continuously.

For more information about this briefing, contact:

Mhairi Snowden, CHILDREN 1ST

Email: mhairi.snowden@children1st.org.uk

Tel: 0131 446 2393
