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UNDERSTANDING FORMAL KINSHIP CARE ARRANGEMENTS IN ENGLAND



SUMMARY REPORT

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Funding and competing interests

What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) was commissioned to conduct this research by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (IRCSC). During the research, we met regularly with the IRCSC, who were involved in formulating the research questions and designing the methodology. The analysis was conducted by the research team and the IRCSC did not influence the reporting of the findings.

About the Independent Review of Children's Social Care

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care was announced in January 2021 and will report in Spring 2022. Josh MacAlister is leading the review which has a wide ranging and ambitious scope. The review is a chance to look afresh at children's social care. It will look at issues through the perspective of children and families throughout their interactions with children's social care, from having a social worker knock on the door, through to children being in care and then leaving care. What Works for Children's Social Care is supporting the review by producing and commissioning evidence summaries, rapid reviews and new analysis.

About What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. We generate, collate and make accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families.

SUMMARY REPORT

There is increasing interest in the potential of kinship care as a permanence option for children, however, little is known about the profile and journeys of children in kinship care. Our research sought to fill that gap by providing a national overview of kinship foster care and kinship special guardianship, with policy-relevant insight to children's care histories and later life outcomes.

The aims of the project were to:

- Examine regional variation in the use of kinship foster care and kinship special guardianship orders
- Describe the experiences of children living in kinship foster care and kinship special guardianship. This includes child characteristics, their care journeys into kinship care and after their first kinship care placement, and wider outcomes at age 16-18.

In this report we summarise the key findings and recommendations from our [full report](#). A full [technical appendix](#) is also available.

This report focuses exclusively on two forms of formal kinship care arrangements:

- **Kinship foster care**, where a child in care lives in a "foster placement with relative(s) or friend(s)" (Department for Education (DfE), 2021: 61).
- **Kinship special guardianship**, where a child leaves care to a kinship special guardian by way of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO). This report exclusively considers SGOs granted to kin on behalf of children who are currently in care. In 2019/20, kinship SGOs made up 88% of all SGOs granted on behalf of children currently in care.

Methods

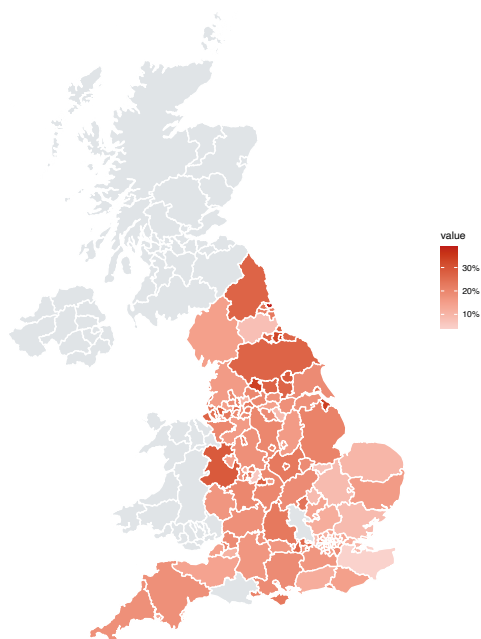
Our analysis used individual-level, national data from the Children Looked After Dataset (SSDA903, CLA Dataset), linked with extracts of the National Pupil Database (NPD) between 1998/99 and 2019/20.¹ We summarise the experiences of children who were in kinship care in 2019/20 and those that turned 18 in 2019/20 who have ever been in a kinship care placement during childhood, using descriptive statistics.

1. Please see the technical appendix for details on how children's records were linked across datasets.

KEY FINDINGS

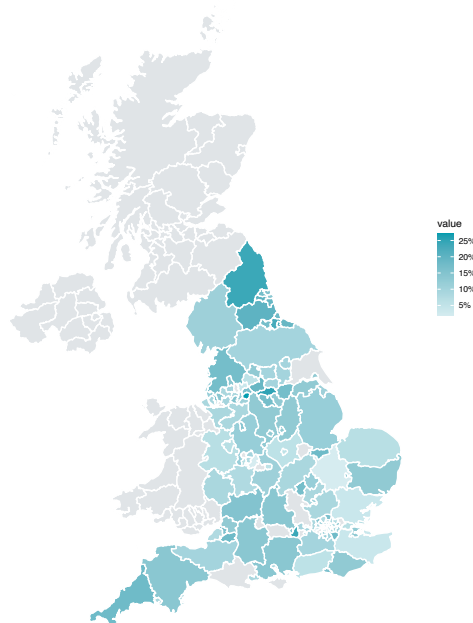
REGIONAL USE OF KINSHIP CARE

Regional use of kinship foster care compared to other care placements across local authorities in 2019/20



There is a high degree of local variation in the use of kinship foster care placements and of kinship SGOs. The rate of kinship care placements ranges from 4% to 39% across Local Authorities (LAs).

Regional use of SGOs relative to all children leaving care across local authorities in 2019/20



The rate of kinship special guardianship ranges from 2% to 27%. Future analyses will examine predictors of local variation.

WHO ARE THE CHILDREN IN KINSHIP CARE?

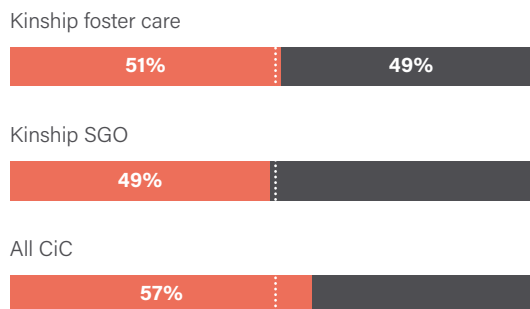
Children are placed in kinship foster care or kinship special guardianships soon in their care history. Children in kinship foster care and children who leave care to a kinship special guardian typically enter care at a younger age compared to all children who are ever in care.

On average, children are six years old when they enter their first kinship foster care placement and on average, SGOs are granted when children are five years old.

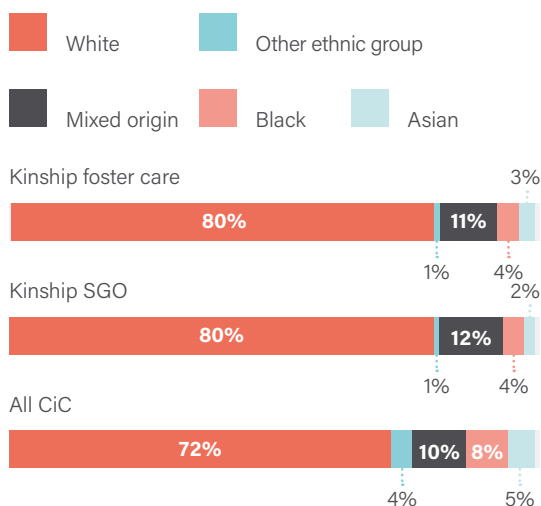
The proportion of girls in kinship foster care and on Kinship SGOs is roughly half, but this is higher than the proportion of girls in care overall.



Gender distribution amongst children in care in 2019/20 by sample



Ethnic breakdown of children in care in 2019/20 by type of placement

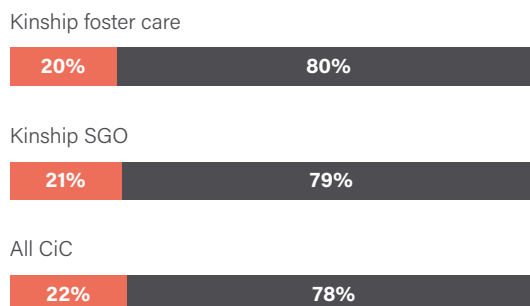


We find that children of minority ethnic backgrounds are, on average, under-represented in kinship foster care and in kinship special guardianship compared to their representation among all children in care: for example, only 4% of Black children are in kinship foster care or on SGOs, whereas Black children represent 8% of all children in care. For Asian children, 40% and 60% fewer live in kinship foster care and kinship special guardianship respectively; and 75% fewer children from “other” ethnic backgrounds live in kinship foster care or kinship special guardianship.²

The share of children receiving provision for special education needs³ is similar between children who ever live in kinship foster care, children who leave care to a kinship special guardian and the wider care population.



Proportion of children who have ever received SEN provision



2. See 2021 census groupings under <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups>. This means that ‘Black children’ describes children of Black African and Black Caribbean heritage as well as ‘any other Black background’. ‘Asian children’ describes children of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese heritage or ‘any other Asian background’.

3. Children who ever had a SEN statement (up to 2014/15) or Educational, Health and Care (EHC) plan (since 2014/15), or a school/early years’ action/action plus (up to 2014/15) or SEN support (since 2014/15) (DfE, 2015)

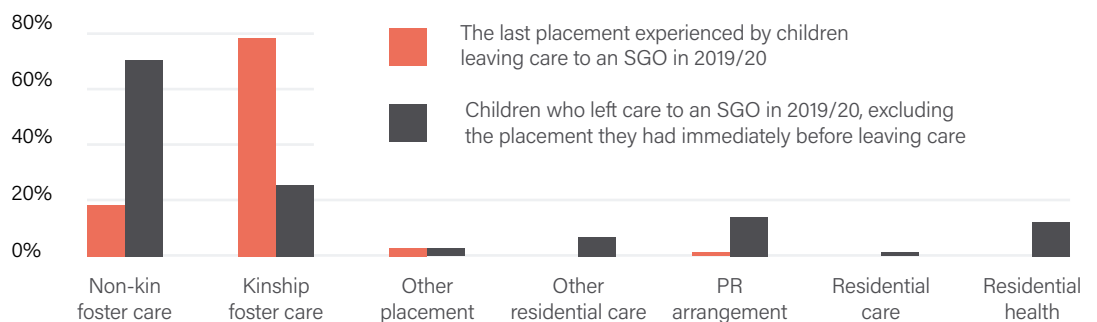
TRANSITIONS TO A KINSHIP SPECIAL GUARDIAN

When children leave care to a kinship special guardian, this happens soon after they enter care, on average when they are age five

Most children (77%, or n=2,520 children) leaving care to a kinship special guardian do so from a kinship foster care placement

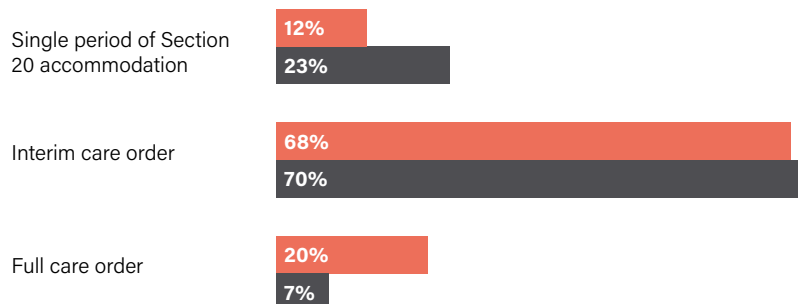
The majority of children (68%, or n 1,720 children) leaving care from a kinship foster care placement to a kinship special guardian were on interim care orders prior to leaving care

Type of placement children were in immediately before leaving care to a kinship special guardian in 2019/20

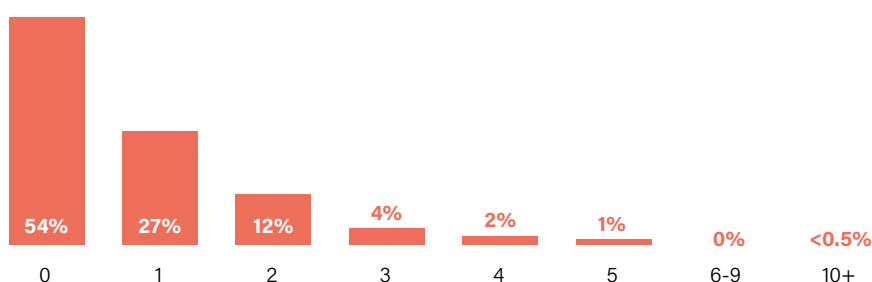


Percentage of children who left care through an SGO in 2019/20 from a kinship care placement based on their legal status

■ Kinship foster care placement
■ Another type of placement



Percentage of children who left care through an SGO in 2019/20 based on the number of placements, excluding their final care placement



Children who leave care to a kinship special guardian experience a relatively high level of placement stability (as measured by the number of placements they have before leaving care). The majority of children (54%) only have one placement before the SGO is granted.

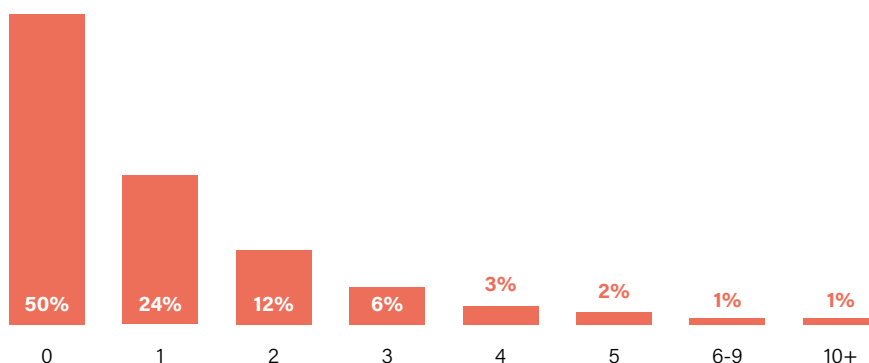
PLACEMENT STABILITY FOR CHILDREN IN KINSHIP FOSTER CARE

Where a kinship foster care placement is considered as a suitable care option for a child, it is realised soon into their care history

Kinship care is the first placement for 50% of children who have ever experience a kinship care foster placement

Only 26% of children in kinship foster care in 2019/20 have been in more than one care placement before entering kinship foster care

Percentage of children placed in kinship foster care placements in 2019/20 based on the number of placements before they entered kinship care



Placement stability for children in kinship foster placements is varied

Children in kinship foster care experience on average 2.9 placement moves; this is higher than for all children in care who typically move placement twice whilst in care.

Analysis suggests that many children who live in kinship foster care, however, do experience high stability: over a quarter of children (27%) stay in a single kinship foster placement throughout their entire care history. Almost half of all children in kinship foster care (46%) stay in the same kinship foster placement until they leave care.

For children who do move to different care placements, additional placements with relatives is common: a third of children go onto other kinship foster placements, and more than a quarter are placed with their own parents or another person with parental responsibility.

For children who experience placements before or after kinship foster care, family-home care through foster care placements (kin and non-kin) are common.

OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN IN KINSHIP FOSTER CARE

We find that social and emotional wellbeing (measured by the strengths and difficulties questionnaire) and educational outcomes at age 16 for children who have been in kinship foster care are on average similar to outcomes for all children in care.

The average Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) scores at age 16 for children who have had a kinship foster care placement (n=2,820) is 13.3, similar to the national average for children in care

Approximately 29% of children (n = 880) who have been in kinship foster care placements have experienced a fixed term exclusion during Key Stage 4 (KS4),⁴ similar to the national average for all children in care

KS4 attainment of children who experience kinship foster care is similar to the national average for all children in care⁵

Outcomes for children leaving care to a kinship special guardian are not presented in this summary report due to the limited number of children in this group for whom we have outcome data. Please see the full report for more details.

LIMITATIONS

There are limitations to this study, and it is important to consider the findings in light of these:

1. This study focuses exclusively on formal kinship foster care and children who leave care to a kinship special guardian and excludes other types of kinship care arrangements (for example children who are cared for by kin but are not looked after by the Local Authority – ‘informal’ kinship care)
2. This analysis used administrative data, which does not capture the unique experiences of children in care
3. There was significant missing data in the dataset we used hampering some analyses, in particular those for children leaving care by SGO
4. To identify outcomes at age 16 and 18, this analysis used a sample of children who turned 18 in 2019/20 who ever lived in kinship foster care or kinship special guardianship throughout their childhood. This methodology is limited because the use of these care types has changed over time, particularly because SGOs were only introduced for application from 2006, and so observed outcomes for younger cohorts may differ considerably
5. Our analyses are not causal, therefore we make no conclusions about the impact of a kinship care placement on outcomes
6. We compared outcomes at set time points for children who have experienced kinship care throughout their childhood. This provides an average score which may obscure differences in outcomes for children who have not entered, have not left, or have already left their kinship care placement at the point in time where the outcome is measured.

4. The national curriculum in England is taught through blocks of school years. Key Stage 4 covers Year 10 and Year 11 when pupils are typically aged 14–16.

5. The average Attainment 8 scores for kinship foster care experienced children is 23.3 (n=2,820). The national average for all children in care is 20.9

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The use of kinship foster care and SGOs made to kin for children leaving care varies considerably across Local Authorities. The cause of strong local variation is beyond the focus of this report. However, it raises questions as to how different LAs utilise kinship care options and whether kinship care options are explored differently across LAs. Future analysis is scheduled to evaluate factors associated with the use of kinship foster care and kinship special guardianship to increase this understanding.

As well as the regional variation, the under-representation of Asian and Black children within kinship foster care arrangements and on kinship SGOs should be urgently examined, particularly in the context of other studies which, in conjunction with our findings, suggest that children from minority ethnic groups are overrepresented in informal (privately arranged) kinship care. It is crucial that we develop a better understanding of why the current care system is placing less Black and Asian children in formal kinship care arrangements than children of other ethnicities, to identify where current systems may require improvement.

Our analysis suggests that children who leave care to a kinship special guardian experience high levels of placement stability whilst in care: children who leave care to a kinship special guardian typically move care placement fewer times than the wider care population, and more than half leave care immediately following their first placement. Educational attainment at KS4 for children who leave care to a kinship special guardian is also typically higher than all children who have ever been in care.

Our findings reveal that SEN, SDQ scores and educational outcomes at KS4 for children who have been in kinship foster care are on average similar to outcomes for all children in care, but significantly below the outcomes for all pupils in England. This suggests that more support is needed to improve outcomes for this group of young people and their families.

Research suggests kinship foster carers are significantly more disadvantaged compared to non-relative foster carers; they are more likely to be caring alone, experience financial difficulties, live in overcrowded conditions and have a disability or chronic health condition (Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Hunt & Waterhouse, 2012; Mercer et al., 2015). More research is needed to understand the relationship between the support kinship carers receive, the circumstances under which children are cared for in kinship foster care and outcomes for these young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Given the strong regional variation, research is needed to explore which factors are associated with the use of kinship care arrangements within LAs, and how support for kinship foster carers and kinship special guardians varies and may be improved
- The underrepresentation of certain groups of children within formal kinship care arrangements should be urgently examined, to ensure children and families in kinship arrangements receive the right support and to understand why fewer Black and Asian children are placed in formal kinship care arrangements
- Policy makers and researchers need to consider what tailored support can be provided to children and young people in kinship foster care and their families to support them to achieve better outcomes
- Future research should explore the link between the support kinship foster carers receive, the circumstances under which children are cared for in kinship foster care, and the experiences and outcomes for children living in kinship foster care arrangements.



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