

## Support for Children in Family & Friends Care

Member's debate, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2010



### Summary:

Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) welcomes the member's debate by Johann Lamont MSP on the importance of kinship carers to the children they look after, and to all levels of Government in terms of the social care and efficiency savings they provide. Kinship carers, as they step into take care of children of relatives and friends, find themselves in an unplanned situation where they have to provide financial, emotional and social support to these children. By 2011 all kinship carers who look after children under formal arrangements will be entitled to receive kinship care payments from their local authority. These payments however are different in each local authority and are further complicated by the interaction of benefit payments in that local authority with what is offered by the UK Government. Kinship carers who informally look after children may receive discretionary payments but this too varies for each local authority. The current situation can leave kinship carers unsure of the financial assistance and support available.

CAS is funded by the Scottish Government to provide specialist advice to kinship carers and welcomes the Government's initiative to help kinship carers. However more needs to be done in conjunction with the UK Government, local authorities and voluntary sector to ensure that kinship carers and the children they look after (formally and informally) receive the level of assistance and support that they need.

### Kinship care in Scotland:

#### Kinship carers

Kinship carers are relatives or family friends who look after children when their parents are unable to do so. In 2006 the Scottish Government published a consultation<sup>1</sup> on kinship caring in Scotland, which was followed by the publication of a new kinship care and fostering strategy which states that a child should be placed within the family unless there are clear reasons why this would not be in his or her best interests.

Independent research<sup>2</sup> shows that children can be taken into kinship care because of parental addiction problems, parental violence, desertion, mental health problems, imprisonment and bereavement. Unlike foster carers, kinship carers step into take in a child or a number of children when these children need a home and support system. They can find themselves having to take unplanned time away from work, including having to give up employment altogether because of the sudden responsibility of having to take care of a child or a number of children. There is also increased financial and emotional pressure.

#### Children in Kinship care

In our evidence report, *Relative Value*<sup>3</sup>, CAS found that over a quarter of kinship carers look after two children, not including their own. A third of the children were aged 5 or under, while two thirds were aged 10 or under. The experiences of a child before they go into kinship care can lead to emotional and behavioural problems once the child is in care – particularly as these experiences are often traumatic.

#### Financial support

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/07/05133153/0>

<sup>2</sup> Richards and Tapsfield (2003); Farmers and Moyers, *Kinship Care: Fostering Effective Family and Friends Placements*, 2008

<sup>3</sup> CAS, *Relative Value*, 2010;p 18

Based on the agreement between COSLA and Scottish Government kinship carers who care for children with a formal 'looked after' status from 2011 will be eligible to receive a kinship care allowance from their local authority. The amount already varies between local authorities. UK benefits law does not recognise the category of looked after-and-in-kinship-care leading to a lack of clarity in determining UK benefit entitlements for kinship carers.

Kinship carers with informal arrangements can receive discretionary payments from their local authority which are typically lower than the kinship care allowance.

In *Relative Value*<sup>4</sup> CAS found that 55% of carers were eligible for kinship care allowance though 5% could not receive a payment at this point in time, a quarter were ineligible for the kinship care allowance but could receive a discretionary payment and one in five were unsure about their eligibility.

### CAS and the Kinship Care Project

In 2008 Citizens Advice Scotland received funding from the Scottish Government to deliver advice and information to kinship carers in Scotland. This project is part of the Scottish Government's strategy on kinship care in Scotland and includes the provision of a national helpline, a national co-ordinator who manages the project, the establishment of a national advisory group on the project, and 5 regional support officers who manage the regional delivery of the service working with local support groups of kinship carers and local authorities and working with CAS staff to deliver training and collate regional social policy feedback and statistical information.

Citizens Advice Bureaux across Scotland and the kinship care helpline have worked with hundreds of clients, usually giving advice over an extended series of sessions. In a few cases, financial gain for these clients has been in excess of £5000. In almost all cases, the financial gain makes a significant difference to the household.

### CAS recommendations

**The three levels of Government need to work together to ensure that kinship carers are not worse off because of their local allowance or because of informal caring arrangements**

**Kinship carers need to receive additional forms of support along with their kinship care allowance, including respite care, practical and emotional support such as counselling and peer support groups. More support should come from local authorities, voluntary agencies and health boards**

**Local authorities and voluntary agencies need to ensure that professionals who have contact with kinship carers have adequate training and understanding of the issues faced by kinship carers. These professionals should ensure that where appropriate, kinship carers are referred to appropriate advice and support services.**

### **Conclusion**

Kinship carers not only help the children they look after but help the Government in their responsibility for finding care for these children. Over the past few years support for kinship carers has improved in Scotland, including through the provision of specialist advice and information to kinship carers by the CAB service in Scotland. However more still needs to be done for adequate support provisions to be realised. It is important that financial support provisions for 'non looked after' children are established throughout Scotland and that the three levels of Government work together to ensure that kinship carers are not worse off because of their entitlements.

**Alizeh Hussain**, Social Policy and Parliamentary Officer

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<sup>4</sup> CAS, *Relative Value*, 2010

## Appendix:

Press release sent out 13<sup>th</sup> October on release of CAS's evidence report *Relative Value*

### Family Carers Being 'Let Down' says New Report

13 Oct 2010

Citizens Advice Scotland have today published a report highlighting the problems that face people who care for children who are part of their extended family.

'Kinship carers' is the term for the thousands of aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings and family friends who take over the care of children whose parents are unable to look after them. The CAS report, *Relative Value*, identifies in detail where the system is working and where it is letting children and their kinship carers down.

CAS Acting Chief Executive Susan McPhee said,

"There have been a number of initiatives in Scotland to improve the lives of the thousands of children in kinship care, and many of these are making a real difference. But case evidence in our latest research report, *Relative Value*, reveals many examples of kinship carers being let down by the system. Too often, the modest level of assistance that can make all the difference to a kinship care household is either missing or the route to accessing it is long and tortuous.

"The main message of this report is that UK, Scottish and local government, alongside voluntary organisations, need to work together to make sure the holes in the system are closed up. The people taking on the care of these vulnerable children are not just providing a home for kith and kin, they're doing a valuable service to society. They need and deserve both support and recognition.

"Our advice to kinship carers themselves is: if you are having problems, get yourself to your local CAB. They will make sure you know your rights, make sure you are getting any benefits and allowances you are entitled to, and will make sure the local authority is doing what it ought to do to support you. And if you can't make it to your local CAB, you can call the confidential kinship care helpline on 0808 800 0006. Scottish CAB advisers have seen hundreds of kinship carers through our doors and as they leave they are often better off, both financially and in terms of peace of mind."

There are an estimated 13,000 children in kinship care in Scotland. CAS's report examines the circumstances and advice needs of over 350 kinship carers who approached the Scottish CAB service for advice in 2009. Among the findings are:-

- most kinship care arrangements come about due to an upsetting and stressful situation for both child and carer. Addiction problems (36% of kinship care arrangements), bereavement (24%), and neglect (16%), were the most common circumstances leading to kinship care
- difficulties faced by kinship carers include having to give up work to meet their care responsibilities; pressure on relationships; health problems of the children cared for; financial problems; and strain on the mental health of carers
- around three-quarters of kinship carers are the grandparents of the children they are caring for. Many have given up employment to meet their responsibilities. The majority of kinship carers are female between the ages of 45 and 59

- councils are legally required to provide allowances to kinship carers of looked after children on an equivalent basis to foster carers by 2011. While most local authorities are providing allowances, the level of allowance varies considerably
- all levels of government need to recognise that the needs, including the need for financial support, of kinship care households are very often the same regardless of whether the children are formally 'looked after' by the local authority or not.

The *Relative Values* report is available on the CAS website [www.cas.org.uk](http://www.cas.org.uk).

For more information please contact Tony Hutson, 0131 550 1010.