

Relative Value

All across Scotland, thousands of people care for children, because their natural parents can't do so for a variety of reasons. These carers – known as “kinship carers” – are often grandparents, aunts and uncles but can also be family friends, and it is thought that there are more than 13,000 of them. Around 1 in 70 children in Scotland are estimated to be looked after either formally or informally¹ by a kinship carer.

Around one in seventy children in Scotland are looked after by a kinship carer – often a grandparent – many of whom are at least 50 years older than the child in their care.

Scottish Citizens Advice Bureaux are working with the Scottish Government to provide an advice and information service – including a dedicated helpline – for kinship carers. Citizens Advice Scotland's latest report, “Relative Value”, is based on a sample of 368 kinship carers who called the Kinship Care Helpline for advice in 2009. It highlights that:

- 9 out of 10 kinship carers seeking advice were female, and the majority (58%) were aged between 45 and 59
- Three-quarters of kinship carers were the grandparents of the children in their care
- Approaching half of children were cared for by a carer who was at least 40 years older than themselves, while a quarter were cared for by a carer at least 50 years older
- A third of kinship care arrangements came about due to the addiction problems of parents, and a quarter due to bereavement
- Kinship carers reported having to deal with a range of difficulties in caring for children, including giving up employment, financial problems, marriage difficulties, and helping children deal with a stressful and upsetting situation
- Kinship carers of ‘looked after’ children are now receiving Kinship Care Allowance, but the levels of payment vary substantially between local authorities. Most kinship carers in informal arrangements do not receive the allowance.

¹ Children can be cared for formally in kinship care if they have a ‘looked after’ status with the local authority (there were 2,990 such children in March 2010) or informally with no or little input from the local authority (it is estimated that there are more than 10,000 such children in Scotland).

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Difficulties experienced by kinship carers

Many of the difficulties experienced by kinship carers stemmed from the situation that led to the care arrangement. In this research, addiction problems (36% of carers), bereavement (24%), neglect (16%), and prison (13%) were the most common situations leading to kinship care. Many kinship care arrangements came about due to two or more of these situations, which often puts strain on carers and the children being cared for. Difficulties experienced by kinship carers included:

- Giving up employment to meet care responsibilities
- Health problems of children caused by the stressful situations leading to care, including mental health and behavioural problems
- Financial problems caused by giving up work alongside higher outgoings
- Ongoing problems caused by the parents of the child being cared for, including violence and intimidation
- Difficulty finding respite care when carers face severe difficulties.

Local authorities and kinship care allowance

The Scottish Government and COSLA have agreed that by 2011, kinship carers of children who are 'looked after' will receive an allowance from the local authority to make sure they are treated on an equivalent basis to foster carers.

The level of local authority payments currently vary significantly, ranging from £23 to £148 per week for a 0 to 4 year old child. A minority of local authorities are yet to implement kinship care allowance or do not currently have the budget to offer payments. Complexities in the benefits system also mean that kinship carers can lose benefit entitlement, potentially making them worse off if they take the allowance. The range of different payments, combined with benefit complexities, means that kinship carers with similar circumstances can receive very different levels of support depending on where they happen to live.

Kinship carers of non 'looked after' children are not automatically entitled to kinship care payments, although some local authorities are offering payments to these carers. This research found that kinship carers of non 'looked after' children had the same problems and support needs as carers of 'looked after' children.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings in the report, we have made a number of recommendations that we believe will benefit kinship carers in Scotland:

- The Scottish Government and local authorities should ensure that all kinship carers are adequately supported, and are not discriminated against depending on where they live.
- Kinship carers who care for non 'looked after' children should receive financial support from the local authority
- Respite care should be available for any kinship carer facing severe difficulties with their caring responsibilities
- Children and carers who have undergone traumatic experiences should have access to relevant health and support services.

Case evidence

|| A West of Scotland CAB reports of a client whose wife left him after he started caring for his two grandchildren aged 3 and 4. The children were placed with him by the social work department after his daughter developed a drug addiction. The client is self-employed and has had to cut his hours to meet his care obligations. The client has also had to give his wife her half of the equity in the house, leaving him in greater financial difficulty.

|| A West of Scotland CAB reports of a retired client who is looking after her great granddaughter who is only two weeks old. Both parents are drug addicts and have two other children who have also been taken into care. The social worker asked members of the family if anyone could help out and the client volunteered. It is hoped that the child will be placed with the parents when they recover from their problems, but in the meantime the client's only income is a basic pension and she is struggling financially.