All Party Parliamentary Group on Kinship Care

Fighting Two Battles

A spotlight on the experiences of children in kinship care with special educational needs and disabilities

This report was prepared by Family Rights Group on behalf of the APPG.

SUPPORTED BY Family Rights Group

About

The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Kinship Care

The APPG is a cross-party group of MPs and Peers who share a common interest in championing kinship care and improving support for kinship carers. We seek to: improve awareness, understanding and support for kinship care; promote policy and practice which supports more children to live safely in kinship care with family and friends when they cannot live at home; and amplify the voices and experiences of children and families.

The APPG's elected officers are:

Melanie Onn MP
Chair

Joe Robertson MP
Vice Chair

Munira Wilson MP
Vice Chair

Baroness Armstrong
Vice Chair

The APPG has over 50 members across both Houses of Parliament. Further information can be found on the APPG's website and on LinkedIn, BlueSky and X.

Family Rights Group

Family Rights Group is the leading specialist charity working to ensure that the child welfare and family justice system supports children to live safely and thrive within their family, while strengthening the family and community ties of those children who cannot live at home. The charity is unique in bringing together legal and social work expertise with the direct voice and insights of young people and families.

Family Rights Group provides the secretariat to the APPG on Kinship Care. The report was authored by Jordan Hall, Head of Public Affairs at the charity.

Find out more online at: www.frg.org.uk

What is kinship care?

Kinship care is any situation in which a child is being raised in the care of a friend or family member who is not their parent. The arrangement may be temporary or longer term. Kinship carers can be grandparents, uncles, aunts, older brothers and sisters or other adults who have a connection to the child, such as neighbours or family friends. Kinship carers are sometimes called family and friends carers.

Special educational needs and disabilities

The labels 'special educational needs' (SEN) and 'special educational needs and disabilities' (SEND) are often used interchangeably but they mean different things. SEND is a broader category including disabilities. While it is common for children with disabilities to have extra educational needs, not all disabled children will fit into the SEN category. This report seeks to explore the experiences of children with special educational needs and disabilities and so we use the broader term, unless referring to specific SEN provision.

Foreword

Families come in all shapes and sizes. For a child, when you are not living with your parents but with another family member instead, it can feel unusual to have a home life that looks different to your friends'. From the age of 7 I was raised by my great aunt. Initially I was only supposed to spend the summer with her, but I never went back to live with my mum. There were no state agencies involved. It was all kept within the family and drifted into a permanent arrangement. We didn't have a particular word for it back then, but today we know it as kinship care.

There are over 130,000 children and young people across England raised in kinship care. Their carers are often their grandparents, but may also be their brothers or sisters, aunts or uncles, cousins, or family friends. Many are in informal arrangements, like mine was, with family sorting it out amongst themselves. For others, children's services and the family court have been involved.

It is love and commitment that motivates kinship carers to step in for the children. They ensure children can remain safely within their family instead of becoming separated in foster care with strangers, in a children's home or being adopted. Research shows that kinship care provides better outcomes for children than other forms of care, including for their mental health, their school achievements, and their employment outcomes. With record numbers of children in a care system creaking at the seams, more could be living safely in their families with the right support.

Kinship care has been undervalued and under supported. Families describe a battle for recognition and for practical, emotional, educational and financial support. Love alone cannot put food on the table or pay for the next school trip. Neither can it provide job security when carers are settling traumatised children into a new home. Recent progress has been made including the new duty for all councils to have a Kinship Local Offer, and the Kinship Allowance pilot. We welcome these important measures but there is more to do.

For kinship families where children have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), those difficulties can be even more acute. The battle to secure recognition and support for a kinship care arrangement is paired with the battle many families are contending with in the special educational needs and disabilities system. A system that is too often failing to deliver the support children and their families need and pushing many into costly legal battles. With around half of children in kinship care reported to have special educational needs and disabilities, kinship families are being disproportionately impacted.

The Government has put forward proposals to address the SEND crisis and deliver a more inclusive education system, including £4 billion of investment. We want to make sure these reforms deliver for kinship families.

Our All Party Parliamentary Group on Kinship Care set out to shine a spotlight on the experiences of kinship families raising children with special educational needs and disabilities. Our *Fighting Two Battles* report explores the unique challenges faced by kinship families. Their battles with a children's social care system and SEND system not designed to meet their needs. We've heard from young people about their struggles to be understood in school, from carers about the highs and lows of navigating the SEND system, and from organisations working with families on the frontline. We set out how reforms can ensure their experiences are part of the story of change. We also reflect on some of the changes that would support all children in kinship care and their families to thrive.

Melanie Onn MP
Chair of the APPG

Executive Summary

Kinship care enables children who cannot live with their parents to remain safely within their family and community. It is a powerful protective factor for many children, offering stability, continuity of important relationships, and better outcomes than other forms of care. Yet for too long kinship care has been undervalued and under supported.

Recent progress has been made towards a child welfare system that recognises and supports kinship care. The National Kinship Care Ambassador is championing change at a national and local level. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 defines kinship care in primary legislation for the first time and creates a new legal duty for every local authority in England to publish a Kinship Local Offer. A new Kinship Financial Allowance is being piloted. These are all critical developments that this APPG has supported and has influenced. However, we know there is more to do.

Children in kinship care are significantly more likely to have special educational needs and disabilities, with survey evidence suggesting this affects around half of all children in kinship care. However, they are often less likely than other groups of children with similar needs, following trauma, loss and disruption, to receive timely assessments or consistent support. Their access to additional support in school is often based on their route into kinship care including whether or not they have spent time in the care system. As a result, kinship families raising children with special educational needs and disabilities often face a double challenge: securing recognition and support for the kinship arrangement itself, while also trying to find their way around a SEND system widely acknowledged to be in crisis.

This report from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Kinship Care aims to shine a spotlight on the experiences of kinship children and families with special educational needs and disabilities. It explores the unique challenges faced by kinship families, drawing on evidence from children and young people, kinship carers, parents and the organisations that support them. It examines the central aspects of the proposed reforms published by the Government in February 2026. It identifies practical opportunities to ensure that SEND and education reforms better recognise kinship care.

Kinship children are disproportionately affected by SEND: Around half of children in kinship care have special educational needs and disabilities, according to survey data. Yet they are less likely to receive timely assessments or support via Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans.

Kinship families face unique challenges: Kinship carers are often older, less financially secure and have their own health challenges. By stepping in, kinship carers have often averted the need for the child to enter or remain in the care system. Many carers are forced to give up work in doing so.

Kinship families face systems not designed for them: Many kinship carers step in at short notice in times of crisis. They often lack essential information about a child's needs at the point that the child comes to live with them. They must then navigate two complex systems - children's social care and SEND – alongside other challenges.

Low awareness of kinship care and trauma across schools and services: Understanding of kinship arrangements and the impact of trauma on learning and behaviour varies widely across schools and services. Some carers report that children's distress and behaviour linked to past trauma is interpreted as poor behaviour and managed punitively. There is a risk that children in kinship care may be misunderstood or overlooked within the Government's proposed new tiers of SEND provision. School culture must embed an understanding of kinship care and the impact of trauma, supported by improved training for teachers and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO). Stronger statutory guidance is needed, and meaningful involvement of kinship families in developing National Inclusion Standards and local inclusion strategies.

Advice and information are critical in helping families navigate complex systems: This needs to be a key part of local authorities' kinship care and SEND local offers, which should both be aligned and developed in partnership with local families.

Executive Summary

Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans have become the default route for securing support, yet access to support remains inconsistent: Even when EHC plans are drawn up, the support provision specified is not reliably delivered. Carers and frontline organisations report an adversarial system. Families are concerned that proposed reforms could make it harder to secure specialist support. It is essential that any new framework protects legally enforceable entitlements and strengthens transparent, straightforward mechanisms to hold schools and local authorities to account. Reforms must not weaken the ability of families to secure specialist support or challenge failures in implementation.

Support and entitlements are inconsistent: Eligibility and access to educational support, including Pupil Premium Plus, varies widely according to the type of arrangement, which can create inequity for children with similar levels of need. This fragmented system must be addressed.

Timely assessments and therapeutic support are critical: Delays in access to therapeutic support can increase the strain on kinship arrangements and risks them breaking down and children entering the care system. Timely specialist assessments and access to specialist therapeutic support, including through the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF), are essential for some children but difficult to secure. There must be a thorough review of the therapeutic needs of all kinship children and how they can be most effectively addressed.

Some kinship children are educated at home not by choice: Families report a lack of suitable school placements and of feeling inadequately supported. Some kinship carers are concerned that their children's support needs are not sufficiently addressed in the proposed reforms.

More kinship families are facing steep declines in support post-16: This is affecting older teenagers in kinship care. Kinship families must be engaged in improving post-16 provision for young people with special educational needs and disabilities, including addressing the support cliff-edges that many young people experience.

Black kinship families are disproportionately affected by systemic inequalities, misdiagnosis and racial bias: Culturally inclusive assessments and support training for all educational staff is essential to recognise and address the experiences and needs of children from Black and minoritised communities.

There is a risk some kinship households with disabled adults or children face extra financial inequities: Financial support is highly variable between local authorities and between different kinship arrangements. In particular, where families rely on special guardianship allowances, inconsistent local policies and means-testing can leave disabled households worse off, especially where disability-related benefits are deducted from allowances. This can effectively force families to use disability benefits to cover basic living costs. There should be greater transparency and fairness in how support is calculated and communicated.

Stronger data, including cross-government, will improve policy, accountability and service planning: The report highlights persistent gaps in national and local data on who is in kinship care, their route into kinship care, and their needs and outcomes. Building on the welcome decision to add kinship care to the school census, the Government should analyse and publish better, joined-up data utilising existing datasets.

Peer support groups and mentoring for children are highly valued but remain scarce: Young people highlight the benefits of connecting with others in kinship care, but opportunities to do so are currently very limited.

The evidence is clear that kinship families raising children with special education needs and disabilities are navigating systems that do not adequately recognise or respond to their needs. Delayed support, inconsistent entitlements and lack of awareness create additional pressures at a time when families are already providing stability for children who have often experienced trauma.

As the Government reforms the SEND system and wider education landscape, there is a critical opportunity to embed recognition of kinship care throughout policy and practice.

Recommendations

Kinship carers step in when children need them most. A fair and effective SEND system must now step up in return—ensuring all children in kinship care have the support they need to learn, thrive and succeed.

The APPG recommends:

- **Stronger Guidance:** Future iterations of 'Keeping children safe in education' statutory guidance should include the definition of kinship care in all its forms to improve understanding among school and educational staff.
- **Trauma-informed practice and training:** All staff in early years, schools and post-16 provision - including teachers, SENCOs and "Experts at Hand" – should receive training on the impact of trauma, loss and disruption and the specific experiences of children in kinship care. This should include culturally inclusive assessment and support training, recognising the experiences of children from Black and minoritised communities. Virtual School Heads have an important role to play in this. This should also be included as an essential component of the new national SEND training programme.
- **Coproduction:** Kinship families should be engaged in the development of the proposed new National Inclusion Standards and in local inclusion strategies to ensure understanding of kinship care is embedded into expectations on inclusion from the very beginning.
- **Recognition:** Building on the definition of kinship care now enshrined in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, the Government should proactively support awareness-raising among educational staff and SENCOs through targeted training. This should extend beyond schools to those working across education-related, community, and health settings, including Family Hubs and mental health services.
- **Timely needs assessments:** The SEND Code of Practice should be updated to include the same expectation of timely needs assessments for kinship children, as is currently in place for children looked after in the care system.
- **Local Offers:** Building on the new legal duty to have a Kinship Local Offer, local authorities should ensure their Kinship Local Offer aligns with their SEND Local Offer to provide kinship families with the tailored information they need to advocate for SEND support their child needs. This should include details about how to access independent, specialist advice and information. The National Kinship Care Ambassador should work with local authorities to ensure this is delivered effectively.
- **Fixing the patchwork of educational support:** All children in kinship care who need it should benefit from priority school admissions, a designated teacher, direct support from the Virtual School Head, and Pupil Premium Plus. Data gathered through the addition of kinship care to the school census could inform this.
- **Pupil Premium Plus:** The Government should explore the feasibility of an automatic opt-out system to avoid the need for children who were previously looked after in the care system to self-declare their eligibility for Pupil Premium Plus.
- **Post-16 provision:** The Government should engage with kinship families as part of improving post-16 provision for young people with special educational needs and disabilities, including addressing the post-16 cliff edge in support for many young people in kinship care.
- **Therapeutic support:** Government should ensure that any reforms to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) are built on a thorough analysis of the therapeutic needs of kinship families, and the most effective delivery models for this population. This should include all forms of kinship arrangements, not just those currently eligible for the ASGSF. Any new system should be designed with children and families to ensure it meets their needs.
- **Financial support fairness:** The 'Kinship Care: statutory guidance for local authorities' should include a set of principles local authorities should follow when calculating special guardianship allowances, including making

a provision for kinship households in receipt of disability benefits. This should be informed by a Department for Education review of how local authorities are currently calculating Special Guardianship Order (SGO) allowances and reflect recent case law. The Kinship Local Offer should also clearly set out these principles so families can understand how their local authority makes its calculations. The National Kinship Ambassador should ensure local authorities work with their local kinship population to devise this.

- **Better data:** The Office for National Statistics (ONS) should improve the design of the 2031 census in order to better understand the demographics of kinship families, including addressing methodological limitations in relation to larger households.
- The Government should utilise and develop existing datasets to improve understanding of the characteristics and educational outcomes of children in all forms of kinship care. This includes the SSD903 looked after children return, Ministry of Justice family court data, the National Pupil Database, the school census, and child benefit data.
- The Government should annually publish outcomes data, including on special educational needs and educational outcomes, for children previously looked after in the care system who are now cared for under special guardianship and child arrangements orders.
- The Department for Education should undertake analysis to understand rates of school exclusion among kinship children.
- **Peer support for young people:** The Government should fund and encourage the development of peer support groups and mentoring for children and young people raised in kinship care.

Contents

Introduction

> **"I am now in a school that is different, they teach in a way that I am able to learn. The classes are smaller, and they don't expect me to learn in a way that I find hard. I feel that they get me."**
>
> Jamie, 15, living with his nan

There are over 130,000 children and young people across England raised in kinship care.[1] Kinship carers step in – often in an emergency – to raise children when they cannot stay at home with their parents. They are mostly grandparents but many are aunts, uncles, older siblings or family friends.

Children are raised in kinship care for a variety of reasons and have invariably experienced loss, tragedy or trauma. Research has found that outcomes are positive for most children in kinship care, who feel loved and have a greater sense of security than those living with strangers in the care system.[2] However, children and their carers can face many challenges in school and work, and in securing the practical, emotional and financial support they need.

There has been significant recent progress towards a child welfare system that recognises kinship care. The first National Kinship Care Ambassador was appointed in 2024. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 defines kinship care in primary legislation for the first time and creates a legal duty for every local authority to have a Kinship Local Offer. Since April 2026, a new Kinship Financial Allowance is being piloted in seven "Kinship Zones." However, there is more to do.

Children in kinship care are significantly more likely to have special educational needs and disabilities compared to those raised by their parents. 2021 Census analysis found that 1 in 10 kinship children were disabled under the Equality Act 2010, compared to 1 in 20 living with a parent.[3] Surveys have found around half have special educational needs and disabilities, compared to a fifth of all children.[4]

Reports have documented the failures of the SEND system to deliver the support children need. Despite increases in funding, educational outcomes often remain poor and families can face costly legal battles to secure support for their children. Kinship families are disproportionately impacted and their particular circumstances can compound these difficulties further.

Children in kinship care have often experienced difficult and disrupted early life circumstances as a result of being unable to live with their parents. Their kinship carers have often stepped up in a crisis to keep the children safely in their family. While they do so out of love, it can be extremely challenging at times and the difficulties they experience securing support for children with additional needs adds further strain.

In February 2026, the Government published the 'Every Child Achieving a Thriving' schools white paper for England and a consultation on SEND reform. Our APPG is working to ensure kinship families' voices are heard. This APPG report analyses evidence from young people, kinship carers and support organisations. Rather than addressing systemic challenges, as other inquiries have done, we apply a kinship lens to the SEND system. We explore the challenges kinship families face, kinship carers' reflections on proposed reforms, and make recommendations to ensure those reforms meet the needs of kinship families.

---

[1] ONS (2023), Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021
[2] Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care (2020) First Thought Not Afterthought report
[3] ONS (2023), Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021
[4] Parliamentary Taskforce (2020); Kinship (2024a) Forgotten: Support for kinship children's education and mental health; DfE (2025) Special educational needs in England

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who have contributed their time, knowledge and expertise to this spotlight inquiry, including:

- The young people who shared their lived experience, including those who spoke at our young people's evidence session on 28th October 2025.
- The kinship carers who have shared their lived experience, including those who spoke at our first spotlight session on 1st July 2025 and in a closed workshop facilitated by Family Rights Group on 30th March 2026.
- Family Rights Group for their invaluable support and guidance as our secretariat, including report author Jordan Hall and colleagues: Jessica Aiken, Cathy Ashley, Laurie Bolling, Beverley Campbell, Angharad Davies, Frances Edwards, Caroline Lynch and Lottie Stacey.
- The organisations who have supported this inquiry, including those who gave evidence at our second oral evidence session on 2nd September 2025 and our young people's session on 28th October 2025.
    - Dr Lucy Peake – Chief Executive of Kinship
    - Anna Bird – Chief Executive of Contact and Chair of the Disabled Children's Partnership
    - Johanna Bernard and Sharon McPherson – Co-directors of Families in Harmony
    - Kate Cox – Senior Solicitor at the Independent Provider of Special Education Advice (IPSEA)
    - Brian Roberts – Director of Education & Well-being at The National Organisation for FASD
    - Pauline Thornley and Laura Wharton – Project Coordinator and Family Project Worker at Kinship Carers Liverpool.

Minutes and written evidence for all the All Party Parliamentary Group on Kinship Care's sessions can be found on the APPG's website.

Contact is a charity for families with disabled children. They provide information and advice, including through a helpline.
https://contact.org.uk/
0808 808 3555 (Mon to Fri 9.30am to 5pm)

Family Rights Group is a charity working to ensure that children can live safely and thrive within their family. They provide advice to parents, kinship carers, relatives and friends who are involved with children's services in England or need their help. They support families to understand the law and child welfare processes when social workers or courts are making decisions about their children. The charity offers online advice resources, online forums, a free telephone advice line, a webchat service, and online enquiry form.
www.frg.org.uk/get-help-and-advice
0808 801 0366 (Mon to Fri 9.30am to 3pm)

Families in Harmony is a kinship care organisation in the UK founded to serve Black African, Caribbean and dual heritage kinship carers.
https://familiesinharmony.org.uk/.

Kinship is a national charity for kinship care in England and Wales. It supports grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and family friends who care for children when their parents cannot. The charity provides information, advice, training, and support, including peer support groups and training services.
www.kinship.org.uk.
0300 123 7015 (Mon to Fri 9:30am to 2pm)

Kinship Carers Liverpool offers a number of different services for carers from all walks of life. From someone to talk, to help and advice, direction to helpful and relevant services, links to other kinship families, and a free activities programme for kin families.
https://kinshipcarersliverpool.co.uk/

Independent Provider of Special Education Advice (IPSEA) is a charity in the field of SEND law in England, providing free and independent legal advice and support to families of children and young people with SEND.
https://www.ipsea.org.uk/

National Organisation for FASD support people with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
https://nationalfasd.org.uk/

Special educational needs support in England

This section explores the types of special educational needs support currently available in England. It also sets out how disabled children's social care is distinct.

Over the past decade, since the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014, the number of pupils in England with special educational needs (SEN) has risen from 1.3 million to over 1.7 million.[5]

A child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which means they need special educational provision beyond that required by most others of the same age. The definition of SEN is broad, relative not absolute, and based on an assessment.

All those with SEN should receive support reflecting their individual needs, which could be within mainstream school, specialist or alternative settings.[6]

There are three primary categories of educational support for children with SEN which are detailed across the page here.

1 Ordinarily Available School Provision, which is the inclusive teaching and everyday adjustments that all educational settings should be providing all pupils. This is provided by class teachers and teaching assistants and does not require any formal identification of SEN.

2 SEN Support which means support that is additional to, or different from, the support generally made available for other children of the same age in a school. It is provided for pupils who are identified as having a learning difficulty or a disability that requires extra or different help to that normally provided as part of the school's usual curriculum offer. Over 1.3 million children and young people receive SEN Support.[7]

3 Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans. A local authority may issue an EHC plan for a child or young person up to the age of 25 who needs more support than is available through SEN Support. This will follow a statutory assessment process whereby the local authority considers the pupil's special educational needs and any relevant health and social care needs. It is a legally enforceable entitlement to specific support set out in the plan. Over half a million children have an EHC plan.[8]

Disabled children's social care provides support for children with disabilities and their families, typically accessed through a local authority social care assessment. Under the Children Act 1989, disabled children are considered "children in need," and local authorities must assess their needs if requested, covering support like short breaks, equipment, and home adaptations.

A child in need is a child who is thought to need extra support or services to help them to achieve or maintain 'a reasonable standard of health or development'. For more information on 'child in need' see Family Rights Group's website.

[5] DfE (2025) Special educational needs in England; DfE (2015) Special educational needs in England
[6] NAO (2024) Support for children and young people with special educational needs
[7] DfE (2026) Special educational needs in England;
[8] *ibid*
[9] *ibid*
[10] Education Select Committee (2025) Solving the SEND Crisis
[11] ibid
[12] DfE (2025) Written evidence to the Education Select Committee
[13] Public Accounts Committee (2025) Support for children and young people with special educational needs
[14] NAO (2024) Support for children and young people with special educational needs; County Councils Network (2025) Councils warn SEND system faces total collapse without major reform to services

The SEND Crisis

Reports and inquiries over recent years have documented the failures of the SEND system to deliver the support children and their families need. They reveal a system which is failing children and young people. A system which is financially unsustainable, and requires urgent, radical, whole-system reform.

Some key findings from these inquiries are:

- There are increasing numbers of children and young people in England with special educational needs and disabilities, in receipt of varying types of support.[9]
- In addition to an increased volume of cases, the complexity of SEN needs has also grown. The types of need driving demand include autistic spectrum disorders, speech, language and communication needs, and social and emotional mental health needs.[10]
- Too many children with SEND cannot access inclusive education in mainstream schools, often due to a lack of capacity and resources to support children effectively.[11]
- There has been an increase in expensive independent school placements for children with SEND, rising from 477 in 2018 to 728 in 2024.[12]
- There has been a huge surge in demand for Education, Health and Care plans – a 140% increase since 2015.[13] The Public Accounts Committee warned that in the absence of funding and resources for children with SEND across health and education systems, families are turning to the guarantee of support provided by an EHC plan.
- Whilst there has been significant increases in high-needs funding, it hasn't kept pace with demand, leading to massive accumulated deficits for local authorities.[14]
- Increased spending has not led to significantly better outcomes for children with SEND, with inconsistent attainment and significant disparities compared to their peers. This includes the prevalence of persistent absence which, in 2023/24, was 34% for pupils with an EHC plan and 26% for pupils with SEN support, compared to 15% for pupils with no identified SEN.[15]
- There's a "postcode lottery" for support, with wide variations in waiting times for EHC plans. In 2024, just 46% of EHC plans were issued within the statutory 20 week timeframe.[16] There is also wide regional variation in how many requests for an EHC assessment proceed to an assessment. National figures show 65% of requests proceeded to an assessment in 2024.[17] However, local rates vary from 26% to 95%.
- There are substantial socioeconomic inequalities in access to SEND support. Children eligible for free school meals (FSM) are over-represented within the SEND cohort. However, those from more affluent homes are more likely to secure an EHC plan.[18]
- Families face a "chaotic and adversarial" system, evident in the 98% tribunal success rate for families[19] and the 96% uphold rate for complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.[20]
- Common complaints from families include delayed and failed assessments, delayed reviews, and non-implementation of support.
- The legal framework around disabled children has further been described as “a system of baffling complexity”.[21] The Law Commission’s review of current law on disabled children identified it to be very complex, out of date, and potentially unfair.[22] In practice, this means disabled children with the same needs get treated differently depending on where they live in the country.

[15] Education Select Committee (2025) Solving the SEND Crisis
[16] ibid
[17] DfE (2025) Special educational needs in England
[18] Sutton Trust (2025) Double Disadvantage?
[19] Public Accounts Committee (2025) Support for children and young people with special educational needs
[20] Sky News (2025) Watchdog upholds nearly 100% of complaints about special educational needs in England
[21] Broach and Clements (2020 3rd) Disabled Children: A Legal Handbook, p 84.
[22] Law Commission (2025) Disabled Children's Social Care: Final Reports

Proposed SEND reforms 2026

In February 2026, the Government published a Schools White Paper called 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' and a consultation on reforms to the SEND system in England called 'SEND reform: putting children and young people first'.[23]

The proposed reforms include:

- Every mainstream setting will be expected to deliver a strong universal offer of high-quality, inclusive teaching for all children, backed by £1.6 billion over the next three years. There will be an updated SEND Code of Practice and new National Inclusion Standards.
- Children who need additional help will be able to access three new flexible layers of support. They will be able to easily move between layers as needs are identified and develop, and they are not sequential:
  - **Targeted:** access in mainstream settings to support like small group interventions delivered by setting staff, and reasonable adjustments.
  - **Targeted Plus:** access in mainstream settings to expertise like speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and occupational therapists.
  - **Specialist:** for children and young people with the most complex needs, beyond what mainstream settings can routinely provide. New Specialist Provision Packages will set out what support a child is entitled to, including education, health and care. They will be created by an independent panel of education, health and care experts in discussion with children and families. EHC plans will provide a legal right to the support set out in the Package.
- All schools (including maintained nursery schools and school-based nurseries) and colleges will be legally required to create digital Individual Support Plans for any child or young person with identified SEND, regardless of which layer of support they're receiving.
- Every secondary school and the same number of primary schools will have an inclusion base where children can receive specialist, targeted support whilst being part of their local school.
- EHC plans will continue to provide a legal entitlement to more intensive or complex support than mainstream education settings can routinely provide. New EHC plans will be based on Specialist Provision Packages. For children and young people with an existing EHC plan transition to the new system will begin from 2030, once the new inclusive mainstream system is built.
- £1.8 billion over the next three years towards creating a new national offer called 'Experts at Hand'. This will wrap professionals such as educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, and occupational therapists around mainstream settings.
- A £200 million over three years for a new national SEND training programme. Training will apply to the entire 0–25 system, with requirements set out in the Code of Practice.
- £3.7 billion in capital for 60,000 new specialist places, including in Inclusion Bases and to make buildings accessible.
- The specialist sector, including maintained special schools, Alternative Provision settings, and special post-16 institutions, will have a clearer focus on outreach, sharing their expertise with local mainstream settings.
- Over £200 million to strengthen the SEND offer in Best Start Family Hubs, led by a named professional in every Hub.
- The school complaints systems will be updated so complaints about SEND are heard by a panel including a SEND expert independent of that school. For children with ECHPs or applying for a needs assessment, the Tribunal will remain as an important backstop, and mediation and dispute resolution will be improved so more disagreements can be resolved without lengthy legal processes.
- Ofsted will inspect early years settings, schools and colleges specifically on their inclusive practice. The Children's Commissioner will have a new remit to provide independent oversight and scrutiny of SEND reform.

[23] DfE (2026) 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' and 'SEND reform: putting children and young people first'

The different types of kinship care

Kinship care arrangements can take different forms which impact the support available to children and their carers. The five primary types of arrangement are:

Kinship Foster Care

The child is looked after in the care system by a foster carer who is a relative or friend.

Special guardianship order (SGO)

The kinship carer has a special guardianship order for the child they are caring for. The order gives the carer enhanced parental responsibility.

'Lives with' child arrangements order (CAO)

The kinship carer has a child arrangements order saying the child should live with them. This order grants parental responsibility to the carer.

Private Fostering

A child under the age of 16 (or under 18 if they are disabled) is looked after by someone who is not a close relative or a foster carer for 28 days or more. The carer must be doing this in their own home. The carer must inform the local authority.

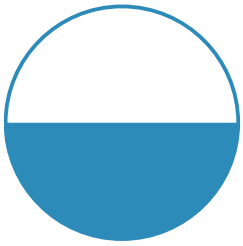
Private family arrangements

The child is cared for by a close relative and children's services have not had a major role in arranging for the child to live with the relative. The Family Court has not made an order about where the child should live or who should care for them.

The latter two are sometimes referred to as 'informal kinship arrangements'.

Source:
Family Rights Group: https://frg.org.uk/get-help-and-advice/who/kinship-carers/#understanding-kinship-care

What do we know about children in kinship care with SEND?



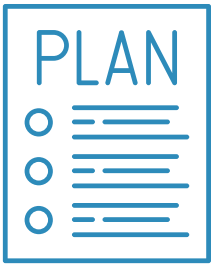
Around half of children in kinship care have special educational needs, according to survey data.[24]

This is similar to other groups of children involved with children's social care.

In 2024/25, SEN was identified for:

- 60% of children in care for more than 12 months;
- 48% of children in care for less than 12 months;
- 52% of children in need;
- 42% of children subject to child protection plans.

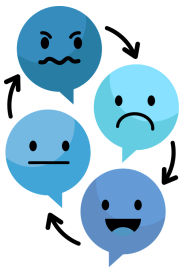
These groups will include some kinship children.[25]



Kinship children overall are less likely to be receiving support through an Education, Health and Care plan.

The survey by Kinship found that 15% of children in England in the survey cohort had an EHC plan, compared to 5% of all pupils.[28] In contrast, 32% of children in the care system for a year or more had an EHC plan in 2024/25.[29] This suggests that kinship children are disproportionately impacted by the increasing necessity for an EHC plan to guarantee support.

The survey also found that a further quarter (24%) of kinship children had SEN support status. This is similar to the 28% of children looked after in care for 12 months or more, but higher than the 14% of all pupils in England with SEN support.[30]

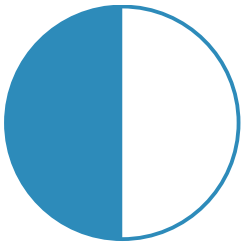


Social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH) is the most common type of need among kinship children.

SEMH needs include challenges managing emotions, behaviour, and relationships, impacting a child's ability to learn.

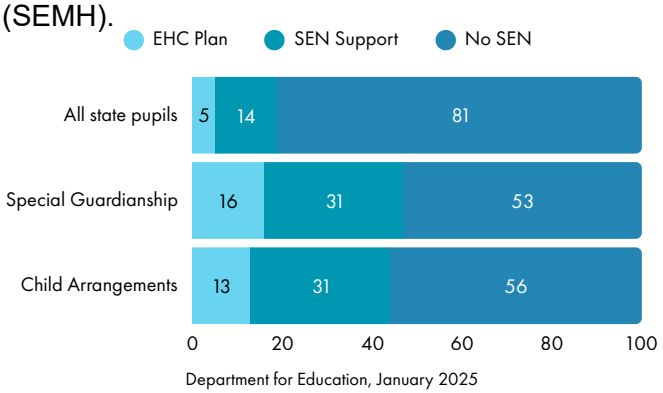
Survey evidence by the charity Kinship found that almost a third (31%) of kinship children in their survey cohort had either diagnosed or suspected SEMH.[26]

This is also the primary type of need for other social care groups: 54% of children looked after for at least 12 months, 39% of children in need, and 40% of children subject to a child protection plan.[27]



Almost half of previously looked after children in kinship care have an EHC plan or are receiving SEN Support.[31]

Children who were previously in the care system and now raised under a special guardianship or child arrangements order are more likely to be receiving statutory SEN support compared to the wider child population. For 4 in 10, their primary type of need is social, emotional and mental health (SEMH).



Department for Education, January 2025

NB. This data is based on self-reporting through the school census and therefore likely underrepresents the total number of children who were previously in the care system. Some children under a CAO may live with their parents.

[24] Parliamentary Taskforce (2020); Kinship (2024a) Forgotten: Support for kinship children's education and mental health
[25] DfE (2024) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England
[26] Kinship (2025) Written evidence to the APPG
[27] DfE (2024) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England

Unique challenges faced by kinship families

Children frequently come to live in kinship care due to tragedy or trauma. That may include the death or severe ill-health of their parents, parental substance misuse or exposure to domestic abuse. These experiences can have long-term developmental and emotional consequences for children.

Kinship families can face unique challenges compared to those where children are raised by their parents. They are:

often older,

Analysis of the 2021 Census for England and Wales identified that kinship carers were predominantly grandparents, and the majority are women aged 50 and over.[32] Older kinship carers are less likely to have had recent experience of the education system, and may be less up to date with certain aspects of childhood and adolescence including use of social media.

less financially secure,

The Census also found many kinship carers were also economically inactive, often due to retirement or caregiving responsibilities. Kinship households were more likely to be deprived than parental households.

and have their own health difficulties.

One in four kinship care households identified in the Census had health conditions limiting them a lot, compared to just 1 in 10 parental households.

For those kinship carers who are younger or haven't had children of their own, they may be finding their way raising children for the first time.

Stepping up to caring responsibilities can also cause financial hardship.

Over half of kinship carers give up their work or reduce their hours when the child comes to live with them.[33] Kinship carers often have to settle a child into a new school alongside managing health appointments and the demands of children's services involvement and court proceedings. In contrast to adopters, kinship carers are not entitled to paid employment leave when the child comes to live with them.

Financial support is very often discretionary and depends on the particular arrangement and whether or not the child has spent time in the care system. In such circumstances, kinship families are less likely to have the resources to, for example, take a case to a SEND tribunal.

Loneliness and isolation is also a major factor.

For many kinship carers, the time and energy required to supporting the children in their care can leave little time or space for their own hobbies and social connections. Isolation can quickly grow, especially if friends don't understand the pressures they are facing. In these circumstances, peer support provided by local kinship care support groups can be invaluable to give carers a sense of belonging to a community with similar experiences.

Jane, a kinship carer from the Isle of Wight raising her grandson, told us:

> We are older and most of our friends are retired. Their grandchildren visit them and then they go back home. Whereas our grandchild lives with us full time. And we don't know about things like social media, how to keep him safe online. And we have no support.

[28] Kinship (2025) Written evidence to the APPG; DfE (2025) Special educational needs in England
[29] DfE (2025) Special educational needs in England
[30] ibid
[31] Written Parliamentary Question tabled by Munira Wilson MP (93819)
[32] ONS (2023), Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021
[33] Family Rights Group (2024) Same Love, Same Leave: Helping kinship carers remain in work

Risk of arrangements breaking down

By stepping in, kinship carers have often averted the need for the child to enter or remain in the care system. However, the challenges posed by supporting children who have experienced trauma and who have special educational needs and disabilities can strain those arrangements. Poor access to support can increase the risk of arrangements breaking down.

Kinship carers report that managing children's needs and challenging behaviour can be difficult for them to handle especially as children get older.[34] This can be especially straining for older carers or those with complex health needs. Sometimes families are struggling so much that they have to contemplate the end of the arrangement and the child entering the care system. For example, the Department for Education commissioned Family Routes study recently found that increasing aggression and violence towards special guardians and adoptive parents or siblings was the most common reason families were considering whether to return the young person to care.[35]

Kinship carers can also find children's services' involvement can bring its own challenges. They may be involved because the child is looked after in the care system, or was before moving to live with them. Or because children's services are involved due to concerns about the children's welfare. Some kinship carers fear that they will be judged negatively by local authorities for asking for help and may be seen to be not coping.[36] Potentially then putting the arrangement at risk.

Kate Cox, Senior Solicitor at IPSEA, shared an example of grandparent special guardians raising twins with Down's syndrome and significant mental health challenges. The family had contacted IPSEA for support when the arrangement was breaking down, and were thankfully able to secure a weekly residential school. The family told IPSEA their input saved the arrangement. However, as quoted here, Kate told our first evidence session that the family felt pressured and that they were not being listened to by the services they were seeking help from.

Family Rights Group report that similar dynamics are felt by kinship carers who contact their national advice line.

> "Each time they said to services, we are really struggling to cope, they were told, well, the boys might not be able to stay together if this placement breaks down. It's almost been used against them as a way to say, you're going to have to make do with what you've got. The grandparents really do feel that they've not been listened to."
>
> Kate Cox
> Senior Solicitor at IPSEA

[34] Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care (2020) First Thought Not Afterthought; Kinship (2025) Written evidence to the APPG
[35] DfE (2025) Family Routes study: making decisions about their children's care
[36] Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care (2020) First Thought Not Afterthought

Recognition and awareness of kinship care

A critical issue is the lack of awareness of kinship care across educational settings and other universal services. Kinship carers and children report that schools do not fully understand their role or the child's circumstances. This is especially acute in secondary schools. This lack of awareness affects educational outcomes. Where a child's circumstances are not well understood, their underlying needs are less likely to be recognised or appropriately supported. To enable an inclusive learning environment and effective early support, all school staff must be able to recognise and understand kinship care arrangements.

Not all kinship carers have parental responsibility for a child and there is limited understanding of the different types of kinship arrangements across different services. This can create barriers for kinship carers when accessing services on behalf of a child, including accessing necessary information and making decisions. Kinship carers may struggle to be recognised or obtain the information to support the child's needs. Variations in legal arrangements and family dynamics add further complexity. For example, a child's parents may retain parental responsibility for their child, and in some cases, be the sole holder of parental responsibility, highlighting the need for improved understanding amongst practitioners and professionals.

Our APPG heard mixed opinions on the level of understanding of kinship care in educational settings. For some of the kinship carers we spoke to, their children's school had not understood their kinship care arrangement. Schools need to be able to understand kinship care in all its forms in order to meet a child's full needs. Kinship carers have reflected that where children felt their voices weren't heard or they didn't feel safe and supported, they were less likely to engage in education and more likely to experience school anxiety and refusal.

The young people the APPG spoke to expressed frustration at feeling unheard and unseen by professionals, especially in school. They spoke about repeatedly having to explain their family situation to teachers, and the stress and frustration this caused. Some of the young people had been involved in a workshop with Virtual School Heads (VSHs) to help improve understanding of kinship care among VSHs.

"We worked hard to educate teachers about what kinship is. In my school I got fed up always having to explain that I didn't live with my mum. I want to be able to tell them once and not keep repeating it." Mollie, 14

"I want teachers to understand what kinship care is, so I don't have to keep explaining to different teachers that I live with my nan and grandad. I took part in the Virtual Schools Conference to help raise awareness." Rosa, 13

"School is really hard when you're in kinship care. Kinship children feel isolated and like they don't have a voice. Having to share your story to other people is tiring and frustrating. It gets to the point where you don't have to share it anymore." Kyle, 21

Defining kinship care

Until recently, there was no single, commonly agreed definition of kinship care which covered the full range of kinship care arrangements. Updates to statutory guidance, including Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 and Kinship Care: Statutory guidance for local authorities 2024, have now incorporated such a definition. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act defines kinship care in primary legislation, for the purposes of the new Kinship Local Offer and expanded responsibilities of Virtual School Heads.

Our APPG welcomes these important developments to build a commonly accepted definition of kinship care and to enshrine it in law.

Government should proactively support awareness-raising of educational staff and SENCOs across education and related services through training, and also those working across community and health settings, such as services like Family Hubs and mental health services.

Statutory guidance for teachers and school staff

The statutory guidance 'Keeping Children Safe in Education'[37], which schools and colleges rely on for safeguarding and safer recruitment, mentions kinship care only three times. All references are in relation to the Virtual School Head role, instead of staff more broadly. This guidance does not define kinship care at any point. If inclusion is to be the concern of all educational staff, then all must have a good understanding of kinship care.

Although the 2024 kinship care statutory guidance[38] technically applies to schools—since they are considered "other providers of services"—it is not a main reference document for schools. Relevant sections of statutory guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026'[39] also apply to schools, but that document ultimately directs readers back to Keeping Children Safe in Education. As a result, the main reference document for teachers offers very little to help them understand kinship care in its various forms.

Government should ensure that future iterations of 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' include the definition of kinship care, consistent with the definition in the 'Kinship Care: Statutory guidance for local authorities (2024)' and 'Working Together to Safeguard Children (2026)'.

School census

The young people we spoke to said a positive step forward would be for schools to record their kinship care status on the school register so they did not have to repeatedly tell new teachers. The National Kinship Care Ambassador, Jahnine Davis, told the same APPG session about work underway in the Department in relation to how kinship care is recorded through the school census. The APPG reinforced this recommendation in a letter to the Children's Minister in December 2025.[40] We are delighted that the Government confirmed in January 2026 that kinship care will be added to the school census.[41]

Photo page 18: The APPG meeting with young people raised in kinship care and the National Kinship Care Ambassador Jahnine Davis in Parliament in October 2025. Supported by Kinship Carers Liverpool and Families in Harmony.

[37] Keeping children safe in education
[38] Kinship Care: Statutory guidance for local authorities, 2024
[39] Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026
[40] The APPG's letter to the Children's Minister can be found here.
[41] Baroness Blake speaking for the Government in the House of Lords on 14th January 2026.

Understanding children's experiences of trauma and loss

"Significant life events impact on children's development, and it is especially so for children who have been in the care system. There is provision in schools for neurodiversity but not for understanding trauma, and that's a concern if staff and schools are not prepared to look after those children who are impacted in this way."

Kinship carer raising a five year old

Many children in kinship care have experienced trauma, loss, and disruption. In school and educational settings, these experiences can affect behaviour, communication, and emotional regulation. Children can have overlapping needs, particularly where special educational needs and disabilities and the impact of trauma interact. A consistent message our APPG has heard from kinship carers is about the importance of schools understanding their children's experiences of trauma and its impact. Without this understanding, carers are concerned that school and SEND reforms will not create a learning environment where children raised in kinship care can access the support they need to thrive.

Where schools adopt trauma-informed approaches, carers report more positive experiences and outcomes. Where it is not recognised, behaviour is more likely to be treated as a disciplinary issue rather than an indicator of unmet need. Kinship carers have expressed concerns that the use of behaviour systems which do not account for trauma, contribute to shame or exclusion.

"I would have to explain to teachers that he is just little and has been taken away from his parents. He doesn't understand what's happening to him, can you give him some leeway. Schools do not understand kinship trauma."

Korreena, raising her grandson

Jac raised serious concerns about behaviourist interventions in schools that are not trauma informed, and which are damaging to children who have experienced trauma.

"There are behaviour management systems like "traffic lights" or systems when "naughty" children are required to sit on raincloud until they are regulated. These systems cause shame and don't meet children's needs. Those needs escalate when they're unmet."

We heard important reflections from kinship carer Shirley, who is also an ex-headteacher, about the importance of school culture and leadership to building a genuinely inclusive system:

"There needs to be a more open culture. Leadership is key, if they get it, it will be disseminated down through the school."

Without this leadership, training alone will not deliver the inclusive mainstream school environment that the government is seeking to build. Shirley said:

"The white paper looks great but without investment into developing the environment and resources etc, I don't know how we can support the children."

Clare agreed:

"If the understanding of trauma and kinship is embedded it becomes second nature and then isn't an additional burden on the teachers. We had an amazing experience with E's first school, they were utterly brilliant, it was all downhill from there though."

Families have highlighted the value of consistent relationships with trusted staff members who understand their family's unique history. For Shirley, a safeguarding officer who understood her grandchild's experience made sure the school listened. She said:

"For kinship families, there needs to be someone in the school that they trust, that can be the person they go to."

Sharon described a bereavement counsellor as a "light" who explained to the school what grief and trauma looks like:

“There needs to be greater recognition in education that bereavement, trauma, attachment disruption and grief can significantly affect a child’s learning, behaviour and emotional wellbeing. Too often, children in kinship care are misunderstood or seen only through the lens of behaviour, without enough understanding of the experiences they have lived through.”

Stefan, raising three nephews

“She has worked with CAHMS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] and social workers and has been brilliant. She is the one person who I can rely on and text at any time. Having one person who truly understands what trauma is and looks like is a positive.” Sharon, raising grandchildren

One carer we spoke to felt that the trauma the child they are raising had experienced was more significant than their other additional needs. Services must be able to respond to this complexity rather than applying rigid or standardised approaches which may not fully capture individual circumstances and risks children missing out on critical support.

The Government should ensure that trauma-informed practice is embedded throughout the school system, to enable schools to respond appropriately to behaviour, reduce reliance on punitive approaches, and create an environment in which kinship children feel safe, understood and able to engage in learning.

All education staff in early years, schools and post-16 provision - including teachers, SENCOs and proposed “Experts at Hand” – should receive training on the impact of trauma, loss and disruption and the specific experiences of children in kinship care. This should include bespoke training on the experiences of children from Black and minoritised communities. Virtual School Heads have an important role to play and it should be included as an essential component of the new national SEND training programme.

Kinship families should be engaged in the development of the proposed new National Inclusion Standards and in local inclusion strategies to ensure that understanding of kinship care experiences is embedded into expectations on inclusion from the very beginning.

Information sharing and advice

"We had not realised the extent of our grandson's needs when he came to live with us. He has a language disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, atypical asthma, chronic constipation, and early years trauma. Many children who come into kinship care have extra needs because their parents were unable to engage with professional services early on. Kinship carers are picking up many of the developmental tasks not undertaken or available in the child's early years."

Jane, Isle of Wight

Information gaps

We have heard evidence of how kinship carers are often unaware of a child's special educational needs, or the extent to which they impact on their learning, when a child comes to live with them. Most kinship arrangements are unplanned and arise unexpectedly during times of crisis, meaning that relevant health and education records and assessments may not have been shared with the kinship carer. In some situations, a child's needs may only become fully apparent once the child has settled into a safe and stable kinship home environment. As a result, kinship carers may lack the information and details needed to advocate for the support the child needs. It can cause further delays in accessing that necessary support and can mean repeat assessments. Some children in kinship care may also have to move schools and local authorities, if their new home is not nearby. These changes can interrupt existing support arrangements and create additional delays and disruption in assessing and supporting their educational needs.

"The difference for kinship carers is that you do not know about the things the children struggle with, you don't know and you don't have records. You're flying blind, the school is flying blind. Money ends up being spent on new assessments that could be spent elsewhere."

Clare, raising a niece and nephew

The challenges all families are facing with the SEND system include significant delays for an initial needs assessment, even before referrals for support and appointments with specialists can be made. Some have reported waiting as long as two years for that initial needs assessment.[42]

For kinship families, these difficulties are compounded further. Kinship carers often begin their role with limited information about the child's history, needs, and support arrangements. As a result, they are often trying to navigate an already complex SEND system while piecing together a clear understanding of the child's needs. This lack of information, combined with lengthy waits for assessment and support, can leave kinship carers feeling particularly isolated and unsupported.

"My eldest child's additional needs became evident as she got older. We started the initial assessment in 2023 and never expected it would be 2027 before the appointment started."

Angela – raising two sisters under special guardianship orders

Under the Government's proposed reforms, there would be new tiers of support available, based on a child's needs. However, without a full understanding of a child's needs, a kinship child may be unable to access the support to which they are entitled. This is where kinship carers may be faced with additional barriers. Carers expressed concerns about the risk that children remain within the Universal support offer for longer than appropriate, without access to additional support. Sharon told our March 2026 workshop:

"A child who has grown up from birth with a parent or carer could be more likely to gain early access to any of the four tiers as their primary carer will have a deeper understanding of their needs. They will be able to evidence any suspected SEND concerns through the child's early years development. A kinship carer, on the other hand, may not have the historical context often sought to link patterns of early childhood behaviour to certain diagnoses."

[42] Lambert (2025) Children with special needs waiting two years to be assessed, published in The Times

The perspectives of the child, their kinship carer, and their parents should be central to the assessment process. Kinship carers have reflected that when children do not feel heard, safe or supported, they are less likely to engage positively in education and are more likely to experience school anxiety or refusal. Kinship carers are often building their understanding of a child's needs over time and can provide insights drawn from their day-to-day experiences of caring for a child. These observations may not be included in formal records but can be critical in developing a full understanding of the child's needs, and the support required. Parents may also have important insights and perspective to share. They can offer valuable historical information and insights into the child's development and experiences.

This reinforces the need for all staff in educational settings those and involved in assessing and supporting the needs of children to have a strong understanding of kinship care and the experiences of children raised in kinship care, alongside their needs and strengths.

However, these difficulties also reinforce the need for what many organisations have been advocating for and what inquiries have been recommending – an inclusive mainstream school system where children's needs are identified early and can be support in the classroom. As Anna Bird from the Disabled Children's Partnership told the APPG:

"The vision of inclusive mainstream schools where children's needs are identified more quickly and those needs are often met routinely in the classroom without a legal fight, without a legal process, that could make a huge difference for kinship carers who aren't getting more formalized support at the moment."

Access to advice

Children's social care and the special educational needs and disabilities system are complex. The variety of kinship care arrangements and family situations adds further complexity still. Early, specialist advice and timely information sharing has a crucial role to play in helping families navigate those systems, and understand their rights and entitlements to support.

Free advice services provided by the not for profit sector are often the main source of advice and information for kinship families. That includes Family Rights Group's national advice service and the Kinship Training and Support Service, both receiving funding from the Department for Education. Both organisations report that kinship families have to battle for the support their children need, and for children with special educational needs and disabilities the SEND system is another system to fight.[43] Kinship carers, often older and without recent experience engaging with schools, are thrust into a complex system they have little experience of.

"There was a lack of support for my grandson in his mainstream school, so when the school applied for him to have an EHC needs assessment and an EHC plan was issued for him we appealed for him to start at a special school. We had to make a formal complaint against the school, with the help of Family Rights Group, which was upheld, because we firmly believe our grandson is not safe in a mainstream school environment. We need to make schools accountable, and to make sure accountability is built into the process."

Jane, Isle of Wight

Family Rights Group provide families with digital advice resources on special education needs and disabilities and through their advice line.[44]

Lucy Peake, Chief Executive of Kinship, told our APPG about the charity's workshop on navigating SEND and the EHC plan process.[45] The National Organisation for FASD also shared their training on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder for Kinship.[46]

[43] Kinship (2025) Written evidence to the APPG; Ashley and Braun (2019) The highs and lows of kinship care: analysis of a comprehensive survey of kinship carers; Hall (2025) The SEND crisis and children in kinship care

[44] Family Rights Group advice sheet on children with disabilities and children with special educational needs

[45] Kinship (2025) Written evidence to the APPG

[46] National FASD (2025) Written evidence to the APPG

Our APPG heard evidence from the Independent Provider of Special Education Advice (IPSEA) on the advice they provide to kinship families. Kate Cox, Senior Solicitor at IPSEA, spoke about a lack of understanding from educational settings and local authorities about how kinship carers have the same rights to enforce educational law as a parent with parental responsibility.

"A kinship carer has the same ability to make an education, health and care needs assessment, request to appeal a decision about an education, health and care plan, to hold their local authority to account, but I don't think they feel empowered because the information they need is not delivered to them."

Kate Cox, Solicitor, IPSEA

This could be a potential factor in why survey evidence points to kinship children being less likely to be in receipt of support through an EHC plan than other children with children's social care involvement. It also points to the importance of families being equipped with the information and advice they need to effectively advocate for the children they are raising. This will continue to be critical as families are faced with the proposed new system.

Kinship Local Offer

Kinship carers must be able to access information about what support they and the children they are caring for are entitled to. Family Rights Group proposed the Kinship Local Offer - a new requirement in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act for local authorities to develop a local offer setting out the support available to families in their area.[47] The Act also includes a requirement for local authorities to consult with children and their families when developing their local offer. We strongly welcome this and are further encouraged by the work of the National Kinship Care Ambassador, Jahnine Davis, to establish a set of National Kinship Principles for good practice.[48]

The Kinship Local Offer follows the requirement on local authorities, since the Children and Families Act 2014, to publish a SEND local offer.

The SEND local offer should set out clear, accessible information on the services and support available in their area for children and young people with SEND aged 0-25, across education, health, and social care. Given the prevalence of special educational needs among kinship children, and the challenges families face in accessing appropriate, tailored information and advice, local authorities should ensure that their Kinship Local Offer aligns with their SEND local offer. This should include information about sources of independent, specialist advice and information. The National Kinship Care Ambassador should work with local authorities to ensure effective delivery of this.

[47] Family Rights Group (2026) The kinship local offer
[48] Davis (2025) Kinship care: a journey, not always a destination

Education, Health and Care (EHC) assessments and plans

EHC plans currently play a critical role in securing additional support for children with special educational needs and disabilities, including many in kinship care. For this group in particular, EHC plans often provide the only clear, enforceable route to appropriate provision.

The kinship carers who contributed to the APPG discussions expressed mixed views on the effectiveness of EHC plans. The kinship child of Jac, a kinship carer in Northumberland, had an EHC plan but there was no school willing or capable of implementing it. Meanwhile, Jane described how key the EHC plan had been in securing the special school their child needed, and her relief finally watching her grandson go to school with a smile on his face.

"Today, we took our grandson for his first day at his new specialist school. He was happy and included and safe. And I came home and we nearly cried. Without an EHC plan that would not have been possible. Because of the EHC plan we had the opportunity to find a school to meet his needs and where all staff are trauma trained"

Jane, kinship carer, Isle of Wight

Clare in West Sussex had been told her kinship child needed an EHC plan to guarantee the support they needed.

For Karina in Suffolk, securing an ECH plan had not been sufficient to get the support her granddaughter needed. She is in the process of looking for another school.

"I am asking for her to get 1-2-1 support to identify triggers and take her out of the situation and she isn't getting it… This is a good school and they are trying but it's too much to deal with."

Kinship carers also describe the hurdles they had to face to secure an EHC plan, including costs they incurred disputing plans and securing private assessments. For kinship families with fewer financial resources and inexperience navigating the education system, these difficulties will feel especially acute and unfair.

In our March 2026 workshop, kinship carers reflected on the detail of the Government's proposed SEND reforms. There was appreciation for efforts to improve the inclusivity and availability of support in mainstream schooling. However, there is deep concern about plans to restrict access to EHC plans to only those with the 'most complex needs' and the absence of further detail on what the threshold for that will be. It is causing significant worry, particularly for those families who have had difficult experiences under the current system.

Some kinship carers are concerned that the tiered framework will increase bureaucracy and that progression through the "tiers" will block or delay early access to specialist support and EHC plans. One carer was especially worried that the number of children with complex needs will increase because there will be less specialist support available overall. They were concerned that by narrowing eligibility for specialist support, the reforms will cause an increase in complex cases, overwhelming both mainstream and specialist settings.

Kinship carers expressed concern that a greater focus on standardised packages of support, including the restriction to a limited number of 'Specialist Provision Packages' could make it harder to secure support tailored to the child.

There are also concerns about how families would be able to hold the system accountable for the delivery of legally enforceable rights to support.

"It is of huge concern that the White Paper proposes that the powers of the first-tier tribunal will be severely curtailed. The tribunal will not be able to name a school (chosen by the parents or carers), instead the tribunal will only be able to remit the case back to the Local Authority for re-consideration if the tribunal finds the school named by the Local Authority to be inappropriate for the children."

Jane, kinship carer, Isle of Wight

Jane was also concerned that these changes could force kinship carers into an adversarial relationship with the school, if they don't agree with the plan made for the child.

Maintaining strong and enforceable rights to support must remain central. Any changes to how support is structured within plans should not weaken families' ability to hold services to account. This is particularly important given concerns raised by carers that the support set out in plans is not always consistently delivered in practice. Robust accountability mechanisms are therefore critical. It should be clear who is responsible for delivering each element of support, and systems must ensure that delivery is monitored and reviewed. For kinship families, who may have less familiarity with statutory systems or face additional barriers to advocacy, this transparency is especially important to building confidence that support will be realised.

Earlier, we referenced the systemic pressures on timely assessments. For looked after children, the SEND Code of Practice recognises that addressing the child's special educational needs is "a crucial part of avoiding breakdown in their care placement".[49] It states that "Local authorities should be particularly aware of the need to avoid any delays for looked after children and carry out the EHC needs assessment in the shortest possible timescale." This guidance will apply to children in kinship foster care who are looked after children in care, but it will not extend to the wider population of children living in kinship arrangements. The APPG heard evidence that children in all kinship arrangements would benefit from the same expectations of timely needs assessments as those currently applied to looked after children in care.[50] This could also reduce the likelihood of kinship arrangements breaking down, averting further pressure on an overburdened care system.

We note that ensuring timely assessments cannot be divorced from the wider systemic challenges and pressures, that are resulting in significant delays for all families. The white paper sets out the Government's intention to improve inclusion and support available within mainstream education so that commonly occurring needs can be addressed with targeted, evidence-based support, without requiring formal assessments or diagnoses. Alongside this, the SEND Code of Practice should be updated to include the same expectation of timely needs assessments for all kinship children as for looked after children.

"The needs of children should be met regardless of whether or not they have an EHC plan. But the funds are so short and the system is so adversarial that without an EHC plan you will not get the support. And even when a child does have an EHC plan, there is often not the accountability to ensure that what it contains is realised. While improving support for children in schools across the board is imperative, there will still need to be a legal guarantee alongside transparent and straightforward ways to enforce that guarantee for those children with the greatest needs."

Clare, raising a niece and nephew

Photo: The APPG's first spotlight session on SEND in July 2025 hearing from kinship carers across England about their experiences.

[49] SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years
[50] Kinship (2025) Written evidence to the APPG

Home schooling

Increasing numbers of children are being homeschooled. The Department for Education estimated 111,700 children were being home-educated in the UK in autumn 2024, a 21% increase from 92,000 in October 2023.[51] 13% of homeschooling families say they made that decision due to school dissatisfaction, which includes a lack of support for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and school bullying.

During our first evidence session we heard Jac's experience, who is based in Northumberland raising a 12 year old. She is concerned about lack of therapeutic provision and limited access to appropriate specialist schooling in rural areas.

"Elective home education is often a misnomer, reflecting a situation where all other options have failed. It is not uncommon. I know three kinship families whose children are currently not attending school but are being educated from home instead."

Jac, kinship carer raising a 12 year old

After a traumatic unsuccessful attempt at attending a specialist setting that could not meet his needs, Jac's child is now Educated Other Than In School (EOTIS). It took over a year for the family to negotiate an appropriate package with the local authority. Jac had to proactively source much of the provision - which has included working with therapists to develop bespoke sessions.

"It is working very well, but I do worry about those children whose families do not have the skills or resources to challenge schools and local authorities."

Jac, kinship carer

Jac is concerned that the Government's white paper does not mention children not in school.

"We know several other kinship carers whose disabled children are on EOTIS or are home educated as they cannot cope with medium to large groups of children. Are these options going to be more difficult to access in future?"

Jac, kinship carer

Clare had also supported homeschooling carers through her local kinship support group. She told our APPG:

"I run a support group for kinship carers, and so many of the carers I meet there have children who cannot go to school. These children are not getting an education."

Like the families we spoke to, the Education Select Committee found that parents and carers of children with SEND who home educate often do so because mainstream provision has failed them. In its report "Solving the SEND Crisis", the Committee recommended stronger support, clearer guidance, and better accountability so families are not left isolated or forced into home education by lack of suitable school places.[52]

The white paper follows the introduction of a mandatory, national "Children Not In School" register for local authorities, being introduced via the Children's and Wellbeing Act.

We ask the Government how they will ensure a reformed system supports children who are not able to attend school and where a standardised specialist package of support would not meet their needs.

[51] DfE (2025) Elective Home Education

[52] Education Select Committee (2025) Solving the SEND Crisis

A patchwork of support

The type of kinship care arrangement a child is subject to, and whether they currently are or have previously been looked after in the care system, has a significant bearing on the support they can access in school. In practice, this means children who have had similarly challenging early life experiences and with similar levels of need, can be eligible for vastly different levels of support. Many struggle to secure the support their children need.

The types of support available include:

- **Priority access to the school of their carer's choice.** This is particularly relevant to kinship children given that some children have to move school if the kinship carer does not live nearby. However, not all kinship children are eligible.
- **A Personal Education Plan (PEP):** which is produced jointly by the school and the local authority, and sets out how the child will be supported and enabled to achieve their full educational potential.
- **A Designated Teacher:** who works at the school and it is their duty it is to promote the educational achievements of looked-after children and previously looked after children at the school.
- **A Virtual School Head:** who is employed by the local authority and is responsible for monitoring the attainment and progress of eligible children, and championing their educational needs. Initially responsible for looked after and previously looked after children, the VSH responsibilities have been extended and now include championing the educational attendance, attainment and progress of children in kinship care. Direct support can also be provided to the families of some kinship children.
- **Pupil Premium Plus:** This is additional funding for a school to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Kinship children who were previously looked after are eligible but must inform the school.

The table on the next page shows how eligibility varies between types of kinship care arrangement.

There is a patchwork of educational entitlements for kinship children. Those who are looked after, or have previously been looked after, are eligible for the most support by virtue of their kinship status. Those with limited or no children's services involvement the least. This can be a complex web of eligibility for families and professionals to understand and navigate. Organisations working with kinship families have advocated for a simpler, consistent, fairer system.[53]

Government should work to address the patchwork of support entitlements so that all children in kinship care who need additional help in school can benefit from priority school admissions, a designated teacher, direct support from the Virtual School Head, and Pupil Premium Plus.

Even where kinship children are eligible for support, such as Pupil Premium Plus, there are barriers to those children accessing that support. The school census for January 2025 identified 30,337 previously looked after children raised under a special guardianship or child arrangements order attending a school setting.[54] There is no published data on the total number of previously looked after children subject to these orders which prevents calculating what proportion of the total population this represents. However, given that identification is based on self-declaration by the carer, it is likely to be an under estimate. This means that there are many eligible kinship children for whom Pupil Premium Plus is not currently being claimed. This could in part be due to a lack of awareness among carers, particularly in authorities where there is little in the way of post-order information or advice, that they need to make the school aware through the annual autumn census. The charity Kinship has proposed an automatic opt out system to avoid the need for eligible kinship families to self-declare their eligibility for Pupil Premium Plus.[55] We recommend the Government should explore the feasibility of this.

[53] Family Rights Group (2022) #TimeToDefine: Proposal from a clear and simple legal framework for kinship care; Kinship (2025) Written evidence to the APPG.
[54] Written parliamentary question tabled by Munira Wilson MP (21851)
[55] Kinship (2025) Written evidence to the APPG

	Priority school admissions	A Personal Education Plan (PEP)	A Designated Teacher	A Virtual School Head	Pupil Premium Plus
Kinship Foster Care	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Special Guardianship Order (SGO) and Child Arrangements Order (CAO)	Only if the child subject to the order was previously looked after in the care system. Although other criteria may apply e.g. they have a current SEN statement or an EHCP. The School Admissions Code provides for urgent in-year school admissions for children in formal kinship arrangements.	No	Only if the child was previously looked after in the care system.	The VSH has strategic responsibility to promote the education of all children in kinship care. For children subject to SGO or CAOs, VSH can also provide advice and information, on request.	Only if the child was previously looked after in the care system. The carer has to inform the school in order for the school to receive the extra funding.
Private fostering	No automatic guarantee by virtue of being a kinship child. Other criteria may apply.	No	No	The overall responsibility to promote the education of all children in kinship care. No direct advice.	No
Private family arrangements	No automatic guarantee by virtue of being a kinship child. Other criteria may apply.	No	No	The overall responsibility to promote the education of all children in kinship care. No direct advice.	No

Source: Family Rights Group, The Education System in England advice sheet

Virtual School Heads

The role of the Virtual School Head was created to champion the education of all children and young people in care within a local authority and to address the considerably lower educational outcomes of children in care. It became statutory in 2013.

The responsibilities of VSHs have been extended on several occasions to include: previously looked after children on a statutory basis (2018), and on a non-statutory basis to children on child in need and child protection plans (2021) and most recently to children with a social worker, those who have previously had a social worker and children in kinship care (2024). The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act has made this latter extension statutory. VSHs will also have responsibility to provide information and advice to kinship families with special guardianship or child arrangements orders, on request.

Our APPG welcomes the extension of the VSH role to include responsibility for championing the overall attainment of all children in kinship care regardless of the type of arrangement. However, we note that the responsibilities to provide direct support remain limited to particular subsets of kinship families. Those kinship families with the least statutory involvement with children's services continue to have the least access to support. Advice from their Virtual School Head could make a critical difference, particularly as schools can be one of the most trusted sources of support for kinship families.

"We know from surveys that schools and charities are key sources of trusted support for kinship families, far above local authorities - who they may distrust or not have had much engagement with at all, depending on their kinship arrangement. So schools are likely playing an outsized role in supporting kinship families alongside the voluntary sector." Dr Lucy Peake, CEO, Kinship

Some of the young people who spoke to our APPG had attended the Virtual School Heads Conference, as part of work to improve awareness of kinship care and how VSHs can meet their new responsibilities to champion the education of kinship care in school.

Mollie, aged 14 and living with her great aunt, said:

"I took part in the Virtual School Conference with three of my friends from Kinship Carers Liverpool. We worked hard to educate teachers about what kinship is. In my school I got fed up always having to explain that I didn't live with my mum. I want to be able to tell them once and not keep repeating it."

The addition of kinship care to the school census should support Virtual School Heads to meet their new responsibilities to kinship children. We recommend this data also be used to extend the full range of VSH support to all kinship children.

2021 census analysis suggests that the age profile of children and young people in kinship care is tending to be older.[56] Teenage children (aged 13 to 17 years) accounted for 4 in 10 children living in kinship care (41.8%), compared with 27.1% of children living with at least one parent. Nearly one-fifth (19.7%) of children identified as living in kinship care were aged 16 or 17 years. Although methodological limitations to the census analysis mean it is difficult to determine if some of these young people are living independently with relatives who are not providing care.[57]

Charities report a growing concern among kinship families with older children about the cliff edge in support at 16 and 18. While children in kinship foster care are eligible for the support entitlements available to care leavers, this does not extend to those in other forms of arrangement. Special guardianship and child arrangements orders also cease at 18. There is almost a social expectation that as family and friends, kinship carers will continue to support the young person into early adulthood. But this overlooks the pressures and unique circumstances that kinship families continue to face. These challenges will be especially acute for those raising children with additional needs.

The Education Select Committee's SEND inquiry heard that "young people with SEND frequently experience a sharp decline in support after the age of 16, despite the extension of eligibility for SEND support up to age 25 under the 2014 reforms."[58] They attributed this "cliff edge" in part to the absence of SEND considerations in post-16 education and skills.

In the evidence to our APPG we heard an example about a family who had faced specific challenges as the young people were reaching 18. Kate from IPSEA spoke about the twins previously mentioned having a mental health crisis aged 16. The family could no longer continue to care for them and the boys are now living in supported accommodation.

"Currently, an education, health and care (EHC) plan appeal needs to take place in the tribunal. The grandparents are no longer able to make that appeal because they don't have care of the young people anymore. We speak to so many parents who are acting in the shoes of their young person who lacks the capacity to bring that appeal. But these families are in a different situation because they're no longer able to continue caring for their loved ones... they're no longer able to advocate for them in the same way as they would do if potentially the young person has been able to stay within their care."

Kate Cox, Solicitor, IPSEA

[56] ONS (2023), Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021
[57] Family Rights Group (2023) Analysis of Census 2021
[58] Education Select Committee (2025) Solving the SEND Crisis

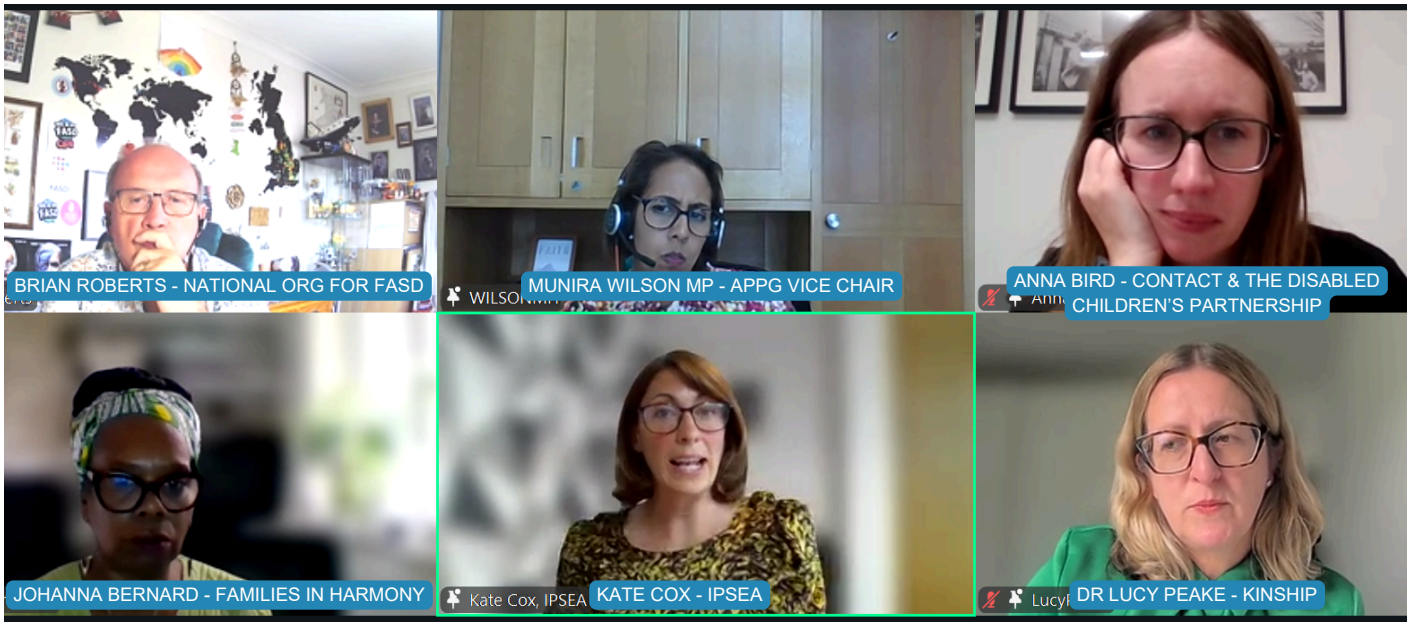


Photo: The APPG's second spotlight session on SEND in September 2025 hearing from frontline organisations.

Jac who gave evidence to our APPG was especially concerned about the post-16 provision available in the more rural area they live:

“In the North East, post 16 provision for young people with SEND is already very limited and generally very poor. Our child will not be able to access a mainstream college. Currently there is a tendency to remove travel costs from provision after the age of 16. As our child’s package requires a lot of transport, the removal of travel provision would be extremely limiting. I do worry about what will be offered to him at both 16 and 18. He is so behind his peers and vulnerable as a result of trauma, he will need well supported provision to the age of 25.”

Taken together, the Schools White Paper, SEND reforms, and the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper (published November 2025) set out a shift toward a more inclusive post-16 system.

- SEND reforms will apply up to age 25
- The proposed national, layered support model will extend into post-16 education and training
- The new Individual Support Plans will follow children post-16
- Proposals include a focus on transitions at 16 with earlier planning
- The reforms are framed around adult outcomes including employability, independence, and progression.
- New qualifications and pathways aim to support progression for SEND learners.
- New expectations and training around inclusion for post-16 providers

Our APPG welcomes the emphasis on improving post-16 provision for young people with SEND including earlier transition planning and support. However, we note given existing cliff edges at post-16 there is significant work to do. Government must engage with kinship families in developing post-16 provision to ensure reforms meet the needs of these young people. This will ensure that new qualifications and pathways are not based on a "one size fits all" model but instead reflect the lived realities of kinship care.

The experiences of Black kinship families

Over the course of our spotlight sessions, we heard evidence about the experiences of Black children and kinship carers from the charity Families in Harmony, a specialist kinship service for Global Majority and dual heritage families.

Black children are statistically more likely to be raised in kinship care than white children.[59] However, they are less likely to have spent time in the care system which has consequences for the support they may be entitled to.

Johanna Bernard, co-Director at Families in Harmony, shared her reflections on the experiences of families they support. This included:

- Systemic inequalities which deepen the challenges faced by Black children and families: Johanna described the compounding impact of systemic inequalities, cultural misunderstandings, and limited representation within mainstream services.
- Under-identification and misdiagnosis of SEND needs: She described services which are rarely culturally trauma-informed or culturally responsive, and which ignore the child's strengths and leave needs misunderstood or unmet.
- Behaviour being over-emphasised and misinterpreted: Johanna spoke about Black children being disproportionately subjected to school exclusions and punitive disciplinary measures, which can also see SEND framed as behavioural issues.

"A significant amount of Families in Harmony's work involves advocacy; particularly in relation to schools, as well as health services. Due to the emphasis being on behaviour and educational attainment, and health factors attributed to lifestyle and generational patterns, little cultural awareness and context is given to what is in the best interest of the child."

- Black children and families feeling dismissed and unheard by services.

The recent Raised by Relatives report[60] also identified that fear of stigma and feelings of shame can deter Black and Asian families from making themselves visible to services. Families in Harmony reported that special educational needs and mental ill health are not always openly discussed within Black African and Caribbean communities. Sharon McPherson, co-director at Families in Harmony, emphasised the importance of education staff having a stronger understanding of race-related trauma and bias.

"This new SEND system appears weighted on the school's judgement of the child, which can sometimes be racially biased by assumptions about behaviour and family stereotyping."

"Racialised communities may also hold misinformed information about the labelling of their child or may hold cultural beliefs about SEND that mean they are less likely to want their child labelled in certain ways. This will require staff linked to all four tiers of support having access to culturally inclusive SEND assessment and support training."

Families in Harmony also called for outreach with racialised communities to improve understanding of how to navigate complex systems and break down barriers to support.

At our session with young people raised in kinship care, we heard from Kyle Rogers, a Youth Coordinator at Families in Harmony. Raised by his grandmother and Families in Harmony co-director, Sharon, Kyle has been mentoring three boys raised in kinship families who have been struggling with school, social relationships and relationships with their parents. We share here Kyle's reflections on the challenges they are facing:

[59] ONS (2021), Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021; Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care (2020) First Thought Not Afterthought

[60] Tah and Selwyn (2025) Raised by Relatives: the experiences of Black and Asian kinship carers

- A teenage boy living with grandparents has spent much of his life outside of mainstream schooling due to behavioural challenges. He describes feeling frustrated by his circumstances and previously lacked a safe space to express himself. He also reflects that, as a Black teenager with ADHD, his behaviour is often judged negatively without understanding the wider context of his experiences.
- A pre-teen boy living with his grandparent who has experienced behavioural difficulties, particularly since going to secondary school, and who is currently awaiting assessment for ADHD. His kinship carer has raised concerns about disproportionate disciplinary action being taken by school staff and potential racial bias. This has included inappropriate comments from staff - "you will end up a young offender if you keep this behaviour up". Despite this, he wishes to remain in the same school. Following a recent exclusion, the school noticed that he responded well to being mentored by Kyle.
- A young boy who had difficulties managing his emotional regulation, living with his special guardian. Initially, the school's response focused on punitive approaches to managing his needs. His kinship carer recognised both his academic interests and his aptitude for sports, and supported him in developing these strengths. Following an ADHD diagnosis and his carer investing in additional support, he secured a scholarship to a different secondary school. He reports that he benefited from having an outlet for his emotions and values having someone to talk to about his experiences.

Reflecting on what needs to change in school, Kyle said:

"There needs to be support for Black boys. School was triggering for me and I reacted. But no-one thinks about family circumstances. Black boys are more likely to be excluded from school, stopped by the police or experience negative stereotypes. So, when you have the additional pressure of being care experienced, having ADHD or any simply feeling isolated and unable to fit in, that makes it even harder, especially when it is impacting your behaviour. Schools need to understand that and put proper support in place. We need to have counsellors with lived experience to support black boys, particularly those with ADHD."

"Black boys in kinship care need to see that professionals acknowledge their additional struggles on top of all that other racial profiling we experience. Teachers and school staff need specific training to help them see and remove some of these racial biases that limit black boys from achieving their full education potential."

Kyle also called for more funding so that mentoring opportunities are available to support other boys.

Culturally inclusive assessment and support training for all educational staff is essential to recognise and address the experiences and needs of children from Black and minoritised communities.

Kinship families from Black and minoritised communities should be engaged in the development of the proposed new National Inclusion Standards.

The Government should also support the development of peer support groups and mentoring programmes for young people raised in kinship care, learning from the successful models by Kinship Carers Liverpool and Families in Harmony.

Photo: Sharon and Kyle speaking at the APPG's session with young people in October 2025.

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)

Most children raised in kinship care have experienced tragedy and trauma, alongside loss and separation. Our APPG has heard how many kinship carers struggle to secure the therapeutic support the child needs as a result of those early experiences. That can include specialist counselling and bereavement support. The long-term impact of trauma on children can be significant, especially if the child has not had access to therapeutic support. Studies have shown that as many as a third of kinship children have emotional and behavioural difficulties compared to 10% of the general population.[61] Access to therapeutic support can be critical to many children in kinship care being able to effectively engage with education. Without specialist support for emotional and behavioural difficulties for instance, school refusal or exclusions can result.[62]

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund is one of the few avenues for children in kinship care to be able to access specialist therapeutic support. However, it is only available to those kinship children who are subject to a special guardianship or child arrangements order and where they have previously been in the care system. This means many others are excluded despite having similar needs.

At our APPG's first evidence session with kinship carers in July 2025, concerns around the changes to the Fund announced in April 2025 were one of the prominent issues raised by kinship carers giving evidence.[63] Those changes include the reduction in the fair access limit from £5000 to £3000 per child per year, and the removal of the £2500 annual limit for specialist assessments.

At a time when the child and adolescent mental health system (CAHMS) is in crisis[64], we are concerned that the changes will disproportionately affect the children with the highest needs. Data secured by our APPG found that almost half of applications (46%) to the Fund last year were above the new £3000 Fair Access Limit.[65] This indicates the scale of the number of children who could be affected. There were also 3319 funded recipients for Specialist Assessments in the 2024/25 financial year.[66] It is now more difficult for families to obtain both assessments and therapeutic support. We have heard from kinship carers who are distressed about the difficult choices they are now having to make. That includes Elaine, who is raising a 7 year old:

"The new limited amount was meant to at least cover her Life Story work, but we are now in limbo as she has only had half the sessions and the funding for this year has run out. Everything is now on hold. She also needed a specialist assessment for sensory needs that were identified but that now can't be funded either. And the therapeutic support that would normally have been offered afterwards, out of the Fund, also won't be covered."

We welcome that the Government promptly confirmed funding for the ASGSF for the 2026/27 financial year. This will help ensure that families do not face the same delays seen ahead of the 2025/26 financial year. The ASGSF will also be funded in 2027-28 ensuring continuation over the next two years.

The Government has consulted on a series of proposals to reform adoption and kinship support, which includes providing proactive support at key life stages, and devolving the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund funding and responsibility to regional and/or local decision makers.[67] This consultation is an opportunity to consider how to build a system that effectively supports children in kinship care who need therapeutic support to be able to access it. But this must form part of a longer conversation with children and families to design a system which meets their needs. The APPG has made a separate submission.[68]

[61] Hunt (2020) Key findings from the last two decades of UK research on kinship care
[62] Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care (2020) First Thought Not Afterthought
[63] Hall (2025) The SEND crisis and children in kinship care
[64] Children's Commissioner for England (2024) Over a quarter of a million children still waiting for mental health support, Children's Commissioner warns
[65] Written parliamentary question tabled by Melanie Onn MP (47692)
[66] ibid
[67] DfE (2026) Adoption support that works for all
[68] The APPG's consultation submission

A widely shared concern from organisations working with and on behalf of kinship families is that kinship care continues to be an afterthought, reflected in the inclusion of kinship care within a broader consultation about adoption.[69]

Government should ensure that any reforms to the ASGSF are built on a thorough analysis of the therapeutic needs of kinship families. This should include all forms of kinship arrangement, not just those currently eligible for the ASGSF. It also needs to consider how support is effectively delivered to kinship families, particularly given there is not an established specialist kinship care support service infrastructure across the country, comparable to regional adoption agencies. Any new system should be designed with children and families to ensure it meets their needs.

Issues the Government should consider:

- Ring fencing funding to ensure families do not lose out on one of the few dedicated sources of therapeutic support for their child. Families have expressed concern that devolved funding will disappear into other local authority priorities.
- Adequate investment. Current arrangements do not currently meet the level of need among eligible kinship families, let alone the wider kinship population. How will the Government ensure a fair distribution of funding if adoption and kinship care support is split.
- Kinship families having varying experiences of dealing with their local authority, including different levels of engagement and ongoing communication, and varying levels of support and trust.
- Local kinship care support services are at varying stages of development, and many are still in the process of developing their Kinship Local Offer. There is not an established kinship care infrastructure across the country, in comparison to regional adoption agencies. This would need to be developed before funding and responsibility could be effectively devolved, and to ensure a consistent, good quality offer to families.
- The needs and circumstances of kinship and adoptive families will differ, and any provision should be tailored and not based on a one size fits all approach.
- How all children in kinship care, regardless of the type of the arrangement, are able to access therapeutic support commensurate with their needs.

[69] See responses to the Government's announcement from Family Rights Group and Kinship

Special Guardianship Allowance and disability benefits

Where a special guardianship order is in place, the kinship carer may receive a special guardianship allowance towards the costs of raising the child. Only if the child was previously looked after in the care system is the local authority required to assess for support, it is otherwise discretionary. Even where an assessment has been carried out, whether a special guardianship allowance is paid is at the discretion of the local authority. Where an allowance is paid, the rate, duration, and how the carer's means are assessed varies significantly between one local authority area and the next.

Our APPG welcomes the Government's investment in the Kinship Financial Pilot, to test providing kinship carers with a financial allowance to cover some of the costs of care, encouraging more family members or friends to come forward.[70] The seven "Kinship Zones" will benefit around 5000 children. The pilot will be independently evaluated.

However, we remain concerned about transparency and inequalities in the current financial support framework for special guardians. It is often unclear to families how local authorities calculate financial support. We have heard of evidence of some kinship carers with a special guardianship order seeing their welfare benefits, including disability related payments, unfairly and erroneously deducted from special guardianship allowance.

Many local authorities are basing their allowance calculations on an outdated means assessment model published by the Department for Education in 2005. The model and accompanying notes pre-date major welfare reform, including the introduction of Universal Credit. The model also does not make very thoughtful provision for households in receipt of disability benefits. There is concern that some local authority policies and calculations informed by, or drawing on, the model therefore do not adequately account for any disabilities children and carers have. In practice, this means some special guardians are being expected to use disability benefits (whether their own, those relating to the kin child, or to others in the household) to meet the basic needs of the child. There is concern that such practice risks placing disabled carers and disabled children at a particular disadvantage. The ramifications for children and families in individual local authority areas could be significant.

We recommend the kinship care statutory guidance should include a set of principles which local authorities should follow when calculating special guardianship allowances, including to make thoughtful provision for kinship households in receipt of disability benefits. This should be informed by a Department for Education review of how local authorities are currently calculating special guardianship order allowances, and reflect recent case law. The Kinship Local Offer should clearly set out these principles so families can understand how their local authority makes its calculations. The National Kinship Ambassador should help to ensure local authorities work with their local kinship population to devise this.

[70] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-investment-in-support-for-kinship-carers

Better data

A key challenge in understanding kinship care and the needs of kinship families, in order to design robust policy, is the lack of good quality data. Even the main estimate of the total population of children in kinship care, derived from the 2021 census analysis by ONS, has methodological limitations due to the design of the census which means some kinship households are invisible.[71] Greater awareness and data gathering on kinship care within national and local government would allow a better assessment of the numbers of kinship carers and their level of need and an improved ability to design and cost policies.

The Department for Education has recognised and begun work to address data gaps, including through work to link the Ministry of Justice's family courts data with the Department for Education.[72] The inclusion of kinship care in the school census in England is a positive development that will improve the data available on kinship care across the country. This in turn should support better tailored educational support and the design of better services for children and families.

Sector organisations including Family Rights Group and Kinship have also made recommendations for utilising cross-government datasets to build a stronger data picture on the circumstances of children and families.[73] This includes the SSD903 looked after children return, data from the family court held by the Ministry of Justice, the National Pupil Database, the school census, and data collected by HMT on non-parent child benefit claims.

We recommend:

- The ONS should improve the design of the 2031 census in order to better understand the demographics of kinship families, including addressing methodological limitations in understanding relationships in households of 6 or more.
- Government should use existing datasets including the SSD903 looked after children return, Ministry of Justice family court data, the National Pupil Database, the school census, and child benefit data to improve understanding of the characteristics and educational outcomes of children in all forms of kinship care.
- The Department for Education should publish SEND outcomes for previously looked after children cared for under special guardianship and child arrangements orders in its annual children in need release.
- The Department for Education should undertake analysis to understand rates of school exclusion among kinship children.

[71] Family Rights Group (2023) Analysis of Census 2021
[72] DfE (2023) Championing kinship care: national kinship care strategy
[73] Kinship (2025) Written evidence to the APPG; Minutes of APPG session with Children's Commissioner for England on 15/11/2022.

Peer support for young people

While not specific to children with special educational needs and disabilities, our evidence session with young people highlighted the importance of peer support and mentoring. Spaces for young people in kinship care to connect with those who have similar family dynamics can help them to feel seen and understood, and develop friendships rooted in empathy rather than explanation.[74] This especially given the evidence set out earlier about difficulties young people face feeling misunderstood in school.

While support groups for kinship families are more widespread, there are much fewer opportunities for children and young people raised by kinship carers to connect and feel understood. Our APPG heard from Kinship Carers Liverpool which operates one of the very few projects for children and young people.

"When I come to our group I feel like I don't need to explain myself to anyone, we all just get each other. I have made some great friends"

Mollie, 14, living with great aunt

"My sister is older than me and never really wanted to come along to our group, but she does now and both of us are so glad because we want to be heard to make changes for us and other young people like us."

Rosa, living with nan, grandad & sister

"I like coming to our group, and when we have days out, I get to be with two of my brothers. In our young person's group, I've met good mates who I contact outside of group, they don't judge, we don't always talk about our situations, but you just know they get you."

Jamie, 15, living with nan and younger brother

"Kinship Carers Liverpool have tried to meet other similar groups in the UK but there isn't really anyone. In fact, in the past we took young people to New York to meet with another kinship support group, because we couldn't find any others closer to home."

Pauline Thornley, Project Coordinator, Kinship Carers Liverpool

We also heard from Kyle about his experience mentoring young people with Families in Harmony.

"I am glad that Families in Harmony has given me the opportunity to use my kinship care experience to support these boys. I have been able to work towards a mentoring qualification, and I enjoy mentoring and giving back in this way….My internship comes to an end in December, but I hope that funding to make this opportunity available to another young person is possible, and that the boys I have mentored will pay it forward in their own unique way some day."

Kyle, 21, raised by his nan

All the young people who presented to our APPG wanted not only to be heard, but for their voices to lead change.

"We want to be heard to make changes for us and other young people like us"

Rosa, living with nan, grandad & sister

We recommend the Government should support the development of peer support groups and mentoring programmes for young people raised in kinship care, learning from the successful models by Kinship Carers Liverpool and Families in Harmony.

[74] Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care (2020) First Thought Not Afterthought

Conclusion

Kinship care enables children who cannot live with their parents to remain safely within their family and community. It is a powerful protective factor for children, offering stability, continuity of relationships and better outcomes than other forms of care. Yet for too long kinship care has been undervalued, under-recognised and under-supported. For kinship families raising children with special educational needs and disabilities, those difficulties are compounded.

This report highlights evidence that children in kinship care are significantly more likely to have special educational needs and disabilities, yet often struggle to access timely assessments, appropriate support or the statutory protections provided through Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. Children can have multiple and intersecting needs, particularly where special educational needs and disabilities interact with the impact of trauma, loss and disruption, however, this is not always well understood within schools.

Kinship carers often step into their role unexpectedly and without notice, frequently without key information about a child's developmental history or needs. Alongside the everyday challenges of raising the child, kinship carers are often required to navigate both the children's social care system and the SEND system — neither of which is designed with their circumstances in mind. This often results in added stress, fragmented support, and a constant need to advocate for services that do not fully address the realities of their situation. They also facing pressures linked to employment, securing healthcare, with the benefits system and many others. The result is families fighting for recognition and support at the very moment they are trying to provide a stable, loving home for children who have often experienced tragedy or trauma.

The consequences of this are significant. Delays in assessment and access to support place additional strain on kinship arrangements, increasing the risk of breakdown and, in some cases, entry or re-entry into the care system. A complex and inconsistent patchwork of entitlements mean that children with comparable needs can receive vastly different levels of support, depending on their route into kinship care and whether they have previously been looked after children in care. Many families face financial insecurity, social isolation and declining physical and mental health. These pressures can limit their capacity to navigate and challenge systems that are often perceived as adversarial. In turn, this undermines their ability to advocate for children and secure timely, appropriate support.

At the same time, this report highlights important progress. Recent developments - including the introduction of a legal definition of kinship care and a duty on local authorities to provide a Kinship Local Offer through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, the appointment of a National Kinship Care Ambassador, and the piloting of a Kinship Financial Allowance - represent significant steps towards greater recognition and support for kinship families. However, as the evidence in this report demonstrates, these advances must be matched by meaningful reform across the SEND system, education provision and wider children's services if kinship families are to benefit fully.

The report also recommends changes that would make a meaningful difference. An inclusive mainstream education system that is grounded in an understanding of the different routes into kinship care, which has a strong focus on the early identification of needs and access to support can significantly improve outcomes for kinship children. Improved awareness of kinship care across schools and services alongside the adoption of trauma-informed approaches, is essential to ensuring that children's experiences are recognised and responded to appropriately. Better alignment between kinship and SEND local offers, combined with access to trusted, specialist advice can enable carers to navigate complex systems effectively. Virtual School Heads also have a critical role in championing educational outcomes for kinship children. In addition, peer support and mentoring opportunities for young people can help them to feel seen, understood and heard - reducing isolation, strengthening identity and building confidence. Together, these measures point towards a more cohesive and inclusive system that recognises and supports the needs of kinship families.

Conclusion

To get there, further action is essential. Longstanding inequities in access to support must be addressed, including the patchwork of entitlements associated with different kinship arrangements. An understanding of kinship care and the interaction between special educational needs and trauma is critical to delivering inclusive education system. SEND reform must ensure timely assessments and guarantee access to therapeutic provision, including through reforms to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, so that children's needs are identified and met before a challenges escalate into crises. Reform must also recognise the specific challenges faced by older young people at key transition points, particularly the cliff edges in support at 16 and 18, as well as the systemic inequalities experienced by Black and minoritised kinship families, including misdiagnosis and the impact of bias in assessment and support processes. Stronger, more joined-up data across government is essential to underpin effective policy and accountability.

The message from children and carers is clear: reform of the SEND system and wider education landscape must actively reflect and respond the realities of kinship care. As the Government takes forward its programme of SEND and education reform, kinship families must not remain an afterthought. Recognition, early intervention, consistent entitlements, culturally competent support, and access to trusted, timely advice and therapeutic services are not optional extras. They are essential to enabling children to remain safely in their families and to ensuring that all children with special educational needs and disabilities can thrive.

This report sets out practical recommendations to support and embed this change. That includes improving awareness and data, embedding trauma-informed approaches, aligning local offers, addressing inequitable support entitlements, ensuring timely assessments and access to therapeutic provision, and investing in advice and peer support. Together, these reforms would improve outcomes for children in kinship care with special educational needs and disabilities, and contribute to a fairer, more inclusive system for all children.

Kinship carers step in out of love and commitment when children need them most. It is now time for the system to step up in return.

All Party Parliamentary Group on Kinship Care