

HOUSING NEED & KINSHIP CARE

HOUSING OFFICER BRIEFING 2024

INTRODUCTION

In 2020 The Independent Care Review in Scotland published its final recommendations in the form of a document called *The Promise*. This policy is the driving force behind work to improve the system of care for children who are 'looked after' by Local Authorities in Scotland. Legislation and policy is clear that Local Authorities and the Scottish Housing Regulator should "uphold the rights and safeguard the wellbeing of a looked after child or care leaver" (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014) and take action to implement the Promise Scotland (2020). This short briefing aims to support Housing Officers in this important work, drawing on a recent study completed by the University of Edinburgh and the Association for Fostering, Kinship and Adoption Scotland.

WHAT IS KINSHIP CARE?

Kinship care is when a child lives with a relative or close family friend, usually because their parents are not able to care for them.ⁱⁱ 'Formal kinship care' is where children have been placed in the care of relatives or friends by social workers, sometimes following the decision of the children's hearing system. 'Informal kinship care' tends to be where families have made the care arrangements themselves. Children in formal kinship care are considered 'looked after' in the same way as those in other forms of care like fostering and residential care. Formal kinship care has increased over the last 15 years to become the largest type of 'out of home' care for children in Scotland.ⁱⁱⁱ This means that key organisations have duties towards them in their role as Corporate Parent under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.^{vi} The Scottish Housing Regulator is listed as a Corporate Parent under this Act.^v Most kinship carers in the UK are grandparents, so both the carers and the children may have additional support needs. However, young people may also be kinship carers, such as those looking after younger siblings. They are likely to have different needs. Kinship carers can take on the care of children at short notice and research shows they are usually provided with less formal support than foster carers or adoptive parents.

KEY POINTS

- Children and young people who are looked after are most likely to be placed in kinship care, provided by relatives or close family friends. Research has shown this form of care often works better for children who cannot live with their birth parents.
- Many kinship carers find caring more difficult due to a lack of suitable housing to accommodate their larger family, and due to affordability issues.
- Housing providers should understand the essential role kinship carers provide and consider what actions they can take to help meet their housing needs.
- Links to further information on these topics can be found at the end of the briefing.ⁱ

BACKGROUND

We undertook a project during 2023-24 to explore housing need for kinship families in Scotland. There was anecdotal evidence to suggest that housing issues are a major challenge for kinship families, but little formal evidence. Current policies for looked after children (notably, the *Promise*), housing (notably, *Housing 2040*), alongside the current housing emergency, provide context for this work. The *Promise* (2020)^{vi} arose from a three-year independent review of the Scottish care system. Its aim is to ensure commitments to improve the care system are kept by a range of services, including housing providers, by 2030. To find out more we hosted two roundtable events and an action orientated dissemination workshop to discuss current issues and potential solutions. We also conducted two surveys about housing issues in kinship care, one with kinship carers and one with kinship practitioners.

GOOD PRACTICE FOR HOUSING OFFICERS

If all professionals working with kinship carers do their part, we can reduce the stress and strain on kinship carers and the children and young people they look after. This important work can help prevent kinship care placements breaking down, ensuring children and young people can continue to be looked after closer to their extended families and communities.

Our study found that just under half of the kinship families in our survey were in housing need, primarily due to overcrowding, but affordability was also a notable challenge. The project heard housing officers have a difficult job given housing providers have fixed housing stock, which does not change quickly. It is appreciated that larger properties are in particularly short supply. There were, however, some examples of good practice which can be acted upon right away:

- **Kinship carers and social workers would benefit from clear, straightforward information about housing waiting times, processes, decision-making and possible trade-offs.** For example, understanding where larger properties are, and the average turnover time. This allows kinship carers to consider their needs against their desires and may reduce refusals of offers.
- **Social work and housing working can work together** to better assess kinship families' housing needs, to understand the challenges and processes that each service faces, and to provide clear, accurate information to kinship carers at an early point in the process.
- Finding opportunities to **share your good practice locally and with other housing providers could help** improve the situation for kinship families more broadly. Social workers told us they would also appreciate greater opportunity to discuss housing providers' perspectives on challenging cases where kinship families had been unable to secure housing moves.
- **Some housing providers currently prioritise kinship families in their allocations policy,** while others use the 'reasonable preference' priority within the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014 to secure appropriate tenancies for kinship families who come to their attention. It would be helpful for more LAs to consider prioritising kinship families.
- **Working with neighbouring Housing Associations and/or Local Authorities** may provide additional options for kinship families by widening the pool of potential tenancies. Some housing providers are using mutual exchange websites to advertise potential social housing swaps or keeping waiting lists with neighbouring organisations (see for example <https://www.homeswaps.co.uk/>). We learnt that some kinship carers have benefited from mutually beneficial housing exchanges made between themselves.
- **We heard that applying discretion within the allocation policy could facilitate the simplest and best short term housing outcomes for kinship families.** For example, a family with three children may only be considered for four-bedroom, rather than three-bedroom, properties. This can prolong their search and potentially take them out of their local area. A move to more suitable housing, even if not ideal, can improve the overall wellbeing of kinship families.
- Families also told us they want to see all available options used. Given the housing emergency, this will sometimes involve working with private sector landlords to find suitable accommodation. This option will not be appropriate in every case; however, housing officers are often aware of information and trends that kinship carers and social workers may not be. **Providing early advice on alternative options and how to pursue them may help kinship families secure the best solution to their housing needs.**

ⁱ For the full report please see https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/research-projects/Kinship_care_Report_digital_2024.pdf. Separate briefings for kinship carers https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/research-projects/Kinship_care_Carer_brief_digital_2024.pdf and social workers https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/research-projects/Kinship_care_Practitioner_brief_digital_2024.pdf.

ⁱⁱ See <https://compass.kinship.org.uk/advice-and-information/what-is-kinship-care/> for more information on kinship care

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-social-work-statistics-2022-23-looked-after-children/pages/looked-after-children/>

^{iv} <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/faq/what-is-a-corporate-parent/>

^v <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2014/8/schedule/4/enacted>

^{vi} <https://thepromise.scot/>