

HOUSING NEED & KINSHIP CARE

KINSHIP PRACTITIONER BRIEFING 2024

INTRODUCTION

In 2020 The Independent Care Review in Scotland published its recommendations in *The Promise*. Legislation and government guidance 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*. *The Promise* (2020, p.20) states: 'Scotland must hold the hands of the hands that hold the child' and 'Whatever the mode of arrangement, Scotland must ensure that children living in kinship care get the support they need to thrive. Kinship must be actively explored as a positive place for children to be cared for.' This briefing aims to support kinship practitioners in this important work, drawing on a recent study completed by the University of Edinburgh and the Association for Fostering, Kinship and Adoption Scotland.

KINSHIP CARE IN SCOTLAND AND HOUSING

There are estimated to be around 12,000 children and young people living in formal and informal kinship care in Scotland.ⁱⁱ 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 Key organisations, including the Scottish Housing Regulator, have duties towards children in formal kinship care as Corporate Parent under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.^{iv} 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. Kinship carers are given less formal support than foster carers or adoptive parents^v and kinship families can struggle with multiple disadvantage.^{vi} Despite such challenges, research also suggests kinship care provides benefits for kinship children including greater stability and connections to family and community networks.^{vii}

KEY POINTS

- **There is a housing crisis in Scotland. There is a particular shortage of multiple bedroom social housing properties. As a result, overcrowding and affordability issues are a pressing issue for many kinship families.**
- **Kinship practitioners should discuss kinship carers' housing needs and future housing needs with them at all stages of involvement, ideally prior to children's placement.**
- **Kinship carers want to see all possible options for addressing their housing needs used. They benefit from clear, straightforward information about realistic possibilities for accessing larger properties and other financial support.**
- **Social workers can help ease the worst impacts of immediate overcrowding by providing financial support to help families adapt the existing home environment to make it as comfortable and usable as possible within space constraints.**
- **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 strategies for looked after children (notably, the *Promise*), housing (notably, *Housing 2040*), alongside the current housing emergency, provide context for this work. 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 KINSHIP PRACTITIONERS

Just under half of the kinship families who responded to the survey were in housing need, primarily due to overcrowding. Carers provided examples of them having to share rooms with non-infant children, of carers sleeping on makeshift bedding in their living rooms and of growing children sharing cramped rooms. Affordability was the second most notable housing difficulty for kinship carers and our findings suggest that practitioners should pro-actively inquire about rent or mortgage affordability issues with carers.

It is appreciated that housing shortages and affordability will not be solved overnight. There were, however, some examples of good practice which can be acted upon right away, these include:

- **Social workers discussing carers' housing needs at all stages of involvement**, including before placement. Where kinship children are placed with kinship carers in emergency situations these discussions should occur at the earliest possible time.
- **Kinship families require clear, straightforward information from social housing providers about average turnover times for properties of the size sought and the allocations process.** Social workers may not have this information but can facilitate carers to access it from housing providers.
- Housing officers have difficult allocation decisions to make given fixed social housing stock. **Kinship practitioners might raise the priority housing providers give to kinship families:** we heard 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.
- **Kinship carers told us they want to see all available housing options considered.** Local Authorities can make grants for housing adaptations or extensions to address overcrowding. While such grants are an attractive option for many kinship carers, we heard that funding for them is severely constrained and relatively few carers receive them. Where they do, the process is a long, bureaucratic one. **Practitioners should provide carers with clear information about the processes and timescales involved.** Housing in neighbouring Housing Associations and/or Local Authorities and use of private sector landlords may provide additional options which some kinship families might consider. Some housing providers are using mutual exchange websites (e.g. <https://www.homeswaps.co.uk/>) to advertise potential social housing swaps, or keeping waiting lists with neighbouring organisations. We also learnt that some kinship carers have benefited from mutually beneficial housing exchanges between themselves.
- **Where kinship families are overcrowded but unable to move, social work services should discuss providing financial support to help families adapt the existing home environment to make it as comfortable and usable as possible within the space constraints.** This may, for example, include providing funding for housing equipment such as new beds, sofa beds, or additional storage options where a daily living space is also being used as a bedroom.
- **Kinship carers find peer support immensely valuable.** Kinship professionals can also help by signposting kinship carers to available groups, and enabling attendance where possible. Mutual assistance and problem solving were seen as a key way for kinship carers to address housing and other challenges they faced. For information about groups see: <https://kinship.scot/>

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://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/spa/documents/kinship/scotland-kinstast-briefing-paper.pdf>

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.stir.ac.uk/media/stirling/services/research/documents/policy-briefings/Children-looked-after-away-from-home-aged-five-and-under-in-Scotland-experiences,-pathways-and-outcomes.pdf>

^{vi} <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746418000179>

^{vii} <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838015611673>

^{viii} <https://www.gov.scot/publications/housing-2040-2/>