

Ensuring Equity and Security
for
Kinship Families

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c/o Treoir

28 North Great Georges Street

Dublin 1

info@kinshipcare.ie

www.kinshipcare.ie

Phone: 087 148 7124

Introduction

This submission is made by Kinship Care Ireland (KCI), to make specific asks of Budget 2024, which would address the needs of kinship families, which are not sufficiently recognised, or equitably supported, under current child and family support provisions.

Kinship Care

Kinship Care involves the full-time parenting of children by grandparents, older siblings, aunts, uncles and other relatives or close friends of the family. It occurs for many reasons, including death of a parent, parental substance misuse, abandonment, illness, or imprisonment¹.

Informal care is described by the *UN guidelines on Alternative Care* (2010) as ‘any private arrangement provided in a family environment, whereby the child is looked after on an ongoing or indefinite basis, by relatives, or friends or by others in their individual capacity, at the initiative of the child, his/her parents or other person, without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body.’

While there is increasing acknowledgement of the benefits conferred on children and young people, by being cared for within their extended family and kin networks, there may be less awareness of issues such as economic adversity, which is experienced by many kinship carers, who step into this important role, on a voluntary basis.

Kinship Care Ireland (KCI)

KCI was established to work with and on behalf of, kinship carers, children, and young people in kinship families. The priority of Kinship Care Ireland is the support and recognition of informal kinship carers. KCI is hosted by Treoir, the organisation for Unmarried Parents, and funded through TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency. The Steering Group of the organisation is made up of kinship carers and organisations who have a remit for and experience of, working with families.

¹ Kinship care is defined as: Family-based care within the child’s extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, by the UN General Assembly Guidelines for the alternative care of children (2010)

The key objectives of Kinship Care Ireland are:

- i. To raise awareness, understanding and recognition of the diversity and value of kinship care and the challenges faced by children, young people, and families.
- ii. To ensure that kinship families are supported, can access relevant and culturally appropriate information, advice and specialist supports and services, when needed.

Evidence of the Needs of Kinship Families

*Effective decision-making and planning can only be undertaken,
with reliable and adequate data.²*

Unfortunately, the lack of accessible data, makes it very difficult to accurately represent the nature and scale of kinship families, in Ireland. However, there is limited statistical information, which offers some indication of the prevalence of this relatively small, but significant cohort of families.

In October 2019, there were 2,249 children living with kinship carers, in receipt of the Guardians payment. This demonstrates an upward trend between 2017 and 2019, of 13.5 per cent. International experience, which suggests that 1% of children and young people are generally in the care of relatives, means that potentially, over 10,000 children are being cared for by kinship families, in Ireland.

Kinship Families are generally viewed by the State as arising from ‘private arrangements’, between parents and kinship carers, even though recent research suggest that these families are very often formed, arising from crises or emergencies, in which the Child and Family Agency may have had direct involvement.³

In many cases, the option of becoming a relative foster carer is not offered to kinship carers, even where they request it, and as such, their subsequent access to financial and other supports remains significantly less, than if they were designated as (formal) relative foster carers (please see Table One, which illustrates the disparity between the Foster Care Allowance and Guardians payment).

² Centre for Effective Services (2015)

³ Burns K., O’Mahony C., and Brennan R. (2021)

Economic Hardship among Kinship Families

'Informal Kinship Carers and the children they look after, are still an overlooked group who experience high levels of poverty and disadvantage, with little or no statutory support'.⁴

Kinship carers often report financial difficulties as being of paramount concern⁵, with some struggling to meet children's basic needs. There is a consistent relationship between kinship care and poverty, with informal carers more likely to be living on very low incomes, compared with those providing care under formal arrangements.⁶

Data from the United States indicates that 31.6% of grandparent carers live below the poverty line).⁷ *Kinship Care Ireland* has had direct engagement with carers who report having had to give up employment, at the same time as experiencing a significant increase in their household outgoings, as a direct result of their caring responsibilities, towards the children and young people they have taken in.

Table 1: Foster Care Allowance vs Guardian's Payment

Age of Child	Foster Care Allowance	Guardian's Payment
<12 years	€325 per child	€203 per child
>12 years	€352 per child	€203 per child

Needs of Children and Young People

Kinship care arises when children cannot be cared for by their parents, due to circumstances, including death, illness, imprisonment, abandonment, or substance misuse, all which can affect children deeply. Children in informal kinship care are as likely to have complex psycho-social and educational needs, as children in formal care⁸ and carers need to be able to support them to cope with the effects of living through trauma and crisis.

⁴Nandy and Selwyn, 2013

⁵ Backhouse and Graham, 2012; Farmer et al, 2011

⁶ Strozier and Krisman, 2007

⁷ Minkler and Fuller-Thompson, 2005.

⁸ Burns, K., O'Mahony C., Brennan R. (2021)

Priorities and Asks for Budget 2024

1. Data Collection

There is an urgent need to collect accurate figures to establish the prevalence and profile of kinship families in Ireland, to inform appropriate policy and practice responses. The data on children in care (CIC) in Ireland currently includes children and young people in general foster care, children and young people in formal foster placements with relatives, and children and young people in residential care, but does not include children and young people in informal kinship care (being cared for by relatives or family friends), in spite of the fact that ‘informal kinship care’ falls under the international definition of ‘alternative care’⁹.

Ask: That a specific question is included in the Census, to elicit information about the care status of children in the household and their relationships

Ask: That the Child and Family Agency is required to collect and share data on numbers and profiles of placement of children and young people with relatives, in informal arrangements

2. Equitable Allowances

In 2019, the total spend on foster care allowances and placements by TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency, was €139,493,525. This includes expenditure on ‘private foster care provision of €22,198,436, through which has been estimated to cost well more than €50,000 per placement, per child.

Kinship Care Ireland believes that providing a specific budget allocation to the Child and Family Agency to enable the adequate and equitable support of relatives who provide children and young people with kinship care, would result in significant savings in the short term, by redirecting children from formal fostering, into the care of their family and kin network and avoid additional costs to the State in the longer term, by providing greater continuity of care and stability of placement.

⁹ United Nations Guidelines on Alternative Care, 2010

Ask: That a specific budgetary allocation is made to TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency, to ensure that financial support is available to relatives who take on the care of a child or young person, who would otherwise be in State care, in particular while they await processing of payments from the Department of Social Protection.

3. Social Protection Provisions

As per table 1, the payment available to kinship carers is the Guardian's Payment (formally Orphans' Payment).

Ask: The Guardian's Payments needs to be increased in line with Foster Care Allowance payment with an additional increase for children over 12 years old.

Ask: At a minimum, the Guardian's Payment should equate to the Jobseeker Allowance for kinship carers, currently at €220 with the qualified child allowance of €42 for those under 12 and €50 for those over 12. Kinship Care Ireland is recommending that the qualified child allowance be increased for all on jobseekers allowance to half the qualified adult rate (50%) for those under 12 (€73) and 56% increase for those over 12 (€83) at the current rates.

Age of child Weekly rate:

- Under 12 years €293 per child
- 12 years and over €303 per child

The process for qualification for Guardian's Payment can be difficult and time-consuming, with requests for proof of eligibility often difficult to obtain and an absence of Social Worker support in what is deemed informal kinship care arrangements. Priority needs to be given to these families in processing their payments to avoid financial hardship, to recognise the contribution they make and how they save the state a considerable amount of money by providing this care to the child.

Ask: The Guardian's Payment needs to be prioritised and fast-tracked for kinship carers to recognise the vital role they play and trigger additional supports.

Foster care allowances are not taken into account in means testing for social welfare payments to foster carers. In addition, a standardised *Aftercare Allowance* and a range of other supports are available to young people leaving care, whether they are in education or not. No such support currently exists for young people who are in kinship care.

Ask: That Kinship Carers can avail of the same income disregards and means testing exemptions as formal Foster Carers

Ask: That Aftercare Supports are made available to young people in kinship care.

4. Housing

In applications to local authorities, for housing, household members under the age of 18 are considered in relation to assessing needs and calculating income thresholds. In some areas, kinship carers have found that children and young people in their informal care, are disregarded in the assessment, based on their Birth Certificate (which shows details of their birth parents) and/or without formal Guardianship having been awarded to the kinship carer.

Ask: That assessment of families for the purposes of housing needs, should include the children and young people in their informal kinship care, where that care is continuous and full-time (as evidenced by the award of the Guardians Payment, by the Department of Social Protection).

Ask: Access to grant or loan support for home extension or necessary home renovation where informal kinship care is continuous and fulltime and house size is no longer suitable for new family size.

5. Health

Unlike children in state care, including those placed with Foster Families, children in kinship care are not automatically deemed eligible for a Medical Card. This is an anomaly, which serves to prevent a specific cohort of children and young people, who often have ongoing or complex health conditions, from access to appropriate healthcare and creates an additional burden for households in which kinship families are often already struggling financially.

Receiving a Medical Card enables families to access further supports, such as exemptions from paying school transport charges and State exam fees in publicly-funded second-level schools and financial help with buying school books in certain schools.

Ask: That a medical card be automatically given to a child or young person, who is being cared for within a kinship family

6. Education

Children in kinship families are as a distinct group, who require recognition within the education system at every level. Collecting data to determine the numbers of children in the education system who are being cared for in kinship families, will enable strategic supports to be developed and available through schools, to address their specific needs.

Ask: That data should be maintained on the arrangements which are in place for children's and young people's care, to ensure that appropriate responses and services are available and accessible, within schools and educational settings.

Ask: That all existing educational supports for children in the care system, should be extended to include children and young people in kinship care.

Conclusion

To successfully implement specific measures, as set out in this submission, KCI believes that an interdepartmental strategy is required, which would provide a comprehensive response to address the needs and ensure the appropriate entitlements, of kinship families.

The welcome approach of the Department of Social Protection, in applying the means test requirement for the *Guardians Payment*, to the child or young person, and not requiring that the carer should be a legally appointed Guardian, offers a valuable precedent, which can and should be followed, across the board.