



Parenting across Scotland Briefing

Kinship carers and employment: barriers and opportunities

Kinship carers take on the care of the children of a family member or close friend when the parent(s) for whatever reason is no longer able to do so. In taking on this responsibility, they are endeavouring to ensure a better future for the child by keeping them with their family, and in doing so, create considerable savings for the state. And yet, one of the unintended consequences for many kinship carers is that they are plunged into poverty.

One of the reasons for this is that many kinship carers are unable to continue with their employment. The aim of this report is to explore through dialogue with kinship carers the reasons for this, and to see if there are measures which employers and others can take to ensure that kinship carers find it easier to remain in employment. As well as avoiding financial hardship for kinship carers, this could have the added benefit of employee retention for employers.

Methodology

The report is based on focus groups with kinship carers in Dundee, Midlothian and Inverclyde, followed up by a questionnaire with kinship carers throughout Scotland.

Key findings

The report details the reasons many kinship carers find it difficult to stay in employment. The main reasons are:

- finding suitable childcare provision
- lack of flexible working
- the need to take time off for appointments
- stress and the needs of the child

Childcare

Finding suitable childcare provision was mentioned by a number of respondents. Kinship carers have an entitlement to childcare for their child from the age of 2 (under the provisions of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014). This may indicate that kinship carers are unaware of this entitlement, or that they find it difficult to access because of location or timings. Given that many of the kinship carers have school age children, it may be that out of school care is the main issue.

Further research is needed to assess kinship carers' awareness of their childcare entitlements, and to ascertain their needs. Employers could help by providing information on childcare entitlements, and local provision.

“As I am raising my grandson alone, childcare has always been an issue. So any job I take has to fit in with the school day.”

“Due to limited hours childcare is available I can no longer work nights or weekends (I manage a residential children’s unit).”

Quotes from kinship carers

Flexible working

Kinship carers often have to take on caring responsibilities at very short notice, and have a lot of arrangements to sort out. Once they have responsibility for a child in a kinship care arrangement, like any parent, they will have appointments for the child, such as doctors' appointments and schools. However, given the more complex arrangements, a kinship carer is likely to have more frequent appointments. Being able to access a degree of flexibility in employment can make the difference for kinship carers of being able to remain in employment or needing to leave. There are recommendations relating to adjustment leave and flexible working below.

“Due to not being given the hours/shifts I used to do, I had to leave my job which was well paid to working in a local supermarket for a lot less money.”

“It has not impacted on my work but I would not apply for another position in case I do not get the flexibility I currently have.”

Quotes from kinship carers

Stress and the needs of the child

Many kinship carers reported that the stress involved and the complex needs of the child(ren) they were caring for mean that they felt unable to combine kinship caring with employment. Many kinship carers were caring for children who had been affected by trauma and needed extra support in their lives. While it might be that for some kinship carers, employment is not an option because of their kinship caring responsibilities, options such as adjustment leave, flexible working, additional support and greater awareness of their needs among employers might be sufficient to ease their stress and allow them to work.

“Both kids have severe developmental delay and other issues along with emotional problems...which means I have had to give up my career in nursing in order to care for them along with my own daughter.”

Quote from a kinship carer

Reactions from employers

Kinship carers reported both positive and negative responses from employers. Helpful responses included providing information about childcare; extra flexibility – changes of hours; unpaid leave to adjust to the change; helpful attitudes – asking the kinship carer what they required.

Negative reactions included lack of sympathy towards the situation; no offer of any concessions or change in work arrangements; lack of knowledge around kinship care and entitlements.

A few participants reported that although their employer had been sympathetic initially, their attitude had changed when the carer requested time off or increased flexibility.

Conclusions

Given that often employers have a low level of awareness about kinship carers, and kinship carers are reluctant to disclose their status because of the associated stigma, it has been difficult for employers to adopt strategies that will keep employees who are kinship carers in work. We hope that this report will start to address this.

Dealing with the barriers that kinship carers face in accessing employment will require a coordinated approach from a variety of agencies including employers, local and central government, advice agencies, and family support services. However, there is much that employers can do to ensure that they retain employees who have taken on caring responsibilities; recommendations for employers are detailed below.

The full report can be read at:

www.parentingacrossscotland.org/publications/reports-on-our-work.aspx

Recommendations

Employers should:

1. ensure that their HR departments and line managers are aware of the definition, characteristics and legal rights of kinship carers so they can adequately respond to their needs and retain employees
2. make sure that their existing policies, such as Carers Policy, Adoption Policy, include and make specific reference to kinship carers
3. include information about kinship carers in communication plans, so that kinship carers are more visible and feel able to identify themselves to employers. (Stigma is a significant issue for kinship carers, and there is often a reluctance to identify themselves as kinship carers to employers). This may include, for example, covering kinship care in their employee networks and incorporating kinship care issues into their manager training as well as their National Carers Week activities.
4. ensure that kinship carers are given information about their rights in relation to employment, and signposted to other agencies for additional support around key issues such as childcare, benefits etc

5. establish a right to a period of adjustment leave to enable kinship carers to make the necessary adjustments to the major change in caring responsibilities without having to give up work. Adjustment leave can be an appropriate response, as kinship care responsibilities can start very abruptly.
6. adopt a flexible by default approach to job design and recruitment, and adopt Working Families' Happy to Talk Flexible Working strapline. Flexibility is a key issue in retaining kinship carers in employment.
7. Employers should demonstrate their commitment to supporting employees who are also kinship carers by achieving recognised awards or standards (Carers Awards and standards, Family Friendly Working Scotland awards, etc).

Agencies supporting or working with kinship carers should:

(Social workers, health visitors, “named person”, schools, Job Centre, etc)

1. Staff should be aware of:
 - the definition of a kinship carer
 - the types of situation that can lead to a person becoming a kinship carer
 - the typical characteristics of kinship care - complex, stressful, long-term, often commences at short notice
 - the implications of kinship caring on maintaining employment.
2. Staff should be able to support kinship carers and signpost them to support:
 - in understanding their employment rights in relation to, for example, flexible working, time off for appointments, taking leave etc
 - about benefit entitlement, including the Kinship Carer Allowance, and
 - entitlement to childcare hours, and information about local childcare providers

Parenting across Scotland

Level 1

Rosebery House

9 Haymarket Terrace

Edinburgh EH12 5EZ

www.parentingacrossscotland.org

Twitter: @scotparents

Facebook: Parenting-across-Scotland

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www.familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk



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