

Written evidence submitted by Foundations, the national What Works Centre for Children & Families to The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee (CWSB28).

Summary of contributions

- **Clause 1 – Family Group Decision Making:** The Bill's measures mandating an offer of Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) by local authorities is underpinned by Foundations' ground-breaking evaluation of Family Group Conferences (FGCs), which is one model of FGDM. This found that the use of FGCs at the pre-proceeding stage meant children were less likely to go into care, spent less time in care, and that families were less likely to go to court for care proceedings. We estimate their use could see 2,000 fewer children entering care within a year and could save over £150 million over the course of two years.
- **Clause 5 – Local kinship offer:** The requirement on local authorities to publish information on their local offer for kinship families is welcome. Our research has found significant variation in the support carers received. We have developed the Kinship Care Practice Guide (akin to NICE Guidelines, but for children's services), which supports local authorities to use the best available evidence to improve practice in children's social care and recommends evidence-based support that we know is effective in supporting kinship families.
- **Clauses 7 and 8 – Support for care-leavers:** The Bill's emphasis on support for care-leavers is vital. Our research has found that relationships, especially with Personal Advisors, play a central role in supporting young people when they transition out of care. The Staying Close programme, featured in the Bill, has also previously shown promise of impact.

1. Family Group Conferences (FGCs)

- 1.1. The provisions outlined in Part 1 Clause 1 of the Bill will require local authorities to offer Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) at pre-proceeding stage. FGDM is an umbrella term used to describe family-led meetings that allow a family network to come together and make a plan in response to concerns about a child's safety or wellbeing. Mandating this intervention is welcome – and our evidence suggests the most effective type of FGDM meetings are Family Group Conferences.
- 1.2. **Family Group Conferences (FGCs) are a specific model of FGDM.** The FGC is organised by a co-ordinator, who invites immediate and extended family and friends, together with those working professionally and directly with the family, to the meeting at a neutral location. The aim of the meeting is to create and agree a plan to keep the children safe.
- 1.3. In 2023, Foundations completed a randomised control trial (RCT) of FGCs – the first in the UK and the largest ever in the world – which demonstrated their effectiveness for keeping

children safely within their family network.¹ Children whose families were referred for an FGC at pre-proceeding stage were:

- **Less likely to go into care** 12 months after the pre-proceedings letter was issued: Just over a third (36%) of children whose families were referred were taken into care, compared to nearly half (45%) of children who were not.
- **Less likely to go to court** for decisions about their care: Only three in five (59%) of children referred to FGCs had care proceedings issued, compared to 72% of children who were not referred.
- **Spent less time in care:** Six months after the pre-proceedings letter, children whose families had been referred for FGCs spent an average of 87 days in care, compared to 115 days for those who were not.

- 1.4. We estimated that **2,293 fewer children would go into care within a 12-month period**, if FGCs are rolled out nationally. This in turn could **save over £150 million within two years**, from a reduction in both court proceedings and the number of children entering the care system.
- 1.5. Additional research found **variation across the stages at which FGDM services were offered**.² Pre-proceedings were by far the most common stage at which a FGDM service was offered locally (82%). It was much less common for LAs to offer a FGDM service earlier than pre-proceedings (22%), during proceedings (32%) or post-proceedings (27%). Some of these percentages were driven by LAs that offer FGDM at multiple (sometimes all) stages.
- 1.6. **FGCs require high-quality support for implementation** so Foundations will be working with local authorities on how best to take these interventions forward in a time of financial and workforce constraints, and with government on the wider expansion of early family help.
- 1.7. **Standards of quality are also essential for their effective delivery.** Family Rights Group (FRG) introduced the FGC model in 1991 and developed a quality standards framework which articulates what an effective family group conference should look like to achieve the best outcomes.³ These seven standards distinguish FGCs from other family focused strengths-based activities such as those which are managed by social workers and other family support workers.
 - However, it's also important to note that **FGCs are not a silver bullet**. They are unlikely on their own to be a sufficient intervention to keep children safe and should be provided alongside ongoing high-quality support which meets the needs of the child and family.
 - While we welcome the mandating of an FGDM offer within the Bill, **it is important to underline that the evidence supports the effectiveness of FGCs** as a specific model of family meeting at pre-proceeding stage.

¹ Blackshaw, E. et al. (2023), Randomised control trial of Family Group Conference at Pre-Proceedings Stage, Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families

² Smyth, E. et al. (2023), A survey of local authorities in England: Understanding the variation in support for kinship carers, Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families

³ Family Rights Group, FGC Accreditation. Available at: <https://frg.org.uk/family-group-conferences/fgc-accreditation/>

2. A local kinship care offer

- 2.1. **Kinship carers provide a vital lifeline to children within their network of family and friends who are at risk of entering the care system.** The Government's commitment in the Command Paper to greater training, information and advice in this area is welcome, as are provisions within Part 1 Clause 5 of the Bill, which require an LA to publish details of its local offer for kinship families.

Experiences of existing support

- 2.2. Our 2023 study found **significant variation in the support that kinship carers receive** – both across local authorities as well as across different kinship care arrangements – in areas such as training, preparation, financial support and legal support.⁴ There were also **concerns raised by kinship carers about accessibility of information**, and only 61% of LAs said they made this readily available on their websites.
- 2.3. Additionally, we examined how local authorities provide support for minoritised ethnic kinship families. **Less than half the LAs surveyed reported making targeted efforts to engage with kinship families in a culturally sensitive way.** Common approaches included using interpreters and translators, as well as having staff from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds who can speak different languages. A small number of LAs reported additional activities, such as signposting to external organisations and considering ethnicities when matching carers in a buddy scheme; however, these were in the minority.
- 2.4. Notably, **a significant number of local authorities did not make targeted efforts to facilitate engagement with kinship families in a culturally sensitive way**, with 26% reporting that they did not make efforts and 16% of respondents reporting they were not sure.
- 2.5. Evidence generated by Foundations to support the 2022 Independent Review of Children's Social Care suggested that minoritised ethnic groups were overrepresented in informal kinship care arrangements.⁵ It is for this reason that **local authorities should have regard to the needs of minoritised communities, and how best to engage with them**, when drawing up their local offer at part of their new duty under the Bill.

Evidence-informed implementation, delivery and practice

- 2.6. In 2024, Foundations carried out an evidence review in this area to establish what works, based on existing evidence.⁶ This informed our **Kinship Care Practice Guide**

⁴ Smyth, E. et al. (2023), Understanding the variation in support for kinship carers: A survey of local authorities in England, Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families

⁵ Schoenwald, E. et al. (2022), Understanding formal kinship care arrangements in England, Foundations – What Works for Children & Families

⁶ Ott, E. et al. (2024), Systematic review: What interventions improve outcomes for kinship carers and the children in their care, Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families

(commissioned by the DfE, and akin to NICE Guidelines but for children's services), which we recently published.⁷

- 2.7. This guide supports local authorities to **use the best available evidence to improve practice in children's social care** and recommends, based on evidence, the types of support that are most likely to be effective in supporting kinship carers, and the children they care for. It also provides key principles for service implementation and delivery, based on the needs, experiences and preferences of kinship carers in the UK.
- 2.8. To support local leaders to put these recommendations into action, **Foundations is working with 11 local authorities across England to develop implementation plans**, troubleshoot challenges, encourage effective use of resources, and help them to create an environment in which evidence-based practice can flourish. Details of the LAs we are supporting can be found in [Annex A](#).

3. Support for care leavers

- 3.1. Two-thirds of care leavers in England don't know where to get help and support when they leave care. **Building supportive relationships for care-experienced children is a key protective factor and improves outcomes for the most vulnerable** – while helping to prevent intergenerational cycles of care. The emphasis in Clauses 7 and 8 of the Bill on support for care-leavers is welcome.

Care leavers' experiences

- 3.2. Our 2023 study of care leavers' experiences of support while leaving care provided several useful findings in this space:⁸
 - **Contributors to low emotional wellbeing:** Participants described how unresolved childhood trauma and isolation caused by independent living and a disconnect from their peers can have a lasting negative impact on emotional wellbeing
 - **Managing mental health and pathways to support:** Participants recognised that managing mental health conditions affected their overall wellbeing, identifying therapy and financial support as key pathways to addressing these challenges
 - **Transitions:** Relationships, especially with Personal Advisors (PAs), play a central support role during the period of transitioning out of care. However, issues within these relationships, such as a lack of fit or inconsistency, can affect care leavers' experiences of PA support.
 - **Key facilitators and barriers:** PAs provide tailored and flexible support which positively affects emotional wellbeing. However, inflexible services, bureaucratic processes, long waiting lists and a wider lack of understanding of care leavers experiences within services can hinder support.

⁷ [Kinship Care Practice Guide](#) (2024), *Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families*

⁸ Rylance, S. and Sharry, L. (2023), [Care leavers' experience of emotional wellbeing support while leaving care](#), *Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families*

- **Equality, diversity and inclusion:** Participants felt misunderstood or stereotyped based on race or gender, affecting their experiences of care and support.
- **Aspirations and achievements:** Participants shared a collective aspiration for a better future. Many described their dedication to improving the care system and helping others through volunteering, employment and other opportunities. Despite challenges, they have achieved many professional and personal growth goals.

3.3. Our recommendations from this study included:⁹

- **Prioritising care leavers** on waiting lists for mental health services
- Improving the process for claiming **Personal Independence Payment (PIP)**
- **Flagging care experience** within healthcare and mental healthcare records, alongside training on what care experience might mean for individuals
- **Greater support with administrative tasks**, and **improved preparation for the transition out of care**, with assistance from PAs coming earlier.

Staying Close

- 3.4. In 2023, Foundations published a feasibility study of the Staying Close programme, which showed promise in supporting young people leaving care to find and maintain accommodation.¹⁰
- 3.5. Local variations in Staying Close implementation were found in accommodation, relationships, wellbeing, independent living skills, and education, employment or training (EET) support.
- 3.4. We found care leavers' awareness of the programme, their experience of the programme and the take-up of the programme within an LA all influenced the extent of engagement with programme activities, and therefore how well they delivered the desired outcomes. We also identified that stable and suitable accommodation, having trusted relationships with staff and improved wellbeing were both mechanisms and short-term outcomes for young people.
- 3.5. Barriers to implementation included limited housing availability, high staff turnover, unfilled specialist staff roles, poor engagement with care leavers in programme development and suboptimal matching of different young people in shared accommodation. Facilitators included suitable accommodation being available within the LA, staff training in trauma-informed care and co-production with care leavers.
- 3.6. Since publishing the feasibility study, we commissioned the Centre for Homelessness Impact (CHI) to conduct an evaluation of the impact the programme has on two main outcomes: accommodation changes, and education, employment and training (EET). The final report on this evaluation is currently scheduled for publication early this year.

⁹ Rylance, S. and Sharry, L. (2023), Care leavers' experience of emotional wellbeing support while leaving care, *Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families*

¹⁰ O'Higgins, A. (2023), Staying Close feasibility study, *Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families*

Annex A: Additional information

The local authorities involved in the evaluation of **Family Group Conferences** (FGCs) were:

Bath & North East Somerset	Birmingham	Bromley
Derbyshire	Knowsley	Lambeth
Lancashire	Leicestershire	Lewisham
Middlesbrough	North East Lincolnshire	Northamptonshire
Nottingham City	Plymouth	Redcar & Cleveland
Rotherham	Salford	Sheffield
Shropshire	Southampton	Sunderland

The local authorities we are supporting to utilise the **Kinship Care Practice Guide** are:

Achieving for Children (Kingston, Richmond, and Windsor and Maidenhead)	Cambridgeshire County Council	City of Doncaster Council
East Sussex County Council	Leeds City Council	Leicestershire County Council
Luton Borough Council	North Tyneside Council	Stockton Borough Council
Suffolk County Council	Tower Hamlets	

About Foundations

Foundations is the national **What Works Centre for Children and Families**. Formed by the merger of the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) and What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC), we provide the answers and practical solutions that empower decision makers to improve policy and practice on family support, so the right actions are taken at the right times, and every child has the foundations they need to reach their full potential.

Our work is focused across specific areas of priority where we have the best opportunity and potential to make an impact to improve the lives of children and families:

- Supporting parenting
- Domestic abuse
- Strengthening family networks
- Relationships for care-experienced children and young people

As a What Works Centre, our work is based on the principle that high-quality evidence should inform decision-making and has a vital role in improving the lives of vulnerable children.

Please contact **Tom Hunter**, our Senior Public Affairs Adviser, on tom.hunter@foundations.org.uk, if you have any questions.