

Special Guardianship Families in Wales: Summary Report

Nuffield Foundation Report

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Dr Lorna Stabler, Dr Nell Warner,
Prof. Katherine H. Shelton, Dr Amy L. Paine,
Dr Ellie Dorrans, Georgia Evans, Dr Verity Bennett,
Daisy Chaudhuri, Bobbie-Jo Haarhoff and Michelle Hall



Correspondence to Lorna Stabler
StablerL@Cardiff.ac.uk



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Bluesky: @nuffieldfoundation.org, LinkedIn: Nuffield Foundation, website: www.nuffieldfoundation.org

This short summary report brings together the findings from the **Special guardianship families: experiences and support needs** project [reference: FR-000024401].

For full details of both strands of the study, please see the accompanying full reports:

- Warner, N., Dorrans, E. M., Bennett, V., Rawlings, A., Onayade, M., Shelton, K. H, Paine, A. L., Evans, G., and Stabler, L. 2026, *Special Guardianship Families in Wales: Characteristics and Care Pathways*. Nuffield Report.
- Paine, A., Evans, G., Shelton, K. H., Dorrans, E. M., Warner, N. and Stabler, L. 2026, *Special Guardianship Families: Identifying Children's Strengths and Support Needs* Nuffield Report.

Reflections on the findings from Daisy Chaudhuri – Special Guardian consultant on the study

"The first time I asked for help I was told by one social worker, 'you took out the SGO, so you are on your own now!' That was definitely not the impression I was given when asked to take out the SGO. Support, including therapeutic support for families, should be put in place immediately to help mitigate some of the impact of trauma for the children and secondary trauma for those who care for them.

Schools are central to a child's well-being and they need to understand SGOs and the ongoing impact of childhood trauma, how that presents itself and how they can support children in their care. Many of my children's schools did not understand their behaviours and were unwilling to listen to me. Guardians should not be dismissed and only professionals listened to as it is they who care for the child and know their behaviours inside out."

Introduction

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) are an increasingly important route to permanence for children who cannot safely live with their birth parents. They are most often used where children can be cared for by relatives or family friends, although former foster carers may also become special guardians. SGOs provide carers with enhanced parental responsibility while preserving the child's legal relationship with their birth parents, offering a balance of stability and continuity.

Despite their growing use, many special guardians report difficulties accessing advice and support. Provision varies considerably across local authorities, and families often receive less support than carers raising children under care orders. Recent policy developments in England, including local kinship care offers and enhanced financial support, do not currently apply in Wales. There has been limited Wales-specific evidence about who receives SGOs, the pathways leading to them, and the longer-term experiences of children and carers. This project was developed to address these evidence gaps.

About this project

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, this project brought together researchers from CASCADE at Cardiff University, the Neurodevelopment Assessment Unit (NDAU), and the SAIL Databank at Swansea University.

The study combined two strands of research. The first used linked administrative data to examine who receives SGOs in Wales, children's care pathways, household circumstances, and differences between local authorities and legal routes to special guardianship (Warner et al., 2026). The second involved detailed assessments of 42 children aged 4–7 living under SGOs or in long-term kinship care, exploring their cognitive, emotional and social development, alongside carers' and teachers' perspectives on wellbeing and support needs (Paine et al., 2026).

Together, these studies provide the most comprehensive evidence to date on special guardianship in Wales, with wider relevance for understanding long-term kinship care across the UK.

Public involvement

Public involvement was central to the project. The research was shaped by conversations with special guardians and kinship carers who highlighted the need for stronger evidence about children's needs and family experiences.

Special guardians, kinship carers and practitioners contributed throughout the study, including through an advisory group that helped interpret findings and identify priorities for future research. Project consultant Daisy Chaudhuri, drawing on her experience as a special guardian, foster carer and teacher, also supported dissemination activities, including resources for schools and a webinar for education professionals.

The project demonstrates the value of working in partnership with people with lived experience to produce evidence that is relevant to families, practitioners and policymakers.



Figure 1: Children's sessions in the Neurodevelopment Assessment Unit were recorded using a suite of cameras in the testing room, with notes on child performance recorded by a research assistant.

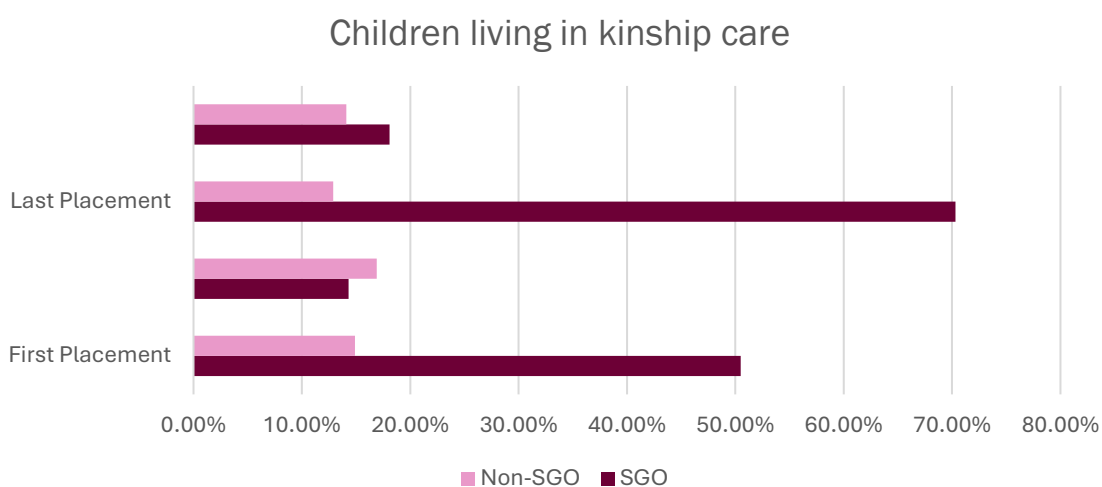
Overall, the project was designed to produce evidence that is useful to families, practitioners and policymakers. It highlights the importance of involving those with lived experience not only as participants, but as partners in identifying priorities for future support and improvement.

Key findings

Kinship care pathways are central

Children who later received an SGO were much more likely than other children in care to have been living with kinship foster carers. Administrative data found:

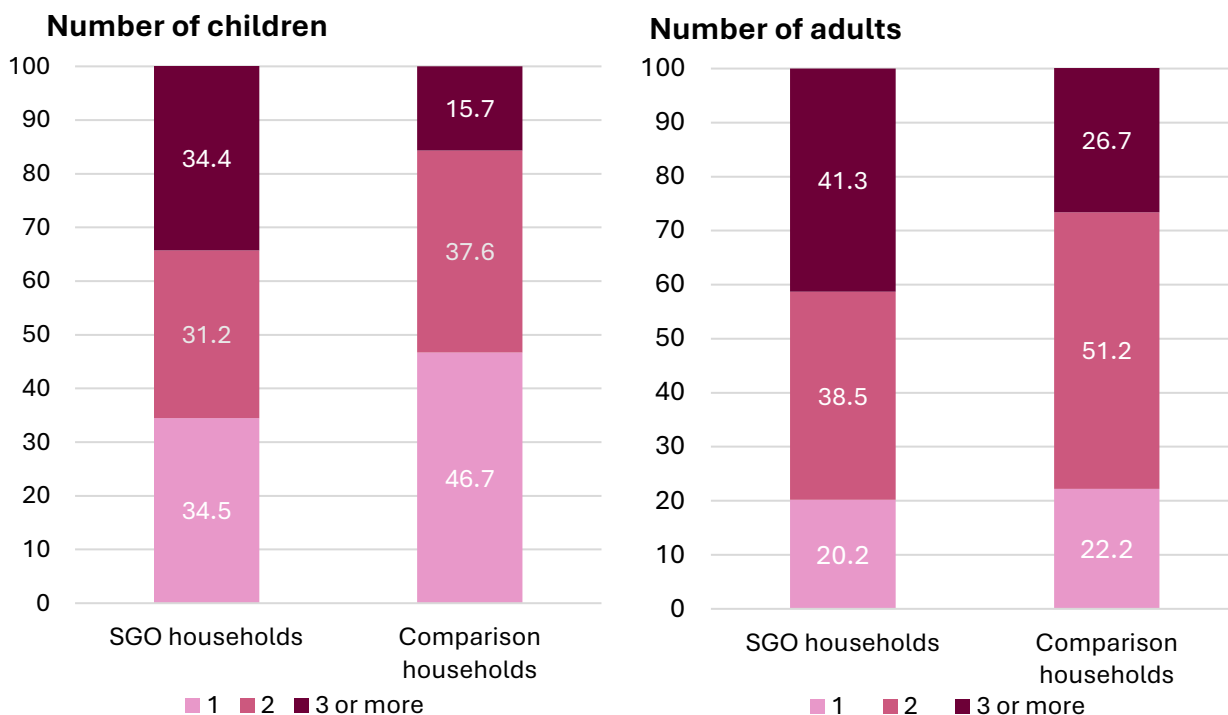
- 50.5% were in kinship care when first entering care
- 70.3% were in kinship foster care immediately before the SGO was granted.



This suggests that early identification and support for family and friends' carers could help children achieve stability sooner if they cannot return to their parents.

Many families face economic hardship and have large households

The administrative data showed that SGO households are often larger and more complex than comparison households, were more likely to include three or more children, three or more adults, and adults across a wider age range. They were also more likely to live in areas of deprivation.



The child assessment study echoed this pattern:

- 50% of families lived in the two most deprived neighbourhood quintiles.
- 73.8% reported household incomes below the national average.

Many carers may therefore be managing parenting responsibilities alongside financial strain, caring for other relatives, housing pressures, or their own health needs.

Some private law SGOs have similar profiles to public law SGOs

Linkage analysis found that some children who received SGOs through private law proceedings, where a Cafcass Guardian had been appointed, had previously been in care. These children were as likely as those in public law cases to appear in the care and support data. Their households were also broadly similar in size and levels of deprivation.

Children have often experienced significant early adversity

Although many children moved to live with carers at a young age, most experienced significant challenges before living with their kinship carer or special guardian, and the majority still had significant family time with their parents. In the assessment sample, carers reported that:

- **59.5% had experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences**
- **26.2% had experienced seven to nine.**

The data linkage study also found higher levels of parental substance misuse and parental learning disability in the histories of children who later received SGOs compared with other children in care.

Children's mental health needs are high

Children in the assessment study showed elevated emotional and behavioural difficulties.

- **Carers reported that 61.9% had high or very high total difficulties.**
- **Teachers reported 50.0% had high or very high difficulties.**

This compares with around 8% in the general population (using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire). Hyperactivity and conduct difficulties were particularly common. This implies that children under SGOs and living long term with kinship carers may need timely access to mental health and behavioural support, even when family life is stable.

Neurodevelopmental and learning needs may be common

Some children in our sample had complex neurodevelopmental profiles. There were strengths, but many had challenges in Cognitive Systems and Systems for Social Processing domains of development, including:

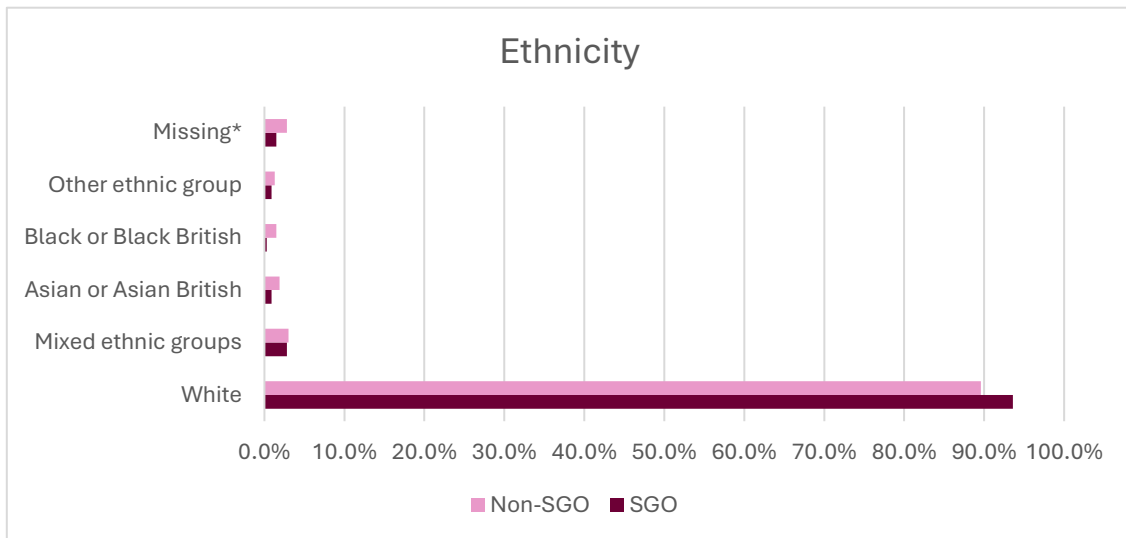
- **88.1% had below age expectations for sustained attention**
- **34.2% had below average inhibition**
- **27.0% had below average cognitive flexibility**
- **26.2% had below average verbal working memory.**

Children also had difficulties recognising emotions and understanding other people's thoughts and feelings. While children's needs may not always meet a threshold for a diagnosis of a mental health or neurodevelopmental condition, children's areas of difficulty can still have a significant impact on behaviour, relationships, and learning.

Inequalities exist in access to SGOs

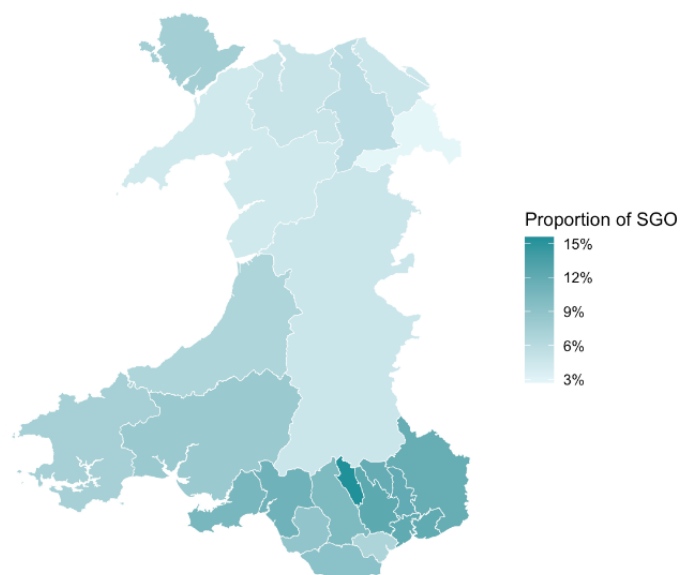
Not all children appear equally likely to receive an SGO when in care. Rates were lower for:

- children recorded as Black or Black British
- children recorded as Asian or Asian British
- disabled children.



There are also geographical variations. The likelihood of children leaving care on an SGO varied considerably across Wales, ranging from 15.6% in Merthyr Tydfil to 2.7% in Wrexham. The study cannot explain why these inequalities occur, but they require urgent attention.

Proportion of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) by Local Authority
Children Looked After in Wales (LACW)



Data: LACW database | Boundaries: ONS LAD 2025

What this means for policy and practice

Changes are needed in eligibility for support

Too often, support systems treat the granting of an SGO as the conclusion of state involvement. This project shows that it should instead be seen as a transition point. Families may need help months or years later as children encounter, school transitions; adolescence; identity questions; mental health difficulties; changing relationships with other family members such as parents and siblings and changing family circumstances. This is particularly important as children who received an SGO had potentially experienced higher levels of exposure to risk and/or harm before entering care, indicating they may be vulnerable to long term effects of childhood adversity.

Support pathways should allow families to re-enter services easily when needs arise.

Strengthen support in schools

Schools are central to children's day-to-day wellbeing. Many needs identified in this project relate directly to classroom support. Priorities include:

- staff understanding of kinship and special guardianship
- trauma-informed and responsive approaches
- strategies for attention and executive functioning
- support for social processing
- strong home-school communication, even once an SGO has been granted
- early referral pathways.

Support carers as well as children

Special guardians and kinship carers often step in during family crisis, sometimes at short notice. They may be grandparents or relatives managing ageing, poor health, employment disruption, grief or family conflict alongside parenting. Families caring for children under an SGO were found to be more likely to live in poverty than other families with children but may not be eligible for the same kind of support as foster carers. Carer wellbeing is an essential element of child wellbeing, and the right support for families could lead to better outcomes for children in the long run.

Priorities for future research

The project also highlights unanswered questions. Future work should focus on:

- **Long-term outcomes**, including how children under SGOs fare over time in education, mental health, identity, relationships, and developmental transitions.
- **What support works best**, including which financial, therapeutic, and practical interventions most improve outcomes and stability.
- **Understanding inequalities**, including why some groups are less likely to receive SGOs, why there is regional variation in the granting of SGOs, and how inequality can be reduced.
- **Family experiences**, including how prepared carers feel, what support matters most, and how children experience special guardianship and kinship care.

This project provides compelling new evidence that Special Guardianship Orders are both a vital strength within the child welfare system in Wales, and an area requiring greater attention.

SGOs can offer children permanence within family networks, preserving important relationships and identities. But many children and carers continue to face substantial emotional, developmental, financial, and practical challenges after the legal order is made.

The central policy message is clear:

A permanence order is not the end of need. To achieve the best outcomes for children, special guardianship should be underpinned by sustained, equitable and evidence-informed support for families across Wales.