Department for Education

Kinship Zones: programme specification

August 2026

Contents

Introduction

This document is designed to give you a clear, shared starting point, setting out what the programme is for and what you may expect as a participating Kinship Zone local authority. This document is not statutory guidance, and policy may be subject to change throughout the duration of the programme.

Kinship Zones bring together two strands of support to help children stay safely within their families and strengthen the networks around them: a kinship allowance and Family Network Support Packages. This is an opportunity for local authorities to shape this approach to fit the needs of their area.

The document contains key processes, roles, expectations, and support available.

Your delivery manager

A Department for Education (DfE) delivery team will work closely with you on the programme and be the operational point of contact between the local authority, DfE and Alma Economics, the independent evaluator appointed to this pilot programme. The delivery team will work closely with your Regional Improvement Support Lead to keep them updated on the progress of the programme.

At this point, you should have assigned a ‘Kinship Zone lead’ from your children’s services team to function as the lead point of contact for DfE and the independent evaluator for the duration of the programme.

The National Kinship Care Ambassador will support you with your Family Network Support Packages (FNSPs) delivery plan, including how you intend to use your offset funding, for example to strengthen the delivery of FNSPs.

The Ambassador will provide practical support and act as a critical friend, offering insight, sharing learning across areas, and providing constructive challenge where appropriate to support the development of robust, deliverable plans.

Overview

Kinship Zones will run from 1 April 2026. The programme is made up of two elements: the Kinship allowance and FNSPs.

Kinship allowance

The kinship allowance will test whether providing regular financial support to eligible kinship carers, paid at the same rate as the national minimum fostering allowance improves the stability and sustainability of kinship arrangements. The allowance is available to Special Guardianship kinship carers and kinship carers with a 'lives with' Child Arrangements Order (CAO), where the child would 'otherwise be in care.'

This reflects the government's commitment to improving support for kinship carers, who play a vital role in enabling children to remain safely within their wider family network. Kinship carers often step in during times of crisis to provide children with a stable home, where they have historically not received consistent financial support, unlike foster carers. By offering an allowance equivalent to what foster carers receive, the pilot aims to provide a more consistent and fairer basis of support for families delivering kinship care.

This policy builds on wider reforms to children's social care set out in Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive[1], where the government committed to strengthening family networks and providing earlier, joined up support. It also emphasises the importance of enabling local authorities, central government, and the National Kinship Care Ambassador to work together to improve outcomes for children who cannot live with their birth parents. The Kinship Zones programme is designed to test how coordinated support, including a financial allowance, can help families stay together and avoid entry into care wherever safe and appropriate.

This allowance will be trialled over a three-and-a-half-year period in seven local authority areas and is expected to support up to 5,000 children during the initial phase and will provide kinship carers with income tax free payments, ensuring carers receive the full financial benefit.

Kinship Zones will be independently evaluated by Alma Economics, overseen by Foundations (the What Works Centre). The evaluation will assess the impact of the allowance on outcomes for children and families, as well as how it supports placement stability, carer wellbeing, and wider system pressures. Findings will inform future decisions about whether a national kinship allowance should be introduced.

The introduction of Kinship Zones represents a major new investment in family-based care, designed to help more children remain within their extended families, reduce

[1] Keeping children safe, helping families thrive - GOV.UK

reliance on the formal care system, and ensure kinship carers receive clearer, more consistent support across participating areas.

Family Network Support Packages

Kinship Zones are encouraged to refine understanding of FNSP delivery, a new expectation of the families first partnership programme, following promising early findings from the family network pilot where a more limited version of this intervention was delivered. FNSPs enable family network members to provide support where financial barriers might otherwise prevent them from stepping in and supporting children to remain in the care of their birth parents.

We are introducing both FNSPs and the kinship allowance because children and families need the right type of support at the right stage, and these interventions work most effectively when delivered as part of a single, coherent pathway. This pathway begins with family help (including targeted early help and child in need) and extends into long term kinship permanence where this becomes necessary for a child’s safety and wellbeing.

In line with the families first partnership programme guide, practitioners can utilise FNSPs to harness support within a family network by delivering flexible funding where financial or practical barriers are stopping or limiting that support offer therefore strengthening a family-led solution to support a child. FNSPs are targeted funding for support that is tailored to the needs of the individual family. FNSPs should be bespoke to individual families’ needs and co-designed with them, through family group decision making (FGDM), to ensure they are targeting specific barriers the family network faces in providing support.

We have received positive feedback from local authorities currently testing FNSPs, citing their flexibility as crucial, allowing delivery throughout the system in both preventive and crisis situations, which have created significant positive impacts for children, whilst also saving the local authority money.

Where this support is not enough to maintain care within the birth family, and a formal kinship arrangement is required, a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) or a ‘lives with’ Child Arrangements Order may be established. At that point, the kinship allowance, aligned with the national minimum fostering allowance, provides consistent financial support to sustain long term, stable kinship care and prevent the need for children to enter local authority care.

This approach ensures continuity for families by preventing gaps between early help and permanent kinship arrangements.

Context

A key principle of the Children Act 1989 is that children are best looked after within their families, unless it is not safe for them. The policy statement Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive[2], published in November 2024, sets out our vision for a reformed children's social care system, informed by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2022)[3], which emphasises the importance of prioritising children's existing legal rights to a family life wherever possible.

Keeping children safe, helping families thrive describes how well-supported family networks, including kinship carers, are a key part of DfE's children's social care reform strategy to prevent, de-escalate and help more families stay together.

Through the Families First Partnership Programme[4], we are committed to prioritising a family-first culture that empowers family networks and puts them at the heart of decision making, whilst ensuring children are kept safe and can thrive. Where it is determined it is best for a child to be removed from their parents, kinship carers can provide stability and familiarity by allowing them to be raised in a familiar environment with people who are connected to them.

Kinship care

Kinship households are also more likely to be deprived and twelve times more likely to be economically inactive due to retirement than parental households[5]. Kinship's 2024 annual survey[6] reported that kinship carers are more than twice as likely to be using food banks than other UK adults, and more than four times as likely to have had a bill they weren't able to pay in the last month. Such financial pressures can put at risk the stability of SGOs and CAOs.

The independent review of children's social care recommended that to support kinship carers with the costs of supporting a child and remove barriers to kinship care, 'all local authorities should make a financial allowance, paid at the same rate as their fostering allowance, available for Special Guardians and kinship carers with a CAO looking after children who would otherwise be in care'.
Many local authorities provide financial allowances in some form to Special Guardianship kinship carers, through the Special Guardianship Regulations 2005[7]. Practice is varied across the country. For example, some local authorities provide a time limited allowance,

[2] Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive

[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care

[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/families-first-partnership-programme

[5] Data on kinship care in England and Wales from the 2021 Census was used to internally determine data for just England – Office for National Statistics (2021) Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021.

[6] https://kinship.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-and-influencing/reports-and-publications/make-or-break-report/

[7] Special Guardianship Regulations 2005

an allowance paid at a lower rate than the fostering National Minimum Fostering Allowance[8] and some local authorities do not pay any allowance at all. Local authorities also have the discretion to pay a residence order allowance to carers with a CAO where this is the most appropriate way to safeguard and promote the child's welfare, though this practice is also mixed across the country.

In 2024, 24% of all children living in foster care in England lived in kinship foster care, which can sometimes be the most reliable route for kinship carers to access ongoing support from their local authority[9] In some instances, becoming a kinship foster carer can be the right choice, however, children in foster care are 'looked after' and these arrangements come with additional oversight for families, which can sometimes create unnecessary barriers to normal family life if implemented under the wrong circumstances.

Foster care is also a significantly more costly form of care. The annual cost of a foster care placement is in the region of £40,000[10] to £70,000[11] per year (c. £50,000 per annum, per placement) compared to the average annual cost of the kinship allowance that the programme is testing (c. £11,500 per annum, per placement). If no action is taken, the number of looked after children and associated total cost to local authorities will continue to increase.

We need to strengthen our understanding of what drives the decision for a kinship carer to become a kinship foster carer instead of an alternative type of kinship arrangement and address any financial barriers that determine these. This will enable us to give better guidance to local authorities and support decision-making that best suits families' needs.

Family Network Support Packages

The primary objective of FNSPs is to create sustainable solutions to keep children living within their family networks, where appropriate and in their best interests.

Although many local authorities already deliver flexible funding to families through section 17 of the Children Act 1989, FNSPs specifically aim to unlock family network support to both de-escalate social care involvement and prevent a child entering care, where appropriate. As well as delivering better outcomes for children and families, this is a cost saving measure for local authorities.
This aim has been informed through evidence from the Family Network Pilot and the Families First for Children Pathfinder, where local authorities are delivering FNSPs throughout the system to unlock the potential of family networks.

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[8] https://www.gov.uk/support-for-foster-parents/help-with-the-cost-of-fostering

[9] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2023-to-2024

[10] Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT) - All LA Level: Barking and Dagenham, Fostering - S251/Outturn weekly unit costs

[11] Children's social care innovation programme: insights and evaluation - GOV.UK

FNSPs are currently being tested in various DfE programmes, though eligibility and delivery mechanisms differ. The FNP is currently testing the impact of FNSPs at the pre-proceedings stage, which must be agreed through a family group conference. The scope of the pilot is limited for evaluation purposes, however feedback from the pilot local authorities has been recognised and the national policy specification has been refined accordingly.

While a full impact evaluation of the FNP is planned for late 2026, initial qualitative evidence suggests the pilot helped strengthen family networks, reduced escalation, and in some cases, avoided care proceedings. Delivery teams reported improved family relationships and increased stability for children.

Kinship Zones: Part 1 – Delivering Allowances to Kinship Carers

Kinship allowance: policy aims

Kinship Zones will test whether the introduction of a regular financial allowance to eligible kinship carers, paid at the same rate as the national minimum fostering allowance, will incentivise kinship foster carers to seek Special Guardianship or 'lives with' CAO (where the child would otherwise have been in care) instead, where appropriate.

The pilot will gather data from the Kinship Zone local authorities to understand how this policy helps to address the challenges facing kinship carers through the following means:

- Improving the financial support available for eligible kinship carers to help with the costs associated with raising a child,
- Changing the structure of financial incentives in care arrangements to enable kinship carers to consider formal arrangements rather than foster care
- Minimising the risk of placement breakdown where the leading cause is financial difficulties, by improving financial stability for kinship carers with legal care orders,
- Improving outcomes for children in kinship SGO and 'lives with' CAO arrangements, including placement fitness-for-purpose, stability and permanency of arrangement, education outcomes, and health and wellbeing outcomes,
- Understanding whether an improved financial offer for certain formal kinship carers with, or applying to obtain, a legal care order, enables kinship families to consider placements outside of the care system; and,
- Alleviating care placement pressures on local authorities.

Kinship allowance: payments

The kinship allowance will fund participating Kinship Zones to pay both new and existing eligible kinship carers (as defined in Section 6) a regular financial allowance to help with the costs associated with raising a child that is:

- weekly;
- income tax exempt; and,
- non-means tested.

Payments to eligible kinship carers

Kinship Zones will make payments to eligible kinship carers under Section 1 of the Local Government Act:

- Kinship carers will be eligible to receive a regular allowance for each eligible child that they care for. This allowance will be paid at the same frequency as the fostering national minimum allowance to avoid disruption to the local authority's standard processes, though this will ideally be weekly.
- Payments can be backdated to the date the Kinship Zone received an application, even if further information was needed from the applicant to confirm eligibility. However, payments to eligible participants cannot be backdated before 1 April 2026, even if the kinship carer applied before this date.
- Payments can be made to eligible kinship carers until the child's 18th birthday.
- Whilst other legislation may accommodate for allowances that support through further education and disability, eligibility for kinship allowance payments under this pilot should cease on the child's 18th birthday.
- The pilot will fund payments to carers for each eligible child, determined by the age of the child and where they live, in line with the thresholds for the national minimum fostering allowance.
- The pilot funds only the core kinship allowance at the national minimum fostering allowance rate. Kinship Zones may provide additional financial support at their own discretion, in line with their existing policies. Such payments fall outside the scope of the pilot and are not reimbursed through the pilot grant.
- The kinship allowance payments funded through the pilot should be at the same rate as the national minimum fostering allowance, even if these thresholds change.
- As the pilot will commence on 1 April 2026, and the new fiscal year begins on 6 April, payments made to kinship carers between 1 April and 5 April will be set at the allowance rate in line with the 2025–26 national minimum fostering allowance.

From 6 April 2026 onwards, payments will increase to reflect the revised allowance rates in line with the 2026–27 national minimum fostering allowance.

- See a breakdown of the payments below according to the current thresholds:

Weekly allowances for the tax year from 6 April 2026 to 5 April 2027

	0-2	3-4	5-10	11-15	16-17
London	£205	£208	£233	£266	£309
South East	£195	£203	£223	£255	£298
Rest of England	£176	£182	£201	£227	£267

Interaction with other benefits and entitlements

Receipt of the kinship allowance in Kinship Zone local authorities will not affect any of the following:

- Universal credit including the child element
- Child benefit
- Guardian's allowance
- Tax-free childcare entitlements
- Pension credit (except where the allowance is saved as capital, further information is detailed below)
- Housing benefit for customers over state pension age (except where the allowance is saved as capital, further information is detailed below)

If an eligible kinship carer is in receipt of pension credit or housing credit, and their capital is greater than £10,000 there is a risk that their pension or housing credit payments could be reduced if they do not spend the allowance.

Receipt of other special guardianship services

Eligible kinship carers should continue to receive any additional special guardianship services to which they are entitled.

Receipt of other foster care services

In cases where kinship foster carers attain an SGO or ‘lives with’ CAO, where the child would otherwise be in care, to become eligible for the pilot kinship allowance, they may only receive the allowance once they have become eligible. Please refer to ‘kinship allowance eligibility’ below.

If a kinship foster carer is in receipt of foster care support, they should continue to receive this until they obtain the relevant care order as set out in ‘kinship allowance eligibility’ below.

Kinship allowance eligibility

Eligibility criteria

A financial allowance should only be offered to kinship carers in respect of any child up to the age of eighteen living in a kinship arrangement, who is the subject of either an SGO or a CAO that specifies:

- the primary residence of the child and who they will live with (a 'lives with CAO'); **and**,
- who would have otherwise been in care.

This is determined when one of the conditions under paragraph 4(b) below is fulfilled.

Eligibility for SGOs

The points at which:

1. Kinship carers who obtain an SGO in public law children’s proceedings are eligible for a weekly financial allowance.

2. Kinship carers who obtain an SGO in private law proceedings are eligible for a weekly financial allowance.

3. Kinship carers who have applied for an SGO through private law proceedings and have passed the first hearing dispute resolution appointment (FHDRA) are eligible for a weekly financial allowance under the pilot.

SGO eligibility does not depend on the ‘otherwise in care’ conditions, which apply only to CAO cases.

Eligibility for ‘lives with’ CAOs

4. Kinship carers who obtain a ‘lives with’ CAO in private law, or who have applied and have attended a FHDRA for children’s proceedings are eligible for a weekly financial allowance if one of the following conditions applies:
    a. The interim or final ‘lives with CAO’ does not name a parent of the child subject to the Order (if the CAO names a parent that the child lives with, the kinship carer is not eligible); and

'Otherwise in care' conditions (applies only to CAOs)

b. One or more of the following criteria apply in respect of the child's circumstances:

- immediately prior to the child being placed in a kinship arrangement, they were looked after by a local authority either via an Interim Care Order or an arrangement under section 20 of the Children Act 1989
- immediately prior to the kinship arrangement, the child was or is still under a child protection plan
- the 'lives with CAO' was obtained in private law children's proceedings during which the family court noted safeguarding concerns arising from the contents of a welfare report
- an FGDM meeting was convened, and a decision was taken for the child named under the 'lives with' CAO to live full-time with a named kinship carer, which the child now does
- both parents of the child subject to the 'lives with' CAO are deceased, but prior to passing at least one of them was caring for and living with the child named under the 'lives with' CAO
- the child subject to the 'lives with' CAO was abandoned by either or both of their parents and at least one of them was previously caring for and living with the child, subject to the 'lives with' CAO immediately before abandoning the child
- either one or both parents of the child subject to the 'lives with' CAO are imprisoned, but immediately prior to that the parent/s were previously caring for and living with the child
- either one or both parents have been detained in hospital pursuant to the Mental Health Act 1983, but they were previously caring for and living with the child immediately prior to being detained.

Additional notes on eligibility:

- Eligibility is based entirely on meeting the set criteria, regardless of any financial support received in the past or present unless there is a risk of double-funding a kinship and fostering allowance. The timing of when the order was made has no impact on eligibility.
- Local authorities also have the discretion to pay an equivalent allowance to carers with a residence order, where this is the most appropriate way to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. Although residence orders are uncommon, the parallels with 'lives with' CAOs means those carers should also be eligible.

- Courts are not expected to advise on entitlement for the kinship allowance. Kinship Zone local authorities remain responsible for outreach and eligibility.
- Birth parents and informal kinship carers are not eligible for the kinship allowance, though they may be eligible for FNSP support.
- Adoptive carers are not eligible as adoption ends kinship status.
- An example eligibility flowchart demonstrating how these criteria may be applied can be found in Annex A. Please note this is an exemplar and may not apply to all circumstances.
- Carers must be added to the Kinship Zone's system to be eligible for the allowance. This requirement cannot be opted out of, and the pilot requires that this is recorded for data collection purposes to support the evaluation.
- For the purposes of the pilot, Kinship Zone local authorities are responsible for determining whether applicants meet the eligibility criteria set out in this specification and for authorising allowance payments accordingly. Kinship Zones should exercise their judgement in applying the criteria to individual circumstances, provided decisions are consistent with the aims and requirements of the pilot, and with your own local processes.

Out of area arrangements

Sometimes a child under an SGO or a 'lives with' CAO (where the child would otherwise be in care) lives in or moves from one local authority area to another. When this happens, there are different rules for financial support and other types of support.

Under Special Guardianship Regulations and guidance:

- ongoing financial support (for example, regular payments like an SGO allowance) remains the responsibility of the 'home' local authority (the authority where the SGO was granted), where financial support was assessed and agreed before or at the time the SGO was made
- this responsibility continues in line with the home authority's local policy, including any applicable eligibility criteria, age limits or review of arrangements, for as long as the family continues to qualify within that local authority's financial policy
- other support services (such as practical or social care support) may transfer to the local authority where the family lives after three years from the date of the SGO, if this is different to where the SGO was granted, the 'host' local authority – this applies only where responsibility for support has previously been established

For these 'lives with' CAO cases (where the child would otherwise be in care), local authorities should apply the same principles in practice, recognising that financial support and responsibility may be governed by local policy rather than statutory provisions. Please refer to page 14 of the programme specification for all eligibility criteria.

Clarification on cases with no prior local authority assessment and/or agreement of support

In line with Special Guardianship Regulations, which provide for financial support to be considered where it was assessed and agreed before the SGO was made, where an SGO or 'lives with' CAO was made on a private basis, and:

- the child was <u>not</u> previously looked after by a local authority
- no assessment or need for support (including financial support) was requested or undertaken by the home authority, and
- no financial support was agreed prior to or at the time of the order,

the home authority would not normally be considered to retain ongoing financial responsibility.

In these circumstances, the local authority where the child and carer are currently resident should be responsible for assessing any request for support, including financial support, in line with the Special Guardianship Regulations and local policies.

The three-year rule does not apply in these cases, as financial responsibility has not previously been established by another authority.

Where a local authority has previously assessed a kinship arrangement, Kinship Zone local authorities should consider whether ongoing financial responsibility has been established, rather than whether an allowance is currently being paid. The existence or end of an allowance previously does not, by itself, determine responsibility for the purposes of the pilot.

For the Kinship Zones programme, the approach below also applies.

Section A: when a child or Special Guardian moves <u>out of</u> your Kinship Zone

Where a kinship carer is granted an SGO in your area (and subsequently moved out of your area with the child, or who never resided in your area), they are eligible to receive a kinship allowance as part of Kinship Zones.

The kinship carer must meet the other eligibility criteria, and your local authority must have financial responsibility for the child.

Financial responsibility applies where it has been established through prior local authority or social care assessment and/or agreement of support before or at the time of the order.

Where an order was made on a private basis with little or no prior local authority assessment or agreement of support, the Kinship Zone would not normally be considered to hold ongoing financial responsibility, in line with statutory guidance. The allowance is to support kinship carers responsible for children who would otherwise have been in care which does not apply to some private applications.

For those eligible, the kinship allowance should continue to be paid for the duration of the programme.

The three-year rule does not apply to ongoing financial support. It applies only to non-financial support services, which may transfer after three years.

You should ensure:

- no duplication of kinship allowance payments across authorities
- no detriment to the child or carer
- where a court order or direction specifies financial responsibility (for example, until age 18), this overrides any other arrangements

Section B: when a child or Special Guardian moves in to your Kinship Zone

Where a kinship child or Special Guardian moves into your area, you should distinguish between:

- regular financial support (for example, an SGO allowance)
- other support services (for example, what is available in the local offer, such as Family Network Support Packages, or similar)

Where a kinship child or Special Guardian moves into your area:

- where an ongoing allowance is in place, responsibility for that remains with the originating authority and does not transfer
- your local authority will take on responsibility for other non-financial support services, such as their local offer once the family is resident if it has been more than 3 years since the SGO was granted
- a change in residence alone does not transfer financial responsibility for SGO support
- the home local authority where the SGO was granted typically retains financial responsibility where there has been prior local authority assessment and/or agreement of support
- where financial responsibility has been formally transferred between authorities (for example, by agreement or by legal order), the receiving authority should consider the carer for the pilot allowance and ensure continuity of support
- court orders and directions continue to take precedence over all other arrangements
- transfers of financial responsibility between local authorities should not be made solely for the purpose of joining the pilot

Overseas arrangements

Where a child and Special Guardian live outside of the UK, the same eligibility principles apply as standard in/out of area arrangements. Where a local authority retains financial responsibility of a kinship carer (having been previously assessed and support agreed), it may continue to provide financial support, subject to its local policy and any legal considerations.

Payments to families overseas may be made at different frequencies to those who reside within the Kinship Zone. This frequency is to be set by each Kinship Zone local authority.

These examples are illustrative and should be read alongside the guidance in the programme specification.

Example 1: Ongoing allowance retained after a move

A Special Guardian obtained an SGO in a non-Kinship Zone authority in 2022 and later moved to a Kinship Zone. The home authority, where the SGO was granted, has been paying a longstanding allowance where eligible, in line with its local policies, including any review arrangements and age limits.

Where financial support has previously been assessed and/or agreed, financial responsibility typically stays with the home authority, regardless of where the family lives.

Where there has been no prior local authority, assessment, and/or agreement of support, responsibility for assessing any future support needs (including financial support) will usually sit with the local authority where the family lives at the point a request is made.

Example 2: Avoiding duplicate payments

A child moves into a Kinship Zone with their Special Guardian. The home non-Kinship Zone where the SGO was granted, has been paying an allowance so will continue to do so as long as the kinship arrangement remains eligible locally.

Only one authority should fund the allowance. Where the home authority retains financial responsibility (including where directed by a court), it should continue to pay the kinship carer. This kinship carer is not eligible for the pilot.

The Kinship Zone where the kinship carer now lives should not make payments and is only responsible for wider kinship support after three years from the date of the SGO being granted.

Kinship carers should not receive more than one kinship allowance, and only one authority must remain financially responsible. Local authorities should not end or alter existing financial support arrangements solely to provide access to the pilot.

Example 3: No ongoing financial responsibility

A Special Guardian lives outside the home authority area where the SGO was granted. This area where the SGO was granted is now a Kinship Zone. They previously received an allowance, but this ended following reassessment. No ongoing financial support is currently in place.

As the home authority retains financial responsibility, in these circumstances, the kinship carer would be eligible to reapply for the kinship allowance from the Kinship Zone.

Where financial responsibility has been established, it remains with the home authority even if payments have ceased following reassessment. The kinship carer is eligible to receive an allowance under the pilot, as the pilot allowance is not means tested, and the SGO was granted within the Kinship Zone.

Example 4: Out-of-area carer with ongoing payments from a Kinship Zone

A Special Guardian has always lived outside the home authority, which is now a Kinship Zone. The Special Guardian has been receiving a means-tested allowance from that authority.

As the home authority retains financial responsibility, the carer is eligible for the pilot allowance. Means testing for a kinship allowance does not apply within Kinship Zones.

Eligibility depends on whether the home authority is a Kinship Zone and retains formal financial responsibility, not simply where the carer lives.

Example 5: No prior support or assessment and/or agreement of support (private SGO cases)

A Special Guardian obtained an SGO through a private application. The child was not previously looked after, and no support was ever requested, assessed, or provided by the local authority. The family later moves to another local authority area and requests support.

As no financial responsibility has been established, the local authority where the family lives should assess the need for support, including financial support, in line with the Regulations and local policy. This applies regardless of whether the originating authority is a Kinship Zone or not.

Example 6: Participation in the pilot and subsequent move

A Special Guardian is accepted onto the pilot by a Kinship Zone authority and begins receiving the pilot allowance. They later move to another local authority area.

The originating Kinship Zone authority should continue to pay the pilot allowance for the duration of the programme, provided there is no duplication of funding.

Key principles

- Ongoing financial allowances remain with the originating authority unless explicitly transferred via court direction or local authority agreement.
- The three-year rule applies to non-financial support only.
- No kinship carer should experience a gap or duplication in financial support due to moving between areas or participating in the pilot.
- For the purposes of the pilot, Kinship Zone local authorities are responsible for determining whether applicants meet the eligibility criteria set out in this specification and for authorising allowance payments accordingly. Kinship Zones should exercise their judgement in applying the criteria to individual circumstances, provided decisions are consistent with the aims and requirements of the pilot, and with your own local processes.

Local government reorganisation

Kinship Zones affected by local government reorganisation should note that, for the duration of the Kinship Zones programme, the original boundaries of each local authority defined by the postal codes in place at the commencement of the programme will remain fixed for all programme-related purposes.

This means that eligibility will apply only to:

- Kinship carers residing within the local authority's original boundaries at the start of the programme; and
- Kinship carers with out-of-area arrangements that were established prior to any boundary changes.

Any areas or postal codes added to a local authority because of reorganisation after the programme begins will not be included in the scope of the programme.

Kinship allowance funding and grant payments

Grant funding

To facilitate the delivery of the Kinship Zones programme, each Kinship Zone will be awarded the following grants:

- Communication and local outreach grant made under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 and supported by a Memorandum of Understanding (one time award)
- Delivery grant made under Section 31 of the Local Government Act 2003 and supported by a Memorandum of Understanding (annual award)
- Kinship allowance grant made under Section 14 of the Education Act 2002 (annual award)

Each award contributes to the successful delivery of the Kinship Zones pilot.

Communication and promotion grant

A one-time grant will be awarded to each Kinship Zone prior to the start of delivery to reach eligible kinship carers with the new offer and advertise the allowance as part of their local kinship offer. Each Kinship Zone will be best placed to consider how to use these funds to target eligible kinship carers and maximise engagement.

Delivery of grant award

Throughout the life of the pilot (subject to review) each participating Kinship Zone will be funded on a year-on-year basis, to support the costs associated with their delivery of the kinship allowances.

It is anticipated that these funds will be used to cover additional salary costs for staff brought in to deliver and ensure the success of the programme. However, as Kinship Zones have different structures, capacities, and needs, each zone is best placed to determine how best to use this funding to support effective delivery.

Each delivery award will be for one fiscal year (the initial award being from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2027). Delivery awards will be reviewed and agreed in advance of 31 March of each subsequent year of delivery, up to the end of the pilot.

Kinship allowance grant payments

Each Kinship Zone will be awarded a Section 14 grant to fund the kinship allowance payments made to eligible kinship carers in the pilot. These awards are solely to reimburse the Kinship Zones for the distribution of allowance payments to eligible kinship carers. Each grant will be for one fiscal year (the initial award being from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2027). Subsequent awards over the life of the programme will be subject to annual review and engagement.

Grant payments will be made in arrears every four weeks, on receipt of appropriate evidence of eligible spend via reports as outlined in the grant agreement. The grant amounts have been determined based on the modelling from the expressions of interest submitted to participate in the programme. Should any overspend occur from higher than anticipated numbers of kinship children, Kinship Zones will be expected to meet the cost from part of the offset funding from engaging in the pilot.

Grant offer letters will cover standard terms and conditions of the grant, and together with Memoranda of Understanding will set out clear expectations of Kinship Zones participating in the pilot. These will include:

- Expectation that Kinship Zones are to ensure all kinship carers are aware of the pilot nature of the programme, the potential for their data to be shared with DfE and the independent evaluator, and the expectation that the data gathered will support the evaluation.
- Milestones that Kinship Zones will be expected to meet to demonstrate the progress of the pilot.
- Key performance indicators to demonstrate impact.
- Reporting and monitoring requirements including evidentiary conditions.
- Requirement to regularly meet with and provide progress updates on the programme to DfE.
- A commitment to fully support the pilot’s independent evaluators, including facilitating liaison with kinship carers in receipt of the allowance and with project staff.

Assurances

DfE must obtain proportionate assurance to independently evidence that the grant terms and conditions have been adhered to, under standard grant conditions as can be found in the grant offer letters.

Evaluation

Evaluation partner

The evaluation of the pilot will be conducted by an independent evaluator, Alma Economics. Alma Economics been procured by Foundations for the main fieldwork and research stage of the pilot evaluation. This may include agreeing ethics protocols and data-sharing. Alma Economics' work will continue through the life of the pilot which is currently expected to be live until September 2029. Foundations are managing the impact evaluation of the pilot on behalf of the DfE.

Roles and responsibilities

The pilot will be evaluated across three key areas:

- Process: how the pilot is delivered and experienced by stakeholders.
- Implementation: how effectively the pilot is embedded within local authority systems.
- Value for money: the cost-effectiveness of the pilot in achieving its intended outcomes.

The evaluation will use a quasi-experimental design, supported by scoping research, interviews with policy and analytical colleagues, and a theory of change that outlines the pilot's inputs, aims, and expected outcomes.

Collaboration with Kinship Zones

Kinship Zone local authorities will play a vital role in supporting the evaluation. As outlined in the grant offer letters, participating Kinship Zones will be required to provide real-time quantitative and qualitative feedback to the independent evaluator.
This may include sharing data, facilitating interviews, and participating in feedback activities.

Kinship Zones are expected to engage actively with the evaluation process and ensure timely and accurate data sharing to support the integrity and impact of the findings. Kinship carers should be made aware when joining the pilot that they may be invited to take part in surveys or interviews as part of the wider evaluation of the pilot. Kinship carers should be reassured that participation in this type of evaluation activity is voluntary, but that anonymised data will be shared with the evaluator as part of the pilot process.

Reporting and use of findings

Quasi-experimental design allows researchers to study interventions in real-world settings, to enhance external validity. These designs are also cost-effective and can be used for longitudinal studies. In this pilot they will be used to assess short- and medium-term outcomes.

The pilot aims to test the feasibility of implementing, and impact of, an allowance for kinship carers with an SGO or a 'lives with' CAO for children who would 'otherwise be in care'. It also aims to build on the current knowledge base on kinship carers, improve DfE's understanding of available data on the broader Special Guardianship and CAO population and measure policy impact alongside potential unintended consequences.
A final report is currently scheduled to align with end of pilot in September 2029. This will include findings from the process, impact, and cost evaluation. These dates are subject to change.

The insights generated will inform decisions on whether to roll out the kinship allowance nationally and provide guidance on how Kinship Zones can better identify and support kinship carers.

Please note the evaluator will require their own data-sharing agreements with each Kinship Zone.

Delivery of the kinship allowance payments

The selected Kinship Zones will be expected to use the pilot funding to find and reach the relevant kinship carer cohorts and deliver funding directly to kinship carers in their respective areas.

What kinship carers need to access the pilot successfully

Kinship Zones should consider what resources the kinship carers in their areas need to access the allowance successfully. Kinship carers will need clear, accessible, and supportive information and systems. This includes straightforward guidance on eligibility and how to apply, ideally through a simple online portal or similar system. Information should be widely available, for example in schools, GP surgeries, courts, and local networks, and translated where necessary to ensure inclusivity.

Carers need to understand how participation might affect their benefits and what level of involvement the local authority will have in their lives. A clear local offer, a designated point of contact within the local authority, and support that goes beyond financial assistance are also essential. Confidence in the local authority, transparency about the pilot's impact on existing kinship services, and involvement in data collection and evaluation will further support successful engagement.

What Kinship Zones are expected to deliver alongside the pilot

To support the successful delivery of the pilot, Kinship Zones will also take on additional responsibilities. These include:

- Active collaboration with the evaluator to ensure accurate and consistent data collection and learning from the pilot.
- Creating or adapting application routes for carers to access the pilot, as no national portal will be provided by DfE
- Development and promotion of a clear local offer, including support pathways for those not eligible for the pilot.
- A strong multi-agency approach, working closely with charities and other partners to provide a holistic approach.
- Engagement with local authority leadership to raise the profile of kinship care internally and ensure strategic buy-in.
- Regular meetings and close coordination with DfE on the progress of the pilot and identify any challenges.

DfE will be providing support to Kinship Zones through a delivery team who will function as their initial primary point of contact for the kinship allowance. In addition to facilitating introductions between the independent evaluator and Kinship Zones, the delivery team will meet with Kinship Zones individually and as a group.

Individual meetings with Kinship Zones will be a way for DfE to understand more about their specific experiences in delivering the pilot and discuss and find resolution to any challenges. Group events will aim to foster networking and peer support opportunities between the Kinship Zones to support the sharing of learning and best practice.

Kinship Zones will be asked to complete a kinship allowance delivery plan prior to the launch in April 2026, and to complete a monitoring document on a regular basis once the pilot is in delivery. Documents will cover information relating (but not limited) to communication and outreach activities planned and undertaken, delivery models employed, data relating to kinship allowance payments and impact on kinship care arrangements.

The kinship allowance delivery plan guidance and template will provide further detail, and the delivery team will be available to answer any queries in relation to these documents. Kinship allowance delivery plans will be reviewed by DfE and used during the monitoring of the pilot in addition to being shared with the programme’s evaluation team to assess and compare delivery strategies across the pilot local authorities.

Kinship Zones: Part 2 – Delivering Family Network Support Packages

Family Network Support Packages: policy aims

FNSPs offers financial and practical help to family network members, with the aim of unlocking the barriers that prevent them from providing support to their relatives, enabling more children to live at home, or to support a transition into kinship care.

We encourage all Kinship Zones to repurpose any savings generated through the Kinship Zones pilot – funds they would have otherwise spent under their existing arrangements, referred to as "offset" – and use these funds to deliver FNSPs and other activities supporting kinship care for the duration of the pilot. The aim is to support families earlier in the system, including those in informal kinship care, and to help prevent children from entering care.

The FNSP specification is part of the families first partnership programme guide and we encourage Kinship Zones to deliver this alongside Families First for Children Pathfinder local authorities to help further refine our understanding of local operating models, governance arrangements and thresholds in a controlled and evidence informed way and to disseminate best practice.

Participation in this element will allow you to both improve outcomes for children and families and shape emerging national policy by contributing practical learning about what works on the frontline.

We have provided case studies to support understanding of how they can be implemented.

Case study one

An FNSP supported the successful reunification of a 6-year-old boy with his father. The child and his four siblings entered local authority care in 2021 due to concerns about neglect. Although he had only intermittent contact with his father before proceedings, focused work during and after the case helped rebuild their relationship. Once assessments confirmed reunification was safe and appropriate, the FNSP funded essential bedroom furniture to help the child settle smoothly into his father's home.

This support has enabled a stable and positive placement, allowing progress of plans to discharge the current care order. The arrangement is expected to reduce the need for statutory and intensive social work involvement, potentially avoiding placement and staffing costs over the next 12 years. The child is reportedly thriving in his father's care, and his father has expressed genuine appreciation for both the emotional and practical support provided.

Case study two

The local authority has supported a young man for several years due to his additional needs and experiences in his mother's care. Despite ongoing involvement from the children with disabilities service, he was recently presented at the legal gateway panel following escalating concerns about exposure to domestic abuse and his mother's substance use.

Given his increased vulnerability, the FNSP was used to mobilise extended family and neighbours to provide short-term, practical support. This included helping him attend important health appointments, with transport and accommodation funded for relatives living outside the Telford area. This timely support created essential safeguards at a critical moment and enabled his mother to meaningfully engage with specialist services, including edge of care and recovery support.

Case studies provided by Telford and Wrekin Family Network Pilot.

Family Network Support Packages: policy specification and eligibility

Expectations for FNSPs:

FNSPs should be used to unlock family network support to enable children to remain safely under the parental responsibility of their birth parents or those with parental responsibility at the time of FGDM.

FNSPs should fund direct payments or procured goods and services. This can include, but is not limited to:

- activity passes
- training
- baby/toddler equipment
- furniture
- home adaptations
- deposits for social housing or rental properties
- income supplements
- rent/mortgage payments
- vehicles
- travel costs
- visas and travel costs for overseas family network members.

FNSPs should be tailored to the bespoke needs of the individual children and family networks. They should not be a “one-size-fits-all” solution and Kinship Zones are encouraged to be creative and ambitious in designing FNSPs for families.

FNSPs can be offered to family networks from initial assessment onward, to enable Kinship Zones to support families early on, to reduce the risk of escalation into statutory services. Kinship Zones may choose to focus their offer at certain points, to suit local need.

Agreement of FNSPs within the family network should be made via FGDM, with the agreed support integrated into FH or CP plans and reviewed regularly.

FNSP eligibility

This will be:

- Any family network member, including birth parents, of a child who is under s.17 or 47, and is not looked after; or,
- Family network members, including birth parents, for a child in targeted early help (part of family help) are also eligible through alternative payment routes.

Direct payments can be made to birth parents and family network members at the discretion of the Kinship Zone where this is deemed appropriate and in line with internal financial/audit processes.

For some families, FNSPs might fund practical support. For example, an FNSP may be a procured service for family networks. In these cases, any commissioned services should be used to directly support the family network, tailored to their individual needs and should not be a universal offer.

In some instances, FNSPs will unlock respite care from family networks, which could be recurring or for a significant period, however the intention is that children will not permanently live elsewhere.

FNSP system enablers

Kinship Zones should develop a clear FNSP internal governance pathway to approve FNSP funding requests in line with internal financial/audit processes.

Kinship Zones should consider how to best streamline FNSP approval and payment process to ensure timely support is delivered for families. This could include:

- recruitment of a business support officer to aid FNSP delivery
- a standardised application or referral form for relevant practitioners to fill out with family network members.
- Kinship Zones are encouraged to consider how they will ensure practitioners working with families are aware of FNSPs and the process for securing funding for them.
- Kinship Zones should support their workforce to understand how FNSPs can be used positively and preventively within a family led approach. This includes developing a ‘”family-first” culture that fosters use of this intervention.

FNSPs and Children Act 1989 Section 20(1)

Recent case law that states if the need has arisen for a local authority to provide accommodation for a child and, where the local authority has played a central or major role in facilitating arrangements, that child should be deemed looked after (section 20(1) Care Act 1989). This means that in some scenarios, children who are supported by an FNSP to live with a member of their family network may need to become ‘looked after’. Although this is case specific and will fall on the facts of each case.

Please note that we cannot completely exclude participating Kinship Zones from risk of legal challenge under these circumstances as ultimately the decision on the child’s legal status rests with you. We suggest you consider several factors when making this decision, including what is in the child's best interests and whether a need has yet arisen for the child to be provided with accommodation.

Our expectation is that:

- Facilitating an FGDM meeting carries low risk of successful legal challenge.
- Funding provided through FNSPs to families where the child is classed as in need but not on a child protection plan should carry a low risk of successful legal challenge.

Delivery

You have been asked to complete an FNSP delivery plan to set out how you intend to set up your services to fulfil the policy specification set out in this document and provide estimates on how many FNSPs you aim to deliver.

Learning from existing programmes has provided useful insight to enablers for successful implementation, these include:

- recruitment of a business support officer to streamline the process from FNSP referral to payment to families;
- a standardised application or referral process that is embedded into existing local processes;
- a clear FNSP internal governance pathway to approve FNSP funding requests, which may have various clearance levels for varying levels of spend; and,
- ensuring relevant practitioners (e.g. social workers, family group decision meeting leads) are aware of the FNSP policy scope, eligibility criteria and process for securing funding for families through use of communications or training.

We ask that you develop the appropriate internal controls and governance to deliver FNSPs.

How DfE will measure delivery and impact of FNSPs

All local authorities are in receipt of the children, families and youth grant which includes funding for delivery of the Family First Partnership Programme (FFPP).

One of the children, families and youth grant conditions states that grant recipients should apply funding to continue to deliver services that meet the policy principles set FGDM and FNSPs to make greater use of family networks.

We will monitor your delivery of FNSPs through the FFPP reporting mechanisms. This will include the data collected through the quarterly FFPP returns which we will use to understand more about FNSPs in your local areas. This will include:

- Number of FNSPs delivered at: family help, child protection, pre-proceedings, reunification, targeted early help.
- Funding spent on FNSPs distributed at family help, child protection, pre-proceedings, reunification, targeted early help.
- How did the FNSP enable the family network to provide support (for all parts of the system)?
- What is the frequency or duration of the FNSP (for all parts of the system)?
- What is the most common funding bracket (for all parts of the system)?

- Total number of FNSPs distributed where the child has a disability.
- Total number of FNSPs distributed to a family network member where those with parental responsibility for the child has a special guardianship or ‘lives with’ CAO where the child would otherwise be in care.
- Total number of FNSPs distributed to birth parents.
- Total number of FNSPs distributed to a family network member.
- Average number of days between FNSPs agreed at FGDM and support received by families.

Your DfE delivery team will discuss the delivery of this policy in your regular catch ups. We may also collect more qualitative information such as case studies to help understand the successes and challenges of delivering FNSPs.

Data protection requirements

Privacy notices

Kinship Zones and DfE will be joint controllers of personal information provided to you by kinship carers as part of the pilot. Consequently, you must issue a privacy notice to all kinship carers as part of the application they will be asked to complete, prior to receiving any of their personal information. It must tell them that any information or documentation they provide to you may also be processed by DfE for monitoring and grant assurance purposes and link to the privacy notice at Privacy information: parents, carers and legal guardians - GOV.UK.

It would also be prudent to mention that their information will be used by Foundations and Alma Economics as part of the independent evaluation of the pilot. You should link to these organisations' privacy notices. The privacy notice for Foundations can be found at Privacy Policy - Foundations. The privacy notice for Alma Economics has been sent to you separately and contains some placeholders for your contact information.

We would be grateful if you would share a copy of the privacy notice that you will issue to kinship carers with us so that we can ensure it meets data protection requirements.

Sharing personal information

When sharing information or documentation with us containing personal information, please ensure this is done securely. We would recommend using a platform called Galaxkey which uses encryption techniques. If you require further information on this then please get in touch with the delivery team.

Exit plan

Any decisions regarding funding further roll-out beyond this pilot will be informed by the programme evaluation. We encourage you to regard this as transitional funding intended to support the continuation of your enhanced kinship allowance offers after the programme concludes, subject to a positive evaluation.

It would be helpful to begin thinking about sustainability planning for kinship carers, even at this early stage. This may include preparing carers for the possibility that their allowance arrangements could change after the programme ends, depending on future policy decisions and available funding. This can also involve working with carers to understand their longer-term financial needs, helping them access wider local support, and ensuring they have clear information about what to expect as the programme approaches its end.

Contact information

Department for Education
The Kinship Zones delivery team can be contacted at kinship.zones@education.gov.uk.

Foundations
Contact Foundations at https://foundations.org.uk/contact-uk/.

Glossary

Definitions for the purpose of this programme

Child Arrangements Order
An order made under section 8(1)(a) and (b) of the Children Act 1989 which specifies with whom a child should live and when they should live with them.

Family Network
The wider group of relatives and connected adults who may be able to offer support or care, either through informal support, Family Network Support Packages (FNSPs), or formal arrangements such as Special Guardianship.

Family Network Pilot (FNP)
A pilot evaluating the impact of FNSPs, used at the pre-proceedings stage, which must be agreed via Family Group Conferences (FGCs), on reducing the number of children entering care.

Family Network Support Package (FNSP)
A package offering financial and practical help to family network members, aiming to remove barriers that prevent them from providing support to their relatives, enabling more children to live at home or supporting a transition into kinship care.

Grant Funding
Financial assistance provided by the department, subject to terms and conditions, for a specified purpose that delivers outcomes benefiting others and contributing to policy objectives. It is not payment for contracted services.

Kinship Allowance
A financial allowance paid at the same rate as the Fostering National Minimum Allowance to Special Guardianship kinship carers and those with a 'lives with' Child Arrangements Order, where the child would otherwise be in care.

Kinship Arrangement
A situation where a child lives with, and is cared for by, a relative, friend, or connected person instead of their parents, and that person provides all or most of the care and support.

Kinship Carer (for this programme)
A person or persons caring for and living with a child who is subject to a Special Guardianship Order or a Child Arrangements Order specifying where the child is to reside, where the carer is the person named in the order.

Kinship Zones
A programme made up of two elements: the Kinship Allowance and Family Network Support Packages.

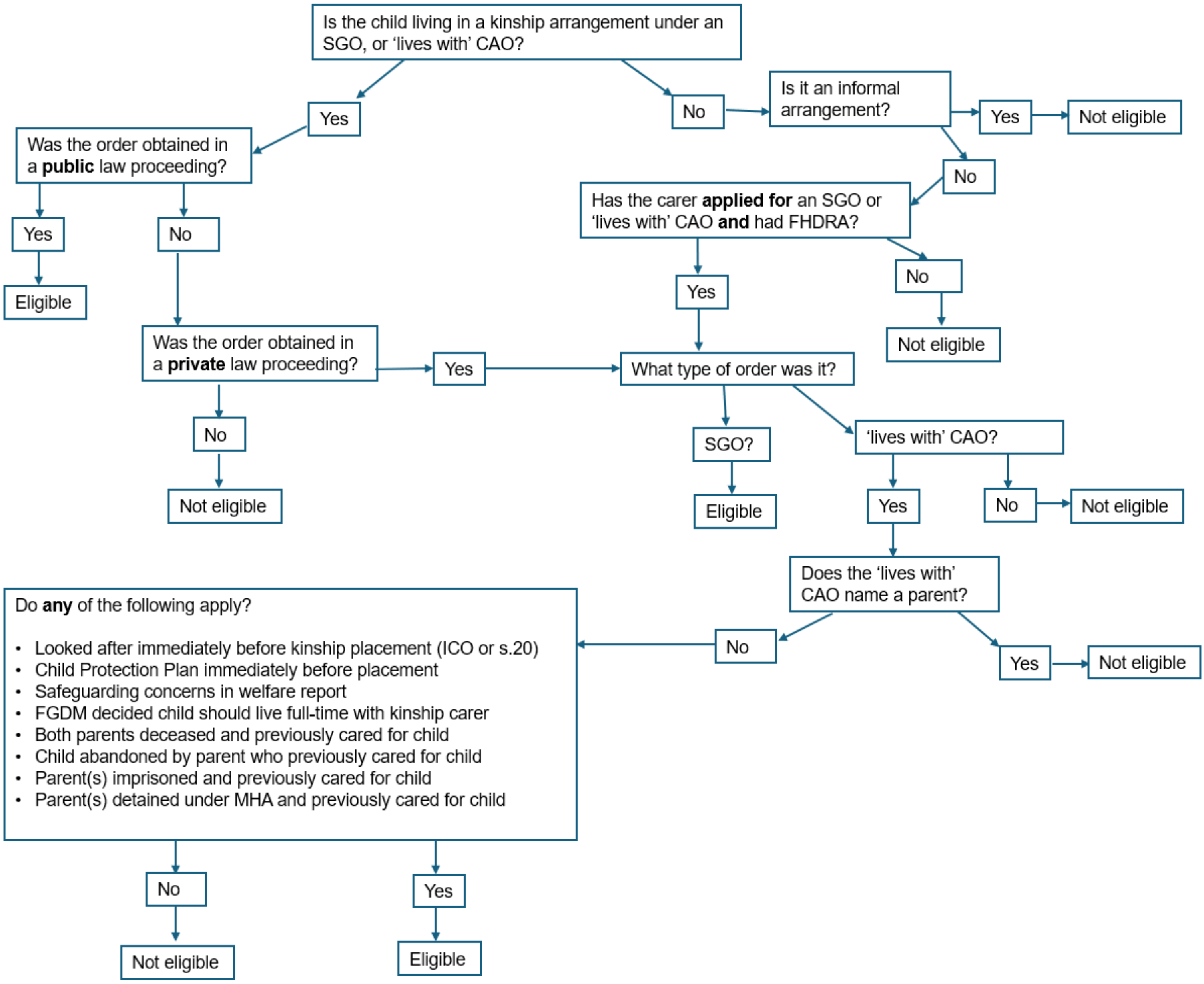
Offset Funding
Savings that arise when Kinship Zone programme funding replaces a local authority's existing kinship allowance offer, which would otherwise have been paid during the pilot.

Parent
Biological parent.

Regional Improvement Support Lead
Individuals who work closely with local authorities and partners to understand local services, improvement journeys, and barriers, and to broker support where needed.

Annex A: Eligibility flowchart

This flowchart is an example only and not representative of all scenarios, including out of area. We expect local authorities to make their own decision on a case-by-case basis.



Eligibility flowchart: step-by-step explanation

This flowchart is an example only and not representative of all scenarios. We expect local authorities to make their own decision on a case-by-case basis.

Step 1 - Is the child living in a kinship arrangement under an SGO or a ‘lives with’ CAO?

- If yes, continue to step 2.
- If no, go to step 4.

Step 2 - Was the order obtained in a public law proceeding?

- If yes →Eligible.
- If no, continue to step 3.

Step 3 - Was the order obtained in a private law proceeding?

- If no → Not eligible.
- If yes, continue to step 6.

Step 4 - If the child is not under an SGO or ‘lives with’ CAO, is it an informal arrangement?

- If yes → Not eligible.
- If no, continue to step 6.

Step 5 - Has the carer applied for an SGO or ‘lives with’ CAO and had a FHDRA?

- If no → Not eligible.
- If yes, continue to step 7.

Step 6 - What type of order was made?

- If SGO → Eligible.
- If ‘lives with’ CAO, continue to step 7.

Step 7 - Does the ‘lives with’ CAO name a parent?

- If yes → Not eligible.
- If no, continue to step 8.

Step 8 - Do any of the following criteria apply?

- Child was looked after immediately before placement (ICO or s.20).
- Child was on a Child Protection Plan before placement.
- Safeguarding concerns noted in welfare report.
- FGDM decided child should live full-time with kinship carer.
- Both parents deceased and previously cared for child.
- Child abandoned by parent who previously cared for them.

- Parent(s) imprisoned and previously cared for child.
- Parent(s) detained under MHA and previously cared for child.
- If yes to any → Eligible.
- If no to all → Not eligible.

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