

Report on the progress on the implementation of the Children's Scrutiny Committee Special Guardianship Task Group

Report of the Head of Children's Social Care (Deputy Chief Officer)

1 Background

- 1.1 This report outlines the progress in implementing the recommendations agreed by the Children's Scrutiny Committee in June 2019.
- 1.2 The report produced by the Special Guardianship Task Group was presented to the Children's Scrutiny Committee on 10 June 2019 and can be found here: <https://democracy.devon.gov.uk/documents/s26953/Special%20Guardianship%20Task%20Group>
- 1.3 Recommendations made by the Task Group are attached ([Appendix A](#)).

2 Progress to date and future plans.

- 2.1 Set out below is the progress achieved since the publication of the report and work undertaken by the Special Guardianship Order task and finish group and officers to continue to support these children and families in Devon.

Rec.	Progress	Planned
1.1	We have developed a "viability checklist" to be used by child care teams to support their work in identifying carers who could become Special Guardians	The Family Rights Group has produced good practice that has been endorsed by the Judiciary and the ADCS. It is planned that this is adopted and used by social workers to undertake initial viability assessments following training and roll-out.
1.1	We are instituting a practice change where all Special Guardianship Assessments have a "set up meeting" and regular reviews to ensure that all parties are aware of progress and any issues that have arisen	
1.1	Team Managers from the Kinship Service have attended locality team meetings to support closer working relationships	
1.2	We provide information about Grandparents Plus as part of our application and information pack	A refresh and development of a dedicated Special Guardianship website to ensure that information about the "Devon offer" is freely available and that details of other support organisations is available. This will be completed by 31 March 2020.
2.1	The child's social worker prepares a background report and an assessment of	We are developing and will implement a process whereby the child's social worker

	the child's needs as part of the Court Process and is normally available to the Special Guardian	completes a summary of the background and needs assessment as well as a "later life" letter to assist the Special Guardian with understanding the background so to support the child with their identity.
2.2	It is expected that a support plan is prepared as part of the assessment process and is shared with the prospective Special Guardian before it is filed with the Court.	A review of the support plan contents and layout in partnership with current Special Guardians to ensure that the plans are fit for purpose and provide clear and unambiguous information for Special Guardians
3.	The finance review has been completed and a draft revised finance policy has been prepared. It is now subject to a process of financial planning and consideration of potential funding streams.	
4.1	A prospective carer course has been developed based on the generic foster care training and adapted to the needs of this group of carers. This has been piloted with carers in assessment and those who have recently been assessed. The training will now be provided on a regular basis	We will increase the frequency and availability of courses and also deliver those courses on a geographical basis to reduce travel for prospective carers.
4.2	We involve other agencies in support groups so that Special Guardians can receive advice on a range of issues, including trauma, attachment and education.	
4.2	There is agreement that, subject to capacity, Special Guardians can attend the training offered to mainstream foster carers. Information about available courses is routinely shared.	
4.2	The support workers have delivered targeted training on Trauma and Parenting	We will increase the frequency and availability of courses and also deliver those courses on a geographical basis to reduce travel for prospective carers.
4.3	We have been able to increase the capacity for permanent social workers so as to reduce the need for independent social workers to undertake assessments	We will continue to monitor the requests for assessments and will use this information to inform future workforce planning.
4.3	We have been able to increase the support team by 1.5 FTE family practitioners and an apprentice position that has been advertised to care experienced young adults	Recruitment to these positions will be undertaken in the new year so that the posts are filled at the beginning of the financial year. Once suitably trained these workers will look to develop further support groups.
4.5	We are currently offering "ad-hoc" reviews where the needs of the carer or child indicate that one is needed	Once the additional workers are appointed and suitably trained, we will increase our review offer.

		We will monitor the requests for reviews and the out of this will be used to inform workforce developments
5.1	This is currently being considered within the broader framework of commissioning services.	
5.2	We currently provide advice on contact issues via our duty line. We also consider general issues about contact in support groups to help Special Guardians learn from each other	The new posts and capacity within the service will enable us to improve this support offer, and may enable the development of bespoke training for Special Guardians on contact.
6	We have concluded the work required to underpin the “recruitment” and “management” of Special Guardian Peer Guides, including training on confidentiality and their responsibilities in relation to safeguarding	Recruitment and training of Peer Guides who can then be supported to implement the wider recommendations
7.1	Waiting lists for access to CAMHS remain long and we are working with Commissioners and CAMHS services to try to remedy this.	Work with Commissioners on how the needs of Special Guardianship carers and the children in their care can be addressed within current services
7.2	Currently “ASF” funding is only available to children who have been in care.	Work is planned to consider the needs of children who are currently outside the criteria for ASF. At a national level, interest groups such as Grandparents Plus are lobbying for a more inclusive offer.
7.4	Currently we are only able to offer out young person’s group (RIO) in one location (Exeter)	With an enlarged workforce we would look to offer groups in other locations. We will consult with our colleagues in the participation service as to how we can best “tap in” to their offer
7.5	The Kinship Service has now joined with the Fostering Service and the Permanence and Transitions Teams, this will provide opportunities for Qualifying young people to be offered PA’s and Pathway Plans as part of the Devon Offer to care leavers	The respective managers will meet on a regular basis to share information about this group of young people so that they can be tracked and offered services
8.1	The Cabinet Member for Children’s Services has raised the issues highlighted by the Task Group through his capacity as Chair of the F40 group.	
8.2	It has been confirmed that Special Guardians who are in rented accommodation and who have enlarged families having taken addition child(ren) have been given “Band B” status and can bid for suitable social housing units.	
9	During 2019 we have undertaken presentations and seminars with	A refreshed website would provide information for both SG’s and professionals

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Judiciary, Guardians, and Children’s solicitors • Designated teachers • Educational Psychologists <p>As well as routine input into Locality Team Meetings.</p>	<p>We will plan activities to raise the profile of SG’s in Devon to coincide with National Kinship Care Week (3rd > 9th October 2020)</p>
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3 Conclusion

- 3.1 There continues to be a lot of attention paid to Special Guardians at both a local and national level and an increasing awareness of the importance that Special Guardians play in providing suitable permanent for children who cannot live with birth parents and of the issues that face them in providing this care.
- 3.2 Since the report was published, we have been able to make some good progress and also lay some firm foundations for service and practice development that means we will be able to continue to forward with the implementation of many of the recommendations of the Special Guardianship task group.

Darryl Freeman
Head of Service (Deputy Chief Officer)
Children’s Services

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and Schools: Councillor James McInnes

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972: LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

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Appendix A – Task Group Recommendations

	Ambition	Specific Recommendations
1.	Impartial and consistent advice and support for prospective special guardians before and during the assessment process	<p>1.1 Joined up working across children’s social work and assessment teams to ensure that consistent advice is provided to families around special guardianship, including access to legal advice</p> <p>1.2 Improved signposting to independent and impartial advice through charities such as Grandparents Plus</p>
2.	All special guardians to have access to history of the child they care for, and to their support plan	<p>2.1 All special guardians to be provided with a summary report of the child’s history as soon as the special guardianship order is made (where the child is known to Devon Children’s Services)</p> <p>2.2 All special guardians to be provided with a copy of the child’s support plan as soon as the plan is finalised</p>
3.	A fair and equitable financial assessment and support policy and special guardianship allowances structure	<p>Review current financial assessment and support policy, and subject to securing appropriate funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consider how a preventative approach can be taken to providing financial support to more special guardianship families in need • bring special guardianship allowances in line with the new foster carer allowances scheme, which is based on the needs of the child
4.	A comprehensive package of ongoing support which enables special guardians to provide the best care and support possible for children	<p>4.1 Bespoke introductory training, which mirrors the initial training undertaken by foster carers and adoptive parents to be made available to all special guardians</p> <p>4.2 Ongoing access to a programme of training including therapeutic parenting, for all special guardians</p> <p>4.3 Creation of permanent social work and business support roles and increased family practitioner resource within the SGO support team, subject to a review of current capacity within the team and appropriate funding being secured</p> <p>4.4 Introduce special guardian support groups in other parts of the county, supported and led by newly trained peer guides, and improve overall attendance levels at support groups</p> <p>4.5 Where a support plan is in place, all special guardians to be offered a support plan review on an annual basis, to coincide with the financial reassessment where applicable</p>
5.	Special guardians and parents to have access to the support and advice they need to adjust to changed family arrangements	<p>5.1 Where appropriate, parents to have access to counselling to support them to manage the loss of their child</p> <p>5.2 Special guardians to be supported to manage contact issues with parents through training and support groups</p> <p>5.3 Subject to increased capacity outlined in recommendation 4.3, the SGO support team to provide parental contact risk assessments, and to support special guardians to make informed decisions around contact</p>
6.	Special guardianship families to be supported to access alternative respite options which provide positive	<p>Review, with a view to improving, current respite and alternative options for SGO families to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supporting and enabling informal ‘respite’ networks • improved signposting to appropriate universal and early help services which can provide day ‘respite’

	experiences for children and special guardians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased access to family-based support trips and activities • increased provision of group trips and activities for older children and young people
7.	Review, with a view to improving, current respite and alternative options for SGO families to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ supporting and enabling informal 'respite' networks ▫ improved signposting to appropriate universal and early help services which can provide day 'respite' ▫ increased access to family-based support trips and activities ▫ increased provision of group trips and activities for older children and young people 	<p>7.1 'Fast-track' access to CAMHS assessment for all children with an SGO</p> <p>7.2 Subject to securing appropriate funding, the SGO support team to provide therapeutic support to SGO children who are not previously looked after</p> <p>7.3 Cabinet to lobby the Department for Education on the vital need for the continuation of the Adoption Support Fund after 2020, and to widen the scope of the fund to be accessible to all children with an SGO, rather than only those who were previously looked after</p> <p>7.4 The achievement of young people living with special guardians to be recognised through an annual celebration event</p> <p>7.5 To explore options to improve support for SGO young people during their transition to independence, including access to Personal Advisors and Pathway Planning</p>
8.	Government and district council policy to recognise and reflect the unique position and needs of special guardians and children in respect of legal aid, housing benefits, child tax credits and universal credit	<p>8.1 Cabinet to lobby the Department for Education over speeding up the provision of legal aid for special guardians, and to provide specific exemptions for special guardians for the over-occupancy penalty and the 'two child' rule</p> <p>8.2 The Cabinet Member for Children's Services to write to district councils urging them to use their discretion to ensure that special guardianship families are not penalised through the underoccupancy penalty or 'two-child' rule in respect of child tax credits</p>
9.	Improve multi-agency knowledge and understanding of special guardianship and the needs of the children they care for	Development of 'guide to special guardianship' targeted at schools, GPs, hospitals, housing authorities and relevant charities such as Age UK, to raise awareness of special guardianship and the potential needs of children and families, supported by a targeted social media campaign