



Report focus
Review of the evidence
from English research
on special guardianship.

Authors
Judith Harwin,
John Simmonds,
Karen Broadhurst &
Rebecca Brown

Special guardianship: a review of the English research studies



About this review

This review was commissioned by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory and has been co-produced by CoramBAAF, led by John Simmonds, OBE, working in partnership with Professor Judith Harwin and her team at Lancaster University. The issues for consideration were scoped by family justice practitioners, policy leads and academics.

As the work has progressed, the issues have been discussed by members of the Family Justice Board, led by HHJ Jane Probyn and David Williams and a sub-group of the President's Public Law Working Group, led by Mr Justice Keehan.

The review has been published in four parts:

- Special guardianship: a review of the evidence. Summary report
- Special guardianship: practitioner perspectives
- Special guardianship: a review of the English research studies
- Special guardianship: international research on kinship care

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28 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3JS
T: 020 7631 0566

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nuffieldfjo.org.uk | @NuffieldFJO

www.nuffieldfoundation.org | @NuffieldFound

About the review's co-producers

Judith Harwin is Professor in socio-legal studies and co-director of the Centre for Child and Family Justice at Lancaster University. She has recently completed a major national study of Supervision and Special Guardianship Orders, published in March 2019. Judith also led evaluations of the Family Drug and Alcohol Court in care proceedings. She was a member of the expert advisory committee of the Department for Education's Review of Special Guardianship in 2015 and of the Family Rights Group Care Crisis Review Academic Advisory Group.

John Simmonds OBE is Director of Policy, Research and Development at CoramBAAF. A qualified social worker, John's recent research includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in foster care, a study of 100 women adopted from Hong Kong into the U.K. in the 1960s, and special guardianship. John sits on the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board and is the chair of the Kinship Care Alliance. He was a member of the Department for Education's Review of Special Guardianship undertaken in 2015.

About the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, the Nuffield FJO will provide accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

The Nuffield FJO has been established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-founder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

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Introduction

This paper summarises the evidence from the English research on special guardianship¹. It draws together the key findings on placement durability, child outcomes and the experiences of children and special guardians. The overall aim is to help inform decision making by family justice practitioners, highlight policy issues and identify gaps in the research and priority areas for future inquiry.

The evidence review was prompted by the case *Re P-S (Children)* [2018] EWCA Civ 1407 and the call by the President of the Family Division to produce authoritative guidance for the Family Justice Council and Public Law Working Group on special guardianship. A key issue identified in the *Re P-S* case was the need for decision-making to be informed by robust research evidence where available. The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory was invited to produce a rapid evidence review to draw together the research evidence and the views of practitioners on the issues raised by the *Re P-S* case and wider sector concerns

Two main factors influenced the decision to provide a separate paper on the English research studies rather than include them in the overview of the international research of kinship care. First, the task set by the President of the Family Division following the *Re P-S* case was to review the evidence relating to special guardianship. The paper therefore focuses solely on special guardianship and the issues specific to the English and Welsh legal, policy and practice frameworks. The international overview explores kinship care more broadly. A second consideration relates to the standard of evidence. The English research evidence base is still in an early phase of development, particularly when compared to studies on adoption, fostering and kinship care. This is largely because special guardianship came into effect in December 2005. There are as yet no systematic reviews² of special guardianship.

The approach to the review

Three questions are addressed in this review:

1. What is the stability of special guardianship placements and their disruption rates?
2. What is the impact on, and experience of the children who are subject to special guardianship orders?
3. What is the impact on, and experience of those carers who become special guardians?

The criterion for inclusion in this review is that the research is based on empirical data that address the three questions set out above. This includes national surveys, case file audits, interviews and focus groups with special guardians and interviews with children. Studies that include empirical data but do not address the above questions are therefore excluded. However, information from these sources appears in other parts of the report or are included in this review as contextual data.

¹ There is no Welsh research at the present time.

² A systematic review collects and evaluates all the available evidence on a particular research question, according to pre-agreed criteria (see international summary).

The following studies underpin this review:³

Harwin, J., Alrouh, B., Golding, L., McQuarrie, T., Broadhurst, K. and Cusworth, L. (2019). *The contribution of supervision orders and special guardianship to children's lives and family justice*. London: Nuffield Foundation, https://www.cfj-lancaster.org.uk/app/nuffield/files-module/local/documents/HARWIN_SO_SGO_FinalReport_V2.1_19Mar2019.pdf

McGrath, P. (forthcoming). 'Grandparents' experiences of being a special guardian: an interpretative phenomenological analysis'. Interim research briefing.⁴

Selwyn, J., Wijedasa, D. and Meakings, S. (2014). *Beyond the Adoption Order: challenges, interventions and adoption disruption*. London: Department for Education, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/301889/Final_Report_-_3rd_April_2014v2.pdf

Wade, J., Dixon, J. and Richards, A. (2010). *Special Guardianship in Practice*. London: BAAF.

Wade, J., Sinclair, I.A.C., Stuttard, L. and Simmonds, J. (2014). *Investigating Special Guardianship: experiences, challenges and outcomes*. London: Department for Education, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/377448/DFE-RR372_Investigating_special_guardianship.pdf⁵.

³ Further references are included in the reference list at the end of this document.

⁴ We are grateful to Professor Beth Neill for permission to report on the interim findings of this PhD.

⁵ Following consultation with Jim Wade, it was agreed that the main focus should be on the findings of the 2014 report, as it is more comprehensive and recent.

What is the stability of special guardianship placements and their disruption rates? What factors are associated with stability and disruption?

Key findings

- Special guardianship has a low rate of disruption.
- The breakdown rate is lower than that for child arrangement orders but higher than for adoption.
- Children aged four or above when the SGO is made are at greater risk of re-entering local authority care and of returning to court for further care proceedings.
- Emotional and behavioural difficulties increase the risk of placement disruption.
- The risk of return to local authority care increases for children who are placed with unrelated carers and with the number of moves the child experienced prior to making the SGO.
- The risk of return to court for further care proceedings increases for children placed on an SGO with a supervision order made at the same time.
- All increases in the risk of disruption are from a very low base as the majority of placements do not end with a return to local authority care or a return to court.

Introduction

Evidence on the stability of special guardianship is crucial in establishing the confidence of the order as a permanence option. While findings from empirical research cannot be directly applied to individual cases, they play a vital role in alerting practitioners to the issues that need to be taken into consideration and to the weight that should be attached to them. The decision also needs to take into account the factors that can promote or destabilise any individual placement. This is important both in terms of the plan for the child and identifying and mitigating any risk factors.

Stability, defined as the absence of disruption, has been examined nationally in the three large-scale English studies (Wade, et al., 2014; Selwyn, et al., 2014; Harwin, et al., 2019).⁶ The first two studies defined disruption as the proportion of children who return to the care of the local authority. Harwin used the yardstick of a return to court for further care proceedings due to significant harm. Both are narrow but robust and measurable definitions but they do not say anything about the quality of the placement or its outcomes.

All three national studies have used the same statistical approach, known as survival analysis,⁷ to establish disruption rates. They have estimated the likelihood of disruption within five years of making the order. By choosing this timeframe they have been able to compare SGO disruption rates with those for other legal order types and in this way can be confident that 'apples and pears' are not being compared.

⁶ Hereinafter these studies are referred to as 'Wade', 'Selwyn' and 'Harwin'.

⁷ See Kartsonaki (2016). Survival analysis calculates the probability of an event such as placement disruption happening and its timing. All percentages are cumulative, thus providing estimates of disruption over five years.

The national rate of special guardianship disruptions⁸

The findings from the studies are broadly consistent. Using Department for Education (DfE) data on 5,921 children placed on SGOs between 1 December 2005 and 31 March 2011, Selwyn and Wade found:

- The risk of disruption judged by return to local authority care was 5.7% over five years.
- The five-year rate is higher than for adoption (0.72%), but it is substantially below that for residence orders/child arrangements orders (14.7%).

Using the Cafcass⁹ dataset based on a total of 140,059 children in 81,758 cases that concluded between 2010/11 and 2016/17, Harwin found:

- The risk of return to court for further care proceedings within five years of making the SGO was approximately 5%.
- The five-year rate is lower than for residence orders/child arrangement orders (approximately 10.5%)¹⁰.

This means that for every 100 children placed on an SGO, five of those placements are at risk of returning to local authority care or of having further care proceedings within five years. These figures are based on reported disruptions only so they may underestimate the actual degree of placement instability that does not come to the attention of local authorities. This was a concern commonly reported by practitioners in the present evidence review and in the judicial focus groups in the Harwin study.

Risk and protective factors associated with stability and disruption of the SGO

Child-level factors influencing stability

All three studies found that older age of the child was associated with disruption. Older age at placement in both Wade and Selwyn was associated with return to local authority care, peaking in the Wade study at ages nine and ten, and ranging from four to eleven in Selwyn's study. Harwin found that children aged five to nine were at maximum risk of returning to court, followed by children aged ten and above. Disruption is least likely among infants and children under the age of four.

Other predictors (in Selwyn) related to the reasons for entry into care, the number of moves made by the child prior to the SGO and to the type of special guardian. Selwyn found that:

- Children placed on SGOs who came into care due to acute stress or family dysfunction were nearly twice as likely to face disruption as those who entered care because of abuse and neglect.
- Children placed with unrelated carers on an SGO were nearly three times more likely to have their placement disrupted than those placed with kin.
- The number of moves before placement with the special guardian predicted disruption. Each move the child had experienced in care increased the risk of disruption by nearly 1.5 times.

The in-depth case file audit in Wade also found that the number of placement moves prior to the SGO predicted disruption. Additional predictors from the survey (n=230) were as follows:

- The child's last placement prior to the SGO was not with a relative.

⁸ All results are statistically significant unless stated otherwise.

⁹ Cafcass (The Children and Families Court Advisory and Support Service).

- The child's SGO was made to a carer with whom the child had not previously been living.
- The bond¹¹ was assessed by social workers as being weak at the time of the placement.
- The children had emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Each of these factors *independently* predicted disruption but there is also an important interaction between these factors. As envisaged in the original design of the SGO, a strong bond, based on a settled, pre-existing and established relationship prior to applying for a SGO acts as a strong indicator of placement stability. Where bonds were weak, it was harder for the special guardians to manage emotional and behavioural difficulties which were widespread.

In Wade's survey sample of special guardians, two-thirds of the children whose placement disrupted before the age of 17 were rated by their special guardian to have serious emotional and behavioural difficulties. Challenging behaviour was also a factor to emerge in the qualitative analysis of the 10% of cases that disrupted in Harwin's local authority case file follow-up. In both studies there was an interaction between older age, emotional and behavioural problems and disruption. No identified permanent placement change occurred for children aged four or under in Harwin's study.

However, the evidence is not wholly consistent regarding the importance of a tried-and-tested relationship between children and their special guardians on the likelihood of disruption. In Harwin's local authority case file audit there was no difference in disruption rates between children who moved to live with their special guardian before or during the proceedings and those who were placed *after* the SGO had been made - and the placement was therefore untested. This finding is unexpected and it may be due to small sample size, the young age of the children, and the low probability of disruption.

Factors associated with professional decision-making and the legal framework

The making of a supervision order alongside an SGO

SGOs were designed as a standalone order with a support plan integrated within the requirements of the order. But within five years of implementation, 11% of SGOs were being made alongside a supervision order. This order places a duty on the local authority to 'advise, assist and befriend' the child for one year in the first instance, and it can be renewed annually for up to a maximum of three years.

The *Special Guardianship Review* carried out by the DfE (2015) identified the use of supervision orders with SGOs as a potential indicator of placement instability. Small-scale empirical studies commissioned by the DfE drew attention to their use when placements were judged to be risky, but also shed light on other reasons for using supervision orders (Research in Practice 2015 a-c). These included monitoring and support, offsetting risks in the face of poor-quality assessments, and helping to ensure the involvement of other authorities, should the child move to a different area. Similar reasons had emerged from earlier research (Hunt and Waterhouse; Hunt, 2016).

Analysis of the Cafcass national administrative dataset in Harwin found that there had been a marked rise¹² in the use of supervision orders alongside an SGO between 2010/11 to 2016/17. The study also found that the risk of SGO cases returning to court for further care proceedings within five years when a supervision order is made increases by approximately 2%. These findings do not allow us to establish why a supervision order increases the risk of

¹¹ Rated by social workers on a four-point scale from very weak to very strong prior to the SGO.

¹² Up from 17.8% in 2010/11 to 29.8% in 2016/17. The rate peaked at 34.6% in 2013/14 (Harwin et al., 2019).

return to court for care proceedings. It could be that SGOs made alongside a supervision order are more fragile in the first place, as identified by the DfE review, or that these cases are monitored by the local authority more closely – or a combination of the two.

The impact of the Children and Families Act 2014

The Children and Families Act 2014 led to the introduction of a 26-week statutory timescale for the completion of care proceedings in all but exceptional circumstances. Case law (Re S) established that the late presentation of prospective special guardians was one of the circumstances in which an extension could be made. However, focus groups with 89 family justice practitioners in Harwin indicated that extensions were difficult to obtain. In their view shorter timescales for completing care proceedings were leading to more rushed decision-making and thereby increasing disruption rates.

The empirical evidence from Harwin found that the risk of return to court for further care proceedings within two years has accelerated since 2014 compared to cases heard in the previous two years. However, the risk remains very low because so few children return to court following the making of an SGO. The acceleration in the rate of return to court for further care proceedings is also open to different interpretations, particularly because it is a trend found for other types of legal orders, such as child arrangement orders and supervision orders made to support the return of children to their birth parents. In the first instance, longer-term monitoring is needed to establish whether the pace of acceleration continues to grow.

Implications

The main message from this overview on disruption is that overall, SGOs have a very low rate of return to local authority care and care proceedings according to the criteria used to judge stability and disruption. We can be confident in this finding because it is based on national data using unambiguous robust measures of disruption. However, as already noted, the figures may underestimate the extent of placement change as it is not possible to obtain reliable information on moves that take place beyond the view of the local authority. This is particularly likely in placements where the children have been living with their extended family (rather than with unrelated foster carers) and subsequently move to a different relative, unbeknown to the local authority. Given that making an SGO means that the child leaves care, the placement cannot and should not be monitored unless there are sound reasons for doing so such as the provision of support.

There is also a need to continue tracking disruption rates over time as the cohort of children aged under five grows older and starts to appear in the highest risk age groups for breakdown. In Selwyn, older age was the biggest single factor to increase the risk of disruption in adoption. Children aged 11 to 16 were ten times more likely to experience adoption disruption than those aged under four.

While a number of predictors of disruption have been identified, they do not provide a contra-indication for use of special guardianship *because so few cases disrupt*. Instead they point to the strengths of SGO as a permanence option. At the same time, the evidence underlines the importance of assessment and support plans that address both the risk and protective factors in what is a life-changing decision for a child and the carers.

What is the impact on, and experience of children subject to SGOs?

Key findings

- A majority of children fare well in special guardianship in relation to their safety, well-being and developmental progress.
- Safety, well-being and development outcomes for children who leave care through an SGO and where a supervision order is made at the same time did not differ from those where only an SGO is made.
- DfE data has shown that children on SGOs have better educational outcomes at key stages 2 and 4 than children who are looked-after.
- A strong pre-existing relationship between the child and the carer when the Order is made contributes to good outcomes
- Greater integration of the child into the family is associated with better child outcomes
- The child's older age when a SGO is made is a risk factor for poorer child outcomes
- Emotional and behavioural difficulties are a major risk factor for poor placement progress and child well-being outcomes.

Introduction

Stability and disruption rates provide us with a good appreciation of the durability of special guardianship but they tell us little about the quality of the placement and its contribution to a child's well-being and developmental progress. To address this question, evidence is needed on children's developmental outcomes and factors that enhance or diminish the likelihood of a good outcome. First-hand accounts of children's experiences are also needed to understand the impact of the move to a new long-term carer on their lives.

Child outcomes

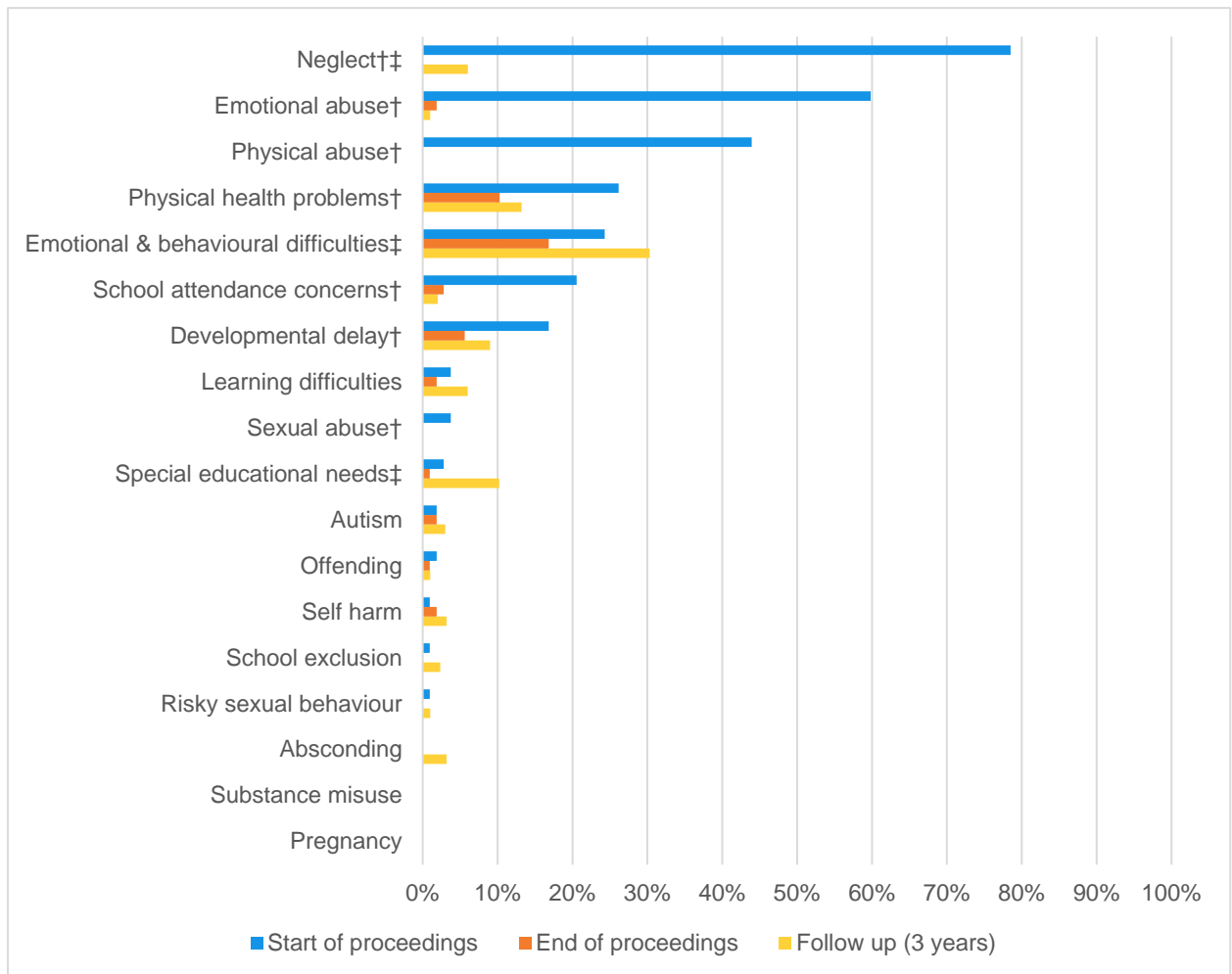
Only a small number of studies have investigated child outcomes empirically and there have been limited opportunities for long-term tracking given the relatively recent introduction of special guardianship. Nevertheless, the studies provide valuable learning to help inform decision-making by local authorities and courts. The main sources of evidence are derived from local authority case file audits of 230 children from seven local authorities (in Wade) and 107 children from four authorities¹³ (in Harwin). They ask somewhat different questions, use different methodologies and have different lengths of follow-up so they cannot be directly compared. However, they come to similar conclusions regarding the benefits of special guardianship. In Harwin, children's safety and well-being outcomes were compared at the start and end of proceedings and at the end of the follow-up.¹⁴ All the SGOs had been made in 2014/15 and children were tracked for a maximum of three years. As can be seen from Figure 1, children's safety, health and well-being outcomes had improved¹⁵ over the follow-up for the majority on a range of measures. But some developmental outcomes deteriorated between the end of proceedings and the end of follow-up. This may reflect better identification by agencies once pre-school children started school, as well as the emergence of new problems (Dickens et al., 2019).

¹³ They comprised 96% of all SGOs made in the four authorities following care proceedings in 2014/15.

¹⁴ Data sources were the local authority children's service records, legal bundles held by the local authority legal departments and Cafcass electronic case management records used to identify and match the cases.

¹⁵ Based on survival analysis.

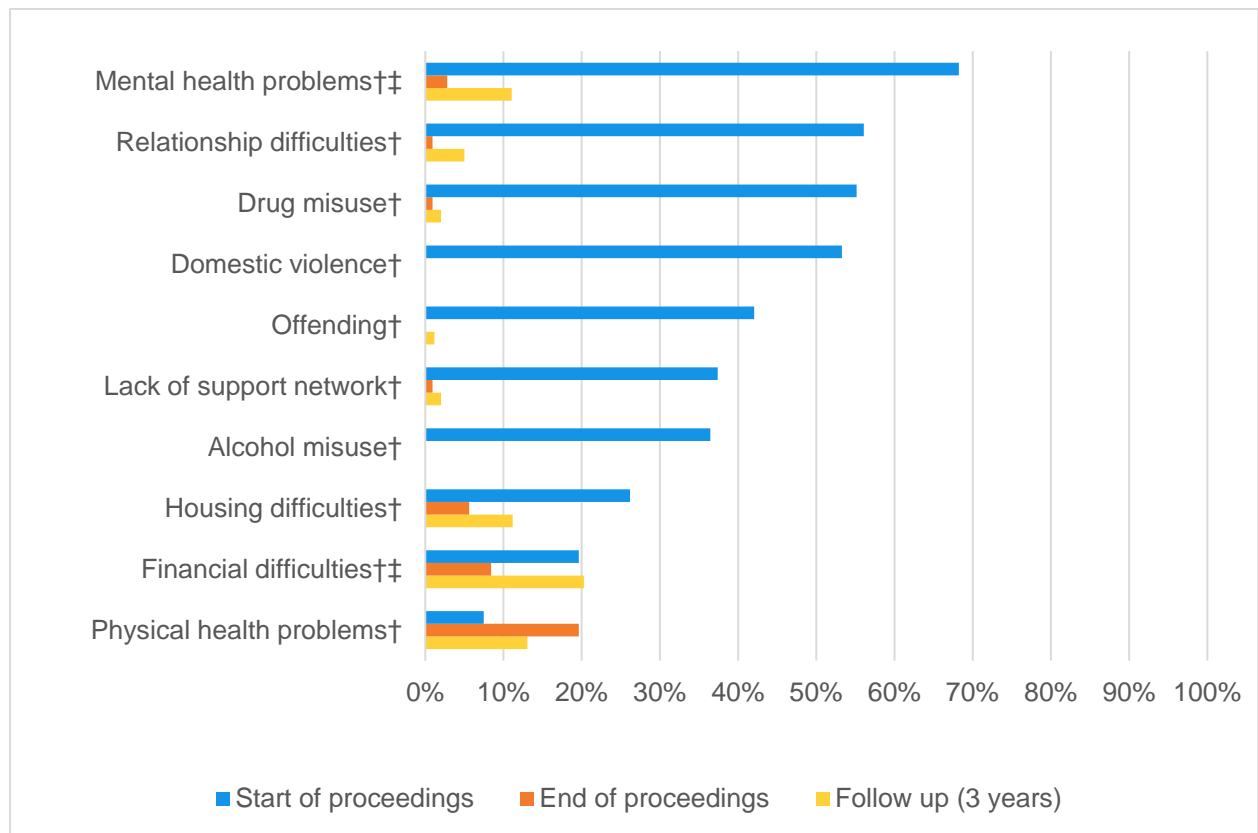
Figure 1: Comparing the children’s experience of abuse and neglect and well-being profiles at the start and end of proceedings, and at the end of the three-year follow-up



† denotes that the change from the start to the end of proceedings was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).
 ‡ denotes that the change from the end of proceedings to the end of year three of the follow-up was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

The overwhelming majority of children were also estimated to be living with special guardians who protected them from the parental psychosocial difficulties that had been part of the reasons for the care proceedings application. According to the information available on file, none of the children was exposed to the likelihood of domestic violence or alcohol misuse by their special guardian in the follow-up (Figure 2). However, their experience of their special guardians’ physical and mental health problems was more common, as were the carer’s financial problems (20% of children) or housing difficulties (10%). Children where a supervision order was made alongside the SGO were significantly more likely to face material disadvantage than children where there was only the SGO.

Figure 2: Comparing the children’s exposure to parental problems at the start and end of proceedings, and to special guardians’ problems at the end of the three-year follow-up



† denotes that the change from the start to the end of proceedings was statistically significant (p<0.05).
 ‡ denotes that the change from the end of proceedings to the end of year three of the follow-up was statistically significant (p<0.05).

The primary research question in Wade was whether the child was doing well in the placement. The findings are based on a composite measure of ‘child-focused’ outcomes that included an overall rating of placement progress, the special guardian’s view as to the child’s integration into the family, and a judgment about their development and well-being¹⁶ over the previous six months.¹⁷

Using this composite measure, 59% of the 223 children were rated to be doing ‘very well’ in their placements and 31% of the children were reported to be doing ‘quite well’. Progress was judged to be poor in 10% of the placements and the majority of these children were no longer still living with their special guardian.

Children’s developmental and well-being outcomes were also rated positively for the majority of children by the special guardians. Overall, most children were reported to be ‘healthy, thriving and normally happy’ (Wade et al., 2014: 161). This was so in respect of health, attachments and emotional well-being,¹⁸ the same factors that had been rated positively in 2010 by carers (Wade et al., 2010). Overall one-third or fewer children had a poor or very

¹⁶ Development and wellbeing covered health, education, friendships, behaviour, confidence and skills. Information was based on a survey completed by 115 special guardians.

¹⁷ All results about outcomes and placement progress take account of the length of time the child had been living with the special guardian.

¹⁸ Emotional well-being was defined as being: sad; unhappy; normally happy. It was a separate measure from emotional and behavioural difficulties.

poor rating in relation to their health, education, emotional ties, friendships, skills, confidence and behaviour.

Factors that increased or diminished the risk of poor well-being child outcomes

The main source of evidence is from the case file audit in Wade (2014). This produced the following findings:

Child-level factors

- Serious emotional and behavioural difficulties (measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire¹⁹ [SDQ]) increased the probability of the special guardian rating that:
 - the placement had not 'gone well';
 - the child was not well integrated into the family;²⁰
 - the child's development and well-being were 'poor' or 'quite poor'.
- Child age: older age²¹ when the SGO was made predicted a poorer child development and well-being rating by the special guardian.
- Gender: being a boy predicted a poorer child development and well-being rating by the special guardian.
- In summary, the most likely predictors of a poor rating of developmental and social progress were being a boy whose SGO was made when the child was older and who had emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Carer factors

High levels of mental health difficulties as measured by the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12),²² combined with a high carer strain score²³ also increased the likelihood of placements being rated by special guardians as going less well.

A high carer strain score was also linked to:

- Whether the special guardian felt well prepared for their role as special guardian;
- Whether the local authority was 'less than fully supportive' of the SGO application.

Family factors

In Wade's survey, the strength of the bond between the child and the carer at the point the SGO was made and the presence of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties were the two factors that best predicted the overall judgment about placement progress.

¹⁹ See Goodman (1997). The SDQ is a widely used screening tool to assess children's emotional and behavioural difficulties and prosocial behaviour.

²⁰ The rating covered the following: the child is easy to care for; feels part of the family; trusts you; feels you care for him/her; talks to you about personal things; feels encouraged. Family integration measures have been used in foster care studies undertaken by the University of York and are based on a 12-point rating scale.

²¹ Precise age is not specified here, rather it is a continuum where older children at the time of SGO tended to fare worse on the developmental scale at follow-up.

²² The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) is a standardised measure designed to detect non-psychotic mental health problems associated with depression, anxiety, somatic symptoms and social dysfunction (Goldberg et al., 1997). It is a widely used screening tool.

²³ A 'bespoke' carer strain instrument, originally devised at the University of York for foster carers and adopters was used to measure levels of strain. It combined several components, including adequacy of housing, financial strain, employment opportunities, lack of leisure time, feeling tired and presence of strain on family relationships.

- A strong bond with the child when the SGO was made combined with low scores on emotional and behavioural difficulties (measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) were the only two factors in combination that were significantly related to placement progress.

A majority of special guardians reported that the children were well integrated into the family. However, this was mediated by a range of factors. As reported earlier, greater integration was reported when children had fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties (measured by SDQ scores) and when guardians felt well prepared for their role. In addition, two other factors were linked to greater integration. They were:

- Greater support from the special guardian's family;
- Less frequent contact with birth mothers.

With the exception of the frequency of contact with birth mothers, these various points are readily understood. Emotional and behavioural problems could both contribute to and result from problematic contact and increase carer strain. Well-prepared special guardians would be better able to manage the many challenges in contact, particularly if they had support from their own families. The Wade study suggests that children who had frequent contact with their birth parents talked about going home more often with the consequent tensions that this created for the child and the rest of the family.

Neither Wade nor Harwin directly measured the impact of contact on children's well-being. But it was an important issue. In Wade, 20% of the children had no contact with their birth parents at follow-up (three to six years after the SGO was granted). However, between approximately 30% to 56% of the children had monthly contact with relatives.

Both studies reported qualitatively on the impacts on children of problematic contact. Wade found that carers were more likely to report that contact was not beneficial when children had a high score for emotional and behavioural difficulties and overall 'relatively poor' developmental progress. In Harwin, the qualitative analysis of children who re-entered local authority care found that conflictual and difficult contact with birth parents was one of three factors contributing to permanent placement change.

Wade reports that children valued contact with brothers and sisters placed elsewhere and were unhappy when they lost contact. However, loss of contact with siblings was not a predictor of poorer integration into the special guardian family.

The child's views of special guardianship

Both the Wade studies (2014 and 2010) included a small number of interviews with children. Three children participated in the 2010 survey and ten children were interviewed for the 2014 report. They were all aged nine or over and were living with special guardians who had taken part in the surveys. Numbers were low because many children in the studies were under the age of nine, or, if older, had learning difficulties. None of the other studies reports on children's views.

The interviews explored a range of themes relating to perceptions of permanency, their understanding of special guardianship and identity issues. Key themes to emerge were as follows:

- The children did not understand the nature and implications of special guardianship and how it differed from adoption.
- The order was less important than having a sense of 'psychological permanence'. This sense included:
 - a perception of a settled future (especially important for children who had previously been in foster care);

- resolution of identity issues such as whether to call the special guardians ‘mum’ and ‘dad’ and to take on their surnames (hyphenated to their own);
- the feeling that they are a ‘normal family now’.
- The quality of contact with birth parents affected the sense of psychological permanence:
 - insecurity increased when contact visits were difficult and when birth parents told their children that they would be returning home soon.

Implications

The evidence on child outcomes is derived from samples of children, a majority of whom were previously looked after or subject to care proceedings due to significant harm.²⁴ The positive outcomes in the majority of cases suggest that special guardianship is not only a stable order but it can help protect children from further abuse or neglect and promote their integration into the wider family. Government national experimental statistics also indicate that educational outcomes are better for children on SGOs than for looked after children. In short, special guardianship for the right child with the right family and appropriate support is a valuable order. This is an important message for both practitioners and policy-makers.

However, there are also some cautionary messages for practitioners as regards risk factors which need to be taken into account in assessment, support plans and decisions on the suitability of a SGO. They highlight the importance of a thorough assessment of the quality of the child’s relationship with their prospective carer, children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties, their age, carer strain and mental health issues, and make very clear that support plans need to identify ways in which risks can be mitigated through appropriate therapeutic and support services. Particular attention also needs to be paid to ways of dealing with problematic contact.

Risks associated with financial and housing difficulties need to be considered to reduce children’s exposure to the negative effects of these issues on well-being which are documented in the wider literature (Cooper and Stewart, 2013; 2017; Bywaters et al., 2016; Schoon et al., 2013). These findings are very important for policy-makers.

The findings regarding the use of supervision orders to accompany an SGO are also noteworthy. Children did not have better outcomes when both orders were made but we do not know if they would have fared worse had the supervision order not been attached.

The themes identified in the child interviews capture a number of key issues, however, the numbers are very small. There are a number of small studies on children’s views of kinship care more generally,²⁵ but a strong conclusion from **this evidence review that there is a dearth of studies on children’s experiences of special guardianship**. As long ago as 2008 the need for studies investigating children’s experiences of SGOs was identified to explore how far they provided ‘security, continuity, commitment and identity’ which encapsulated government’s views of the features of a permanent placement (Hall, 2008). With much larger cohorts of children now available who have been placed on special guardianship, and a wider array of methodologies to explore their views, this significant gap in knowledge and understanding must be addressed.

More generally, this overview of special guardianship studies has also found that **the overall evidence research base is very limited on children’s medium- and long-term outcomes. This is a key finding**. There is a need for national longitudinal studies on children’s long-term educational, health, development and well-being outcomes. **Research**

²⁴ In the 2014 survey by Wade et al., 30% of children were previously not looked after. Approximately 25% of those who were looked after had been subject to care proceedings (personal communication).

²⁵ See, for example, Farmer et al. (2013) and Wellard et al. (2018).

is also very limited on contact with birth parents and siblings and their impacts on child well-being.

What is the impact on, and experience of those carers who become special guardians?

Key findings

- Special guardianship is a life-changing order. Most special guardians thought that it was the right order for them and their child because it gave them legal security and enhanced their parental decision-making powers.
- Special guardians frequently experience a wide range of stresses across all areas of life. They include financial and housing issues, as well as impacts on family life and well-being.
- Special guardian stresses increased when their children had emotional and behavioural difficulties. They negatively impact on mental health well-being and significantly increase carer strain.
- Raised levels of carer strain are associated with lower ratings of placement progress and of the child's integration into the family.
- Contact with the child's birth parents is a major source of strain for a significant minority of special guardians.
- The interviews and focus groups confirm the key findings identified in the carer surveys.
- Special guardians have many concerns over their experience of local authorities and access to justice that are highly relevant to the Re P-S Court of Appeal judgment.
- When prospective guardians were not party to the proceedings, many reported that they did not have access to necessary information about the child, the risks and their ability to safeguard and promote well-being.
- A lack of legal and social work advice affected prospective special guardians' ability to advocate for financial and other support. They often did not understand the nature and implications of special guardianship and some had to resort to Google to get basic information.
- Carers want their special guardianship support plans to include provision for allowances, other finances and clear specification of ongoing support arrangements for themselves and the child when needed.
- Carers wanted guidance and support in managing problematic contact but found that it was often only provided short-term. Some welcomed support over contact provided by means of a supervision order.
- Special guardians want to have their voice heard. They often feel undervalued by the authorities and concerned that their needs and difficulties have not been listened to.

Introduction

Special guardianship is by its nature a life-changing experience. Forming a new family and developing new relationships with birth parents, often at a later stage in life, sets everyone on a brand new life course, not just in the short term but in law until the child is 18, and often beyond that. Therefore understanding the detail of the multiple impacts on special guardians and their experiences is very important for both practice and policy. It can shine a light on what is working well and not so well and help inform professional decision-making.

The main studies provide a growing repository of special guardians' experiences that cover the period from 2006 to 2016/17. It is largely based on first-hand accounts charted through surveys, focus groups and interviews. Implications are drawn out after reporting on all the

sources. The accounts provide a snapshot rather than a longitudinal picture and this is also the case when standardised questionnaires have been used to assess impact.

There are two main avenues of inquiry. The first focuses on the impacts of special guardianship on the health and well-being of the carer, on family relationships, finances, employment and housing. The second examines how the process of becoming a special guardian affects well-being. In reality the two foci of analysis interact with each other. The main story that can be told is predominantly about women as carers and the impacts that special guardianship has on their lives, health and well-being. To date, there have been no surveys of the experiences of partners, birth parents or other members of the wider family.

Survey data: based on questionnaires completed by 115 special guardians

The Wade 2014 survey identified three primary stressors. A majority reported increased financial strain on family resources (61%); lack of leisure (71.5%); and feeling tired much of the time (61.5%). A concerning and significant minority reported:

- Housing difficulties (overcrowding and/or lack of privacy) (30%).
- Restrictions on employment opportunities (42%).
- A strain on family relationships (41%).

The impact on mental health and levels of strain was corroborated through use of the GHQ-12.

Child emotional and behavioural difficulties were the only issue to predict high GHQ and carer strain scores. Two other factors, however, predicted increased carer strain. They were that:

- The local authority was 'less than fully supportive' of the application.
- The special guardian felt less well-prepared to take on the role.

Carers who felt strained were less likely to report that the child's placement was going well and that the child was well integrated into the family. They were more likely to experience difficulties with maternal contact and its consequences on child well-being, but this finding was not statistically significant.

The experience and impact of becoming and being a special guardian: interview and focus group evidence

This section is based on three studies (Wade et al., 2014; Harwin et al., 2019; McGrath (forthcoming)).

It is based on interviews with a total of 69 special guardians and focus groups with 22 special guardians.²⁶ Grandparents were the largest group of participants.

The process of becoming a special guardian: experiences and views regarding local authorities and courts

Many special guardians found their experiences of local authority assessments and court left them feeling 'isolated, bruised and embattled' unless they had access to legal advice. The process was perceived to be adversarial, often described as 'them and us' and 'a fight' to

²⁶ Paul McGrath interviewed 27 grandparents; Harwin et al. interviewed seven special guardians; Wade et al. interviewed 15 special guardians (2010 study) and 20 different special guardians for the 2014 report. Twenty-two special guardians took part in focus groups and two provided their views in writing (Harwin et al., 2019).

keep the child. This was more frequent when the local authority did not fully support the choice of prospective special guardian.

Many were not party to the proceedings or were unsure of their legal status. When they were not parties to the proceedings, many reported that they did not have access to necessary information about the child, the risks and their ability to safeguard and promote well-being.

A lack of legal and social work advice affected special guardians' ability to advocate for financial and other support. They often did not understand the nature and implications of special guardianship and some had to resort to Google to get basic information. They did not always feel that they had been well prepared for the role of special guardian.

The challenges of taking on the parenting role and forging a new family identity

Becoming a special guardian was life-changing and special guardians' long-term commitment to the child was an important theme. Becoming a special guardian is a family matter that requires adjustments, including some tensions. There were, however, some consistent challenges:

- Parenting children with complex emotional and behavioural needs due to their earlier life experiences is challenging and stressful. Special guardians worried about their ability to do so effectively, without support and access to therapeutic help for the child.
- Special guardians were concerned about the longer term, and in particular what would happen once the child reached the age of 18, an issue that was particularly relevant for older special guardians.
- A key issue for grandparents was reconciling their feelings for their own adult children who were frequently in difficulty; ambivalence about resuming a parental role when they may have had other life plans; and managing tensions within the wider family.
- The challenges of contact were frequently reported. In many cases special guardians felt ill-equipped to deal with contact and the impacts on the child, and wanted guidance and support. Once the SGO had been granted, support for contact was often quickly withdrawn. Yet contact needs could change over time as children grew older or new members of the family came forward.
- In the few cases where supervision orders were used to assist in supporting complex contact arrangements, they were highly valued. Special guardians worried about what would happen when the supervision order ended.

Impact on finances and housing situation

Stress over accommodation was particularly common when special guardians had children of their own and/or were taking a sibling group – sometimes at very short notice. However, they found that the role of the local authority was very limited. It was only able to write a supporting letter to the housing department, a response that special guardians considered to be inadequate. Success in rehousing could take several years.

Attitudes to support

A strong theme was the importance of support. Informal support groups hosted by local authorities and NGOs were valued and so was support from the wider family. However, support could be difficult to access for many reasons that include both structural and internal barriers.

The structural barriers included a lack of available services, lack of knowledge about services on the part of professionals and access to support being subject to means-testing or restricted to children who were previously looked after.

Internal barriers included the following:

- Special guardians prized self-reliance and did not want help.
- Unhappy experiences of help-seeking from the authorities, as well as negative experiences during assessment and proceedings, discouraged special guardians from subsequently seeking help from the local authority.
- Fear that requesting help from the local authority might be perceived as evidence of not coping, leading to the possible removal of the child.

Implications

The survey and interview findings tell a similar story about the positive benefits of special guardianship and the range of associated stressors. These messages are consistent over time. The research findings from the interviews rely primarily on testimony of grandparents, mainly women. **There is a need for research on the views and experiences of other groups of special guardians**, such as aunts, uncles, friends and unrelated carers, and to include those where the SGO ended prematurely. **There is a pressing need for research on how best to ensure safe and positive contact with birth parents and the wider family.** Issues around housing and income and access to legal aid to enable participation in the court proceedings involve wider policy-related responses.

The findings have important practice and policy implications. They point up the importance of support and show that a variety of types of support can play an important role. They include peer networks of special guardians, access to support via the Adoption Support Fund, specialist therapeutic support for children and for carers experiencing mental health stresses. Some forms of support are relatively inexpensive and can be very effective by enabling peer group networking. The findings also raise a question as to the leverage the court might bring to ensure adequate housing provision is provided to the family from the start. They also suggest that supervision orders when made to support complex contact arrangements may have a valuable role.

Conclusions

The review has found that the evidence on the stability of special guardianship is consistent and robust. The impacts on special guardians are consistent in demonstrating the positive benefits of special guardianship but there are also negative effects on the health and well-being of these carers. There is more information on this in relation to the entire spectrum of special guardians than there is on those who are caring for children whose SGO was made at the end of care proceedings and who are among the most vulnerable (Wilkinson and Bowyer, 2017). **The most marked gaps in knowledge relate to children's developmental outcomes and experiences and how to effectively manage contact.** Despite these gaps, the evidence has highlighted the need for social workers and courts to pay particular attention to child risk factors, particularly older age groups of children and those with emotional and behavioural difficulties, in their assessments and support plans. The evidence indicates that **risks can be mitigated by helping special guardians to fully understand their role via appropriate preparation, legal advice and tailor-made support for them and their children.**

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and practice issues - both those that are working well and those that not working at all. This includes having access to sources of information that are not explicitly identified in this report – particularly those of special guardianship carers but unfortunately, not young people themselves.

Despite the challenges that both professionals and carers are having in finding answers to complex questions, there is a deeply held commitment to identifying and finding solutions for families whose lives have been changed by special guardianship.

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