



Report of the Head of Child and Family Services

Social Care and Tackling Poverty Service Transformation Committee –
4 December 2023

Special Guardianship Orders

Purpose:	The report presents the development of our services in relation to children and young people living in Special Guardianship Order arrangements.
Policy Framework:	Social Services and Wellbeing Act 2014
Consultation:	Access to Services, Finance and Legal
Report Author:	Claire Edwards
Finance Officer:	Chris Davies
Legal Officer:	Lucy Moore
Access to Services Officer:	Rhian Millar
For Information	

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report outlines our commitment, vision, and ambitions for our support services for children, young people, and families in Special Guardianship Order arrangements.
- 1.2 A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) provides an alternative legal status for children and families, offering greater security than long-term fostering placements but without the legal severance from the birth family that stems from an Adoption Order. Most importantly, it ensures children are offered the opportunity to grow up and be cared for within their family network and the Special Guardian will have parental responsibility for the child.

Information on relevant legislation and practice guidance for Special Guardianship Orders can be found in the Special Guardianship Order Policy (Appendix 1).

2. Background

2.1 The Special Guardianship Order project was initiated in 2021. The project has been led by the Family and Friends Fostering Team, who manage and oversee Special Guardianship Order arrangements, with support from Child and Family's Service Development Team. The project aims to review and develop the support offer and systems we have in place for our children, young people, and Guardians to ensure they have access to the right support, at the right time, throughout the lifetime of their order.

2.2 Key achievements to date include:

- Reviewing and streamlining of our Special Guardianship Order system and processes, including financial support.
- Updated Special Guardianship Order Policy (See Appendix 1).
- A focussed Special Guardianship Order Development Plan (see Appendix 2) which is based on the 'Key elements of a special Guardianship Service' as identified by the Kinship Organisation in their best practice guidance for England and Wales.
- Consultation events with children, young people and Guardians to understand what matters to them and inform the development of our services.
- Enhanced data and performance monitoring information to support our understanding of our Special Guardianship Order population.
- Development of the Special Guardianship Order stability meeting process to provide a rapid response to families in Special Guardianship Order arrangements who are at risk of family breakdown.
- Development of induction / information workshops for prospective and current Guardians.
- Growth of the Special Guardianship team, employing a Special Guardianship Coordinator and additional support workers to strengthen the service following significant growth in Special Guardianship Orders being granted. The Special guardianship team are currently supporting 330 children subject to an Special Guardianship Order support plan.

3. Achieving our Ambition

3.1 Child and Family Services is committed to ensuring our Guardians are supported emotionally, financially, and practically, to enable the children in their care to thrive. The development of our services has, and will continue to be, focussed on achieving this.

3.2 Children and young people in Special Guardianship Order arrangements have often experienced trauma and disruption similar to those who remain in care, or those who leave care through adoption. We recognise therefore that children and young people in Special Guardianship Order

arrangements need a similar range of therapeutic services. Our vision is to establish robust and collaborative working relationships between the Family and Friends Team and the internal therapy service, with the primary goal of meeting the therapeutic needs of children in special guardianship arrangements. We understand the importance of working hand-in-hand as teams to develop comprehensive and effective plans that address the specific needs of each child and their family. We believe that by equipping our staff with enhanced therapeutic knowledge, and close working between the Family and Friends Team and Internal Therapy Service we can better support children and their families in their journey to recover and thrive. Ultimately, we want to create an environment where every child in special guardianship arrangements receives the therapeutic support they require, enabling them to heal, grow, and flourish.

- 3.3 Additionally, as with many other families, there are times when low-level support is beneficial to ensure the family's wellbeing and placement stability. In many cases, this support can be provided through peer networks. We have developed additional workshops and peer support groups to enable carers to support each other and engage with Special Guardianship Order support workers in informal settings and these continue to successfully grow and develop.
- 3.4 We also recognise the importance of early intervention and prevention and close working between the Family and Friends Team and early intervention and prevention services. Our vision includes working proactively to provide services and quality support to these children and their families in order to prevent the escalation of difficulties and the potential breakdown of the family unit. By engaging in early intervention, we aim to identify and address any emerging challenges or concerns before they become more significant. This proactive approach allows us to provide timely and targeted support, which can help improve the overall well-being of the children and their families. Furthermore, we understand that by offering quality support and intervention at an early stage, we can assist in building strong foundations for the future. By equipping families with the necessary tools, resources, and guidance, we empower them to navigate challenges, strengthen relationships, and create a nurturing environment for the children in their care. Our vision is rooted in the belief that by investing in early intervention and prevention, we can make a significant and positive impact on the lives of children and their families. We strive to create a supportive and inclusive community where families feel heard, valued, and empowered, ultimately avoiding the breakdown of the family unit and promoting the well-being of all involved.
- 3.5 When entering into a Special Guardianship Order arrangement, Guardians have to adjust to the additional cost of caring for a child and the potential effect their new caring role may have on their work life / financial stability. It is crucial to acknowledge that financial support should not be the sole reason for a Special Guardianship arrangement

failing to survive. We are in the process of developing new financial arrangements for Special Guardianship Orders, part of which focussed on increased 'Basic Allowances' for all Guardians which was approved as part of the Fees and Allowances Paper to the Corporate Management Team earlier this year. Alongside this, we are building a robust financial support offer to ensure we work with the Council's Welfare Rights Unit so that our Guardians have support to understand and maximise their financial situation. We have also been working alongside the Social Services, Social Care Income and Finance Team, to develop robust, consistent approaches to assessing the finances of Guardians in line with the approaches taken across the Directorate and Welfare Benefits system.

- 3.6 We pride ourselves on working with Guardians in an open and honest way to explore their individual circumstances and the implications of them entering into a Special Guardianship Order. We understand this is particularly crucial prior to the order being granted to ensure prospective Guardians are able to make decisions around whether this type of arrangement is the most suitable for their family. To support our understanding of what information is important to Guardians, we have been working closely with our local Special Guardianship Order support group around this topic, and their feedback will support us to develop updated information about the support and services available to Guardians.
- 3.7 Each individual Special Guardianship Order support plan outlines the support the children, young people, and Guardians will receive both during their first year and ongoing throughout the lifetime of their order. The information contained in the plan includes information about practical, emotional, and financial support available for each family and the details of their allocated Support Worker who will be their link for support, information, and advice. Support plans are reviewed on an annual basis to allow us to understand the family's experience from the past year and respond to their changing needs as necessary. We have seen significant growth of our Special Guardianship population in recent years, and to support this we have expanded the Family and Friends Fostering Team with additional specialist roles focussing on supporting Special Guardianship Order arrangements. This includes a Special Guardianship Coordinator role and additional Support Workers to strengthen our offer. Recently 6 additional support officers have been appointed, a coordinator post is being advertised and a senior Social Worker dedicated to this part of the team to focus in complex support plans and stability meetings has also been assigned.
- 3.8 Engagement and participation with children, young people and Guardians is key to ensuring we have a clear understanding of what matters to families in Special Guardianship Order arrangements and provide us with an understanding of models of best practice and priorities for future service development. Our Participation and Children's Rights Officer has, and will continue to, work alongside the Family and Friends

Team to maximise opportunities for meaningful what matters conversations and co-design opportunities.

3.9 The Special Guardianship Order service and offer has grown significantly over recent years, feedback from individual families is good and the staff team are skilled and stable. There is a huge focus on achieving excellent quality support plans, joint working with therapeutic and early help and prevention teams and external agencies to achieve our vision.

3.10 We are committed to the ongoing service analysis and development of our Special Guardianship offer. We will continue to work with, listen and respond to the views of children, young people, and Guardians. Our Special Guardianship Order development plan (Appendix B) outlines clear identified priority areas of development which we believe will enable us to achieve our vision for children, young people, and their family network.

4. Integrated Assessment Implications

4.1 The Council is subject to the Equality Act (Public Sector Equality Duty and the socio-economic duty), the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure, and must in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Acts.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Deliver better outcomes for those people who experience socio-economic disadvantage
- Consider opportunities for people to use the Welsh language
- Treat the Welsh language no less favourably than English.
- Ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

4.2 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 mandates that public bodies in Wales must carry out sustainable development. Sustainable development means the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the 'well-being goals'.

4.3 Our Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) process ensures we have paid due regard to the above. It also takes into account other key issues and priorities, such as poverty and social exclusion, community cohesion, carers, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Welsh language.

4.4 An IIA Screening Form has been completed with the agreed outcome that a full IIA report was not required. The IIA screening process outlined there is no reputational risk to the council or any negative impact on any protected characteristics. The impacts are positive. (Appendix C – Integrated Impact Assessment Screening).

5. Legal Implications

5.1 There are no legal implications.

6. Financial Implications

6.1 There are no financial implications.

Background papers: None

Appendices:

Appendix A – Special Guardianship Order Policy Nov 23

Appendix B – Special Guardianship Order Development Plan

Appendix C – Special Guardianship Order IIA Screening Form