

Special Guardianship Questionnaire Report

November 2023



1 Background and Methodology

This survey was designed to better understand the effectiveness of the current Special Guardianship support offered by Shropshire Council and to assist in review and development of special guardianship support provision.

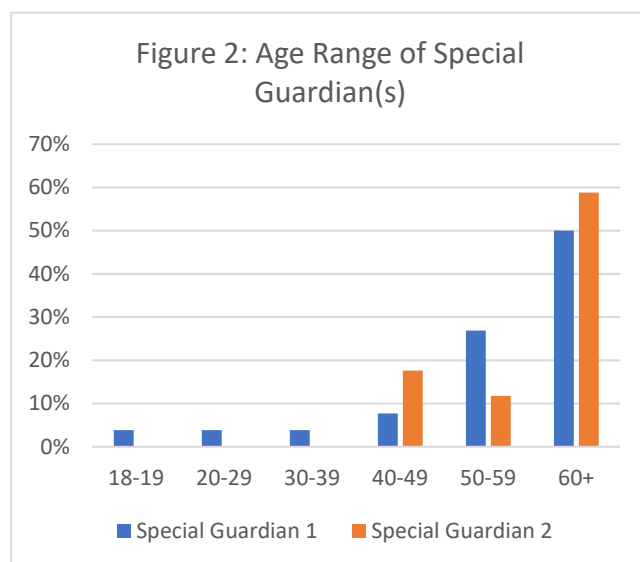
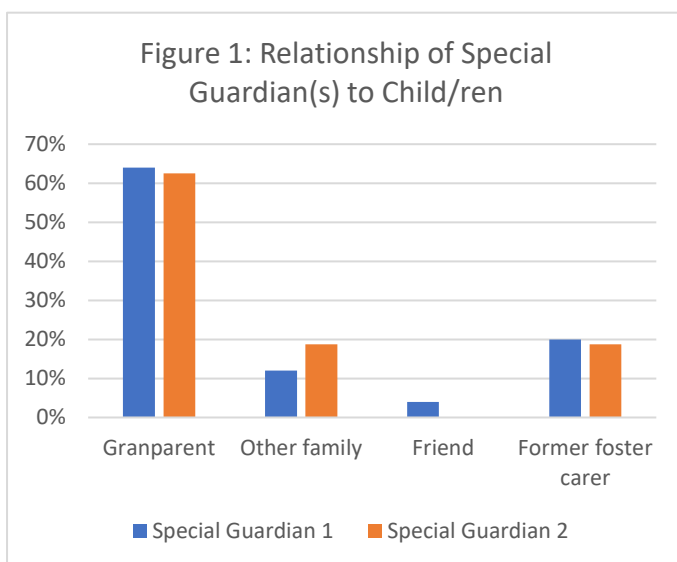
The survey was sent to all households of the 141 children with Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) being offered support by Shropshire Council and repeated reminders to complete the survey were also sent.

Survey responses were collected via Survey Monkey and quantitative results were analysed using Excel. Open-ended qualitative responses were thematically grouped for ease of interpretation. Some details in comments that may identify respondents have been redacted to maintain anonymity.

2 Respondent and Child Demographics

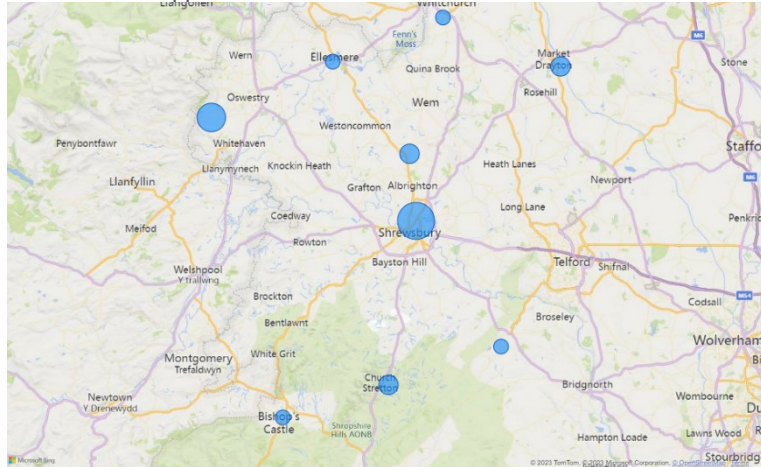
There are 141 children supported by Shropshire Council’s Special Guardianship Support Team, and **39 (approximately 28%) of them are accounted for in this survey**, with 27 individual households responding.

The makeup of the special guardians responding to the survey was largely of older people, aged 60+ and grandparents of the children under SGOs (see **Figures 1 and 2**). Other family members and former foster carers made up the next biggest group of respondents, and very few special guardians reported being under the age of 50.



Most of the survey respondents currently live in Shropshire, with only three of the respondents (approximately 11%) saying that they currently live outside of Shropshire. Respondents were asked to identify their nearest town, so as to provide a sense of the range of areas that this survey covered. Most respondents are located near Shrewsbury and Oswestry, but less populated areas across both North and South Shropshire are represented (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Nearest town of Special Guardians residing in Shropshire. Locations are approximate.



All respondents answering the ethnicity question identified themselves as “White (British; Irish; Welsh)” with the exception of one set of Special Guardians (two people) who both identified as being of Mixed ethnic background.

Respondents identified children under special guardianship orders with them as being mostly white, with five children (14%) identified as having Mixed ethnic background.

The majority of households in the survey are caring for one child under SGO, but 23% are caring for two children and 12% of respondents were caring for 3 or more children (see Figure 4).

The majority of children in the households of survey respondents are of school age

Figure 4: Number of Children in Special Guardianship that Respondents Are Caring For

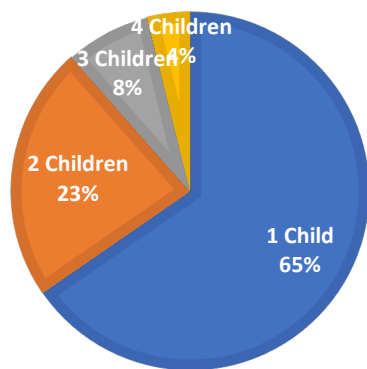
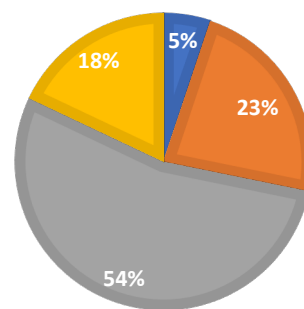


Figure 5: Ages of Children in Special Guardianship that Respondents Are Caring For

Legend: 1-4 years (Blue), 5-9 years (Orange), 10-15 years (Grey), 16 years and over (Yellow)

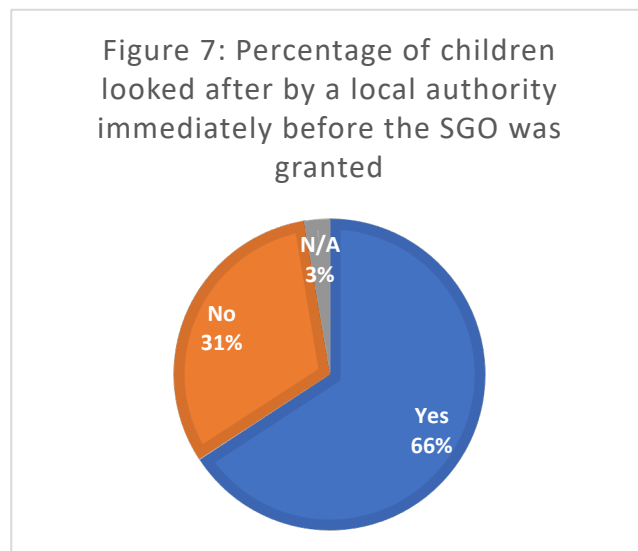
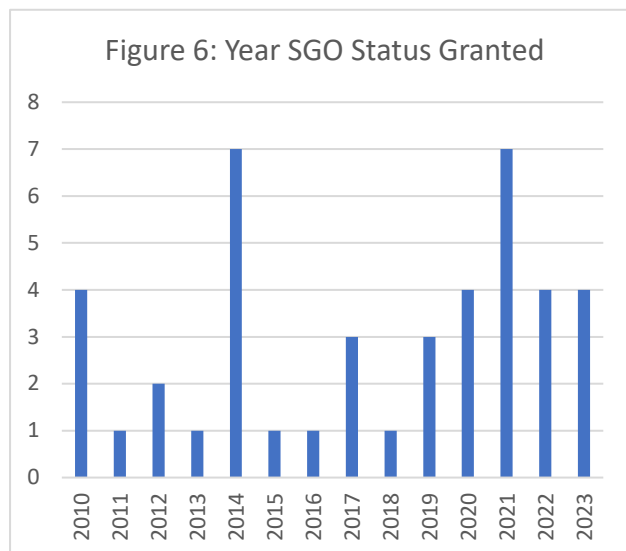


(5-9 and 10-15 years) with smaller percentages of households caring for older teens

or pre-school aged children (see Figure 5).

Children in the households responding to the survey were granted SGO status across a range of years, with peaks in 2014 and 2021 (see Figure 6).¹ **Just over half of children were granted SGO status in the past 5 years.**

Two thirds of children in households responding to the survey were looked after by a local authority prior being granted SGO status (see Figure 7).



3 Entitlements

The majority (72%) of respondents said they had received an SGO assessment and support plan from Shropshire Council. Additionally, **all respondents** said that they had had some contact with the Special Guardianship Support Team.

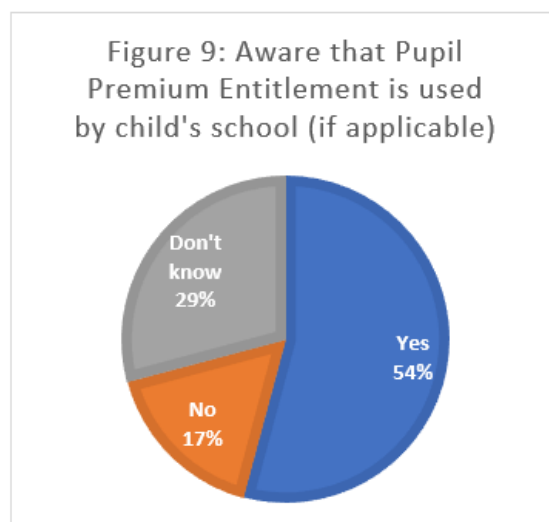
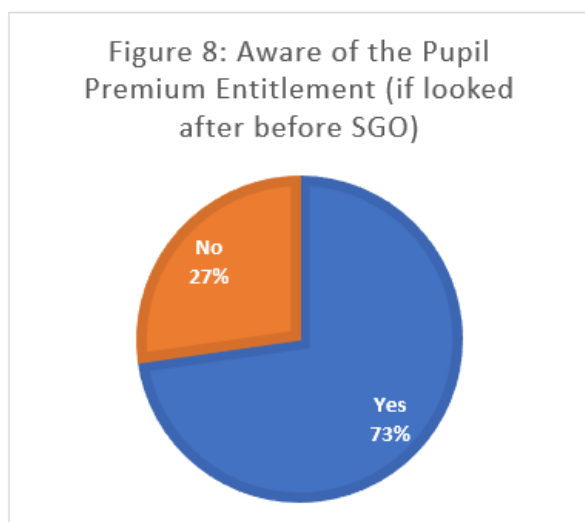
Respondents were then asked a series of questions about specific entitlements that may be applicable for children under SGOs.

Pupil Premium Plus

Pupils who were previously looked after by a local authority are eligible for a Pupil Premium Plus payment to their schools or local authority to support their educational needs. 16 of the 22 (73%) of respondents who had said that the children in their care had been previously looked after by a local authority said that they were aware of this entitlement, while 6 respondents reported that they are not aware of the Pupil Premium (see Figures 8 & 9). Of those reporting that the Pupil Premium is applicable to care, 54% said that they are aware of the entitlement being used by the

¹ Responses to this question account for more than the 39 children identified in previous questions. When added together for this question, respondents, there appear to be 43 children in total. There is no obvious explanation for this overcount. One possibility is that households may be counting children no longer under SGO for whom they were previously responsible.

child's school, while 17% said it is not, and a large minority (29%) said they don't know whether the entitlement is being used by the child's school.



One individual who said that they “don't know” whether the child's school is receiving the Pupil Premium commented that “there is some contention as to the status PP/PPP here.”

Another respondent who said that he/she is not aware of the pupil premium and that the child's school is not receiving it left a lengthy comment in this open-ended question asking for comments on this entitlement. The comment speaks to overall concerns about the educational support the child in their care has been given, rather than the premium specifically, but contains some important feedback about the need for educational support for children with SGO status.

- “[The child in my care] has had problems all his life they have put it down to early childhood trauma which is completely wrong. They will not assess for any underlying issues due to neglect from Shropshire Council and education. [The child] has not been in education for almost 3 years we have been told off the record [the child's] primary school let [them] down big time. [The child] is now a teenager with no purpose. With no diagnosis will keep getting let down by Shropshire Council even specialist schools won't take [the child] because of no diagnosis one day when [the child] may not be here because of fear of rejection I might get an apology but that won't help [the child's] state of mind.”

Adoption Support Fund

Respondents who had children that were looked after by a local authority before SGO was granted were asked whether they are aware of the Adoption Support Fund as a means of getting therapeutic support. **50% of the 20 individuals responding to this question said that yes, they are aware of this fund, and 50% responded that they are not aware of it.**

Three respondents said that this therapeutic support is in place and offered feedback in the following comments:

- “Very supportive, helpful. Originally were assessed SGO with [another local authority], didn't know any of above information until we were assessed by Shropshire.”
- “Currently seeing [specific provider] it's going really well.”
- “This has only just started for [the child in my care].”

4 Feedback on Information and Support

Information and Support Ahead of SGO

Respondents were asked about whether they had been given the opportunity to reflect upon whether becoming a Special Guardian was the right decision for them and the child(ren) in their care, including thinking about their responsibilities under the order and the support that would be available after the order was in place. **85% of respondents said that they did feel that they had been provided with the opportunity to reflect, while 15% said they had not.** Several respondents left comments about this question.

One commented that they found Amy Morgan in the Special Guardianship Support Team to be “great”.

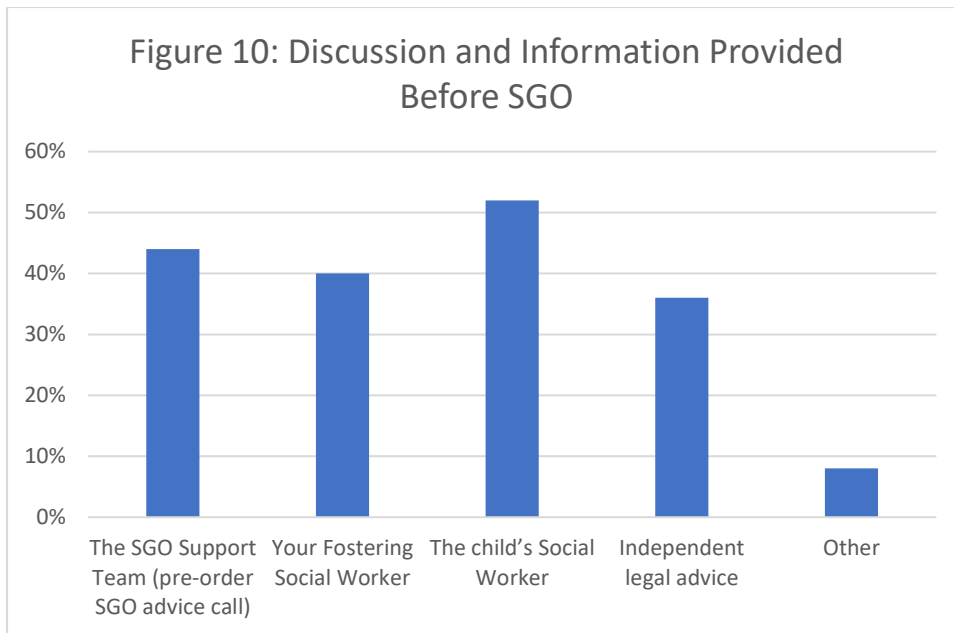
Some respondents reflected that they had made the choice out of a desire to protect the child, and their fears about the child being taken into care.

- “Our grandchild was not going into care.”
- “I was protecting my [grandchild]”
- “We were told that if we didn't take [the child] on and look after [them that the child] would be taken into care and then adopted and then we would never see [the child] again.”

Two respondents reflected that the choice was made hastily and that more reflection might have impacted their decision to become special guardians.

- “With hindsight, what I know now and what I have gleaned from other SGs, I am not sure there was an entirely open and comprehensive setting out of the pros and cons of all options. Not least all the reasons why local authorities strongly favour the SGO route.”
- “On reflection, SGO was not the right decision for the child or us as a family.”

Respondents accessed various sources of information and advice ahead of their decision to become special guardians, including the SGO Support Team, social workers and independent legal advice (**see Figure 10**). The child's social worker was the most likely to have been consulted, with 52% of respondents having had discussions with them about special guardianship ahead of the SGO being granted.



Further comments on this advice were similar to those offered above, with most comments repeated. One respondent, for example, repeated that another local authority did not provide them with enough information, but the Shropshire Council SGO Team “met our needs and gave us all the information that was available to us.”

Despite seeking advice and information from multiple sources, two respondents reiterated that they did not feel that they had received all of the information they needed ahead of making the decision to become special guardians.

- “Not certain if it was good or bad advice.”
- “Although we face access to SGO support, there are still elements of our role as a SG that we are learning about.”

Contact with Special Guardianship Support Team

All respondents said that they had had contact with the Special Guardianship Support Team.

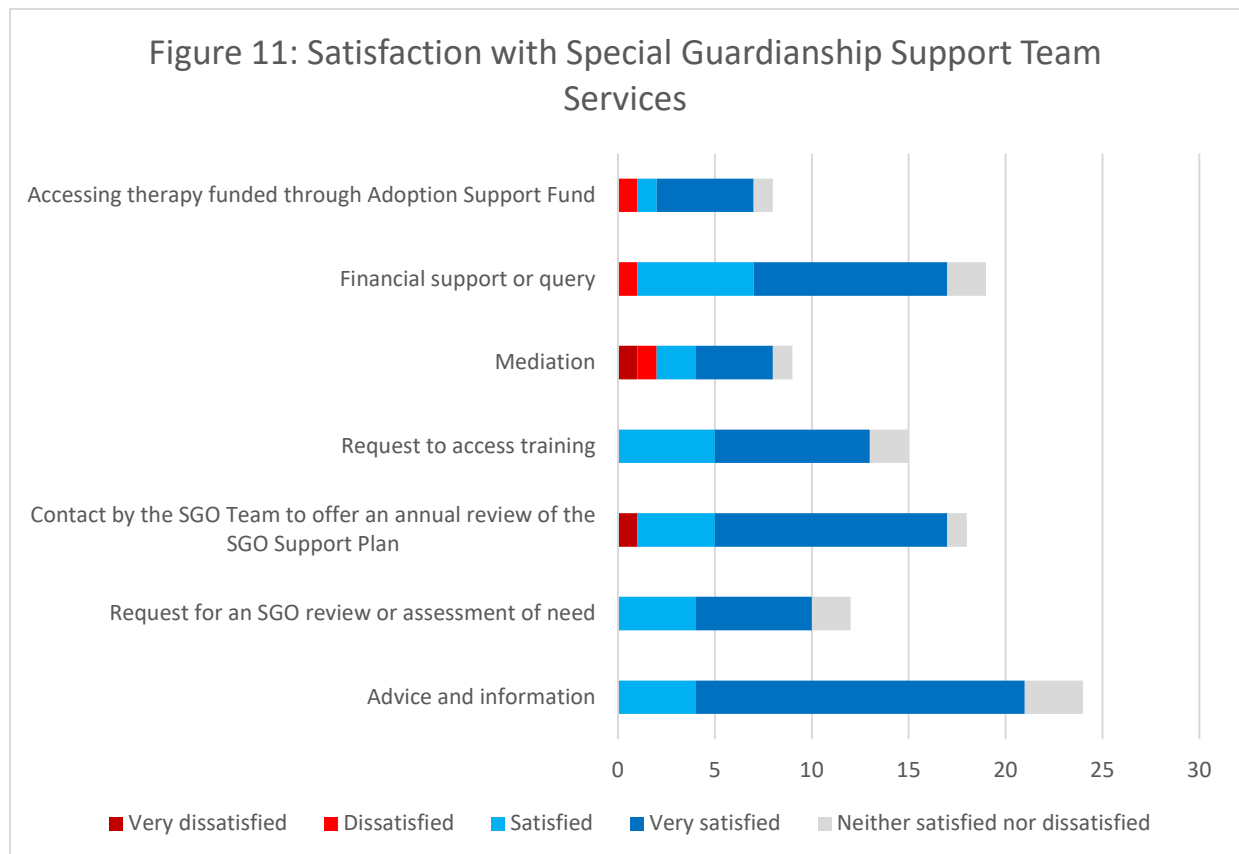
Figure 11 depicts the reported satisfaction levels of those responding to questions about services they had accessed from the Special Guardianship Support Team. Dark red and light red sections of the bar graph indicate negative feedback, while lighter and darker blue sections indicate positive feedback on each service.

Overall, 26 respondents answered that they had accessed one or more of these services, with advice and information being the service most respondents reported having accessed.

Overwhelmingly, respondents reported that their experiences with the team were positive. For example, among those saying they had received advice and information from the team, had requested access to training, and/or requested an SGO review or

assessment, all respondents were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” or felt neutral about the help they received.

While a large majority of respondents also reported positive experiences with the team’s other services, a few respondents reported either being “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with receiving support from the team around accessing therapy funded through the Adoption Support Fund, obtaining financial support, mediation and the annual review of the SGO support plan.



Nine survey respondents provided eleven open-ended comments on services, which largely express positive appreciation for the work of the Special Guardianship Support Team, though a few comments also ask questions and offer some critique of the services the team offers. When additional comments were sought at the end of the survey, some further positive and critical comments were made. These are also integrated into the feedback here.

The positive comments were as follows:

- “Although not in receipt of financial support now, we are very grateful for the financial support we received from 2017 until 2023.”
- “A good listening ear.”
- “Shropshire Council have always treated us with respect and very easy to talk to, never made us feel judged.”

- “Had help sorting out financial problems.”
- “Amy and Jane have been fantastic, they have supported us as a family through very difficult times and have always been there when I have requested contact with them. I have never felt a burden or felt like my call wasn't treated as a priority.”
- “Our experience with SGO Shropshire has been nothing but positive, just keep on doing what you're doing.”
- “After what was an appalling start to our "journey" with Children's Services in October 2021, (it was absolutely dreadful!), things improved massively in February 2022, with the excellent Scott, Jess, and latterly, Jane A...Excellent support from all those mentioned above. I also found the process of preparation for and involvement in the SGO application/hearing very well managed and supported as well. Thank you to all involved in that...[W]e encountered many truly committed staff members. As the SGO process started and as the SGO hearing approached, we initially got to know Amy and then Jane O, who were (and continue to be!) excellent, both being friendly, helpful, patient and supportive....Finally, I would like to thank both Amy and Jane O, and for this opportunity to respond to the Survey – an excellent idea and opportunity, the sheer existence of which carries its own positive and important message – SGs are important, and they matter.”
- “We are brilliantly supported by Amy and if we have an issue at school and she can't attend she sends Jane.”
- “SGO workers seem friendly and approachable, and helped with our query...”

Three respondents posed questions or demonstrated a need for further information:

- “‘Advice and Information’. Who decides what advice and information can either be asked for or given? The SG or SG Support?”
- “Unaware it was available or of the situations in which we could request it. SGO was granted by [another local authority] and as we currently live in Shropshire, we still don't know [which local authority] would arrange this.”
- “I don't know about this” [implying that they are unaware of the services].

Three respondents provided more critical comments which overall indicate these individuals are experiencing a feeling of being unable to get the help they need, even after having accessed services. Their comments were:

- “Mediation with birth parents poor. Feel like we have no options.”
- “Service users (SGs) appear not to be considered important enough to be kept informed of developments/changes in the local authority's services in Children's Services... changes which may affect special guardians.”
- “Only asked for support this year for the first time. A lot of people involved but not much constructive support offered / given.”

Other respondents left comments that offered very specific constructive feedback on how to improve the experience for special guardians in various ways. These comments were:

- “I feel most strongly that there needs to be a more sensitive assessment of support needs and a more “tapered” reduction in support and contact, individualised as required and requested before, during and then after the granting of the SGO. Some SGs may not need or want much if any support. Others will. This point was supported and agreed by a number of Shropshire SGs at a recent Kinship Carers SG meeting at the Lantern: the lack of support, even at the most basic, human contact level was not part of the SG “deal”. Or certainly, that was what many of us were told and/or experienced. I was almost sarcastically told by a SW (not Amy/Jane O) that surely, having full and complete responsibility was what I wanted and was getting from the SGO. But the subtlety and sensitivity of a “steadying/guiding arm” to even lean on, given the other challenges in our lives, just didn’t seem to be part of the offer. I emphasise that support/guidance needs are very individualised and specific. One size does NOT fit all!”²
- “[W]e were completely unaware until last year that SGO support would be from the LA we were living in rather than the one who granted the order, even though they were still providing financial support. This should be highlighted when order is granted.”
- “Working with neighbour counties to give a more inclusive support network. If you live on the borders (e.g. Staffordshire or Cheshire) you can feel isolated.”

Coffee Mornings and Newsletters

The Special Guardianship Support Team have been offering monthly coffee mornings both virtually and in person, and survey respondents were asked about their experiences with these events.

Of the 25 people responding to a question about SGO coffee mornings, only 5 said that they had attended one. Half of respondents to a question about how these should be delivered (10) said they preferred them to be in person, with about half (11) saying they preferred a mix of in person and virtual events.

Six respondents offered feedback on these events (one whose spouse had attended included their thoughts as well as those who had attended in person). One respondent said that they are “not sure if [they are] helpful” but the remaining comments were mostly positive. These included:

- “Excellent and appreciated idea. Would perhaps benefit from a little more structure/themes. Seem to have tailed off in the past months, and there is some linking with Kinship Care facilitating SG gatherings.... live and on-line. But not open and clear what the plan/strategy is.”
- “My husband attended one as I was working. I have since retired and hope to attend one in the not too distant future.”

² This respondent indicated that they are happy to be identified and work closely with the Special Guardianship Support Team on improving this process should that be of interest.

- “We attended one training event which was helpful about talking about emotions.”
- “Coffee was good.”
- “If I could make the coffee mornings, I would love to. With school runs and the distance (I live out the borough) I can't make them very often.”

Respondents were asked to offer suggestions as to future ideas for coffee mornings. One respondent suggested that in-person meetings be spread out more over the county.

- “Everything is arranged in Shrewsbury or near to. Shropshire is a large county it needs to be spread out more.”

Another respondent commented that meetings during the working week are not suitable for those working full time.

- “We work full time so meetings during the working week would not be suitable.”

Others offered ideas for topics that might be discussed at future meetings:

- “Additional support and legal advice.”
- “16-18 year olds, finance and university.”
- “Strategies on dealing with rejection and introducing the family tree to very young children.”
- “Not sure what the situation is with Kinship Care - SGs not been informed about this. Not sure what, if any, changes to workloads/service provision are affecting/potentially affecting SG support. I think the situation with Kinship Care (who is offering what, and why) needs to be discussed (with all!), clarified and agreed to the lines of communication, support and responsibilities are clear to all. I am clear that we still need links and options to work with SG Support.”

The Special Guardianship Support Team also produce a regular newsletter with resources, events and information for special guardians and their families. **62% of respondents (16 people) said that they currently receive the SGO newsletters**, but 4 did not and 6 said they didn't know if they received them or not.

Comments and suggestions about the newsletters were offered by three respondents, and were as follows:

- “Most recently, received newsletters in December (22), March and June this year. Delighted to receive them, they are informative and useful across a wide range of matters. Future ideas? Possibly ask for contributions from SGs of tips/ideas/strategies. Every new "challenge" for a SG is new, but most will have been encountered before by existing SGs. Make use of this rich vein of experience and knowledge? This may then promote some discussion back and forward. Sharing stories/events/little incidents that made us laugh, and

made us cry. It can be lonely/isolated being an SG, and individual circumstances can be challenging! Tough job, especially with issues such as family contact, mental health (SG's and children's) etc. Info about national and LA developments in our area of interest i.e. SGOs and related Children's Services info, changes to regulations, legal stuff, LA provision/principles etc.”

- “Content appropriate.”
- “I think the newsletters are great.”

5 Conclusions

Households looking after just over a quarter (28%) of the children with SGOs responded to this survey. The demographic profile of survey respondents was largely older and/or grandparents of children who are of school age and come from a range of Shropshire towns. Two thirds of the children under SGOs from households in the survey had been looked after by a local authority prior to SGO status being granted.

Overall, respondents seem to be fairly well informed of entitlements available to special guardians, though there is room for improvement in awareness around the therapeutic support available through the Adoption Support Fund, as only 50% of respondents answering that question were aware of the availability of this support, and one respondent said they were dissatisfied about accessing therapy through this fund.

Prior to SGO status being granted, respondents accessed information from a range of sources. Overall, respondents felt that they had enough time to consider the choice to seek SGO status, but some comments suggest that more could be done at this early stage to provide information and advice to those thinking about this option.

The satisfaction of survey respondents with the services provided by the Special Guardianship Support Team was high across most respondents. Some comments suggested improvements in delivering advice and information to special guardians earlier on in the process, emphasising the difficulty of transitioning into this status. Two respondents indicated a dissatisfaction with mediation services, with one offering a comment that seemed to suggest that it was the challenges of working with birth parents made this particularly difficult. Other negative comments provided seem to indicate that the complexity of the SGO situation can be overwhelming to navigate and can feel very isolating. They would like to be kept better informed on changes in the local authority, entitlements, and other information.

Finally, comments suggest the necessity of an individualised approach to working with special guardians and the children under SGOs is perhaps the most important take away from this report. The complexity of the circumstances these families face requires a great deal of support in ways that – as one respondent put it – “one size does NOT fit all.” The Special Guardianship Support Team is designed to deliver this individualised support, and for most respondents in this survey, they are succeeding.

November 2023

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Shropshire