Review of the Implementation of the Scottish Recommended Allowance for Foster and Kinship Carers

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Final Report
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Executive Summary

Background

In 2019, the Scottish Government committed to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) to introduce a Scottish Recommended Allowance (SRA) for foster and kinship carers. The SRA was introduced in August 2023 and marked the first time a set rate, which all local authorities must pay to foster and kinship carers, was introduced across Scotland.

The final agreed weekly allowances, which were backdated to 1 April 2023, were:

- For children aged 0 to 4 year-olds - **£168.31**
- For children aged 5 to 10 year-olds - **£195.81**
- For children aged 11 to 15 year-olds - **£195.81**
- For young people aged 16-years-old and over - **£268.41**

This report provides the findings from independent research that was commissioned by the Scottish Government to collect data on whether the implementation of the SRA had achieved (or was starting to achieve) its policy intent. Specifically, the research sought to explore the extent to which the SRA was bringing consistency and transparency to the allowances paid to foster and kinship carers, and to explore if caregivers, no matter where they lived, were receiving at least the SRA.

Methods, Sample and Caveats

The research began in October 2024, with data collection to inform the review carried out over a four-month period between December 2024 and March 2025. A mixed methods approach was used which included:

- an online survey of all local authorities in Scotland;
- an online survey and interviews/discussions with independent fostering agencies (IFAs)[1];
- interviews with third sector organisations (TSOs) and other stakeholders with an interest in the SRA review;
- online surveys of foster and kinship carers living in Scotland, with separate surveys developed for each type of carer; and
- follow-up in-depth interviews with a sample of foster and kinship carers to explore their experiences of the SRA in more detail.

[1] The term 'independent and voluntary fostering provider' (IVP) was also used in surveys and interviews and by some who took part in the research instead of the term 'independent fostering agency' (IFA). These terms are also used interchangeably in places in this report.

A Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP) made up of current carers was also established to help guide the development of data collection tools and to provide advice on engaging with carers at various stages in the project.

The professional stakeholder surveys attracted variable levels of response (with 30 out of Scotland's 32 local authorities taking part but fewer than 10 IFAs contributing either via survey or interview). The carers' surveys attracted a strong response, with 271 carers taking part (137 foster carers and 134 kinship carers) and 40 providing feedback via in-depth interviews (with equal numbers of foster and kinship participants). It is not possible to know what proportion of all carers were represented, however, as the full population of foster and kinship carers in Scotland is not known (especially when considering that some registered foster carers will currently be providing a placement and be in receipt of the SRA while others will not, and some kinship carers will be eligible for the SRA and some will not). While reasonable regional coverage was also achieved (among both professional stakeholders and carers) not all local authority areas were represented and so the findings cannot be considered as providing comprehensive geographical coverage.

There were also some gaps and contradictions in the data provided by local authorities which may affect the accuracy of data presented in this report, including some of the comparisons that are made between allowances paid to foster and kinship carers pre- and post-SRA.

Main Findings

Payment and receipt of the SRA

All of the 30 local authorities who responded to the survey reported that they were currently paying at least the SRA across their entire area to foster carers providing long term, permanent, interim, short break and short-term foster placements for all age bands. Similarly, all but one local authority said that they were paying at least the SRA across their entire local authority area for formal kinship carers (where the child has looked after status), for all age bands. There was less consistency with regards to eligible informal kinship carers (where the child is subject to a Kinship Care Order (KCO) and is/was previously 'looked after' or at risk of becoming 'looked after'), with several authorities confirming that carers in this category did not receive at least the SRA.

Just under half of authorities noted that they paid above the SRA for 'some children' and three authorities said that they paid a higher rate for 'all' children.

Most foster and kinship carers also reported that they were receiving the set SRA rate. Of those who were not receiving the set rate, foster carers were more likely to report receiving above the SRA rate (with the exception of those

caring for children in the 16+ age group), while kinship carers were more likely to report receiving below the SRA. While it is not possible to say definitively why this is the case, it may be accounted for by different practices that were reported across different local authority areas both in the rates paid by carer type, whether kinship carers did or did not have access to 'additional payments' and whether SRA payments made to kinship carers reflected deductions made for other benefits.

Publication of Current Allowances Information

At the launch of the SRA, the Scottish Government and COSLA agreed that local authorities would publish their allowances for foster and kinship carers online. This should include key details of rates, entitlement, eligibility criteria, how eligibility is assessed and where more information can be found. Most local authorities (n=25) reported that the foster care page on their website had been updated since the implementation of the SRA to show the current rate of allowances for foster carers. Three said that it had not and two indicated that they did not know.

There is also a legal duty under Part 13 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (Support for Kinship Care) and The Kinship Care Assistance (Scotland) Order 2016 for local authorities to publish information about the provision of kinship care assistance in their local authority area, and this includes the rate at which allowances are paid. Again, most local authorities (n=24) reported that the kinship page on their local authority website had been updated since the implementation of the SRA to show the current rate of allowances for kinship carers. Six reported that it had not.

Independent verification of website data found that, across all 32 local authorities, information was unavailable for foster carer rates in five areas, and in six areas for kinship carers. Based on the data available from these websites, there appears to be some variability in the SRA payments being made across different age bands for both fostering and kinship care. Specifically:

- for foster carers, the most significant deviation from SRA rates appears to be for those aged 11-15, with half of authorities (n=16) showing that they paid higher rates for this age band;
- no authorities appear to be paying below the SRA to foster carers consistently across all age bands (although one authority website suggests that they were paying below the SRA for all except those aged 11-15);
- for kinship carers, data suggests that most authorities are paying in line with the SRA, however, a large number (n=13) are paying above the SRA for those aged 11-15 in kinship care (slightly fewer than for children in foster care of the same age); and

- the online data suggests that slightly more authorities are paying below the SRA for children in kinship care across the different age bands compared to those in foster care.

Overall, the allowances data published online contradicts some authorities' reports that they were paying in line with or above the SRA for some or all children. Regardless of the reasons for the discrepancy, this finding has implications for transparency, both in terms of the accuracy of published information and the consistency of payments being made. The lack of clear and accessible online allowances information, presented in a consistent manner, undermines one of the fundamental intentions of the SRA, i.e. to help bring consistency and transparency to the allowances process.

Paying Above and Below SRA

Where local authorities reported that they were paying above the SRA rates for some children, this was typically because they were already paying above the SRA before its implementation, and to reduce the allowance was seen as inappropriate. No authorities reported that they had reduced the amounts paid to carers following the introduction of the SRA (i.e. where they previously paid above the SRA rates). Again, however, this was not supported by allowance information published online, and there were also some suggestions from interviews that this was not the case (with several carers and TSOs reporting that some authorities appeared to have reduced allowances).

Comparison with Pre-SRA Rates

For foster carers, at the aggregate level, most authorities are now paying higher rates than before the SRA was introduced. The biggest aggregate average increase has been for those aged 16+ (at +£34.65), and for children in the 5-10 age band (at +£34.48). The smallest aggregate average increase appears to have been for those aged 11-15 (at +£8.20).

For kinship carers, at the aggregate level, authorities also appear to be paying higher rates in most age bands post-SRA. However, the overall improvement in allowances across those authorities where data are available appears to be less pronounced overall compared to foster carers. Again, the largest increases appear to be among the 16+ age group (at +£30.06), and the 5-10 age group (at +£28.01). The change in the allowance for those aged 11-15, however, is slightly lower for kinship carers (at +£3.61) compared to foster carers (at +£8.20). The average post-SRA rates appear to be slightly lower for kinship carers compared to foster carers across all age groups.

While the data suggest that there remains a wide range in payments being made across local authorities, the difference between the minimum and maximum rates being paid post-SRA is smaller for all age bands (at the

aggregate level) compared to pre-SRA. As such, variation has shrunk since the SRA was introduced.

From the very limited data that were available from IFAs, the ranges in rates reported appear to be significantly narrower than the ranges reported by local authorities. It is not possible to conclude, however, if the narrower variation overall can be accounted for simply by the small number of providers who gave rate data rather than reflecting a more generalisable trend in the sector.

Administration of the SRA

All but one local authority confirmed that backdated payments had been fully paid to all foster and eligible kinship carers in their areas. There were mixed responses with regards to the time taken for completing the backdating process - 59% of authorities who gave a time estimate indicated that it had taken roughly 0-2 months, with a further 19% indicating 3-5 months and 22% indicating a process that took 6+ months.

The main challenges experienced by local authorities with the backdating process were linked to lack of administrative resource to calculate and implement the backdating of payments, limitations with existing payment systems/technical work required to update IT systems, the requirement for manual calculation in some cases, financial decisions needing to be signed off at committee/senior management level, and issues related to when the additional monies for SRA were received from the Scottish Government. There were also views that there had been limited guidance available to authorities regarding how backdating of the SRA should be approached.

Carers gave little negative feedback and at the aggregate level appeared to be relatively content with the time taken for both processing backdated payments and how promptly initial SRA payments had been made (however, there were variations in experiences reported at the geographical level). A more significant issue for carers in relation to the administration of the SRA was how payments were made and communicated. There was significant variation in both the frequency of payments and the nature/detail of payment information that carers received. For several carers there was a lack of clarity around what they were being paid, for whom and when. Several carers and TSOs called for greater clarity in the information shared on a routine basis about how allowances are broken down and what they should/could expect in terms of regularity of payment and any changes over time.

There was also considerable variation in the reported receipt of ‘additional payments and expenses’ made by local authorities and IFAs to carers (including, for example, additional payments given for holidays, birthdays and religious holidays, travel and mileage expenses, unexpected costs/special items, etc.). This was true both geographically and by carer type (with kinship

carers typically less likely to be able to access the full range of additional payments available) and decisions around eligibility appearing to be made on a local and discretionary basis.

Kinship carers also reported a range of challenges associated with deductions from the SRA based on claiming other benefits, with evidence that many kinship carers were unaware and/or lacked understanding of how the SRA interacted with other benefits (especially Universal Credit). Differences were also reported in the way that the deduction of child benefit is approached by different local authorities. Several stakeholders shared the view that the current practice of deducting benefits from the pay of kinship carers was acting to reduce the parity in financial support by carer type that had been hoped for when the SRA was introduced.

On a related note, many kinship carers and TSOs reported that kinship carers were often treated as the “poor relation” in the care sphere. Reports were given of significantly varying levels of support for kinship carers across the country, and while some local authorities were seen as having excellent packages of support (e.g. kinship panels, kinship care peer groups, highly trained social workers to work alongside kinship carers), others were seen as having no such wraparound in place. More support and information for kinship carers was urged, recognising that their route or pathway into caring was very different from the experience of most foster carers.

Perceived Adequacy of the Allowance

There was unanimous agreement among stakeholders that the SRA rates should increase, with views that a single increase followed by annual uplifts would be welcomed. Increasing the SRA was seen as an essential lever in helping to meet government commitments around tackling poverty, particularly child poverty.

Several carers (both foster and kinship) reported that the rates paid were not enough to cover daily living expenses, and noted that they continued to experience financial challenges post-SRA implementation. Carers reported using their own money to help them with unmet needs as a result of the allowances being too low, including using savings, money from benefits and pensions, from the foster carer fee, and relying on loans and support from other family members, as well as also taking on other employment or increasing hours in existing employment. Some were also relying heavily on credit to get by.

There were two main age groups where the SRA was perceived as currently being particularly inadequate, i.e. for children aged 0-4 and those aged 11-15. The cost of nappies, milk and equipment for babies and those aged under 2 in particular was noted to place a strain on carers’ finances for children in the

pre-school years, while the cost of clothing and shoes, phones/IT and money to facilitate more independence for older children were the most pressing concerns for carers of secondary school aged children.

The other biggest area of discontentment with the age bandings of the SRA was related to children aged 5 to 10 year-olds and 11 to 15 year-olds receiving the same allowance. Feedback on what was essentially seen as a collapsing of these two age bands into one was unanimously negative between the different stakeholder groups. TSOs in particular highlighted that there was a wealth of evidence that the age bracket 5 to 15 is not fit for purpose and so were particularly surprised to see this announced as part of the SRA.

Despite the hardships that most families were facing, there were also some reports of children and young people benefitting directly from the introduction of the SRA, and on this basis it was welcomed. Several families also reported that it helped to reduce their financial stresses and concerns overall.

Implementation, Communication and Understanding of the SRA

Among carers and TSOs, the main feedback in relation to implementation was that it had taken far too long for the SRA to come into effect. As a result of the long wait, many of the perceived weaknesses with the final announcement (including the age banding and allowance rates) were seen as inexcusable, i.e. as there had been ample time for better planning.

For IFAs, one of the biggest issues linked to the SRA was a noted lack of engagement with this sector during the planning and implementation stages. Indeed, most IFAs felt that there had been little or no consultation with their sector in advance of the SRA announcement and noted that when it was announced, the messaging was very confusing. The Scottish Government had made a financial estimate of what the SRA introduction would cost for all foster carers in Scotland (both local authority and independent) and had allocated local authorities the funds pro rata to cover that. In practice, however, the allocated money had not been passed on to independent agencies. IFAs noted that this had been something that the Scottish Government had failed to anticipate in planning for the SRA, and had also been unable or unwilling to rectify retrospectively, instead leaving IFAs and local authorities to negotiate solutions/arrangements between themselves. This was, for IFAs, perhaps one of the biggest oversights in the planning and implementation of the SRA.

Carers and TSOs also noted that, post SRA announcement, there had been variable engagement between local authorities and carers, with notable differences observed around the country. Again, the lack of communication by some local authorities with their carers resulted in confusion around such

things as when the new payments would start, if and when backdated payments would be made and whether or not IFA carers would be included in any increases in allowances. It also resulted in some confusion around what the SRA hoped to achieve. Mixed messaging coming from the Scottish Government was also highlighted alongside different interpretation of the SRA policy among local authorities.

Wider Feedback on the SRA and Associated Policy

Although not specifically part of the SRA, a great deal of feedback was given in relation to current continuing care arrangements in Scotland with perceptions that policy in this regard needed to change. Specifically, it was perceived that there was currently a lack of transition planning for young people leaving care, and different continuing care practices being applied by different local authorities across the country which needed to be addressed.

A lesser-raised issue was in relation to kinship carers who become carers at short notice or in emergency situations. Overall, it was considered that there were gaps and delays in terms of initial payments made to such carers and in making them aware of their entitlements. Unlike foster carers, who had a planned journey into caring, there were views that support in place for kinship carers was lacking, especially around financial advice and what kinship caring responsibilities may mean for a family in the long term.

All stakeholders who were represented in the research agreed that the recruitment and retention of carers was also a pressing issue that needed to be addressed, and that any bad publicity linked to the SRA, or any failure to raise fees and allowances or increase the SRA in line with inflation going forward may be a deterrent to future recruitment and retention.

In line with this, greater respect and consideration of the independent sector was urged. Viewing the independent sector as an ‘add on’ was seen as outdated and misguided and instead, treating local authority fostering agencies and independent fostering agencies as two equal parts of Scotland’s fostering service was seen as essential in any future planning and development of the SRA or associated policy.

Future Uplifts

While the SRA had been welcomed, there was shared disappointment from carers, local authorities, IFAs and TSOs that there had been no uplift to payments in the financial year 2024/25, and no indications of an uplift in 2025/26. While there was no clear agreement on what the uplift amounts should be (and bearing in mind disagreements about the existing rates per age band), stakeholders felt strongly that rises were needed to at least reflect increases in inflation and the cost of living. Having a transparent and predictable minimum uplift was also encouraged.

Future Legislation

Carers in particular felt that the Scottish Government should mandate minimum SRA rates across local authorities, but they should still be able to choose to pay above this. Among other stakeholders, however, there was mixed feedback in this regard with no clear preference for legislating for either minimum rates or standard rates (the former would help achieve consistency but the latter would potentially mean that more support could be given to families where authorities felt able). On balance, there did however appear to be a preference for local authority and IFA rates to be aligned.

Many consulted across the research also expressed a desire for local authorities and IFAs to publish their allowances and fees data in an accessible, consistent and up-to-date way. This was seen to be the single biggest step that would help achieve transparency.

Conclusions

While all stakeholders welcomed the SRA and efforts to improve consistency, the increase in payment amounts that were experienced in some areas were seen as long overdue. The research also indicates that allowances are still perceived and experienced as being insufficient to meet families' needs, especially in light of the current cost of living crisis, with views that the SRA did not go far enough to address the cost of caring for children and young people in the current climate.

Despite implementation challenges and some areas of discrepancy that still need to be ironed out, all stakeholders agreed that, fundamentally, the SRA had been a crucial first step forward improving the lives of foster and kinship carers and the children and young people in their care. It was seen as a positive step forwards but would need to be continually reviewed, in collaboration with all those affected, to ensure that it remains fit for purpose now and in the future.

Introduction

Background

In 2019, the Scottish Government committed in its Programme for Government to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) to introduce a Scottish Recommended Allowance (SRA) for foster and kinship carers; this was re-stated in The Promise Implementation Plan 2021-24.

On 29 August 2023, following negotiation with COSLA, agreement was reached and the Scottish Government introduced the SRA. This marked the first time a set rate, which all local authorities must pay to foster and kinship carers, was introduced across Scotland.

In October 2024, the Scottish Government commissioned independent research to collect data on the implementation of the Scottish Recommended Allowance for Foster and Kinship Carers (SRA). The aim of the work was to collect data on whether the implementation of the SRA had achieved (or was starting to achieve) its policy intent, by bringing consistency and transparency to the allowances paid to foster and kinship carers, and ensuring that all caregivers, no matter where they live, receive at least a set rate to cover the costs of the child[ren] they are looking after.

This report presents the findings from that work and will be used to feed into the overall evaluation of the SRA, to understand the impact for foster and kinship families, inform adjustments to delivery and help with design and development of future policy in the field.

The Scottish Recommended Allowance for Foster and Kinship Carers

The introduction of the SRA sought to ensure that every eligible foster and kinship carer would receive at least a standard, national allowance which recognises the valuable support they provide, and ensures that children in foster and kinship care get the support they need to thrive. It also sought to ensure parity in the financial support provided to kinship and foster carers, no matter where they live in Scotland. The SRA was forecast to benefit over 9,000 children and result in an uplift in most kinship and foster carers' finances to help them cover the costs of caring for children. Its introduction was a significant achievement and contributes to the Scottish Government's commitment to Keeping The Promise, and wider priorities to reduce child poverty.

While Scottish Ministers have the option to legislate to require local authorities to adhere to the SRA using powers under The Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 (Section 110), this power was not used and instead a collaborative approach with COSLA was taken to introducing the SRA. As

such, local authorities were not legally required to pay the SRA and its implementation was an agreement between COSLA and Scottish Government.

At the launch of the SRA, Scottish Government and COSLA also agreed that local authorities would publish online their allowances for foster and kinship carers. This was to include key details of rates, entitlement, eligibility criteria, how it would be assessed and where more information could be found. In addition, there was also a legal duty under Part 13 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (Support for Kinship Care) and The Kinship Care Assistance (Scotland) Order 2016 for local authorities to publish information about the provision of kinship care assistance in their local authority area, including the rate at which allowances are paid.

COSLA also agreed that where local authorities were already paying above the SRA, allowances would not be reduced, so that kinship or foster carers currently in receipt of an allowance would not be worse off.

Importantly, the SRA is an agreement between the Scottish Government and local authorities to ensure equity in the allowances paid for looked after children across Scotland to foster and kinship carers.

Similarly, the placement of children by local authorities, with external agencies, is a contracted agreement between the local authority and agency. By their nature, independent fostering agencies (IFAs) have always been able to decide both the allowance and fee they pay their foster carers, and the responsibility for payment of the allowance to foster carers sits with the IFA, not the local authority. Consequently, any discussion regarding the implementation of the SRA in IFAs is a contractual matter. Given this, and the fact that Scottish Government did not legislate to require local authorities to adhere to the SRA, it was not and is not enforceable on IFAs.

Placement of children with IFAs by local authorities can be made via the Scotland Excel (or other) framework but also by the local authorities' own contracts or occasionally on a spot purchased basis. They are therefore covered by the terms of that contract. Contracts will have a weekly rate inclusive of various costs - including child's allowance, fees, management fees and additional items. Discussions as to how the SRA is reflected in contracts between local authorities and IFAs are currently (and were at the time of the SRA launch) the responsibility of those two parties.

Recognising the complexity and diversity of the foster and kinship arrangements in Scotland, information regarding the allowance rates for different age bands and what the SRA monies were intended to cover was set out after its launch on the Scottish Government website alongside other information for carers and professionals (at Scottish Recommended

Allowance: information for carers and professionals - gov.scot (www.gov.scot). This, alongside the information provided by local authorities, IFAs and various third sector organisations working with and for carers in Scotland provides the main source of current information regarding the SRA.

Research Questions

While the overarching aims of the research were to explore if the SRA has helped to bring **consistency and transparency** to the allowances paid to foster and kinship carers, and whether it had resulted in local authority foster and eligible kinship carers **receiving at least the SRA,** the data collection also focused on gathering feedback to address ten key research questions, these being:

- Do carers and professionals know where to find information about the SRA?
- Is it clear that the SRA is to pay for the costs of the child and does not cover foster carers' fees?
- Is there any additional information that it would be helpful for Scottish Government to publish centrally (e.g. interaction with benefits, annual allowance rates for all local authorities)?
- Are individual local authorities paying the SRA or above the SRA?
- Do the current allowance rates at each SRA age band reflect the needs of the child at that age?
- Should there continue to be four SRA age bands, or is an alternative approach to banding more appropriate?
- How many kinship carers are impacted by how the SRA interacts in practice with both Scottish and Reserved Social Security benefits?
- Do stakeholders hold the view that the Scottish Government should legislate for the SRA to ensure consistency and transparency of allowances in Scotland?
- How has the implementation of the SRA affected the contracts between local authorities and independent fostering agencies and how do IFA allowances compare to the SRA?
- What is the distribution of foster and kinship carers in Scotland, and are more foster and kinship carers receiving the SRA residing in areas of high deprivation, measured by the SIMD, than in areas of affluence?

The methodology for the work was designed with these research questions in mind.

Methodology

Data collection to inform the review was carried out over a four-month period between December 2024 and March 2025 and included:

- an online survey of all local authorities in Scotland;

- an online survey and interviews/discussions with independent fostering agencies (IFAs);
- interviews with third sector organisations and other stakeholders with an interest in the SRA review;
- online surveys of foster and kinship carers living in Scotland, with separate surveys developed for each type of carer; and
- follow-up interviews with a sample of foster and kinship carers to explore their experiences of the SRA in more detail.

The research was designed to be carried out in a phased way, so that findings from the earlier stages of the work would help to inform development of data collection tools for the subsequent phases.

Local Authority Survey

The survey of local authorities was designed by the research team with input from Scottish Government policy staff. Advice on the content and method of distribution was also sought from Social Work Scotland and COSLA through informal discussions. The survey contained 30 questions including a mix of both open 'free text' questions and closed 'tick box' questions and was designed using the online survey tool Smart Survey, with emailed Word versions and printed copies available on request.

The online survey link was distributed initially via Social Work Scotland to Chief Social Work Officers in each of the 32 local authorities, as well as invitations being sent directly by the researchers to Chief Social Work Officers or other nominated staff. The survey was open for a total of 10 weeks between late November 2024 and early February 2025 and a total of 30 responses were received (including eight responses which were submitted by email). All data were downloaded for analysis and merged with information collated via desk-based research in relation to pre-SRA rates[2] and information published online by local authorities about their current fostering and kinship allowances and rates[3].

Independent Fostering Agency Survey and Interviews

The online IFA survey was developed in collaboration with the Scottish Government and following consultation with two IFA representative organisations. It went live in early December 2024 with an initial deadline two weeks later. Based on low levels of uptake, and to accommodate the festive

[2] This information had previously been collected by the Scottish Government and so a decision was made not to request this as part of the survey.

[3] As this information is required to be published online, a decision was made not to request this as part of the survey to minimize burdens on respondents.

period, a decision was made to extend the deadline for responses until mid-January 2025.

The survey link was distributed directly to all IFAs identified by the Scottish Government where a dedicated email address was available, via the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP) to relevant organisations, and via The Fostering Network to their independent sector forum members. Invitations were staggered to act as a reminder to all previous invitees and to potentially reach new/different participants.

A total of five IFA survey responses were received. This was complemented by interviews with three representative organisations and a short mini-group discussion with IFA staff.

Third Sector Organisations and Other Stakeholder Interviews

Interviews were carried out with 10 third sector organisations (TSOs) who either worked directly with or on behalf of foster and kinship carers or care professionals, as well as with one care policy improvement organisation working in partnership with carers, social workers, local authorities and aligned professionals. These interviews were carried out online or in person. Interviewees were invited to share their views and experiences of the impact of the SRA on their own organisations and on those who they worked with or represented.

More informal input and advice was sought at various points in the research from representatives of COSLA and Social Work Scotland. This was largely in the planning stages of the research to discuss the best ways of maximising engagement from local authorities and what the focus on the local authority survey should be. Scotland Excel also engaged in discussion to provide clarity on the operation of the national framework to provide context for feedback from other respondents.

Foster and Kinship Carer Surveys

Two separate surveys were developed in collaboration with the Scottish Government - one for foster carers and another for kinship carers. There was a high level of consistency in the questions asked across the two questionnaires, although dedicated questions were also asked of each respondent type. The survey of foster carers contained 45 substantive questions, while the kinship carer survey contained 42 questions in total. Both included a mix of open free text questions and closed response questions, and were made available for completion online using Smart Survey (with paper and email versions available on request).

The surveys were distributed primarily via local and national kinship and fostering support organisations who shared the survey link with their

respective members. The researchers also asked for the survey link to be shared with carers via local authorities and IFAs who took part in the parallel surveys. The survey was also shared via word of mouth among carers as well as attendance of the researchers at a carers event to raise awareness.

The survey ran for a total of six weeks between January and February 2025 and a total of 271 carers provided a substantive and usable response, including 137 foster carers and 134 kinship carers (all submitted online).

Responses came from across the country, with the sample distribution by geographic region outlined in Appendix A. Although all responses were anonymised, respondents were asked to provide their postcode in order to identify which Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) area they resided in. There was considerable diversity in the sample achieved, with reasonably balanced representation from carers living in each of the different SIMD zones (with Quintile 1 in the table below representing the most deprived 20% of data zones and Quintile 5 representing the least deprived 20% of data zones).

Table 1: SIMD Quintiles of Carer Survey Respondents

Quintile	Foster Carers (number and %)		Kinship Carers (number and %)		Total Sample (number and %)	
Quintile 1	14	13%	24	21%	38	17%
Quintile 2	22	20%	36	32%	58	26%
Quintile 3	21	19%	21	19%	42	19%
Quintile 4	28	26%	18	16%	46	21%
Quintile 5	24	22%	13	12%	37	17%
Total	**109**	**100%**	**112**	**100%**	**221**	**100%**

The majority of foster carers who took part were local authority foster carers (n=125, 91%) with most others reporting that they fostered via an IFA (n=11, 8%). One person (1%) indicated that they fostered via another authority area, but did not specify whether this was through the local authority or an IFA.

Most kinship carers who took part (n=86, 64%) indicated that they were a carer for a looked after child[ren] (i.e. with a compulsory supervision order or permanence order), while 30% (n=40) were kinship carers for a non-looked after child[ren] (i.e. with a Section 11 Order). The remaining respondents (n=8, 6%) included four with residency orders, two with Section 25 Orders, one who said they had a non-looked after child and were in the process of applying for

a Section 11 Order, and one respondent who cared for more than one child in different circumstances (and included both looked after and non-looked after status).

Most foster carers had 11+ years of experience in foster care, with a further quarter having 6-10 years' experience. The number of years that kinship carers had been providing such care was more varied.

Table 2: Carer survey sample reported years of caring experience

Years experience	Foster Carers (number and %)		Kinship Carers (number and %)		Total Sample (number and %)	
<1 year	3	2%	8	6%	11	4%
1-5 years	12	9%	54	41%	66	24%
6-10 years	34	25%	44	33%	78	29%
11+ years	88	64%	27	20%	115	43%
Total	**137**	**100%**	**133**[1]	**100%**	**270**	**100%**

Note: One respondent did not answer the question

The average number of children being cared for by individual foster carers was 1.9, with a wide range in the maximum and minimum being cared for by any one respondent - responses were received from a small number of foster carers who had no current placements through to those who had five or more children currently in their care (excluding their own biological children). The average number of children being cared for by individual kinship carers was slightly lower, at 1.4. This ranged from those who looked after one child, up to those caring for five children.

Foster and Kinship Carer Interviews

A total of 20 kinship carer interviews and 20 foster carer interviews were carried out to gather a deeper insight into the lived experiences of those receiving the SRA. Interviewees were recruited mainly via the surveys, (i.e. individuals were given a chance to 'opt in' to a follow-up interview if they wanted to share their experiences in more detail) as well as via word of mouth among the carer community. The sample of carers was split across the country with both long- and short- term carers represented, as well as male and female carers, and families caring for between one and five children (excluding their own biological children). The ages of carers also ranged from 28 to 68.

All interviews were carried out by telephone and lasted an average of 30 minutes (ranging from 16 to 46 minutes). Interview fieldwork took place throughout February and March 2025. Bespoke topic guides were developed to guide the discussions and respondents were also invited to share any wider

feedback, issues or concerns on the SRA. All interviewees also received a small ‘thank you’ voucher to reimburse them for their time.

Finally, a Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP) made up of five current carers was also established at the start of the research. This group was consulted at key stages in the research to help guide development of data collection tools with carers. They helped to design and test the online surveys as well as to inform and test the carer interview schedules.

Caveats and Reporting Conventions

The surveys attracted variable levels of response. Although the overall response to the carers surveys was strong, it is not possible to know what proportion of carers the respondents represent as the full population of foster and kinship carers is not known (especially when considering that some registered foster carers will be currently working and in receipt of the SRA while others will not, and some kinship carers will be officially registered as such and some will not). As local authorities, third sector organisations and IFAs used a mix of different means of reaching carers, it is also not possible to know how many of the overall fostering and kinship population in Scotland will have received the invitation and thus had an opportunity to contribute. Some local authorities confirmed distribution to carers in their areas, for example, while others did not.

While reasonable regional coverage was achieved, no individual responses were received from carers living in three authorities. As not all local authorities were represented in terms of carer experiences, the findings cannot be considered as providing comprehensive geographical coverage and this is acknowledged as a gap in the work.

All surveys, including the carer survey, were completed on a voluntary ‘opt in’ basis and, again, this can mean some inherent bias in the sample, as those who took part are more likely to have been those with strong views to share (i.e. those with neutral or moderate views or those who feel unaffected by policy changes are less likely to engage in research). This may account for disproportionate balance towards negative feedback that was received, however, the views expressed are no less valid as a result.

While the foster and kinship carer surveys generated significant interest, there was less uptake from IFAs. Anecdotal feedback during the fieldwork suggested that this may be because IFAs felt they had not been sufficiently consulted on the SRA before its introduction and so were ‘disengaged’ with any post-implementation attempts at engagement. There were also views that low engagement may have been due to the SRA having only marginal impact on IFAs to date, and therefore IFAs having little by way of feedback to provide. Although the number of IFAs who contributed to the work was small, the depth of feedback given was nonetheless strong, and those who contributed

represented different perspectives in terms of the nature and scale of the organisations that they spoke on behalf of.

For local authorities, although the overall survey response was high (with only two authorities not responding), the findings cannot be considered as fully representative. Similarly, given the unique geographies, demographic profiles and administrations of all individual authorities, findings cannot be generalised across the whole local authority sample. There was also significant variation in the level of detail provided by local authority respondents in different areas.

Importantly, the local authority survey did not ask for either pre-SRA rates or current rates to be provided as these data were either already held by the Scottish Government (i.e. rates being paid as of August 2023) or should be published online as part of the SRA agreement. This led to gaps where information could not be independently located online. Even where information was available online, this was not always clearly labelled as being 'current', and in some cases it was not clear if the rates shown were inclusive or exclusive of deductions for social security benefits (which would apply to kinship carers[4]). This may affect the accuracy of data presented in this report, including some of the comparisons that are made between rates paid pre- and post-SRA.

To support understanding of the qualitative findings, the following report uses descriptive terms to identify the strength of feeling expressed by respondents. Where reference is made in the report to 'few' respondents, this relates to five or fewer respondents. The terms 'several' and 'some' refer to more than five respondents, but typically less than ten. Any qualitative views that were expressed by larger numbers of respondents (i.e. ten or more) are referred to throughout as being expressed by 'many'. Similarly, for the survey, while specific numbers and proportions are presented below in most cases, any references to 'few' typically refer to <10% of the sampled population, 'several' and 'some' refer to >10% but typically less than 50%, and 'many' refer to >50% of the relevant sample.

For survey data, tables in the following chapters show both the number and proportion of respondents who concurred with the different response options presented. Where 'non-responses' were observed, tables also show the 'valid percent' (i.e. the proportion who expressed views for each response option once the non-responses were removed). This gives a more accurate account of the strength of feeling among those who did answer the set questions.

[4] Local authorities may deduct some child-related benefits that kinship carers receive from their allowance. This is to make sure that, overall, the amount they receive is equivalent to the fostering allowance amount paid by the local authority.

Finally, to protect anonymity and confidentiality, and to encourage honest responding, reassurances were given to all survey and interview respondents that they would not be identifiable in the reporting of the work. As a result, all local authority, third sector and IFA names have been removed and aggregate level data is presented. This means that some of the nuance for local arrangements is lost. However, where specific comments were made which suggested notable regional or other variation from the main findings reported, these are included.

Payment and Receipt of the SRA

Age bands and calculation of the SRA

The National Review of Care Allowances (2018) recommended that the SRA payment rates were broken down into three age groups: 0-4 years; 5-15 years; and 16-17 years. However, the allowances were presented across four categories to mirror the four age categories (0-5, 5-10, 11-15, 16-17) that were used by local authorities in Scotland, mainly to aid administration in any transition from old to new payment rates. Specifically, it was decided that presenting the SRA as four categories was more straightforward, as local authorities would not require any alterations to their existing systems or ways of working to aid implementation. It was also hoped that this banding would be more transparent and easier to understand for caregivers.

The Scottish Government developed the SRA rates for children in kinship and foster care based on various sources. This included the independent Analytical evidence on the 'cost of a child research carried out by Fraser of Allander Institute in 2018.

The model and supporting principles adopted a rights-based approach to understanding the needs and characteristics of kinship and foster families. This took into account the differing number of carers and children within households, as well as establishing an expenditure level that would secure a reasonable standard of living.

A 50% weighting was added to the cost of a child, to account for the additional costs of a looked after child. This was consistent with earlier research[5], as well as practice across other parts of the UK. These values from 2018 were uprated prior to the SRA's commencement in August 2023 on a similar basis as used for other payments to households, but also taking account of affordability and deliverability.

The final agreed weekly allowances, which were backdated to 1 April 2023, were:

- 0 to 4 year-olds - **£168.31**
- 5 to 10 year-olds - **£195.81**
- 11 to 15 year-olds - **£195.81**
- 16-years-old and over - **£268.41**

[5] Oldfield, N. (1997) The Adequacy of Foster Care Allowances, Routledge: London

Payment of the SRA by Local Authorities

All local authorities who took part in the survey reported that they were paying at least the SRA across their entire local authority area to foster carers providing long term, permanent, interim, short break and short-term foster placements for all age bands. Similarly, all but one local authority said that they were paying at least the SRA across their entire local authority area for formal kinship carers (where the child has looked after status), for all age bands.

There was less consistency with regards to local practice for paying at least the SRA for eligible informal kinship carers (where the child is subject to a Kinship Care Order (KCO) and is/was previously 'looked after' or at risk of becoming 'looked after'). While 24 out of the 30 participating authorities confirmed that they were paying this for all age bands, three noted that this was paid only for some. Among these, one authority noted that, if the family was assessed as being eligible for kinship allowance, they would pay the same rate regardless of the status of the child. Another noted that where a kinship allowance was being paid, it would be in line with the SRA and that kinship allowance was paid to eligible carers up to the point Child Benefit stops for the child/young person. Any Section 29 payments beyond that point were paid on the basis of assessed individual need. The third gave no explanation for not paying the same to all.

A further three authorities noted that they were not paying at least the SRA for eligible informal kinship carers. In one case, this was an area of practice that was said to be 'under review'. A second authority confirmed that they do not pay informal kinship carers and instead pay the SRA only for all formal kinship carers of children placed by Social Work subject to Section 25, Section 83, kinship carers who have Kinship Care Orders, and children who are at risk of becoming looked after. The third authority noted that they classed placements subject to a Kinship Care Order as 'formal' (and pay the SRA), however, they classed placements not secured by any legal order differently, (even when social work are involved and the child is/was previously 'looked after' or at risk of becoming 'looked after'). These carers are paid £50 per week.

Local authorities were also asked if they were currently paying any allowances at a higher rate than the SRA rate.

Just under half of authorities that responded (n=13) noted that they paid all carers in line with the SRA and a similar number (n=12) noted that they paid above the SRA for some children only. Only three authorities noted that they paid a higher rate for all children. In all of these cases the authorities reported that this was because they increased their allowances every year as standard, either at 3% or based on the rate of inflation. These routine annual increases meant that their allowances were now higher than the SRA rates.

Table 3: Reported payment of the SRA by local authorities

Response options	Number	%
Yes - we pay a higher rate for all children	3	10%
Yes - we pay a higher rate for some children only	12	40%
No - we pay all carers in line with the current SRA rate	13	43%
Other	2	7%
Total	**30**	**100%**

Reported Receipt of the SRA by Carers

All carer survey respondents were asked, for each child that they cared for in each age band, how many were receiving the set SRA rate, above or below.

Table 4: Reported receipt per child of the SRA by carer survey respondents

Age band	Carer Status	Receiving **set** SRA rate	Receiving **below** SRA rate	Receiving **above** SRA rate	Not specified/ Don't know/unsure
0-4	Foster	39 (24 carers)	2 (2 carers)	14 (1 carers)	1 (1 carer)
	Kinship	22 (17 carers)	2 (2 carers)	1 (1 carer)	1 (1 carer)
5-10	Foster	42 (34 carers)	3 (3 carers)	13 (11 carers)	16 (7 carers)
	Kinship	45 (39 carers)	7 (6 carers)	4 (3 carers	5 (4 carers)
11-15	Foster	46 (33 carers)	2 (2 carers)	24 (18 carers)	6 (4 carers)
	Kinship	42 (35 carers)	12 (11 carers)	6 (5 carers)	8 (8 carers)
16+	Foster	38 (26 carers)	6 (6 carers)	4 (4 carers)	4 (3 carers)

	Kinship	22 (18 carers)	6 (5 carers)	5 (5 carers)	4 (3 carers)

Most foster and kinship carers reported that they were receiving the set SRA rate. However, among those that were not, foster carers were more likely to be receiving above the SRA rate (with the exception of the 16+ age group), while kinship carers were more likely to be receiving below the SRA rate.

Those who either reported that they did not receive the SRA payment or were receiving an allowance rate below the SRA rate, were asked to explain why this was the case (if known) and what impact (if any) this had on their family. While 33 respondents (including 10 foster and 23 kinship carers) indicated that they received below the SRA rate, several others also provided information at these questions.

Foster carers who said they did not receive the SRA payment/SRA rate included a mix of local authority (n=8) foster carers, and those working for IFAs (n=2). Those working for IFAs indicated that they received their set payments from their agency and were unsure about how this related to the SRA rate. Those fostering via local authorities did not generally know why they were receiving less, except in one case where they were providing continuing care for a young person over the age of 18 and were not receiving payments for this.

Among the others who provided feedback at these questions, five indicated that they did not know whether they received the full SRA rate or not, due to the way the payments were made, particularly in relation to short-term placements and respite care. One foster carer also indicated that payments were not always made promptly upon placements starting and/or for short-term/respite care, and that it was often difficult for foster carers to know what they should be receiving in such cases. Another noted that funding was not being passed on from local authorities to IFAs to cover any uplift required in the allowance rates paid.

Kinship carers who did not receive the SRA payment/SRA rate said this was mainly because deductions were made from the allowance to account for other benefit payments. These included child benefit/family allowance and the child payment element of Universal Credit. Importantly, a few respondents noted that deductions were made for child benefit even when this was not being claimed. Other respondents did not know why they were being paid less, and in some cases were receiving around half as much as the relevant SRA rate. Two kinship carers who received no allowance payments noted that, due to barriers, a lack of support from their local authority, and a lack of knowledge and awareness of the system at the outset, they had been unable

to secure formal kinship care status and were considered as having private arrangements, and were therefore ineligible for the payments.

Publication of Current Allowances Information

At the launch of the SRA, Scottish Government and COSLA agreed that local authorities would publish online their allowances for foster and kinship carers. This was to include key details of rates, entitlement, eligibility criteria, how it will be assessed and where more information can be found. In addition, there is also a legal duty under Part 13 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (Support for Kinship Care) and The Kinship Care Assistance (Scotland) Order 2016 for local authorities to publish information about the provision of kinship care assistance in their local authority area, and this includes the rate at which allowances are paid.

Most local authorities (n=25) reported that the foster care page on their website had been updated since the implementation of the SRA to show the current rate of allowances for foster carers. Three said that it had not and two indicated that they did not know.

Almost the same number (n=24) reported that the kinship page on their local authority website had been updated since the implementation of the SRA to show the current rate of allowances for kinship carers. Six reported that it had not.

Verification of Current Rates

Local authorities were only asked to specify their current rates where they indicated that these had not been updated online since the introduction of the SRA. Information from both sources was combined (i.e. published rates were combined or updated as per survey responses as required) to generate a final set of rates.

This resulted in some gaps in the data where authorities said that their online information had been updated but it could not be found during independent checking. Across all 32 local authorities, information was unavailable for foster carer rates in five areas, and in six areas for kinship carers.

Using these final rates, the data show that, while most authorities are indeed paying in line with the SRA, there remains some variability across different age bands for both fostering and kinship care.

Foster Carer Rates Online

For foster carers, the most significant deviation from SRA rates appears to be for those aged 11-15, with half of authorities (n=16, 50%) showing that they paid higher rates for this age band on their respective websites. The available

rates for three authorities also suggest that they are paying above the SRA for all age bands for foster care.

There are no authorities that appear to be paying below the SRA for all age bands (although one authority website suggests that they are paying below the SRA for all except those aged 11-15).

Table 5: Reported payment of the SRA to foster carers by local authorities by age band

Response options	Ages 0-4	Ages 5-10	Ages 11-15	Ages 16+
Paying SRA	21	21	11	21
Paying Below the SRA	1	1	-	2
Paying Above the SRA	5	5	16	4
Missing	5	5	5	5
Total	**32**	**32**	**32**	**32**

Kinship Carer Rates Online

The final rates (either from local authority websites or updated information provided via the survey) suggest that most authorities are paying in line with the SRA for kinship carers. Again, however, a large number of authorities (n=13, 41%) are paying above the SRA for those aged 11-15 in kinship care (slightly fewer than appear to be paying above the SRA for children in foster care of the same age).

Table 6: Reported payment of the SRA to kinship carers by local authorities by age band

Response options	Ages 0-4	Ages 5-10	Ages 11-15	Ages 16+
Paying SRA	16	16	9	17
Paying Below the SRA	4	4	4	4
Paying Above the SRA	6	6	13	5
Missing	6	6	6	6
Total	**32**	**32**	**32**	**32**

The data for four authorities suggest that they are paying above the SRA for all age bands and four appear to be paying below the SRA for all age bands for those in kinship care.

The online allowances data also suggests that slightly more authorities are paying below the SRA for children in kinship care across the different age bands compared to those in foster care.

Overall, the allowances data published online contradicts some respondents' survey responses that they were paying in line with or above the SRA for some or all children (as above). Possible explanations include:

- that the allowances data published online on local authority websites are not current or accurate;
- that some of the published allowances reflect payments before social security deductions are made while others are shown inclusive of deductions; and
- that some websites include/exclude fees data for foster carers in the rates shown.

Regardless of the reasons for the discrepancy, this finding has implications for transparency, both in terms of the accuracy of published information and the consistency of payments being made.

Paying Above and Below SRA

Where local authorities reported that they were paying above the SRA rates for some children, this was typically because they were already paying above the SRA before its implementation, and to reduce the allowance was seen as inappropriate. This is in line with the Scottish Government and COSLA agreement that, where local authorities were already paying above the SRA, allowances would not be reduced, so that kinship or foster carers currently in receipt of an allowance would not be worse off.

Other reasons for paying above the SRA were in cases where children had particularly complex needs and enhanced rates were seen as appropriate i.e. paid to Level 3 foster carers. One authority noted that decisions for enhanced allowances were based on the individual circumstances and needs of the child[ren], including where this placed additional demands on the carers.

Two authorities reported that they had applied an uplift of 3% to their allowances since the SRA was introduced (linked to cost of living/inflation), which accounted for the higher payments.

Several authorities commented that they had not reduced or lowered previously higher rates as this was seen in the best interests of children, young people and their carers, especially where classification into different

age bandings may have left them disadvantaged. One authority specified that higher rates were paid for a small number of carers that were part of the historic categorised level scheme.

In one area, the new age bandings meant that children between the ages of 11-15 would have been disadvantaged if the SRA was applied and so a decision had been made to continue to pay at the old rate for such children until they reached 16 and moved to the next allowance rate (with all new placements paid at the SRA rate).

No authorities reported that they had reduced the amounts paid to carers following the introduction of the SRA (i.e. where they previously paid above the SRA rates). They were clear that no carers should be worse off with the introduction of the SRA and this had driven their post-SRA allowance decisions. Again, however, this was not supported by allowance information published online, and there were also some suggestions from interviews that this was not the case (some carers and TSOs reported that some authorities had indeed reduced allowances).

No specific question was asked about reasons for paying below the SRA.

Comparison with Pre-SRA Rates

Data on pre-SRA allowances paid to carers by local authorities were already held by the Scottish Government, and therefore did not require to be collected as part of the survey[6]. This data was merged with the published online rates and any updated survey findings, to facilitate analysis of any changes to rates pre- and post-SRA.

To protect anonymity, analysis focussed on the number of authorities in aggregate who were now paying more, less or the same as the pre-SRA period.

Foster Care Allowances

The table below shows the number of authorities who appear to be paying more, less or the same allowance rates to foster carers for children in each band, pre- and post-SRA implementation.

At the aggregate level, most authorities are now paying higher rates than before the SRA was introduced. In only a very small number of cases are

[6] In 2015, the Scottish Government requested formal Kinship Carers and some informal Kinship Carers be paid in parity with foster care allowances (minus child related benefits) and so the allowances data provided by the Scottish Government for foster carers should also reflect what kinship carers received.

authorities paying lower rates in any age band (n=5, although this ranged from a 1p reduction to a £40 reduction per week), and these 'below SRA' payments were spread across five different areas (meaning that all authorities were paying at least the SRA for most children). Nearly one third of authorities (n=9) said that they were paying the same for children aged 11-15 both pre- and post-SRA, with fewer paying the same for those aged 0-4 (n=3), 5-10 (n=3) and 16+ (n=1) pre- and post-SRA.

Table 7: Reported pre/post payment comparison to foster carers

Response options	Ages 0-4	Ages 5-10	Ages 11-15	Ages 16+
Paying more	24	23	15	25
Paying the same	3	3	9	1
Paying less	0	1	3	1
Missing	5	5	5	5
Total	**32**	**32**	**32**	**32**

The table below shows the average allowances for foster carers, per age band, both pre- and post-SRA, as well as the difference between the two rates (based on 27 authorities where information was available):

Table 8: Average pre/post payment comparison for foster carers

Age band	Pre-SRA Average	Post-SRA Average	Pre- and Post-SRA Difference
Ages 0-4	£147.34	£174.06	£26.72
Ages 5-10	£164.86	£199.34	£34.48
Ages 11-15	£200.67	£208.88	£8.20
Ages 16+	£236.96	£271.61	£34.65

The biggest aggregate average increase has been for children in the 5-10 age band (at +£34.48) and for those aged 16+ (at +£34.65). The smallest aggregate average increase appears to have been for those aged 11-15 (at +£8.20). However, the table below shows that the average pre-SRA rates for this group were also closest in value to the new SRA rates that were introduced (i.e. they had been, on average, £4.86 above the recommended allowance).

Table 9: Difference in pre/post payment comparison for foster carers

Age band	Pre-SRA Average	SRA	Difference
Ages 0-4	£147.34	£168.31	£20.97
Ages 5-10	£164.86	£195.81	£30.95
Ages 11-15	£200.67	£195.81	-£4.86
Ages 16+	£236.96	£268.41	£31.45

The table below shows the minimum and maximum foster allowances being paid both pre- and post- SRA implementation by age group, for all authorities where data were available.

Table 10: Pre and post SRA ranges in payments for foster carers

Age band	Pre-SRA Range	Post-SRA Range
Ages 0-4	Minimum = £110.76 Maximum = £300.51 Difference = £189.75	Minimum = £142.86 Maximum = £300.51 Difference = £157.65
Ages 5-10	Minimum = £125.14 Maximum = £300.51 Difference = £175.37	Minimum = £162.73 Maximum = £300.51 Difference = £137.78
Ages 11-15	Minimum = £138.45 Maximum = £360.60 Difference = £221.15	Minimum = £195.81 Maximum = £360.60 Difference = £164.79
Ages 16+	Minimum = £138.45 Maximum = £360.60 Difference = £222.15	Minimum = £195.81 Maximum = £388.61 Difference = £192.80

While the data suggests that there remains a wide range in payments being made across local authorities, the difference between the minimum and maximum rates being paid post-SRA is smaller for all age bands (at the aggregate level) compared to pre-SRA. While variation exists, therefore, this has shrunk since the SRA was introduced.

Kinship Carer Allowances

Again, based on the data provided by the Scottish Government and the data currently available on local authority websites (and updated by information in the survey responses where required), the table below shows the number of

authorities who appear to be paying more, less or the same allowance rates to kinship carers for children in each band, pre- and post-SRA implementation.

Table 11: Reported pre/post payment comparison to kinship carers

Response option	Ages 0-4	Ages 5-10	Ages 11-15	Ages 16+
Paying more	22	22	14	22
Paying the same	2	2	5	2
Paying less	2	2	7	2
Missing	6	6	6	6
Total	**32**	**32**	**32**	**32**

Again, at the aggregate level authorities appear to be paying higher rates to kinship carers in most age bands. However, the overall improvement in allowances across those authorities where data are available appears to be less pronounced overall compared to foster carers.

The number of authorities who appear to be paying lower rates to kinship carers post-SRA is also notably higher when compared to foster carers - six separate local authorities appear to be paying less for one age band, one local authority appears to be paying less across three age bands, and one appears to pay less for children across all age bands. The main difference when compared to foster carers is the number of authorities who appear to be paying lower rates rather than the same as pre-SRA.

The table below shows the average allowances for kinship carers, per age band, both pre- and post-SRA, as well as the difference between the two rates (where information was available).

Table 12: Average pre/post payment comparison for kinship carers

Age band	Pre-SRA Average	Post-SRA Average	Pre- and Post-SRA Difference
Ages 0-4	£147.99	£168.08	£20.09
Ages 5-10	£165.37	£193.38	£28.01
Ages 11-15	£200.96	£204.57	£3.61
Ages 16+	£236.71	£266.77	£30.06

As with foster carers, the allowances for kinship carers overall appear to be higher post-SRA (where data are available). Again, the largest increases appear to be among the 16+ age group (at +£30.06), and the 5-10 age group (at +£28.01). The change in the allowance for those aged 11-15, however, is slightly lower for kinship carers (at +£3.61) compared to foster carers (at +£8.20). The average post-SRA rates appear to be slightly lower for kinship carers compared to foster carers across all age groups.

The table below shows the average pre-SRA rates for kinship carers and the difference compared to SRA rates.

Table 13: Difference in pre/post payment comparison for kinship carers

Age band	Pre-SRA Average	SRA	Difference
Ages 0-4	£147.99	£168.31	£20.32
Ages 5-10	£165.37	£195.81	£30.44
Ages 11-15	£200.96	£195.81	-£5.15
Ages 16+	£236.71	£268.41	£31.70

Similar to the difference for foster carers, the SRA represented an uplift for most kinship age groups, with the exception of the 11-15 age group. At each of the age bands, the SRA represented similar levels of change for both kinship and foster carers.

The table below shows the minimum and maximum kinship allowances being paid both pre- and post-SRA implementation by age group, for all authorities where data were available.

Table 14: Pre and post SRA ranges in payments for kinship carers

Age band	Pre-SRA Range	Post-SRA Range
Ages 0-4	Minimum = £110.76 Maximum = £300.51 Difference = £189.75	Minimum = £142.71 Maximum = £200.00 Difference = £57.29
Ages 5-10	Minimum = £125.14 Maximum = £300.51 Difference = £175.37	Minimum = £170.00 Maximum = £205.60 Difference = £35.60
Ages 11-15	Minimum = £138.45 Maximum = £360.60 Difference = £222.15	Minimum = £176.00 Maximum = £276.46 Difference = £100.46

Ages 16+	Minimum = £138.45 Maximum = £360.60 Difference = £222.15	Minimum = £236.60 Maximum = £287.00 Difference = £50.40

As with the foster allowance data, the data suggest that there remains a wide range in payments across local authorities. Again, however, the difference between minimum and maximum rates being paid post-SRA is considerably smaller for all age bands (at the aggregate level) compared to pre-SRA. The difference between the minimum and maximum allowances being paid is also smaller for kinship carers compared to foster carers for all age bands.

Overall, for both foster and kinship allowances, the data that are available online contradicted authorities' own responses that none had reduced the amounts paid to carers following the introduction of the SRA. The data also show that there remains significant variation in what is being paid to both foster and kinship carers by area.

Payment of the SRA by Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs)

Due to very low number of responses from IFAs, there was little available data to emerge from the research with regards to rates paid to foster carers outside of local authority arrangements. Only five gave specific allowance information, and one gave information which combined allowances and fees and so was not usable.

Among the five who did provide rate information, IFA rates appeared to be lower than those paid by local authorities for all those aged 5+. That being said, the average was higher than the SRA for the three lower age bands, and only marginally below the SRA for those aged 16+ (despite all IFAs saying that they did not ever pay below SRA rates).

Table 15: Reported range and average of payments by IFAs

Age band	Minimum	Maximum	Average
Ages 0-4	157.37	218.00	179.27
Ages 5-10	183.08	218.00	198.18
Ages 11-15	183.08	218.00	198.18
Ages 16+	218.00	268.41	251.54

The ranges in rates reported by those who took part was significantly narrower than the ranges reported by local authorities, as shown below. The ranges appear to be attributable to much higher maximum rates being paid by some local authorities compared to IFAs, with the value of the minimum amounts not

being so starkly different between IFAs and local authorities. It is difficult to say, however, if the narrower variation overall can be accounted for simply by the small number of providers who gave rate data rather than reflecting a more generalisable trend in the sector.

Table 16: Comparison of Local Authority and IFA payment ranges

Age band	IFA Range	Local Authority Range
Ages 0-4	Minimum = £157.37 Maximum = £218.00 Difference = 60.63	Minimum = £142.86 Maximum = £300.51 Difference = £157.65
Ages 5-10	Minimum = £183.08 Maximum = £218.00 Difference = £34.92	Minimum = £162.73 Maximum = £300.51 Difference = £137.78
Ages 11-15	Minimum = £183.08 Maximum = £218.00 Difference = £34.92	Minimum = £195.81 Maximum = £360.60 Difference = £164.79
Ages 16+	Minimum = £218.00 Maximum = £268.41 Difference = £50.41	Minimum = £195.81 Maximum = £388.61 Difference = £192.80

Of the five IFAs that took part in the survey, all worked across more than one authority and most covered several different areas. All noted that they paid the same foster allowances across all areas that they operated in.

Reported Receipt of the SRA among IFA Foster Carers

As IFAs do not have to publish their allowance rates online (in the way that local authorities agreed to), foster carers who provide services via an IFA were asked a series of questions related to the SRA rates to try and achieve a better understanding of allowances paid in this sector.

Of the 11 IFA carers who took part in the survey, all worked for one of just two named fostering agencies (one respondent did not identify their agency).

In most situations, respondents indicated that their IFA was paying at least the SRA rate for all children (n=7), one said it was only paid for some children, and two did not know. One respondent also noted that any extent to which their IFA met the SRA rates was only valid from April 2024 onwards, as no backdated payments were made.

The respondent who stated that their agency paid the SRA rate for only some children was also asked if they had been notified about when they would start to receive the SRA rate for all children. They had not.

All IFA foster carers were also asked whether the allowance they currently received from their fostering agency had caused them to consider any of the following changes:

- moving to a different independent fostering agency - three said it had;
- becoming a local authority foster carer - four said it had; and
- leaving their role as a foster carer - four said it had.

These numbers represent only four individuals from the 11 private foster carers who took part (i.e. the same carers said that they had considered each of the above, rather than these being more widespread views across the sample).

Respondents explained that they had considered these changes due to the low allowances and fees currently being paid, which were not considered to be enough to cope with rising prices and to reflect the level of input required from foster carers. A few indicated that they would reconsider their position as a foster carer when their current child placement ended:

> “When we started, fostering provided a good income, now we just make ends meet, cost of living has no way been reflected in how foster carers are paid.” (Foster Carer)

> “I was paid more at a different agency. The remuneration doesn’t cover cost of living for a child and if my husband didn’t work full time we wouldn’t be able to foster a child.” (Foster Carer)

Administration of the SRA

A series of questions were asked in the surveys and interviews of all stakeholders regarding the initial and ongoing administration of the SRA. Questions were designed to explore if the SRA was being facilitated as intended as well as to identify any barriers or challenges which needed to be addressed or further explored in any future rethinking or remodelling of the SRA.

Backdated Payments

The SRA was designed to be backdated to April 2023 for all carers who were already providing fostering or kinship care before the SRA was announced. All but one local authority that responded to the survey confirmed that back payments had been fully paid to all foster and eligible kinship carers in their areas.

The one local authority respondent where backdated payments had not been made explained that such payments were not made in relation to:

- foster carers who were de-registered prior to 29/11/23 but provided a placement between 1/4/23 and 29/11/23; and
- kinship carers who no longer provided kinship care at 29/11/23 but provided a placement between 1/4/23 and 29/11/23.

There were mixed responses with regards to the time taken for completing the backdating process.

Table 17: Reported processing time for back payments by local authorities

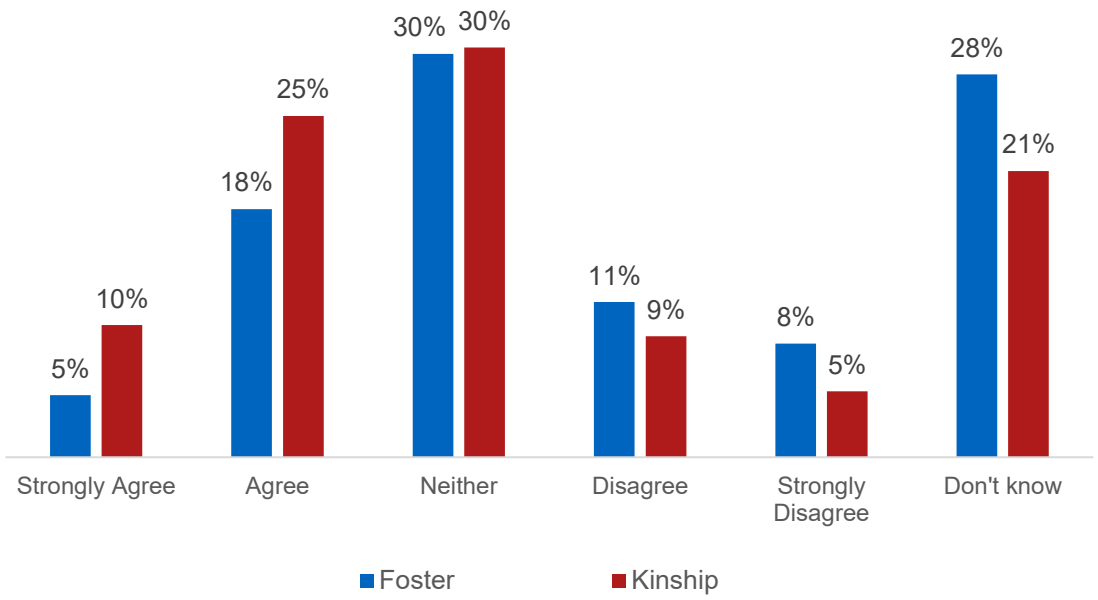
Processing time	Number	%	Valid Percent
0-2 months	16	54%	59%
3-5 months	5	17%	19%
6+ months	6	20%	22%
Don’t know	1	3%	-
Not applicable	1	3%	-
Missing	1	3%	-
Total	**30**	**100%**	**27**

Over half (59%) of authorities who gave a time estimate indicated that it had taken roughly 0-2 months, with a further 19% indicating 3-5 months and 22% indicating a process that took 6+ months.

One local authority reported that there had been no requirement for backdating in their area as they had always paid at least the SRA amounts.

Carers who were asked about the extent to which they agreed that backdated payments were made in an appropriate time frame as part of the survey gave very mixed responses. Most carers were neutral in this regard (30% of both foster and kinship carers). Similar proportions of foster carers agreed (23%, n=30) and disagreed (20%, n=26) that backdated payments had been prompt. Kinship carers, however, were more likely to agree (35%, n=43) compared to those who disagreed (14%, n=17).

Figure 1: Carer perceptions of backdated payments being made in an appropriate timeframe



While 29 respondents (including 10 kinship carers, 15 local authority foster carers and four IFA foster carers) noted that they had not received any backdated payments for at least one or more of their foster children, a further 11 respondents also provided feedback in relation to why they had not received this and the impact this had on their family. Most were either unaware of the reasons for not receiving this or noted that a back payment did not apply as they had already been receiving at least the SRA rate previously. Two foster carers flagged that the 11-15 year old age group in particular had not received any uplift as a result of the SRA rates, which made situations more challenging due to inflation, cost of living increases and rising bills. A few were unsure whether they should have received a back payment or not. Two

foster carers also noted that their IFA decided not to pay this. Again, the impact of not receiving any back payment for both foster and kinship carers was largely identified as making household finances more challenging.

Challenges with Backdating

Roughly one third of authorities that responded to the survey (n=8) reported that there had been no challenges associated with processing or administering backdated payments (with one again noting that this had not been relevant in their area).

Where challenges had been experienced, these related mainly to:

- lack of administrative resource to calculate and implement the backdating of payments (including administration capacity to implement mid-year payment changes) and the resulting financial impact on authorities in meeting the costs of additional administration;
- limitations with existing payment systems/technical work to update IT systems, including needing to change the carer payment system to accommodate new age ranges;
- the requirement for manual calculation in some cases, e.g. because uplifts had already been made in the same financial year, as well as the need for manual checking prior to processing to ensure accuracy (described as a labour intensive process which caused delays in other work commitments);
- financial decisions needing to be signed off at committee/senior management level (including the need to ensure executive level authorisation for additional spend and exceptions once calculations were complete) causing onward delays; and
- issues related to when the additional monies for SRA were received from the Scottish Government/ensuring that funding was secured from the Scottish Government to meet any shortfalls (and/or needing to absorb that directly).

A specific concern was also raised in relation to backdated payments resulting in financial burdens in some areas. This included one authority which incurred additional costs once SRA rates were backdated for those in continuing care (due to them having previously lower rates). Similarly, where authorities had previously paid below SRA rates, but were keen to get the SRA implemented, this meant that some burdening of additional costs was experienced in the short term while awaiting monies from the Scottish Government. One authority reported that they had made a decision to implement ‘estimated’ backdated payments to families before the Christmas period of 2023 (recognising that this was a financially challenging time for families). This in turn resulted in some overpayments having been made once more detailed calculations had been completed, and these overpayments were absorbed by the council directly so as not to negatively impact families.

Other comments included that there had been limited guidance available to authorities regarding backdating of the SRA and that processes were therefore open to interpretation (for example, how to handle back payments of 'former' kinship carers or what to do in cases where families' situations had changed significantly, such as placements ending, children having moved on, changes in children's age bandings over the implementation period, etc.).

Other less frequently mentioned challenges included:

- working out accurate backdated allowances that took account of additional payments such as previous Christmas and birthday payments, for which no guidance was provided;
- the need to liaise with welfare rights colleagues regarding impacts of the SRA on kinship carers benefits, and how this would be communicated to kinship carers (with some challenges in calculating payments that accurately took account of benefits deductions); and
- in one area, attempts to update foster carers fees at the same time as the allowance.

Among local authorities, the main sentiment was that they had not been sufficiently well notified or made aware of the requirement for backdating, and had not therefore accounted for this in their administrative staffing/resource planning. In some areas, the fact that this had not been accounted for also delayed backdated payments significantly and it was felt that more preparation time was needed (which would potentially have removed or reduced the frustration expressed by carers as a result of delays experienced in receiving their payments).

Prompt Payment

Carers were also asked to what extent they agreed that initial SRA payments had been made in an appropriate time frame. Among those who gave a response, foster carers were relatively evenly split between those who agreed (n=40, 30%), those who disagreed (n=39, 30%), and those who neither agreed nor disagreed (n=38, 29%). Meanwhile, kinship carers were more likely to agree (41%, n=52) than disagree (19%, n=24) that initial payment had been prompt.

Among the carers who took part in interviews, there were no reported problems with prompt or regular payment now that the SRA had become embedded and so any reported delays in the initial payments seemed to have been resolved.

How Payments Are Made

Most foster carers who took part in the survey (n=116, 85%) indicated that their allowance and fees were paid together, while 16 (12%) said they were

paid separately. The remaining five respondents either did not know or did not answer the question.

Almost all foster carers (n=131, 96%) stated that they received notification when their allowance or fees were paid. Only five said they were not notified and one respondent did not know.

There were significant differences, however, in how this information was provided, the timing of the information, and how detailed it was. Of the 105 foster carers who specified how the information was sent, just over half (n=57, 54%) received it by email, 21% (n=22) received a letter, and a further 10% (n=10) received both an email and a hard copy letter or remittance via post. A further 15 (14%) foster carers indicated that they received a payslip or remittance notice but did not specify whether this was received via email or post, while one respondent said they received an annual payment timetable at the start of every year.

The frequency of payment information varied, with some respondents receiving this weekly, some fortnightly and some monthly. Occasionally foster carers also noted that more detailed information was also provided at larger intervals, for example every six weeks or quarterly. The timing of the information also varied, with some receiving this a few days before the payment is made, and others (often where postal delivery was used) noting this generally arrived a few days to a week after the payment. Where the information was received after the payment, this was said to cause possible challenges when carers were usure of the accuracy of the payment amount:

> “[The] letter arrives two days after payment which means if it's a different amount than expected you can't touch it for two days until your pay slip arrives and you can figure out what's wrong with it.” (Foster Carer)

The content of the payment information also varied in terms of the detail provided to carers. Some received detailed breakdowns of how the payment amount had been calculated, (i.e. clearly setting out the fee amount, the allowance amount, any other expenses or additional payments made, and any deductions). Others received more basic information detailing the children’s names, the time period the payment covered, and the total payment amount. A few, however, noted that the information they received was so basic that they found it difficult to even determine the time period the payment covered:

> “We get an email but no explanation of what the payments are for, just the amount, it can be very confusing when your waiting on mileage or any other payments. We then get a more detailed statement through the post about every six weeks (after the payments) which is no use at all.” (Foster Carer)

> “We are sent an email of the amount. But a final breakdown of what it relates to does not get sent until a month later which is difficult to tally. Especially when you have holidays (to be taken off), respite and expenses etc.” (Foster Carer)

While kinship carers were not asked about the type and nature of payment information they receive in the survey, similar sentiments were expressed in interviews:

> “It’s just a lump sum that goes in. I couldn’t - for all these years that I’ve been a kinship carer, I don’t think I can actually tell you how much each of the children get, cos there’s never been a breakdown. There’s never been correspondence to say how much it is per child.” (Kinship Carer)

Differentiating between Fostering Fees and Allowances

One the main emerging issues for foster carers was around the merging of fees and allowances received and not being able to differentiate between the two.

Several carers noted that they used the monies received as a “lump sum” or described it all being added to the “family pot”, and many viewed any attempts to manage this money differently as being futile. Most said that their fee was often spent on things for the family (including household bills, food, family trips, holidays, etc.) and so could not easily be separated out from expenditure directly on the children for goods or activities such as clothes, after-school clubs, etc. Similarly, the allowance was often used to pay towards family expenditure in general, rather than specific items:

> “I never really sit and think about what I’m getting paid for it as long as it does the job.” (Foster Carer)

Even though not in receipt of fees, similar sentiments were also expressed by kinship carers regarding their own different income streams:

> “I wouldn’t be able to survive if I wasn’t able to use that kinship allowance as part of my household income…Because you get the letter to say, “This money is not for you” and I’m aware of that but certainly, I think it’s my gas and my electricity and my Virgin package, like with his phone and everything. That all comes out the same account as his kinship allowance cos there’s no other way round it.” (Kinship Carer)

> “I just think I get paid and that’s it - like when you’re in a normal job, you get paid an amount and you work with it and you support the kids the best you can with what money you’ve got to pay. If you counted every penny and kept every receipt for every single thing, you’d go off your head. You’d have nothing to do but think about payments.” (Kinship Carer)

While local authorities were not asked about how they made payments to carers, among the IFAs who took part in the survey, all but one reported that they paid the allowance and fee to foster carers as separate payments (with one issuing carers with a combined payment which clearly indicated the amounts allocated to each part).

Third sector organisations supporting carers also reported that many queries received by them related to carers not knowing which of the two elements they could or should use to spend on certain things, especially food and routine household bills, etc.

Additional Payments and Expenses

As part of the local authority survey, all but one authority said that they paid additional payments to their foster carers.

The range of payments made varied by area, although the most frequently cited additional payments were those being made for Christmas, birthdays and summer holidays (often four additional weeks or 56 weeks pay in total). While this was typically the equivalent of two weeks pay for additional expenses in the summer school holidays and one week each for birthdays and Christmas/winter school holidays (where detail was given), one area noted that they paid a flat rate of £500 per child per year as a holiday allowance and another said that they funded costs of holidays with foster carers for all children and young people (e.g. flights and accommodation). One authority also noted they paid one extra weeks payment in September for extra-curricular activities, and another noted that they paid unused holiday entitlements.

Other frequently cited additional payments and expenses were those made for mileage (for example, for foster carers when transporting children to and from family visits or to attend foster related meeting/training, etc.), a telephone allowance, and discretionary payments for miscellaneous items/activities/expenses where these were considered in the best interests of the child. Some authorities noted that they made additional payments for new placements to cover initial essential set-up/equipment costs, etc. (with funding for replacement of essential equipment also covered), and one noted that they paid additional or enhanced payments for children with complex needs, assessed on a case-by-case basis. Emergency payments were also cited to cover such things as purchase of a passport, etc.

Several authorities reiterated that they also paid fees to their foster carers as well as skill level payments. In all cases, neither the fees nor the additional payments listed were said to have changed as a result of the SRA.

A sizable minority of authorities (n=9) said that they did not pay any additional payments to their kinship carers.

Where additional payments to kinship carers were made, these were similar to those made for foster carers and related mainly to birthday, Christmas and holiday payments (typically an additional four weeks, as above) as well as mileage, accommodation and travel costs for supporting children to attend appointments, meetings and for family time, telephone expenses, set-up equipment/furniture costs, and miscellaneous expenses on an ongoing basis.

One authority noted that they had previously paid legal costs in relation to applying for Kinship Care Orders. This was the only additional payment that was mentioned that was unique to kinship carers (although some noted that start up payments/expenses could be higher for kinship families than foster families, especially for placements made in emergencies and at short notice).

Given the variation in the level of detail given by authorities in response to questions about additional payments, it was not possible to compare like-for-like across the sample in terms of current practice. From the feedback provided, however, it appears that there is considerable variation in additional payments for carers by area and type of carer, and that decisions are made on a local and discretionary basis.

As with local authorities, all IFAs reported that they paid additional payments to foster carers on top of SRA allowances and fees. Again, these mainly covered holiday, Christmas and birthday allowances, with parity in the nature and scale of the payments paid by local authorities (i.e. equivalent of one week for Christmas/religious festivals/birthdays and two weeks for summer holidays). Additional payments were also made by IFAs for travel, e.g. for carers to attend meetings and/or to facilitate parental or familial contact for the children, as well as ‘set up fees’ being reported by one. One IFA also noted that they paid both 10 and 20 year ‘awards’. Ad hoc payments for things such as costs towards tuition for academic or leisure pursuits were also cited, as well as discretionary funds to assist carers with unexpected costs which may impact on daily living (e.g. car or boiler breakdown, etc.). There was no consistency in the additional payments made by different IFAs and a wide variety of different amounts and items mentioned in survey responses.

All IFAs said that they paid additional payments separately to the weekly allowances that were made to carers, typically alongside monthly allowances as a separate entry (although one did report that they had included their additional holiday payments in the average weekly allowance costs).

Among carers, there was considerable variation in the additional payments reported at interview, with kinship carers in particular reporting that there appeared to be very different practices and policies in relation to what was paid above the SRA, both within and between areas (and between different families/children):

> “Prior to the SRA coming in and the guidance, the new guidance, kinship carers where the children were non-looked after, would receive the additional payments. However, what we’re now seeing is that those kinship carers who are becoming kinship carers at a later date are not entitled to those additional payments. So even within the same local authorities…I had a kinship carer approach me to say, “Everyone else is getting these additional payments but I’m not getting them.” That’s so unfair.” (TSO)

Several carers perceived that variation within local authorities was due to differences in the allocated social workers and their familiarity with the local authority practices, as well as differences in social worker discretion to sign off certain items of expenditure:

> “It’s not very transparent and it seems to be each area team work different - one area team could say “Yes, we’ll finance that piece of equipment” and the other area team will say “No, we can’t finance that.” (Foster Carer)

Specific discrepancies included differences between areas in relation to travel and transport costs - it was reported that while some carers get all mileage costs, some have to pass a threshold of miles before they are allowed to claim.

Several carers also reported that additional payments were not adequate enough to meet their intended purpose, especially birthday and Christmas payments:

> “I would say Christmas, birthdays and holidays. It’s not enough…I think he had a Switch that he got for Christmas and that alone is like £300 - over £300! And our wee boy last year had a birthday party…you hire a venue, you buy a cake, you get all the kids a party bag, you know, you’ve spent £200 and you haven’t bought the child a present.” (Foster Carer)

> “I find it really difficult to afford Xmas and birthdays for my kinship child. I know some local authorities give extra payments at Xmas, birthdays and holidays but [local authority] have never done that, so although they have tried to make all kinship carers receive the same, that still isn’t the case.” (Kinship Carer)

Some foster carers also reported what they saw as undue pressure being placed on them by local authorities to evidence best outcomes for children in care, without providing the financial support to facilitate that:

> “They [the local authority] are saying, “Get them into clubs”. I mean, I’ve got a wee fellow who was wanting to be in a football team and it was like £50 a month and then £5 a week and then I had to pay for travelling. So, you’re sitting going, well, where’s that money going to come from? Every time you

> go to a foster review, they ask you, “What club’s he in? Are you taking him on holiday?” And you’re like that, “Where do you think I’m getting all money from?”” (Foster Carer)

> “I think the other thing that could be thought about more is that, you know, our kids use technology and, you know, mobile phones are now coming in at £1000…and who’s paying for that? The expectation from Social Work is the child has a mobile phone, but who’s paying the £1000 for the mobile phone? Because that’s a lot.” (Foster Carer)

While several carers expressed views that they were buying or wanted to buy items that might be considered ‘expensive’ or ‘lavish’, this was justified, they felt, as a means of not making children ‘stand out’ or appear different from their peers. Indeed, many carers expressed that their children were already ‘different’ by virtue of being cared for and so they made all efforts to try and reduce any other sense of difference or marginalisation where they could, i.e. “The stigma of being in care is enough to deal with.” (Foster Carer). This meant ensuring that children had the same clothes, technology and access to opportunities as their non-cared-for peers, and this was seen as important to help them feel included and to have the experiences they deserved:

> “I know a lot of people say, you don’t need to spend that…but you want children to have good experiences when they’re growing up…So, I don’t agree that you shouldn’t spend that money. There’s a difference between being excessive and extravagant and then just making sure that children have a good experience.” (Kinship Carer)

A minority view was expressed that additional payments should be scrapped and instead be calculated and incorporated into standard allowances. This would, it was suggested, remove the bureaucracy associated with administering additional payments, the costs of which were seen as excessive and likely to be the same as the cost of additional payments themselves. It would also remove some of the current scrutiny being exerted over carers and their expenditure which was seen by some as being overly intrusive, i.e. “If we’ve trusted them with the lives of children, we can trust them to use their allowance effectively and to do what’s right.” (TSO)

Interaction of the SRA with Other Benefits

Local authorities may deduct some child-related benefits that kinship carers receive from their allowance. This is to ensure that, overall, the amount they receive is equivalent to the fostering allowance.

As part of the survey, all kinship carers were asked if they received any social security benefits which meant that money was deducted from their SRA allowance. Of the 133 who answered the question, 48% (n=64) said they did, 44% (n=59) said they did not, and 8% (n=10) did not know.

Those who did receive other benefits that were deducted from their allowance were asked if they had been aware that these benefits would impact the amount of SRA that they would receive. Just over half (52%, n=33) said they had not been aware of this, compared to 39%, (n=25) who had been aware, and 9% (n=6) who did not know.

Respondents impacted by these deductions were also asked about the impact of the reduction in the SRA. Some said there was no impact as they received the same amount of money overall, with some coming from the SRA and some coming from child benefit (or other payments):

> "I still receive the same amount, just paid from two sources instead of one." (Kinship Carer)

Some carers did, however, comment that the different timing of payments of the SRA and other benefits made it challenging to manage family finances and budget efficiently and effectively. This aligned with suggestions from some TSOs that it may be helpful for the SRA to be administered by the same agency as those administering benefits (although this was a minority view).

A few also highlighted that the current system of deducting the full amount of alternative benefits from the SRA meant that these recipients did not benefit from any inflationary uplifts in these other benefits. Any increase in the rate paid for child benefit or to the child payment element of Universal Credit is taken off the SRA payment in full, meaning that kinship carers ultimately do not receive the intended increase in this support:

> "…the government keep telling everyone how wonderful they are at increasing child benefits (i.e. family allowance) but kinship carers get the increase taken straight back off their kinship allowance, which therefore tells you that kinship carers lose out on this benefit." (Kinship Carer)

Further, there appears to be differences in how the deductions of child benefit is approached by different local authorities. Some carers indicated that they had decided not to apply for child benefit in order to claim the full SRA amount without deductions, to keep their payments more streamlined. However, others noted that, despite not claiming child benefit, their local authority automatically deducted the equivalent payment from their SRA (regardless of whether it was received from these other sources or not).

Several kinship carers also outlined other issues and challenges with receiving both the SRA and other social security benefits. These included:

- lack of awareness of kinship carers and/or the SRA/kinship allowance at DWP - respondents reported difficulties in applying for child benefit as a kinship carer, difficulties related to the requirements of Universal Credit,

and DWP/Universal Credit staff not being aware of the SRA payments and how these interacted with other benefits payments;
- delays and difficulties with DWP, particularly in relation to adjustments and migrating from other benefits to Universal Credit - resulting in the need for advance payments which then need to be paid back;
- carers being informed of over payments and the need to pay these back. One respondent did not know why the overpayment had occurred, while another said this was a result of payments not stopping immediately when the child turned 18. Payments stopping abruptly at this age were also described as difficult as the child was still living with the kinship carer but had no income; and
- difficulties arising from payments being changed from 'in advance' to 'in arrears'.

There was agreement among other stakeholders too that the reduction of child benefit payments and other benefits from the SRA allowance for kinship carers was not fair:

> "I've heard it from probably every carer - that they're getting their child benefit taken off their kinship allowance…I would say the majority of all our kinship carers are struggling financially and, I understand that the child benefit and kinship allowance is kind of the same thing, but they just say they need that extra because already they [are] struggling financially." (TSO)

> "For kinship carers where the child-related benefits are deducted from their Kinship Care Allowance, the Kinship Care Allowance stays the same. So they would be getting more child benefits, say an increase of £3 a week, then that money is taken off the Kinship Care Allowance. So, this is some of the most disadvantaged people in society and they are not getting access to any increases. And the fact that there's been a block - there's been no uplift for the Kinship Care Allowance then, in fact, they're actually worse off than the general public…it's a real travesty." (TSO)

The fact that benefits were deducted from the pay of kinship carers was seen as reducing the parity that had been hoped for when the SRA was introduced:

> "And [kinship carers] are also means-tested on the benefits that they get, which is then taken away from their allowance to make them parity with foster carers. But, to my mind, it's not parity because foster carers also get a fee. So, there's that loop that I think we've not cracked yet. So, it does, on the face of it, offer parity but the reality of it, I think, is different." (TSO)

While several stakeholders called for transparency in the information shared with carers about how the SRA interacts with benefits, there were also calls for more proactive sharing (mainly by local authorities) of financial information

for carers per se. A proactive approach was seen as essential due to the existence of some negative stereotyping fears among carers that any enquiries about money would be viewed as greedy or self-serving:

> "…often carers are afraid of putting their hand up and saying, "I need some advice on finance" because then they can be seen as or perceived as only being interested in fostering because of money." (TSO)

Contracts between IFAs and Local Authorities

Only a few authorities (n=5) reported that the announcement of the SRA had resulted in any specific changes to the contracts that their local authority had with independent fostering agencies. The changes related to:

- some providers charging additional rates for fostering provision;
- some increasing their fees as a result of the SRA;
- some agencies requesting uplifts to costs/increased payment costs; and
- all agencies in one area being required to provide evidence to the authority that the SRA rates were being paid.

One authority also commented that contracts with providers via the Scotland Excel Framework were subject to annual variation in fees, although it was not clear in what way, if any, the announcement of SRA had contributed to any specific changes to date. They noted that uplift rates varied across providers and clarity in relation to the breakdown of these fees would be useful with the SRA in mind going forwards.

Similarly, only one IFA said that some of their contracts with local authorities, that were in place before August 2023, had changed or been updated as a result of the SRA being introduced. All others said that they remained unchanged with one commenting that local authorities had not agreed to amend contracts to include the SRA.

Indeed, overall, IFAs noted that the announcement had made little material impact on their operations, as most were already paying equal to or above the SRA. While there were a minority who were paying below the SRA rate, the impact was felt by this small number of agencies only, rather than broadly across the independent sector.

There was some variation in responses regarding the number or proportion of fostering arrangements made 'off contract' or outside of IFAs standard fee structure or agreed framework. While some reported that none of their contracts operated this way, others commented that 'off contract' arrangements were in place for some children with particularly complex needs (accounting for anything up to 20-25% of placements at any given time).

There was variation across the small number of IFAs who took part in the survey in relation to whether their contract(s) with local authorities specified an exact or minimum allowance amount that should be paid to foster carers. Two said that 'all' contracts specified this, two said that 'some' contracts specified this and one said that none of their contracts specified this.

There were also very mixed responses with regards to whether local authorities had passed on any uplift in respect of the SRA to their IFA providers. Two said that no uplift was needed as they already paid allowances above the SRA, one said that all local authorities that they worked with had passed on the uplift, one said that some authorities had passed it on but not others, and one said that none of the local authorities they worked with had passed on the required uplift:

> "Financially we have had to absorb this as it has not been passed on by LAs, and discussions have been ongoing as to when (if) it will be passed on. In the interim we have passed on an uplift to our carers. This is in addition to the range of additional payments made to support our carers and children that are not within the contracted amounts." (IFA)

One IFA that had received the uplift had passed it directly to foster carers in full, and one said it had not - they instead opted to try and ensure parity across all carers by apportioning across the board to achieve equity for those living in local authority areas where the uplift had/had not been made.

While the survey data were limited from IFAs in terms of consistency in uplifts, qualitative feedback did suggest that a failure by most local authorities to pass on monies to IFAs which they had been given by the Scottish Government as part of the SRA announcement was a widespread issue. IFAs highlighted that the Scottish Government had made a financial estimate of what the SRA introduction would cost for all foster carers in Scotland (both local authority and independent) and had allocated each local authority the funds pro rata to cover that. In practice, however, it was reported that none of the local authorities passed on the allocated money to any of the independent agencies, meaning that local authorities were given a surplus of funds that they did not spend on independent carers. IFAs noted that this had been something that the Scottish Government had failed to anticipate in planning for the SRA, and had also been unable or unwilling to rectify retrospectively, instead leaving IFAs and local authorities to negotiate between themselves how local solutions could be found. This was, for IFAs, perhaps one of the biggest oversights in the planning and implementation of the SRA.

There was consensus among all IFAs who took part in the research that the fees they charged local authorities for their services were fixed, i.e. providers operating in multiple areas charged all authorities the same. Rough estimates were provided that between 50-60% of IFAs' fees were paid directly to carers,

with the remainder spent on providing wider support to carers. Again, all carers were paid the same fees by IFAs operating in more than one area.

Although not well represented in the research overall, among the small number of foster carers who worked with independent agencies, there were views at interview that the communication regarding the SRA had been confusing. Many had contacted their agencies on the understanding that they would receive increased and/or backdated payments and were disappointed when they were told this would not be the case:

> "I immediately contacted the fostering agency and I was quite surprised about the response I got from them because my reading of the literature on the Scottish Government website with the implementation of the recommended fees, the SRAs, it seems to suggest that local authorities were told that they should be paying these rates. Now, what my fostering agency, which I was kind of a bit aghast about, told me when I brought them up about this, say that our fees went up in April 2024 but this implementation was April 23. Do you have any plans to backdate? And the response I got from the fostering agency was, no…The local authorities refused to give us the money, basically, despite being recommended by the government. I was a wee bit aghast and a wee bit disappointed at that to be honest with you." (Foster Carer)

While some had been reassured by agencies that there would be a rise in allowances in the future, this had not always been delivered and was something that remained unclear:

> "They [the agency] came back to me saying was that it wasn't really geared towards independent agencies, it was more of a government scheme for local authorities because the money in effect wasn't passed on to individual agencies…they came back to us in March saying that they would change things in line with the government. But they wouldn't change them until 1st April 24, so there wasn't any back pay for anybody within our agency…which is a bit unfair." (Foster Carer)

In addition to receiving no financial benefit from the SRA, some agency carers had felt let down and in some cases that local authority carers had been treated more preferentially which, in turn, made them question the value of fostering with an IFA instead of their local authority:

> "It always was that, if you went with the independent agencies, you were paid just that wee bit more…I think it's more transparent in terms of you know it being the same across the board, definitely, that needed to happen and it might stop people from thinking that it's better to go with another agency because of the financial impact…Because then that kind of opens up where people are maybe going and it might be of benefit more to the

local authorities who were maybe always paying less. Do you know what I mean? They're maybe paying less than the independent agencies before. So, it might actually be more effective to local authorities than the actual agencies, if you like." (Foster Carer)

Because some agency carers were already receiving above the SRA and others received no change in their pay as a result of the SRA, most private foster carers noted that it had not impacted them in any way other than to feel undervalued and let down by the Scottish Government in some cases.

Allowances Entitlement and Eligibility Criteria

Prior to the agreement with COSLA, regulations were already in place to ensure that allowances were paid to foster and kinship carers by local authorities, but the amount was not specified. These include Regulation 33 of the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 (also referred to as section 110 of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007), Section 22 (3) (b) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Section 50 of the Children's Act 1975.

Part 13 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 also places a duty on local authorities to ensure that kinship care assistance is made available to those who apply for, consider applying for, have obtained, or are subject to a Kinship Care Order if the relevant eligibility test is met. Part 13 of the Act came into force on 1 April 2016 and the secondary legislation associated with this part of the Act, called the Kinship Care Assistance (Scotland) Order 2016, sets out the manner in which a local authority shall provide kinship carers with this additional support and assistance.

However, eligibility for kinship care allowances apply only to those kinship carers of children where the child has a looked after status or where the child is not a looked after child but is subject to a Section 11 Order (known as a Kinship Care Order), and is, or was previously, looked after, or is at risk of becoming looked after.

Only one authority reported that they had made any changes to their allowances' entitlement and eligibility criteria following the introduction of the SRA (although they noted that the change had been to the allowance amount, rather than the eligibility criteria).

Kinship Care Legislation and Kinship Carer Status

Specifically with regards to kinship carers caring for a child subject to a Kinship Care Order who was previously looked after or at risk of becoming looked after, local authorities were asked under what legislation they made allowance payments.

Table 18: Legislation under which authorities make payments for a child subject to a Kinship Care Order

Response options	Regulation 33 of the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009	Section 22 (3) (b) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Section 50 of the Children's Act 1975
All	8 (28%)	15 (52%)
Most	3 (10%)	1 (3%)
Some	-	2 (7%)
Total	**11 (38%)**	**18 (62%)**

Base = 29 as there was one missing response

Around half (n=15) said that 'all' allowance payments were made under Section 22 (3) (b) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Section 50 of the Children's Act 1975, with a further 3 saying that most or some were made this way. Far fewer (n=8) said that 'all' allowances were made under Regulation 33 of the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 (also referred to as section 110 of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007), with a further 3 saying that most were made this way.

Specifically with regards to kinship carers caring for a looked after child, local authorities were also asked under what legislation they made allowance payments.

Table 19: Legislation under which authorities make payments for a looked after child

Response options	Regulation 33 of the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009)	Section 22 (3) (b) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Section 50 of the Children's Act 1975
All	8 (29%)	17 (61%)
Most	2 (7%)	-
Some	-	1 (3%)
Total	**10 (36%)**	**18 (64%)**

Base = 28 as there were two missing responses

Again, more than half (n=17) reported that they paid 'all' such allowances in line with Section 22 (3) (b) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Section 50 of the Children's Act 1975, with a further one saying that they paid some this way. Fewer than a third (n=8) said that they paid 'all' such allowances in line

with Regulation 33 of the Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009, with a further two saying that most were paid this way.

Where authorities noted that they used Section 22 (3) (b) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Section 50 of the Children's Act 1975 for the payment of any or all kinship carers, they were asked to explain their reasons for doing so. The most frequent reason given was that the Section 22 legislation meant that allowances would be discounted as income for benefit purposes, and that payments on this basis would not interfere with carers' entitlements to child benefits and tax credits (unlike Section 33). Several authorities cited that using this legislation enabled kinship carers to claim for and receive the child related benefits they were eligible for, treating the allowance as a welfare payment which should not impact on benefits.

Two authorities reported that payments were made through the Section 22 legislative pathway in order to ensure they were fulfilling their legal duties to both safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people within the local authority who are looked after.

One authority noted that they had always paid kinship carers using Section 22 (3) (b) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, following legal advice and national practice after the implementation of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. Another explained that Section 50 of the Children Act 1975 allowed the local authority to make payments for the maintenance of a child who is under age 18 and who is living with a person other than her/his parent. Section 50 allowed the local authority to make payments to kinship carers, but did not oblige it to do so.

One authority explained that kinship carers paid this way had not been assessed as eligible for formal kinship allowance and another noted that they used Section 50 for what they regarded to be informal carers, i.e. kinship placements where social work were involved but there was no legal order in place. Another indicated that sometimes payments were made this way under emergency assistance prior to the carers being formally set up as kinship carers.

One authority said that this approach was based on budget alignment and flexibility of approach, while two said that this had always been their practice (one of whom said there were no plans to review and the other who said that this was due for review).

One authority reported that they were unclear why Section 22 was used.

Views were expressed by various stakeholders across the research that children subject to a Kinship Care Order were being treated unfairly compared to looked after children. In some cases, there was cynicism that families were

being encouraged to take out Orders, to prevent their child being categorised as 'cared for' without having sufficient knowledge that this would impact on the child's entitlement to financial support at a later date:

> "And what we say to kinship carers when they're being advised to take out an Order which means the child will be non-looked after, they need to ask the local authority - "What will this mean for my payments?" Will my payments change? They're often just told, "This is in the best interest for you and the child". And it's not until further down the line that they'll hear - "Well, the additional payments are stopping…you know, the payment will only be for the child up to age 16, there'll be no continuing care."" (TSO)

The legal basis under which children were being cared for was seen as creating a divide in the kinship carer experience. Those who sought a Section 11 Kinship Care Order as a personal family arrangement (either by choice or on advisement of their social worker), where the child was never previously looked after, was not placed by a social worker, and was not at risk of becoming looked after, were neither eligible for the allowance nor any wider support, despite still being a kinship carer:

> "That, to me, is a big gap and I think, in general, that is always why sometimes we hear carers say, "I don't get the same support as I used to", and that is often because they have been encouraged to or they have chosen to seek a Section 11 Order which means the child, on the granting of that, is no longer a looked after child, so you don't get the same Social Work support, you don't get the same reviews, etc. So, there's that complexity too." (TSO)

This was another area where greater transparency was urged, and there were reports that different authorities were again employing different practices in relation to Kinship Care Orders compared to one another:

> "For Kinship Care Orders carers…some people are continuing the allowance up until they're 18, others are only paying it until they leave school. Others are stopping it at 16." (TSO)

At a more fundamental level there were also calls for more information to be made available for kinship carers more generally, specifically on their roles, their rights, and eligibility for support:

> "I suppose a clearer message from the government would be nice rather than all the jargon they put in front of it that just makes you confused and you don't want to read on." (Kinship Carer)

> "There's two positions for kinship carers. There's a temporary kinship carer, which I am at the moment. And then they move you on to the permanent

kinship carer. But what Social Work doesn't do is tell us that, if you want to go permanent, if we earn over that amount, it will be means-tested, so you would lose it [the SRA]…Social Work didn't bother telling us that. Do you know what I mean?" (Kinship Carer)

"I just think, you know, people should be made aware from the minute they take on a child that this is what - it's out there to help them. Nobody should have to struggle financially. You shouldn't have to sit at home thinking, can I do this financially? Nobody should ever have to think like that." (Kinship Carer)

Third sector organisations in particular noted a significant issue with kinship carers not always understanding their status as carers and, therefore not seeking the relevant information or support that was available to them:

"Often kinship carers don't even know that they're kinship carers, so how can they look for a kinship service when they don't know that's what they are?" (TSO)

"It's really hard to engage with kinship families…I believe there's a lot of families out there who don't realise there actually is a name for it…they don't realise that there is support out there for grandparents or whatever who have taken on their grandchildren." (TSO)

While many support organisations provide booklets, leaflets or other communications which can be shared with kinship carers, there were reports that this was not routinely provided, especially in the early days of people's care experience:

"When I first started this journey, I didn't get told anything because I said, if you don't know, then they don't need to give you money. So, they're saving money…You have to go and do your own research and then you're up against all the barriers. I've had to fight tooth and nail for this child for five years for everything that child's entitled to. It's ridiculous." (Kinship Carer)

Several also commented on legacy practices in relation to kinship care allowances, the feeling being that although the SRA had helped, it had not completely alleviated what some still viewed as 'reluctant awarding' of allowances to kinship carers:

"The kinship payments up until a few years ago felt very cloak and dagger. Nobody would tell you about it. They didn't want you to receive it. Some people would get a very small payment, like - it was like the council did not want to release this money to people and you had to fight to get what you wanted for that child. So, it felt like they were keeping their budgets to themselves and re-allocating it somewhere else." (Kinship Carer)

Many kinship carers and third sector support organisations also reported that it was fellow carers and/or peer support groups who provided the main source of information for kinship carers, rather than any more formal source:

> "I think the peer support is where each carer will pass on information about allowances and what benefits they can get and I think that's where they get the most information from, to be honest." (TSO)

> "They're a community that often don't know they're a community…unless somebody's giving them the right information at the right time, when they're open to be able to listen, take it in and act on it, that is a real barrier to them having that same access." (TSO)

Some carers were also unaware of the new guidance published by the Scottish Government on Part 13 of the Children in Scotland 2014 Act and how this impacts how and when Kinship Care Allowance is awarded to kinship carers.

In some cases, carers who had contacted third sector organisations reported that they had been informed by their local authorities that they were not entitled to financial support. This too points towards a lack of clarity at the local level around eligibility and access. Again, this was linked to a need for greater transparency and clarity in all communications (including those from local and central government) on what an 'eligible' carer would be:

> "When the announcement came out, it was just 'eligible' foster carer, 'eligible' kinship carer…If I'm a kinship carer and I see it's an eligible carer, I've no idea whether I'm getting it or not. So, I do think there's still a bit of work to do around that in terms of transparency." (TSO)

There were questions around whether a standard definition was being used across all local authorities of what an eligible foster carer or kinship carer would be.

On a related note, many kinship carers and third sector organisations reported that kinship carers were often treated as the "poor relation" in the carer sphere. Reports were given of significantly varying levels of support for kinship carers across different areas, and while some local authorities were seen as having excellent packages of support (e.g. kinship panels, kinship care peer groups, highly trained social workers to work alongside kinship carers), others were seen as having no such wraparound in place:

> "There's different practices across all the local authorities. There are some kinship care teams in local authorities but some don't have them at all. Some are very much focused on their looked after children, some don't have processes at all for children in kinship care. And this has always been

an issue that, as the number of children in kinship has risen in the last 10, 15 years, our processes and practices and policies aren't always catching up. And so things like that aren't always attended to with the same rigour as they are for the more quote traditional care, like foster care, adoption, residential, secure." (TSO)

More support for kinship carers was urged, recognising that their route or pathway into caring was very different from the experience of most foster carers:

"I think often kinship carers need support to fully access things, like they need that handholding in a way that maybe foster carers don't. Because the difference is, as a foster carer, you are a trained professional, you've had a lot of training and you're receiving payment, you're treated as an employee effectively…So it's very different." (Kinship Carer)

"I just feel across the board, it should be fair for everybody. We're taking on kids that we never gave birth to, we didn't choose to have. However, out of love, we do this and you just can't live on love alone." (Kinship Carer)

Some called for a nationally adopted kinship care pathway to be established (i.e. which set out everything that kinship carers or those supporting them may need to know) accompanied by wider support. This would, it was suggested, help to bolster the parity and equity that the SRA had sought to introduce for different types of carers:

"I think the SRA, in essence, comes from a place of good. It comes from a place of trying to make things as equitable as possible, but I don't think it's necessarily to do with the payment that makes things less equitable. I think it's the way people enter into kinship care and the support related to that, giving them the information on their rights, what access to different things, being under different Orders may give people…It's all of these things. It's that whole journey, isn't it?" (TSO)

Short Break and Permanent Foster Carers

There was little feedback received across the research in relation to differential impacts of the SRA on both short-break and permanent and long-term foster carers (short-break carers being those who offer care for a child or young person over a short period of time (e.g. 7-14 days) as a means of providing respite to their main care givers). The main issues affecting short-break carers that were reported were in relation to difficulties understanding their payments and whether they were accurate for the care provided (as discussed above), and delayed back payments for this cohort when the SRA was initially introduced.

One carer reported at interview that their own authority had employed a 'two tier system' for backdating payments which had caused considerable confusion and unrest among carers. The approach entailed making backdated payments to full-time carers first and much earlier than payments were made for carers offering short breaks. This resulted in short-break carers feeling undervalued and experiencing delays in their entitlements compared to full-time caring peers.

The National Framework

Several IFAs who fed into the research through various means expressed that they were part of the National Framework managed by Scotland Excel. As such, no changes were made when the SRA was introduced (with no additional money being given to IFAs as a result). Many IFAs had already signed up to long term agreements as part of the framework which meant that local authorities were not contractually obliged to pass on any of the money that the Scottish Government had given them for the purposes of the SRA (instead spending the money elsewhere). This had been disappointing and had again meant that local solutions were sought.

Some commented that they had tried to offer parity with local authority allowances post-SRA implementation, sometimes at their own expense, and this was seen as important to retain the carers already working with them.

With regards to future frameworks, there were views that costs quoted by some IFAs (especially those who had been hit financially by receiving no earlier monies from local authorities and meeting increases to costs themselves) may be significantly higher than pre-SRA since future payments would need to reflect the backdated SRA payments that the providers were unable to claim under their previous framework agreements. IFAs noted that future costs were likely to be artificially high because of this claw back and this was something that national and local government needed to be mindful of. In particular, there were questions around whether this had been factored into future budgeting for the SRA since, although prices may be high, the service would still be needed due to demand for carers nationally:

> "We need all the foster carers we can get…So if you put in a price for [the local authority's] next contract that is higher than others, they might come to you last but they're still going to need your foster carers." (IFA)

Other feedback included that the existence of various different frameworks around the country undermined the idea of a 'national framework' and that IFAs were continuously considering how best to operate with changing frameworks in place. Some IFAs commented explicitly that the move away from the National Framework by many local authorities was retrograde and was potentially adding bureaucracy to a system that should be child-focused and not process driven.

Future Uplifts

While the SRA had been welcomed, there was shared disappointment from carers, local authorities, IFAs and support organisations that there had been no uplift to payments in the financial year 2024/25 and no indications of an uplift in 2025/26:

> "It has caused some unsettlement for carers as there's no guarantee (or recognition) for them of the impact of cost of living and other increases, leaving them feel less valued by national and local government." (IFA)

While there was no clear agreement on what the uplift amounts should be, stakeholders felt strongly that rises were needed to at least reflect increases in inflation and the cost of living. Having a transparent and predictable minimum uplift was encouraged:

> "Some kind of formula based on the obvious cost pressures for a foster carer would be eminently sensible and people would be able to plan. And I guess the Scottish Government could say, "We've changed our mind this year, it's less than that, it's more than that" or whatever. But at least if there was some sort of predictive formula, that would take some of the uncertainty out of it." (IFA)

There was also strong consensus that all future uplifts needed to be notified to local authorities and IFAs at least 2-3 months in advance of the start of the financial year to allow them to plan accordingly. This was necessary to avoid a repeat of the complications that had previously been experienced with the backdating process, and stakeholders strongly urged the Scottish Government not to announce retrospective uplifts which may be hard to implement:

> "It costs more to foster every year just like the cost of living costs more. So, I think it does need to be in line with inflation and it should be looked at on an annual basis. It also needs to be done in a really timely way, so that local authorities can prepare their budget, so that they can implement it…it should be part of everybody's awareness, we should all be waiting for it in December time, we should know roughly what is the uplift to that, just like there are to every other aspect of local government planning. It's fairly standard in every other area." (TSO)

Some stakeholders suggested that there were opportunities to concrete plans for uplifts as part of the Promise Bill.

Understanding and Use of the SRA

Pre- and Post- Implementation Communication

Among carers and carer representative organisations, the main feedback in relation to communication was that it had taken far too long for the SRA to come into effect, after what was seen as years of lengthy negotiations between the Scottish Government and COSLA:

> "This has been going on for over 10 years…I think the communication was really poor for carers because they knew this was coming but the position with COSLA and the Scottish Government became a sort of stalemate situation…They just kept getting told that they were in negotiations and nothing - each year, nothing tended to move on. So, I think it's important to have that context that these carers were waiting for over 10 years for this to be agreed and implemented." (TSO)

As a result of the long wait, many of the perceived weaknesses with the final announcement (including the age banding and allowance rates discussed more below) were seen as inexcusable, i.e. as there had been ample time for better planning.

Carers and carer representative organisations also noted that, post SRA announcement, there had been variable engagement between local authorities and carers, with notable differences observed around the country:

> "When it was implemented, there was guidance and there was information on the website that was provided to carers but it was up to local authorities and services to talk to their own carers themselves. And I think that's where the problem lay there, because some were very good at that and giving regular updates, you know, when it was implemented, when carers would be paid, how they would be paid, when it would be backdated, all of that information. But I know of one particular authority that…just didn't communicate at all when that money would be paid." (TSO)

Again, the lack of communication by some local authorities with their carers resulted in confusion around such things as when the new payments would start, if and when backdated payments would be made and whether or not IFA carers would be included in any increases in allowances.

For IFAs, one of the biggest issues linked to the SRA was a noted lack of engagement with this sector during the planning and implementation stages. This resulted in the independent sector feeling somewhat marginalised, as well as feeling that they had spent a lot of time and energy post-SRA launch in negotiating with local authorities and the Scottish Government to try and express the impact of the SRA on their operations:

> "It would have been helpful to have had the opportunity to say how [IFAs] thought about this and have some plans in place so they could have avoided some of the inevitable tensions that took up too much of everybody's time throughout the following nine months once it was launched." (IFA)

Indeed, most IFAs felt that there had been little or no consultation with their sector in advance of the SRA announcement and noted that when the SRA was announced, the messaging was also very confusing. Specifically, it was felt that that the launch communications presented the SRA as something which was going to be applicable to every foster carer in Scotland and implied that all would get a 'pay rise' which, in reality, was not the case:

> "…we had a number of independent agency foster carers contact their agency saying, "I've just seen on the news that I'm going to get a pay rise. How is that going to work?"" (IFA)

One of the main gaps in pre-implementation communications was again lack of clarity about the applicability of the SRA to IFAs (and, indeed, this was still unclear for some):

> "There were statements from government that the IVPs [independent and voluntary fostering providers] would pay this rate. There was no obligation on local authorities to increase their payments and therefore the costs lay with the IVP." (IFA)

Mixed messaging coming from the Scottish Government was also highlighted alongside different interpretation of the SRA policy among local authorities:

> "The policy has been confusing, with lack of consistency in the understanding of it, or its intent from Scottish Government colleagues. Advice has changed, and local authorities have also interpreted the policy differently leading to lack of commitment." (IFA)

As above, this resulted in many IFAs experiencing financial challenges in trying to meet and be equal with local authorities in paying fostering allowances, especially where local authorities had not forwarded any uplift or backdated payment amounts to independent providers:

> "The introduction of the SRA without any consultation with the independent organisations has had financial implication as we have had to increase all of our allowances to be in line with the SRA. We received no money for this from any local authority." (IFA)

One of the main outstanding communication concerns relating to the SRA (in addition to lack of information about any future uplifts) was ongoing

disagreements between IFAs and local authorities. It was reported that monies were still being withheld in some cases and that some local authorities were disinterested in the negative financial impacts this was having for IFAs:

> "We are not in a position to be arguing with every local authority about every payment we make to carers or they make to us…The SRA was poorly thought through in terms of impact on IVPs [independent and voluntary fostering providers] and the local authority are not interested in discussing the implications." (IFA)

> "Local authorities are not interested in discussing the increase in fees with IVPs [independent and voluntary fostering providers]. They are not compelled in any way to share the 14 million pounds[7] paid by the government to introduce SRAs. We have had to incur this cost." (IFA)

One of the main recommendations made by several contributors to the research was that all future communications regarding the SRA should be developed alongside those directly affected, i.e. "Work with organisations who know the audience the best to help create the best type of comms for that audience." (TSO) This included IFAs. There were also views that all future communications should be mindful of the differences between foster and kinship carers and, in particular, their place in the caring journey and their pathway to becoming a carer:

> "…make sure in a really easily digestible way that, as soon as someone becomes a kinship carer, they can understand what's available to them. Cos I guess the support and even the fact that there's a planned decision to become a foster carer, it's more planned versus reactive sometimes to become a kinship carer. There's just different ways that you're engaging with that information based on where you're at in that cycle." (TSO)

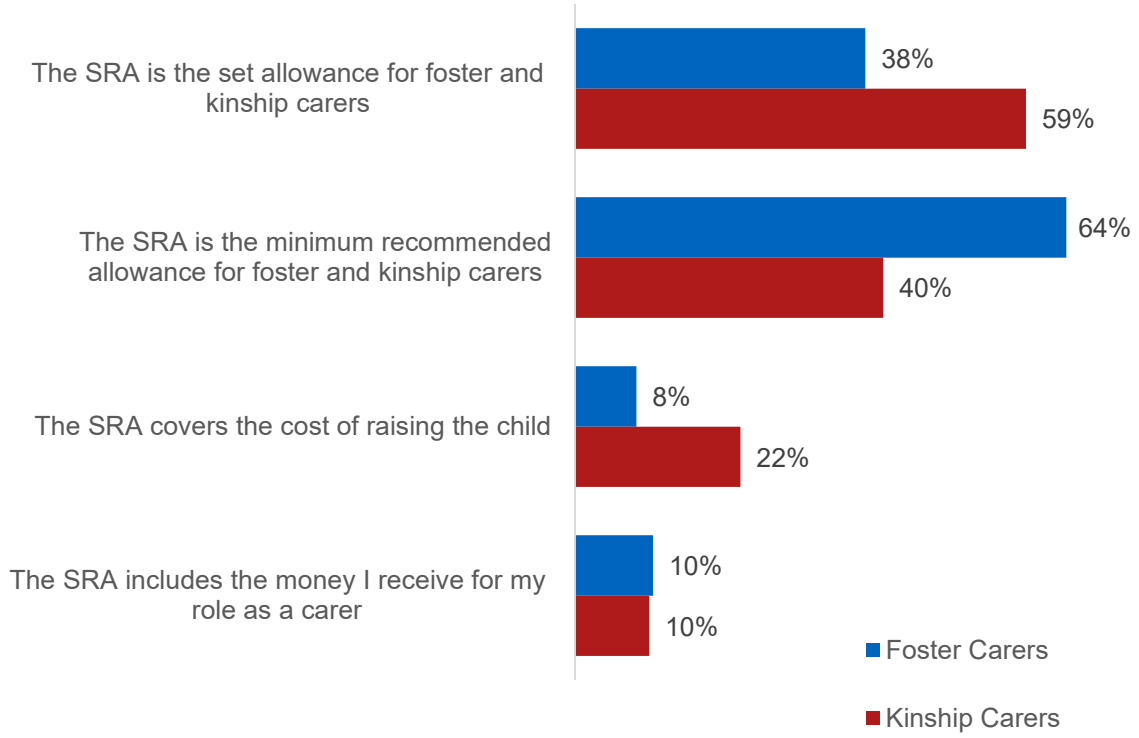
Clarity and Transparency of the SRA Policy Intent

All carers who took part in the survey were asked to indicate which statements they thought were correct or true, from a list of four options relating to the SRA policy intent.

Kinship carers were more likely to describe the SRA as a set allowance than foster carers (59%, n=79 and 38%, n=52 respectively), while foster carers were more likely to describe it as a minimum allowance rate (at 64%, n=88 for foster carers and 40%, n=54 for kinship carers). Comparatively small numbers of both foster and kinship carers felt that the SRA covered the cost of raising the child or that it included money for their role as a carer.

[7] Introduction of the SRA was funded by £16 million from the Scottish Government.

Figure 2: Percentage of carers who perceived that policy statements were 'true'



Respondents were also asked to explain, in their own words, what they thought the main purpose of the SRA was. The main comments, outlined by most of the respondents (both foster and kinship carers), related to helping towards or covering the cost of raising and caring for the child:

> "To ensure a consistent and sufficient payment to help look after the children." (Foster Carer)

> "To support the child and fund any needs they may have." (Kinship Carer)

Other purposes, discussed by smaller numbers of foster and kinship carers included:

- making payments more equal or fairer/providing greater standardisation across the country and between different types of looked after children;
- providing kinship carers and foster carers with the same payments;
- supporting looked after children to have the same living standard/quality of life/experiences as their peers;
- improving the lives of looked after children, giving them support and opportunities they may not have had otherwise;
- providing a 'minimum' or benchmark amount towards the costs of raising the child; and

- to avoid children and families from falling into poverty or for placements to breakdown due to financial hardship.

Only a few foster carers linked the allowance payment back to the payment or fee for foster carers.

Respondents were also asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of other statements relating to the SRA.

Across all statements, kinship carers agreed to a greater extent than foster carers. In particular, 41% (n=54) of kinship carers agreed or strongly agreed that the **financial support given to carers in Scotland was fairer** since the SRA, while 20% (n=26) disagreed or strongly disagreed. This was compared to 24% (n=33) of foster carers who agreed or strongly agreed and 38% (n=52) who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Similarly, kinship carers were more likely to agree to some extent that t**he SRA had led to an improvement in carers finances** compared to foster carers. Overall, 37% (n=48) of kinship carers agreed with this statement while 23% (n=30) disagreed. Conversely, foster carers were more likely to disagree with this statement, with 44% (n=60) disagreeing to some extent compared to 24% (n=33) who agreed.

Figure 3: Agreement with SRA statements among Foster Carers

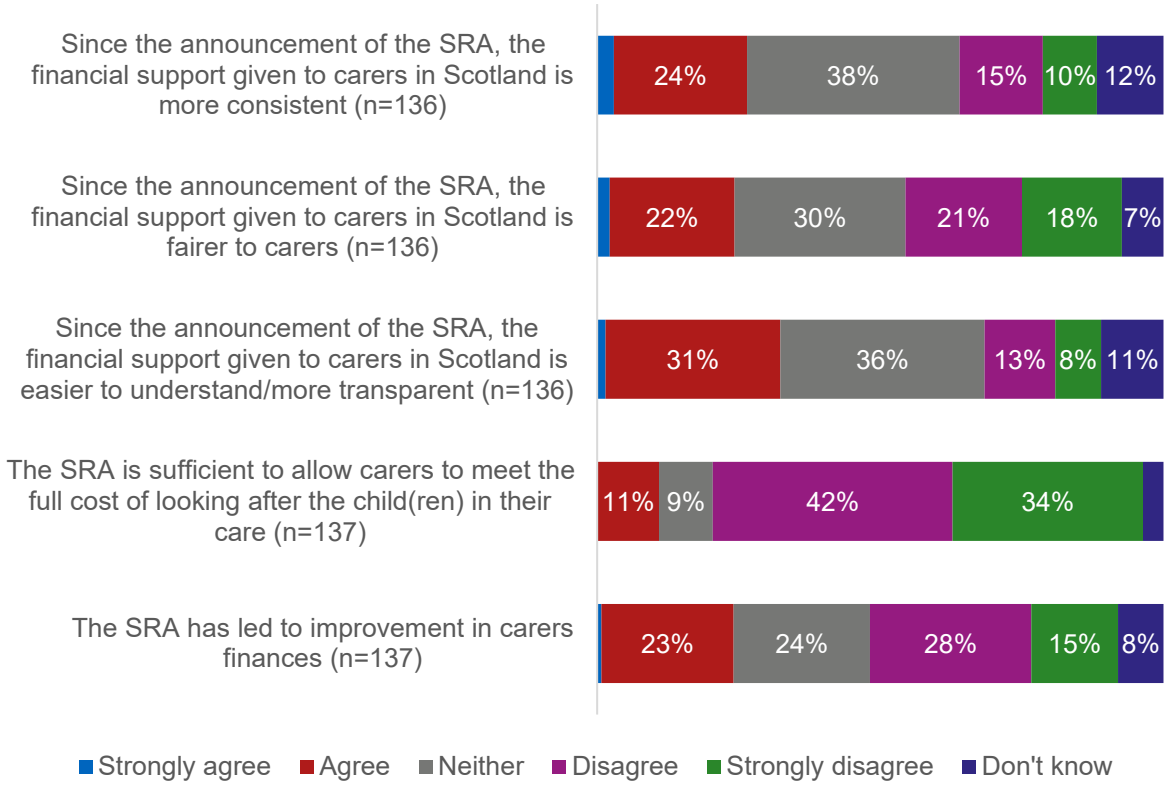
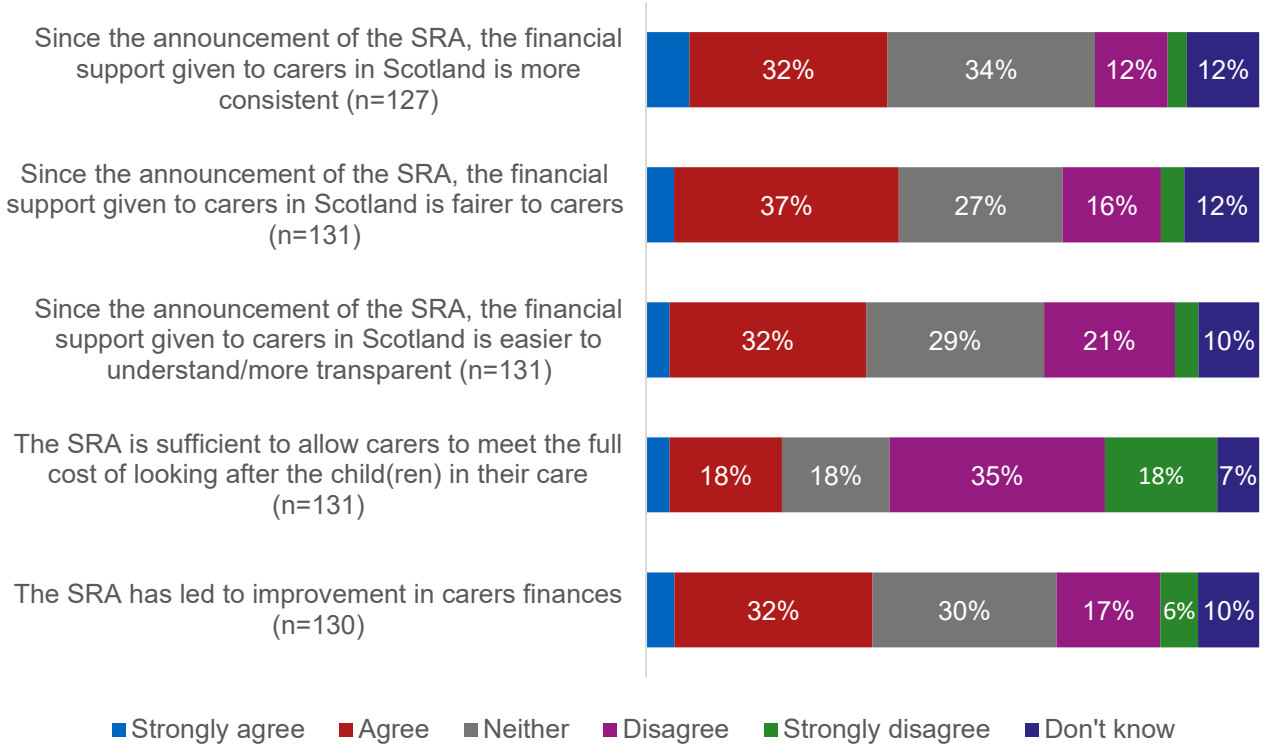


Figure 4: Agreement with SRA statements among Kinship Carers



The statement which attracted the highest levels of disagreement across both foster and kinship carers was that t**he SRA was sufficient to allow carers to meet the full cost of looking after the child[ren]** in their care. While the majority of carers disagreed to some extent across both groups, far higher proportions of foster carers disagreed with this statement compared to kinship carers (76%, n=104 compared to 53%, n=70 respectively).

There was also mixed understanding among carers who were interviewed of what the purpose and intention of the SRA was and what it hoped to achieve. Some framed their understanding of the SRA along the lines of it being to improve outcomes for children and young people:

> "It's to achieve better outcomes for young people that are with us in terms of what their individual needs are and what it costs to look after them and to be able to give them the kind of most valuable experience that they can." (Foster Carer)

> "The reason the allowances were put up were to try and make sure that these kids were getting what they should be getting, getting the opportunities that other children get who aren't in care basically. I think that's what the objective was in respect of that." (Foster Carer)

Others perceived the SRA was about making things fairer and more affordable for carers and for reducing stress and anxieties related to money for those in caring roles:

> "You have enough on your plate when you become a kinship carer and feeling like you're begging for that allowance that the kids are entitled to because if you were a mainstream foster carer, they would get it without any question plus you would also be paid, like skills payments and an actual wage. Whereas you're not obviously with kinship and I think to have the reassurance that, if you take on that role, that that child won't have to fight for every piece of allowance, you know, that it is an entitlement - it takes away one element of stress from the situation, I think." (Kinship Carer)

A small minority also commented on what they perceived as the intention to keep families together, and to encourage kinship care arrangements over fostering in the best interests of the child:

> "I think, in terms of providing this allowance, you know, I think it's probably enabled a lot more children to remain with their kinship care in their own family, where they should be rather than, you know, going into foster care." (Kinship Carer)

Foster carers employed by IFAs had the least clarity or understanding of the SRA, possibly linked to the fact that many felt they had not been directly impacted by it:

> "I'm not sure what that SRA stands for…I'm imagining that it's trying to make the allowance more universal because, at the moment, people can pick and choose what agency they go with by what they pay." (Foster Carer)

As above, there were also comments that, for kinship carers in particular, there was a lack of understanding what the SRA meant:

> "I think that we understand what the SRA is, like everyone gets the same. But I think there's like a lack of understanding of why it was introduced…I think unless you go to a support group, you have no idea. You would just be getting your payments and you wouldn't know what that meant." (Kinship Carer)

There was also confusion about whether or not the SRA was means tested and this muddied some people's perceptions of the equity and parity that the SRA intended to achieve:

> "I feel it is great the SRA is in place, however, this needs to be more streamlined so all local authorities are doing the same thing. Payments should not be permitted to be means tested because a local authority chooses to do so. Especially when the local authority does not inform kinship carers of this prior to telling them to apply for a section 11 order. A more robust policy and procedure which all local authorities must adhere to would be fairer for all kinship carers." (Kinship Carer)

While TSOs had a good understanding of the SRA and its policy intent, they shared carers' views that this was not always sufficiently well cascaded to carers themselves and, in some cases, to the professionals working in local authorities and within agencies who worked directly with carers.

Among IFAs, there was no consensus on the extent to which they agreed that the policy intent for the SRA was clear and transparent. Again, this was linked mainly to a reported lack of engagement between the Scottish Government and the independent sector in planning for the SRA and a reported lack of clarity which lasted for some time around whether the SRA would or would not apply to IFAs. The lack of clarity also existed in relation to whether the SRA would apply to framework contracts.

One of the other main areas of confusion for IFAs was in the passing on of monies paid to local authorities for the SRA which were not passed to independent providers:

> "The SRA was intended to ensure an allowance is in place for all children to minimise a postcode lottery in care - and to cover the costs for the child, given to the carer. Calculations were made based on all children, however, allocation of funding was given to LAs for all children, who in turn did not, or delayed, passing on [the] benefit to those children with IFAs…thus creating a further disparity dependent on care provider." (IFA)

Perceived Adequacy of the Allowance

Among all those consulted, the SRA was welcomed, despite being something that was long overdue and feelings that the rates could/should potentially be higher:

> "We know it was a very difficult and long process, as a lot of these things are. So, when it actually arrived, it was very much welcomed. I mean, we'd obviously want more for our carers….But very, very much welcomed." (TSO)

> "I don't think people will ever be happy but the increases have gone some way to address those shortfalls that I feel have been in the system. So, I think we're not there yet but we're not far from being there, I would say, given the government's policy that they've implemented…Not quite high

enough but it's a lot better than what it was. Yes, definitely…we're getting in the realms of where it should be." (Foster Carer)

In particular, the parity that was achieved for kinship and foster carers by having the same rates for both was very much welcomed. This was seen as supportive of the kinship community in recognising their equal worth with fostering peers:

"While kinship care is very distinct and so important and so special…it is still providing care for a child that otherwise may be in foster care and may still be a looked after child…So, I think, for that reason, the actual monetary support was welcomed. But also that parity of, we're providing this for our children, but for the State as well. I think that recognition and value was really welcomed and certainly we welcomed it for that reason as well." (TSO)

"We're not looking for a reward but at least an acknowledgement that we understand that this is a very difficult situation and, financially, it does help that there's adequate finances there so you're not having to sit and worry." (Kinship Carer)

There were also comments that more equity had been achieved within the kinship sector:

"I've got a Permanency Order which means that my grandson is looked after and accommodated and because I go to so many support groups, I've met carers who have Section 11s, which are now called Kinship Care Order, and we get the same rate. There used to be a difference of like pennies, under a pound, and someone questioned it. So, now, it's like down to the very last pence, we all get the same." (Kinship Carer)

Feedback on transparency and equity was not unanimously positive, however, with some kinship carers and those living in areas where rates were lower than neighbouring areas still feeling that greater transparency and equity could be achieved:

"It doesn't seem fair that one council is paying kinship carers more than another. There's no rationale, there doesn't appear to be a rationale for that and I think I can't understand why foster carers are paid so much…They're doing the same job but - they're doing it because - well, they've chosen to do that. Kinship carers have not chosen to do this." (Kinship Carer)

There were also perceptions that IFA carers were still being paid more than local authority carers and kinship providers (despite this not being evidenced by the current research):

> “I think a lot of the private, especially again for foster carers, their rates seem to be quite extortionate, they’re very high. Again, I don’t understand why that is. There needs to be more clarity on that…you know, it’s like this hidden secret…there’s probably not enough information online about the disparity between foster carers and kinship carers’ allowances.” (Kinship Carer)

Although not raised with notable frequency, some comments were also made that some local authorities may have reduced their rates compared to pre-SRA payments for ‘new’ carers despite this never being the intention of the SRA.

There was also unanimous agreement that the SRA rates should increase, with views that a single increase followed by annual uplifts would be welcomed. Increasing the SRA was seen as an essential lever in helping to meet government commitments around tackling poverty, particularly child poverty:

> “If you can uplift carers out of poverty, and we know that a lot of these children are already at a disadvantage because of their previous experiences and circumstances, then you’re going to help nationally. So, for me, that link is really important, so the rates, I think, really need to be attended to.” (TSO)

Foster carers **not** receiving the SRA rate, however, typically noted that this impacted on their household budgeting, creating challenges, particularly as a result of the cost of living crisis and increasing prices in recent years:

> “We can no longer run a house, and keep the children in an appropriate way, and have an adult full time at home with fostering, when we started 10 years ago this was easy, but these days my wife and I both work in addition to fostering to make sure the kids get everything they deserve.” (Foster Carer)

Most kinship carers who did **not** receive the SRA rate also suggested that this made daily household finances difficult. A few noted that they had had to either give up or reduce their level of work to care for the child/children, and the SRA was not enough to support them:

> “We live on what we have and it's hard to give the kids what they need.” (Kinship Carer)

> “Since becoming a kinship carer I had to drastically reduce my working hours to suit the needs of my niece. Every penny we get counts as [we] no longer have the same income but more outgoings.” (Kinship Carer)

Three kinship carers did not receive any allowance (due to being classed as having private or informal arrangements), however, only one of these outlined the impact of not receiving the SRA or any allowance payments. They described this as having a huge financial impact, with the kinship carer having to reduce their working hours and position within their job in order to look after the child. This resulted in a reduction in household income at the same time as having an extra person to support:

> “As she has been classed as 'not looked after' she will not receive any support throughout her life, despite being care experienced and having experienced huge trauma at such a young age. Financially, it has had a huge impact on us. I had to give up a promoted post and reduce to part time work so that I could care for her. Our family income has reduced considerably at the same time as having an extra person to support.” (Kinship Carer)

Several carers (both foster and kinship) who received at least the SRA payment levels also felt that the rates paid were not enough, and noted that they continued to experience financial challenges. In particular, it was suggested that the payments were insufficient to cover the cost of living, rising prices, the desire to enroll children in clubs and to take them on outings and holidays. One foster carer also noted that they had not received an uplift in allowances or fostering fees for many years, making it difficult to manage and carry on fostering:

> “There has been no increase in our fostering allowance or fees for over 10 years. Taking inflation into account we’re now receiving nearly 30% less than when we were first approved. It’s harder work to make ends meet. It’s harder to justify carrying on based on the income now.” (Foster Carer)

Several carers (again both foster and kinship) reported using their own money to help them with unmet needs as a result of the allowances being too low, including using savings, money from benefits and pensions, from the foster carer fee, and relying on loans and support from other family members, as well as also taking on other employment or increasing hours in existing employment. Some were also relying heavily on credit to get by:

> “I use my credit card for everything and, see now, I’m paying my credit card but hardly any of it’s coming off. It’s all interest and I’m going - I feel as if I’m never getting to the end of it.” (Kinship Carer)

Older kinship carers reported a heavy reliance on savings and their pension, especially if they were no longer of working age or had retired. Younger respondents also highlighted possible longer-term impacts for them once they reached pension age, having had to deplete their savings now to supplement

the allowance and support the child when this had been intended to support them in later life:

> "I didn't imagine that I would be in my mid 50s and having to look after a baby, you know, she's going to be with us on a permanent basis. So, the finances that I had put aside for saving will be allocated elsewhere now…It was horrendous but, you know, ultimately, she's safe now and the other alternative was that she went into care, which was not an option. That wasn't going to happen but you just kind of fumble your way through it, don't you?" (Kinship Carer)

Single parent caring families reported unique financial struggles since they were often unable to find part time work which also allowed them to meet their caring responsibilities. Similarly, some foster carers noted that single-child households were also disproportionately penalised, i.e. it was harder to make ends meet with the allowance for those who were caring for only one child. This included, for example, fixed costs for things such as heating the home, which when caring for two or more children became more affordable (since multiple allowances were received):

> "If you want to get people to be foster carers then you need to make sure they can afford to do so. If you have two children then you can survive okay. We choose to just have one child but it's not enough to live on unless money is coming in from another source/job." (Foster Carer)

Despite the hardships that most families were facing, there were also some reports of children and young people benefitting directly from the introduction of the SRA, and on this basis it was welcomed:

> "It's allowed us to take her away on holidays and places she wouldn't have even imagined going away to. It allowed her just the freedom to do things like going for meals with family and friends. Like it's just allowed her to be herself." (Kinship Carer)

Several families also reported that it helped to reduce their financial stresses and concerns:

> "Without the kinship allowance, it would be more difficult to give that child the childhood that they deserve, especially if they've come from childhood trauma and things. Without that allowance, it would be added stress…I know that it would put so much stress on my relationship and my family." (Kinship Carer)

Some professional stakeholders noted that the SRA rates were currently below the Fostering Network's current recommended allowance rates which, for 2025/26 are:

- £250 per week for those aged 0-4 years (compared to the SRA rate of £168.31);
- £332 per week for those aged 5-10 years (compared to the SRA rate of £195.81); and
- £428 per week for those aged 11 years and above (compared to the SRA rate of £195.81 for children aged 11+ and £268.41 for children aged 16 and over).

It was also noted that wider research carried out in the UK advocated for higher foster care rates than those prescribed by the SRA (see: Loughborough University's Minimum Income Standard).

Overall, professional stakeholders supported increases in the allowance rates as a means of solidifying financial support to carers, which in turn would fulfil the commitment in The Promise to "hold the hands of those who hold the hand of the child."

Feedback on Age Bandings

Feedback on the age bandings of the SRA was sought from all stakeholders.

All carers who took part in the survey were asked whether they thought the current age bands were appropriate.

Table 20: Carer perceptions of the appropriateness of age bands

Response options	Foster Carers (number and %)		Kinship Carers (number and %)		Total Sample (number and %)	
Yes	64	47%	65	49%	129	48%
No	57	41%	40	30%	97	36%
Don't know	16	12%	27	21%	43	16%
Total	**137**	**100%**	**132**[1]	**100%**	**269**	**100%**

Note: Two kinship carers did not answer the question

For both foster and kinship carers responses were split, with 47% (n=64) of foster carers and 49% (n=65) of kinship carers indicating these were appropriate. Conversely, 41% (n=57) of foster carers and 30% (n=40) of kinship carers said they were not appropriate.

While survey respondents were asked to offer alternative age bands, most of the comments related to the rates being paid rather than highlighting particular disagreement with the specific age brackets. Of those that did focus on age groups, a few foster and kinship carers suggested that the youngest age group should be further disaggregated (i.e. to include a 0-2 year old age group) in order to reflect the different costs for babies, while several others

argued that a single rate should be paid to all, regardless of age. One foster carer said that other factors also needed to be considered, not just age. A few respondents also suggested that additional (higher) rates were needed for children with additional support needs. A few kinship carers also discussed the upper age limit for the payments, suggesting this needed to be extended (with one suggesting it should continue up to age 21 or 25), and another arguing that this should not be linked to continuing in full time education.

A few survey respondents outlined different age groupings that they thought would be more appropriate, however, there was little consistency in suggestions.

Carer survey respondents were also asked if they felt that the rates paid for each of the four age bands was sufficient.

Foster carers sent a clear message, with nearly three quarters (73%, n=100) stating that the rates paid were not sufficient, compared to just 12% (n=16) who said they were sufficient. While kinship carers tended to support this standpoint they were less emphatic, with just over half (52%, n=67) stating that the rates were not sufficient, compared to around a quarter (26%, n=34) who said they were.

Table 21: Carer perceptions on whether the rates paid for different age bands were appropriate

Response options	Foster Carers (number and %)		Kinship Carers (number and %)		Total Sample (number and %)	
Yes	16	12%	34	26%	50	19%
No	100	73%	67	52%	167	63%
Don't know	20	15%	29	22%	49	18%
Total	**136**[1]	**100%**	**130**[2]	**100%**	**266**	**100%**

Note 1: One foster carer did not answer the question
Note 2: Four kinship carers did not answer the question

The reasons given for the rates not being considered sufficient, and/or how they should be amended tended to be relatively consistent between both foster and kinship carers. As above, most feedback focused on:

- the need for allowance rates to increase in line with inflation/rising costs;
- that the rates for particular age groups were too low; and/or
- that the rates paid should be higher at all age bands.

Again, both foster and kinship carers highlighted that the cost of living had increased significantly, but that the allowance rates had remained fixed.

Again, carers highlighted the challenges this created, either having to cut back or subsidising the allowance with money from other sources:

> “Inflation must be taken into account year on year. My current payment is worth 30% less than when we started fostering. It can’t go on indefinitely.” (Foster Carer)

Among survey respondents, two age bands were most commonly perceived as too low - the 0-4 year olds (and particularly for babies), and the 11-15 year olds, i.e. those at both ends of the age spectrum:

> “On the whole, I think when you look at those spectrums, the babies take up the most amount of time and they’re expensive, likewise the teenagers, it’s the most stressful and the most money-wise because of all the additional expenses. And then the middle category in the primary range should be the lowest category, I think.” (Foster Carer)

Survey respondents stressed the expense and often unique costs associated with caring for babies, including the high cost of formula and nappies, the need to purchase bottles and other equipment, their rate of growth and frequency with which new clothes are needed, the fact that they spend more time in the home resulting in higher heating costs, that they are with the carer 24/7 and have greater care needs than other age groups, etc.:

> “…the amount of growth in the 0-4 age group means a lot of new clothes, jackets, shoes. Nappies, wipes and milk cost a lot. Clubs for little ones are paid monthly direct debit and can be very expensive. New car seats, buggies etc... lots of equipment. I feel this age grouping doesn't get enough money.” (Foster Carer)

> “Oh, they grow so quickly. I mean, my granddaughter is 12 months old and she’s wearing 18 to 24 months. She’s very, very tall, so it’s just constant, you’re constantly buying. Stuff that maybe fitted her 2 weeks ago no longer fit her cos she’s just taken a huge stretch.” (Kinship Carer)

Interviewees also perceived that this was a very expensive age for carers to support (especially under 2s) and that very young children were very time demanding and so carers needed to be compensated for this too:

> “I used to take young, really young children and I felt…the younger ones were using just as much money as the older ones…I definitely believe that younger children, especially young children that are in nappies, it’s really hard work looking after a child with nappies and they’re there with you all the time, they’re not at school or anything. I think that [carers of babies] probably deserve a little bit more.” (Foster Carer)

Kinship carers also noted the cost of childcare and nursery fees for this age group. Generally, respondents argued that the rate paid to the 0-4 year age group should be higher than it is currently, and should be more in line with the other age bands.

In relation to the 11-15 age band, many foster and kinship carers argued in the survey that the rate paid was too low. Respondents highlighted that teenagers often require more expensive adult size clothing and shoes (which incurred VAT), have larger appetites, require pocket money or money to support activities and socialising, need access to IT and mobile phones, and will desire branded items in order to fit in with peers and avoid stigma. It was stressed that teenagers aged 14 or 15 will cost significantly more than a 5 year old, and therefore the 11-15 year old band should receive more than the 5-10 year old band. While most did not specify what they felt a fairer rate would be for this age band, a few respondents did suggest this should either be more in line with the 16+ rate, while a few foster carers suggested that between £210 and £230 would be more appropriate:

> "…to keep 5-10 years and 11-15 the same is disappointing, kids in 11-15 bracket attend secondary school and their needs are greater everyday, no access to breakfast clubs or lunch, kids require more each day to be able to access the same choices as their friends, there is also much more pressure for them to have the same as their peers in terms of clothing, activities out of school also cost much more than they do for younger kids." (Foster Carer)

In interviews, the biggest area of discontentment with the age bandings of the SRA was also related to children aged 5 to 10 year-olds and 11 to 15 year-olds receiving the same allowance. Feedback on what was essentially seen as a collapsing of these two age bands into one was unanimously negative between the different stakeholder groups who engaged with the research, and was particularly acute among carers and carer support organisations. Third sector organisations in particular highlighted that there was a wealth of evidence that the age bracket 5 to 15 is not fit for purpose and so were particularly surprised to see this announced as part of the SRA.

Again, the main reasons given for this discontent were that caring for a 11-15 year-old was more expensive, primarily due to their increased independence when attending secondary school and the associated costs with this, e.g. the need to have a mobile phone to be contactable by family when out alone, the need for additional money to buy food during school lunch periods, and the cost of large often adult sized and adult priced clothing. Other expenses for teenagers included personal hygiene products (e.g. deodorant and feminine hygiene products). The general increase in costs associated with becoming a teenager and wanting more independence meant that the SRA was not adequately covering the costs of young people in this age bracket:

> "When kids get to that stage where they get to teenager years and go to High School, they want to go out more with their friends, they want to go to the cinema, they want to go to clubs more and that sort of stuff. So, if the money stays the same as when they're in primary school and they weren't doing all that, how are you expected to allow them to do that?" (Kinship Carer)

Comments were also made that collapsing the older age bands (i.e. 11-15 and 16+) may be appropriate to help prevent the current cliff edge for carers of children once they approach 18. The preference for some was instead to see a more steady rate for 11-18s which would potentially disperse financial support to more young people and for longer:

> "If you up it at the age of 16 and then remove it at the age of 18, you're creating a challenge in the system as not as many children are able to remain with their foster carers…We need to do more to prevent that care cliff that is happening at the age of 18, so our recommended allowances are from 11 years onwards and actually should continue in our view until the child doesn't need to be there anymore. So it's not about having cut-off points, it's about meeting the needs of children until they don't need to be in that care situation any longer." (TSO)

Financial support for those aged 18-21 (or even 26) was also encouraged by a small number of respondents as a means of providing young people with the care and stability that they needed for longer:

> "What we should be doing is providing the love, stability and permanence that they need for as long as they need it." (TSO)

Consistent with comments related to the age bands, a few respondents also suggested that all children should receive the same rate, regardless of their age:

> "I think they should all be entitled to the same regardless of age, make everyone equal." (Kinship Carer)

> "…kids are extremely expensive to raise and the cost of living, £268.41 for the oldest should be paid to every child regardless of age." (Kinship Carer)

All carers who took part in an interview were asked to reflect on the models offered by other countries in their allowances for carers, including:

- a single minimum recommended allowance for all children regardless of age
- three bands based on the SRA rates i.e. 0-4 year-olds, 5-15 year-olds, 16-years-old and over

- three bands based on school ages i.e. 0-4 year-olds (pre-school), 4-11 year-olds (primary school) and 12-years-old and over (secondary school)
- five bands in line with English allowances i.e. 0-2 year-olds, 2-4 year-olds, 5-10 year-olds, 11-15 year-olds, 16-years-old and over

There was no clear consensus among those who took part with different preferences being expressed across the board for each of the above options.

Others stressed that not all children progressed at the same rate and that some children with more complex needs would always need more support than others (therefore, a calculation of allowances based on complexity and need may be more appropriate than one based on age alone):

> "I think the categories would be better to be based on the challenge difficulty of the child but I think you'd need to assess that somehow with metrics and criteria, which may be more difficult." (Foster Carer)

This aside, there was a general view that secondary school aged children should attract a higher allowance than primary school aged children, and also that any age banding should not be overly complex as adding complexity would have the consequence of increased administration costs for the taxpayer as well as being confusing for carers.

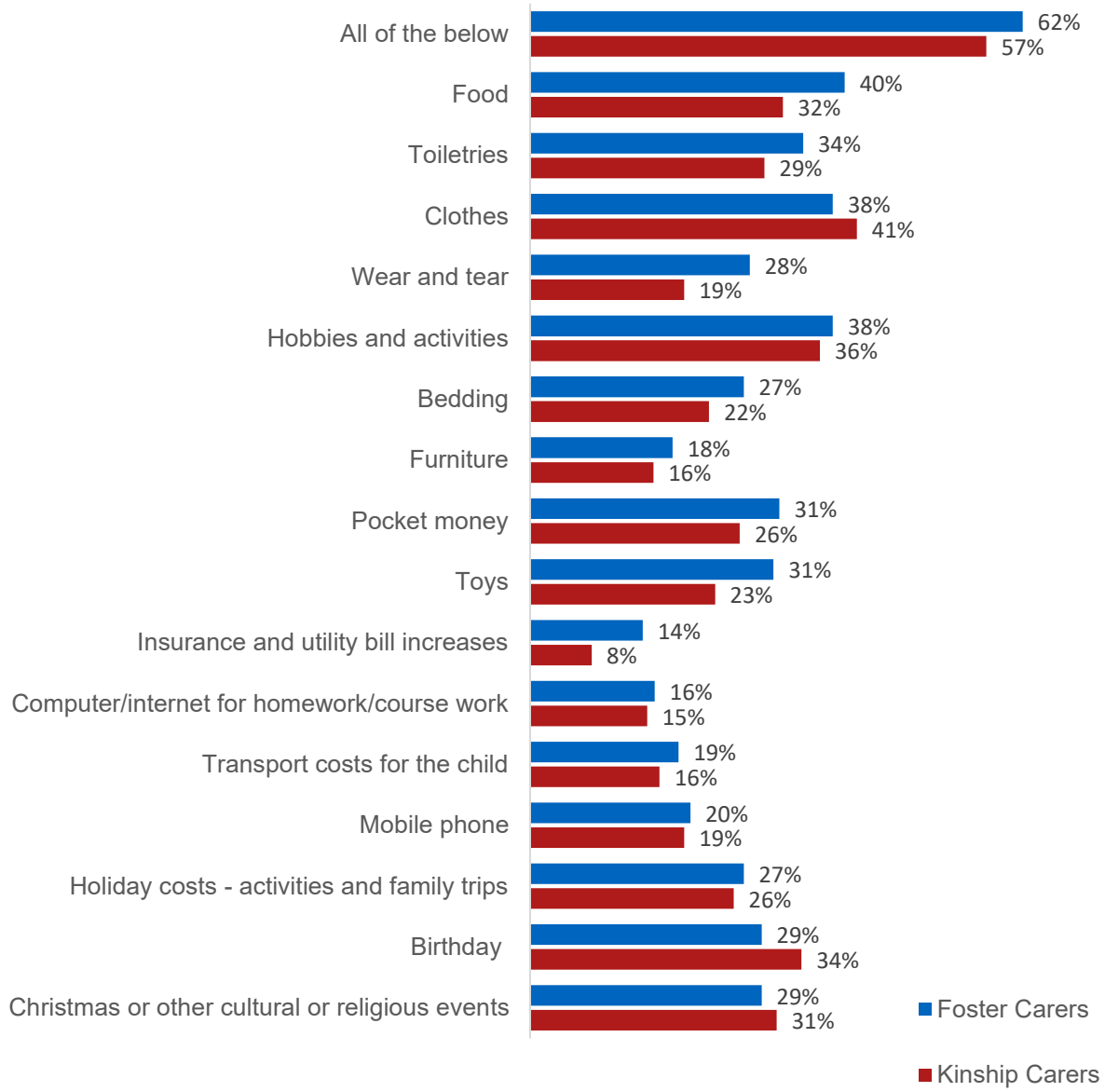
How the Allowance is Used by Carers

The SRA is paid for the child (not for the carer) and is intended to cover 16 key components in relation to living expenses, as follows:

- food
- toiletries
- clothes
- wear and tear
- hobbies and activities
- bedding
- furniture
- pocket money
- toys
- insurance and utility bill increases
- daily access to a computer and the internet for homework/course work
- transport costs for the child (for the purpose of attending review meetings, children's hearings, contact, travel to school, college or other educational facility)
- mobile phone
- holiday costs to cover school holiday activities and family trips
- birthday
- Christmas or other cultural or religious events

All carers who took part in the survey were asked to indicate what they use the SRA to pay for, with 134 foster carers and 129 kinship carers answering the questions.

Figure 5: Reported use of the SRA by Carers on different expenditure items



Over half of the respondents (62% of foster carers and 57% of kinship carers) use the allowance to pay for all of the 16 elements. However, there were also several items where fewer than one in five used the allowance to pay for it. This included:

- wear and tear (19% of kinship carers);
- furniture (18% of foster carers and 16% of kinship carers);
- insurance and utility bill increases (14% of foster carers and 8% of kinship carers);

- daily access to a computer and the internet for homework/coursework (16% of foster carers and 15% of kinship carers);
- transport costs for the child (19% of foster carers and 16% of kinship carers); and
- mobile phone (20% of foster carers and 19% of kinship carers).

Several 'other' costs were also identified by both foster and kinship carers as being covered by the allowance, including: extra-curricular clubs, activities and childcare; health and beauty; savings for the child; driving lessons; specialised milk and food products for children with allergies; specialist/therapeutic support and equipment for children; medication and supplements to help with medical and mental health issues. Several kinship carers simply noted that the allowance was used to cover the costs of the child's wants and needs, whatever they may be.

Again, both foster and kinship carers also commented that, while the money contributed towards all of the general living expenses for the child, they felt it did not go far enough. Several noted that they had to use their own money/ income to top-up the allowance, particularly for birthdays, Christmas and holidays, as well as other more unique issues, such as legal fees if the child gets into trouble with the police, or where the child has excessive travel expenses due to medical appointments/treatment:

> "My own money is being used to cover all the above too, the allowance isn't enough to cover it all." (Foster Carer)

> "My kinship is just added with my pension so it goes towards everything he needs, especially a caravan holiday as I can't afford abroad, his clothes, and footwear." (Kinship Carer)

Carer survey respondents were also asked if the SRA allowance that they currently received was sufficient to allow them to cover all of the costs/expenses for the foster and kinship children that they cared for.

Table 22: Carer perceptions of sufficiency of SRA for meeting costs of the child

Response options	Foster Carers (number and %)		Kinship Carers (number and %)		Total Sample (number and %)	
Yes	25	18%	44	34%	69	26%
No	96	71%	66	50%	162	61%
Don't know	15	11%	21	16%	36	13%
Total	**136**	**100%**	**131**	**100%**	**267**	**100%**

A higher proportion of foster carers (71%, n=96) said it was not sufficient compared to kinship carers (50%, n=66). While still a minority, more kinship carers responded positively in this respect than foster carers (34% verses 18% respectively who said the SRA was sufficient).

A wide range of items were described as not covered by the SRA allowance, and/or were highlighted as areas where carers have to subsidise the allowance. These were reasonably consistent between foster and kinship carers, and included:

- costs related to children with additional needs and/or specific dietary requirements;
- damage and general wear and tear on the home;
- school related costs, including trips, uniform, snacks, school dinners/ packed lunches, equipment and IT needed for school work;
- the cost of clubs, activities and hobbies, including clothing/uniforms, travel and trips associated with these;
- clothing and shoes/trainers;
- days out;
- birthdays (including parties) and Christmas;
- holiday costs;
- initial placement costs (e.g. setting up the home with required furniture, toys, clothes, etc.);
- baby items (e.g. pram, formula milk, clothing, etc.);
- childcare, after school clubs/care, and respite (mentioned more by kinship carers than foster carers);
- subscriptions;
- gaming;
- mobile phones;
- driving lessons;
- specialist assessments and support (e.g. therapy and counselling);
- food;
- takeaways;
- pocket money and savings for the child;
- maintaining contact with parents (or other family);
- medical requirements (e.g. glasses);
- hair and beauty costs;
- home improvement and redecoration costs;
- general household items and furniture;
- the carer's travel costs, including public transport and/or petrol and car maintenance costs;
- the carers pension; and
- energy costs, e.g. gas and electricity bills.

As noted above, in order to meet the full range of expenses, both foster and kinship carers typically use their own money to top-up the allowance to ensure the child's needs are met. This typically involves carers using their:

- foster carer fee;
- savings (which a few noted had originally been intended to support them in retirement);
- income from other employment (either theirs or their partners) - with several noting that they had either had to take on a job to cover their costs, extend their working hours or work overtime, or take on multiple jobs;
- benefits (e.g. Universal Credit, child disability and carer payments) and pension payments; and
- relying on other/wider family support.

Some (both foster and kinship carers) also noted cutting back on expenses, "making do", and "tightening the belt". Specific adjustments included having fewer/no holidays; less days out; prioritising only certain clubs and activities; sourcing cheaper clothing; buying cheaper food; bargain hunting and buying second hand items; carers going without items for themselves; and undertaking all home maintenance themselves. Some kinship carers said they used local/community pantries and food banks; sought emergency funding, welfare funds, and additional grants and payments from the local authority/ social work or charities; loans or borrowed money; and avoided paying some bills; while one also indicated that they had to sell a vehicle.

Savings for the Child

All carer survey respondents were asked if they had ever been advised, required or encouraged to set aside some of the allowance each week for a child's savings account. In total, 88 kinship carers and 116 foster carers provided a substantive response at this question, with mixed responses expressed.

Kinship carers were much less likely to have been advised, required or encouraged to set aside money in a savings account for the child compared to foster carers. Only a few kinship carers (6%, n=5) said they had been advised to do this, while most (61%, n=54) had not. Meanwhile, over a quarter of foster carers (29%, n=34) had been advised to provide savings for the child, while less than half (42%, n=49) had not. Around a third (33%, n=29) of kinship carers and a quarter (24%, n=28) of foster carers said that, despite not being advised to, they did this anyway - although a few noted that they provided pocket money which the child could then save rather than the carer being directly responsible for making the deposit. In addition, a small number of foster carers (4%, n=5) indicated that their IFA took care of the savings account and making payments into this. Where advice on this issue had been

provided, this generally came from either their local authority (social worker) or the fostering agency.

While the payment amounts earmarked for savings were not commonly disclosed, those that were varied. The more common amounts appeared to be £20 per month and £40 per month, although some did provide higher amounts of £50-£100+ per month. Others noted that the amount saved varied from month to month and depended upon what could be afforded at the time. Several respondents (both foster and kinship carers), however, noted that they could not afford to provide savings for the child.

Many carers who took part in interviews said that they did try to set aside a small amount of the allowance for their children, or encourage them to have savings. Again, however, this was not always possible, especially as the child got older and wanted to buy expensive items. In some cases, carers reported that children were having to use some of their own savings towards things such as clothing:

> “It was just the other day that he wanted his trainers cos everyone had them.. And they were £175 cos he’s a size eight now and I said, “Well, you had a lot of money for Christmas, we will go halves on that”. Because he needs to realise that it costs a lot of money if I went and bought them or out his allowance, within weeks they would probably be wrecked. But cos it’s coming out of his money, he’s got to learn.” (Kinship Carer)

Wider Feedback on the SRA and Associated Policy

Continuing Care

A young person born after 1 April 1999 who is looked after in foster, kinship or residential care has legal rights and entitlements (under section 26A(4) of the 1995 Act) to remain in their current care placement until they turn 21 i.e. to 'stay put'. There should be no pressure or expectation placed on the young person to 'leave care' and continuing care should be offered routinely, with local authorities being legally obliged to support the decision. This is intended to provide the stability and security that young people need to remain with the family and/or in the environment that they have come to know and trust. Although not specifically part of the SRA, a great deal of feedback was given by stakeholders in relation to current continuing care arrangements in Scotland with perceptions that policy in this regard needed to change.

Most local authorities who took part in the survey (n=22) reported that they currently paid the £268.41 weekly allowance (i.e. the SRA rate for children aged 16-years-old and over). Where authorities did not pay this rate (n=8), there were significant differences in the rates and arrangements reported[8].

Overall, 34 foster carers who took part in the **carers survey** indicated that they provided continuing care for young people. However, there appeared to be a lack of knowledge and a lot of confusion among kinship carers regarding continuing care and whether they were providing this, or differing interpretations of the question (with some responses suggesting that they hoped/intended to provide this in future). A further 20 kinship carers from the survey sample were reliably identified as providing continuing care.

Those who provided continuing care were asked whether the allowance they received was in line with the 16+ age band of the SRA (i.e. £268.41 per week) or if it was above or below this rate.

For foster carers:

- nine received in line with the SRA rate;
- three received above the SRA rate (although one noted this was only very slightly above);
- eight received below the SRA rate;
- one said they received no payment; and
- two did not know, while the rest either did not answer or did not indicate whether the payment was in line with the SRA, above or below.

[8] Given the unique arrangements that were in place, these are not presented here as to do so may make the authorities identifiable.

For kinship carers:

- five received in line with the SRA rate (albeit that child benefit payments were deducted - even where these were not paid);
- one received above the SRA rate;
- three received below the SRA rate (one of which was receiving only a nominal payment to retain the child's place with the kinship carer while in student accommodation);
- one said the payments had been stopped despite being advised previously that they would continue to receive this until they turned 21; and
- three did not know, while the rest either did not specify whether the payment was equal to, above or below the SRA rate, or did not answer the question.

While young people can, in theory, leave care at the age of 16 or 17, there were perceptions among carers, IFAs and TSOs that most carers and care organisations (including local authorities as corporate parents) were reluctant for that to happen, which was resulting in most 16 and 17 year olds (and many older children) being retained in care relationships. This was seen as in the best interests of the child in most cases and the best means to provide the stability and security that they needed. However, since the cost of continuing care is less expensive than foster care, some respondents noted what they perceived to be an increase in the movement of young people to continuing care as a potential money saving exercise (specifically those placed with carers on local authority contracts):

> "We have also seen young people being moved to continuing care at 16, we suspect to avoid increased costs with SRA and to overall decrease costs. We received no funding whatsoever in this change." (IFA)

This was one area where regional variation was noted in the way that the introduction of the SRA had affected IFAs and the contracts they held with local authorities, i.e. people being encouraged to move to continuing care at age 16 in some areas, whilst others supported 16 and 17 year olds to remain in foster care:

> "…you've got a postcode lottery of 16 and 17 year olds where some of them feel the benefit of the SRA and others don't because of a sort of set of, I suppose, historical issues around what I regard as misuse of that piece of legislation for 16 and 17 year olds." (IFA)

Other more general comments were made that there was a lack of transition planning for young people leaving kinship care in particular, with no assessment or transfer to throughcare and aftercare (consistent with wider research which shows continuing care is not implemented consistently

between, or even within, local authorities in Scotland[9]). This means that carers often seek advice about what the procedures and processes are, how to access this support and what financial support, if any, will be in place when the child reaches the age of 16:

> "There's a lack of clear procedures and no wellbeing assessment. There's a complete lack of preparation for transitions for either money stopping or continuing and it's not a smooth process for the families, which is totally different for foster carers - there's processes in place for when the child reaches the age of 16 or 18 and then what comes afterwards." (TSO)

> "We're getting foster carers phoning up two weeks before a young person's about to have their 18th birthday. The lack of planning and foresight is really a massive stress." (TSO)

> "It's really about really good care planning, really good relationships and looking at the needs of the young person and making sure we're getting it right, not waiting till it's too late. But not doing it at a time that that young person's still, you know, navigating their way through school, education or relationships, which we know for our children can be really tricky at times sometimes for them." (TSO)

Carers of older children too commented that they felt uneasy with current arrangements in place for young people approaching adulthood and some commented specifically that they would like to see legislation and action in this regard:

> "We'd like to see the government legislate for support for kids once they become adults basically for continuing support cos most of these kids find themselves in a position in foster care through no fault of their own, through maybe parents with addictions or criminal convictions or whatever, neglect, things like that, sexual abuse. These are things that happen basically to kids and it's through - 99% of these kids, they've got no control over it basically and a lot of these things that happen to them when they're young could shape their future basically…We try to reassure [our kids] – "Look, you stay here as long as you want…our aim here is to get you away from abuse and poverty and things like that and make a life for yourself and get an education and get a good job and get a nice house and get a nice car and do all the things that normal people do basically." (Foster Carer)

> "Continuous care, I think it needs to be re-addressed cos, as I say, when our kid turned 16, they halved your money. They took away your allowance and you only get the kid's allowance but you're still expected to look after

[9] See: Dennell et al. (2022) Continuing Care: An exploration of implementation [online] Available at: Continuing Care: An exploration of implementation

them. But they say, they're independent and they're not. These kids are not like normal kids." (Foster Carer)

One particular concern was raised in relation to young people who do not stay in education, with some carers (especially kinship carers) expressing that they were worried about if their caring relationship and the stability they offered could be maintained if their children left mainstream education:

"My fear is, because to get that [SRA for aged 16+] he's got to be in the extra education…And if he doesn't stay - if he isn't able to stay in extra education, it's just going to be what happens then? It stops. I think it would be so hard. It would be so devastating for that to happen because the strain it will put on to me and to my husband, so I just hope that I never have to really cross that bridge. And I know that he's never going to be ready to go on into the world himself at 16." (Kinship Carer)

"The oldest one, she turned 18…and [the council] told me, no when she turns 18, the day she turns 18, her money stops. And I said, well, that's actually - that's quite bad, I said, because you've gave her that for all these years, I said, she's trying to get into college, I said, and you've just cut off her money altogether and now she's got nothing. And that's the way it is just now. She's trying to get into courses and the courses are full. Most of the courses that she's went to go into are completely full. So, she's not got any funds at all. Nothing. No money coming in. And I was like that, I said, that is – that's not right. I don't think it's right, personally." (Kinship Carer)

Third sector organisations were also keen to stress that there was also no parity when a child is non-looked after, i.e. a child with a Kinship Care Order in place who, if they were not legally looked after on their 16th birthday, would be unable to access continuing care allowance.

This was one area linked to the SRA where future legislation was welcomed by many to help achieve consistency in support for older young people around the country.

Emergency Placements

A lesser raised issue was in relation to kinship carers who become carers at short notice or in emergency situations. Overall, it was considered that there were gaps in terms of initial payments made to such carers and in making them aware of their entitlements.

Several kinship carers noted that they had become carers at very short notice, which had negatively impacted on them financially until they were made aware of the kinship allowance (which in some cases had been a long time):

> "It's been helpful [the SRA] because we had like 45 minutes notice to go and pick an eight week old baby up, so we had nothing at home for her…we funded everything ourselves initially…So we had all that initial outlay and we got nothing from the birth parents, you know, she came to us with - she had a bag with one change of clothes in it. So, that was it." (Kinship Carer)

Unlike foster carers, who had a planned journey into caring, there were views that support in place for kinship carers was lacking, especially around financial advice and what kinship caring responsibilities may mean for a family in the long term:

> "I think many of us would try and do the best thing if it was asked of us in a case of emergency. But you're asking people to make a decision at a moment in time without maybe them being able to think through how long that arrangement might be for. So what seems doable for a particular time period, both in terms of financial implications, emotional implications, all of that, as we get into longer term, becomes very difficult for kinship carers." (TSO)

Further, while Section 22 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 monies were available to support families, there were views that rules in relation to its spend were employed differently across the country:

> "It's not done the same way across the country and I think there needs to be a greater focus on that point because, as we know for foster carers, you very much go into it voluntarily and you prepare and you have all that process with a social worker before you're even sent to approval, before you're even linked with a child. So, you have a lot of time to prepare and to understand the financial and other consequences of it and what this may mean for you. Whereas, for a kinship carer, it's obviously an emotional undertaking and response to it that understandably trumps, can we afford this?" (TSO)

Recruitment, Retention and Movement of Carers

All stakeholders who were represented in the research agreed that the recruitment and retention of carers was a pressing issue that needed to be addressed, and that any bad publicity linked to the SRA, or any failure to raise fees and allowances or increase the SRA in line with inflation going forward may be a deterrent to future recruitment:

> "We might not have got it right for the ones that are retiring but we owe it to the new carers and the new children coming in to care that they are in a system that's going to support them right up until they [no longer] need it. And I think, if we don't have that, that financial support set up properly and

reviewed properly and supported properly, then I don't think it's a sustainable situation we've got." (TSO)

Carers were among those to highlight that investment in more established carers was also as important as investment in those new to the caring role:

"A lot of investment is for new foster carers, but it's the old foster carers really that have the experience for the children that come into the system, because the new ones, they're not going to be able to deal with half the children that they get cos they're just new…So, I feel more emphasis needs to be put on to the existing foster carers for retention and recognition by the social workers…you are going to lose the experience, and experience is the most important thing when you deal with traumatised children." (Foster Carer)

In line with this, greater respect and consideration of the independent sector was urged, especially as it was estimated that around a third of foster children in Scotland were currently being cared for by carers employed by independent providers. Viewing the independent sector as an 'add on' was seen as outdated and misguided and instead, treating local authority fostering agencies and independent fostering agencies as two equal parts of Scotland's fostering service was seen as essential in any future planning and development of the SRA or associated policy.

Comments were also made that there was an increasing reliance on kinship carers in Scotland, and that this was a risky situation going forwards if they do not feel valued or financially able to continue:

"…out of the four nations in the UK, Scotland is the one that uses masses more kinship care than anybody else. Almost the same number of kinship carers as foster carers…If those people are now less willing to care for those children because they feel hard done by, we will need the mainstream foster carers even more, and there's not enough of them. So it would depend on how it pans out with the willingness of those people to continue to care for their children from their wider family networks…So the negative PR isn't good." (IFA)

A small number of IFAs expressed concerns that foster carers would potentially consider moving to local authority fostering contracts unless IFAs were able to keep their allowances above any SRA. That being said, only one IFA reported explicitly in their survey response that any of their foster carers, in any areas where they held contracts, had indicated that they may consider moving to become a local authority foster carer directly as a result of the introduction of the SRA. Other comments were made that carers typically did not move from IFA contracts to local authority contracts because they valued

the wider support and relationships that they harnessed with these former organisations:

> "We support our carers better than the local authority supports their carers. We pay our carers better and this is reflected in the time carers stay with us and that young people stay with our carers." (IFA)

This was also born out in interviews with carers themselves, where they fostered through IFAs:

> "That's the one thing we do have with being with the independent agency is, we're not short on support in any area, to be fair…It's almost available 24/7, so there's not any reason for me not to feel supported, if you like…we can't complain about anything like that." (Foster Carer)

The Promise was cited as a platform that could be better utilised to highlight the need for more foster carers.

Information and Support

The Scottish Government publishes information online to help professionals, as well as foster and kinship carers, to understand the SRA[10].

Local authorities were asked to indicate the extent to which this information was being used by professionals in their local authority areas (for example, by social workers) to help answer questions from foster and kinship carers. Just over a quarter (26%; n=7) indicated that the information was used 'often' or 'very often' with just under half (48%; n=13) noting that it was used 'sometimes'. The remaining authorities who answered this question noted that the information was used 'rarely' or 'never' (26%; n=7).

Only four local authorities reported that there were any frequently asked questions from carers that the Scottish Government online information did not currently address. These related to:

- kinship carers entitlement for child benefit versus foster carers;
- information for informal kinship carers regarding the definition of different types of kinship care, linked to eligibility for allowances (and that informal kinship carers do not have automatic entitlement);
- continuing care rates post 18 years; and
- the position in relation to reviews and yearly increases.

[10] See: Information published by the Scottish Government

Table 23: Reported use of the Scottish Government online information by local authorities

Response options	Number	%	Valid Percent
Very often	2	7%	7%
Often	5	17%	19%
Sometimes	13	43%	48%
Rarely	6	20%	22%
Never	1	3%	4%
Don't know	3	10%	-
Total	**30**	**100%**	**27**

Local authorities reported that the main other sources of information from which professionals commonly sought information about SRA allowances were third sector organisations and national membership organisations including The Fostering Network, KCASS, AFKA and CPAG as well as the Citizens Advice Bureau and other local support groups. A small number of authorities also reported that they relied on either local social workers, welfare rights teams, local authority advice services or other "internal staff" to assist with queries.

While most authorities said that there was no other information or support from the Scottish Government that would be helpful to professionals in their local areas in assisting them with the ongoing administration of the SRA, some requests were made for:

- advance notice of any future increases, review dates and proposals on annual uplifts to the SRA (and for these to align with the beginning of the financial year to minimise the impact of mid-year back payments);
- clearer guidelines for kinship carers regarding what additional financial support can be offered/is available to assist with initial outlays/purchases (for example, buying nursery equipment, furniture, etc.);
- additional guidance in relation to payments for young people aged over 18 who remain in education and have additional support needs (ASN) or enhanced care needs (with a national response provided surrounding financial support for their foster or kinship carers); and
- more consistent use of language in the care field, for example, around fees, allowances, tiered payments based on skill, the differences between council, charity and 'for profit' fostering services, with existing

terminology and variation in its use between areas currently making it a confusing landscape for foster carers.

Although not a requirement for additional information, one authority did suggest that additional support could be offered in the form of kinship payments being paid directly through Social Security Scotland (in line with child benefits) instead of by local authorities, to help bring consistency in practice and payment amounts.

Similarly, one authority urged additional support for young people who are not 'looked after' at their 16th birthday (by virtue of the Section 11 legislation) who they perceived were disadvantaged financially once their entitlement to care leaver status was removed.

Among **TSOs and carers** who had accessed the Scottish Government information online, most said that this was clear and easy to understand:

> "The government website's great. The information and advice about kinship care, what allowance and what you're eligible for is really clear." (TSO)

The information for professionals published online by the Scottish Government was, however, seen as being only rarely or sometimes used by those in the independent sector and as being moderately helpful.

All **carer survey respondents** were also asked if they had ever accessed any of the information about the SRA published by the Scottish Government online. Only 16% (n=22) of foster carers and 28% (n=38) of kinship carers indicated that they had accessed this. These respondents were also asked to rate how helpful they had found it, how easy it was to find the information, and how easy it was to understand the information:

- just over half of foster carers (59%, n=13) and half of kinship carers (51%, n=19) found the information helpful overall;
- similar proportions of foster and kinship carers said the information was either quite or very easy to find (45%, n=10 and 47%, n=17); and
- foster carers were far more likely to say the information was easy to understand compared to kinship carers, with 68% (n=15) of foster carers stating this was very or quite easy while 47% (n=17) of kinship carers said this was easy.

Only a few foster carers (n=4) indicated that they had been signposted to the Scottish Government's online information, with various sources mentioned. These included other carers, the Fostering Network, their foster agency, and IWGB foster care workers.

Thirteen kinship carers said they had been signposted to the information, typically by KCASS, social workers or local authority kinship teams, third sector kinship organisations and support workers, and Money Matters.

All carer survey respondents were also asked if they had accessed any other sources of information or advice about the SRA, including speaking to anyone for help or support. Again, most had not, with 77% (n=105) of foster carers and 61% (n=82) of kinship carers indicating they had not accessed other sources of information. However, slightly more kinship carers (24%, n=32) had accessed other information compared to foster carers (12%, n=17). Sources of information were varied, with foster carers noting they had sought/received information from the Fostering Network, while kinship carers had used KCASS. Other sources which were used by both types of carer included social workers and other key workers; their local authority; support organisations/groups; support networks, including other carers; benefits agency; advice centres; and charities/third sector organisations.

All carer survey respondents were also asked if there was any other information or support from the Scottish Government, local authority or others that would be helpful in understanding the SRA. Nine foster carers and 13 kinship carers outlined additional information which might be helpful. A range of issues were highlighted, including:

Information needs identified by both foster and kinship carers:

- the provision of a simple leaflet, letter or booklet about the SRA and any others benefits which carers might be entitled to, any eligibility criteria, and general questions and answers;
- information about continuing care, e.g. payment rates, how long this will be received for, different options for the legal status of this age group and any implications of the different options, etc.;
- information about how the different allowance rates have been calculated, an explanation of why different age bands receive the same rates, and why carers generally receive the minimum rates; and
- clearer information and breakdown of payments on remittance notices, and contact details for any queries.

Information needs identified by foster carers only:

- any information would be welcomed by those who have not received any to date, including whether they are entitled to different payments and how to apply for/access these; and
- a breakdown of how the SRA rates are meant to cover all costs.

Information needs identified by kinship carers only:

- more information provided proactively, carers should not have to search for this;

- greater engagement with kinship carers to understand situations and circumstances;
- use simple and easy to understand language;
- more information on “hidden grey areas”;
- for Universal Credit/DWP staff to be more aware and understanding of the kinship carer role and requirements, and how the SRA interacts with other benefits;
- more information on overpayments;
- information about appeals processes; and
- information on nursery funding.

The other main information or support that was requested, mainly highlighted by carers in interviews, was some guidance from the Scottish Government on proportionate spend of the allowance against the items it was allocated for. For example, carers spoke of not knowing how much they were expected to ‘save’ for the child (if anything) as well as not knowing what proportion of the allowance they should reasonably allocate to such things as hobbies and activities:

> “I’m still not clear on what I am expected to do. See if you ask any foster carer, they don’t even know what - like, what are the expectations? And the biggest one that kind of got me was you need to put savings by for them and this is on top of the holiday money. And I’m like, wait a minute. Where’s all this money coming from? And they set the pocket money, they tell you how much to give a kid pocket money…And I’m like that - where’s this all coming from?” (Foster Carer)

Carers in particular felt that a case study illustration or explanation of how carers might utilise their money to help them meet all of the costs specified as part of the SRA would be interesting and helpful, i.e. “a kind of guide for foster carers to know what they were expected to do with it [the allowance].” (TSO) Indeed, some long-term carers reported that they used to receive such guidance from their authority but that this was something that had stopped post-COVID (which they perceived was a money saving exercise).

Comments were also made (especially among kinship carers) that there was an absence of non-digital information available. It was felt that it may be appropriate to develop leaflets or booklets in printed form to be given to kinship carers at an early stage in their caring career, especially where digital literacy was a barrier:

> “You can quite simply Google kinship care allowance and you’ll get lots of information coming up…I don’t know how it is for older people, you know. I don’t know if there needs to be a wee bit more clarity. There’s a lot of people that are not computer literate, so where else would they get that information from?” (Kinship Carer)

Future Legislation

All respondents were asked to share their views on whether the SRA should be legally enforced going forward and, if so, how the legal obligations should be framed. There was no real consensus across the various stakeholder groups with regards to future legislation in relation to the SRA.

All **carer survey respondents** were also asked to rate their level of agreement with a series of statements about the possible future of the SRA. The results are outlined in Appendix B.

Most foster carers (80%, n=109) and kinship carers (71%, n=93) either agreed or strongly agreed with option (a) the Scottish Government should mandate minimum SRA rates across local authorities and IFAs, but they should still be able to choose to pay above this. Conversely, the lowest level of support was for the idea that there should be no legal mandate and local authorities and IFAs should determine their own allowance rates, where just 11% (n=15) of foster carers and 11% (n=14) of kinship carers agreed to any extent, and 68% (n=92) of foster carers and 67% (n=84) of kinship carers disagreed to any extent.

Views were more mixed in relation to whether the Scottish Government should mandate SRA rates across local authorities and IFAs, which must be the rate paid. Kinship carers viewed this option more favourably that foster carers, with 61% of kinship carers agreeing with this option, compared to 40% (n=55) of foster carers.

Comments from both foster and kinship carers at interview were generally supportive of the need to establish a statutory mandated payment level to provide parity and equity/equality between different carers as well as within and between different local authority areas. Respondents felt it was important to set a fair and proper payment amount which provided everyone with the same level of support:

> “Each LA should pay the same. It shouldn’t be a postcode lottery with some getting more than others.” (Kinship Carer)

> “I believe all kinship and foster carers should be paid the same SRA across Scotland. It is unfair that some local authorities pay less, and others more.” (Kinship Carer)

It was also felt that setting mandated rates was important to make sure payment levels were protected from potential budget cuts, and that local authorities and IFAs could not choose to pay below this:

> “The way the budgets go, if it wasn’t a set amount there would be no way of knowing if your payments were going to be cut or be fair.” (Foster Carer)

> "If we left it to the local authority there could be significant discrepancies meaning some children will be deprived of items or forced to live in poverty." (Kinship Carer)

Several foster and kinship carers also supported the need for flexibility. Respondents felt it was important to allow local authorities and IFAs to pay above the mandatory payment level in order to reflect differences in circumstances (e.g. for children with additional needs, to reflect different/higher cost of living in different areas, to reflect levels of experience (for foster carers), etc.). A few foster carers also argued that this was also a helpful tool to attract people into fostering, while kinship carers argued that payments needed to be sufficient to ensure there were no financial barriers to becoming a carer:

> "Local authorities should be able to pay more to Foster cares for the 24/7 care that is provided and also for kids with higher needs and who can be aggressive and cause damage, extra payments should be available to carers for this." (Foster Carer)

> "Minimum requirements should legally [be] in place but consideration should be made to increase this amount in special circumstances i.e. Child with increased medical/physical/emotional needs. This should be reassessed if needs change." (Kinship Carer)

Although in the minority, some kinship carers also noted that foster carers may deserve higher rates, because of the 'additional commitments' that it brought:

> "There's a lot in kinship that…they get upset because they think that it should be the same as foster payments. But you've got to remember that that is their job, that is their job and they have mandatory training to do. Kinship hasn't. So, there's all that that's got to be taken into consideration." (Kinship Carer)

A few respondents also supported the need for flexibility because they felt that the current SRA rates had been set too low. While they wanted equality across the country, they advocated for higher rates overall. This suggests that, had the rates been considered sufficient, there may have been greater support overall for option (b) a mandated set rate rather than option (a) to allow flexibility to pay above the minimum rates.

While very few respondents offered comments in support of there being no legal mandate with local authorities and IFAs being responsible for setting their own rates, one foster carer did value the ability for payments to be decided at the individual level.

Some **carers who were interviewed** were keen to see set rates, rather than a set minimum, as they perceived the 'minimum' would always be adopted by authorities if given the opportunity and they viewed 'fixed' allowances as being fairer;

> "I don't think there should be a minimum…There should be a rate identified basically, a 'must pay' rate…Not a minimum because if you bring in a minimum rate, it's clear that most local authorities will try to pay that minimum rate. That's what will happen…especially local authorities are being squeezed for things like that and that's where they're going to try and make savings…" (Foster Carer)

Some carers, especially IFA carers, felt that legislating across both local authorities and IFAs would help to reduce competition and make things more even for all carers doing the same job:

> "If they legislated for it, that would help to make sure it was fair between different agencies and different local authorities as well." (Foster Carer)

Some **TSOs** viewed that while the minimum mandate was helpful, it still allowed for some variation which was difficult for carers to understand and difficult to manage:

> "I think the minimum is really helpful in that it does provide a safety net that nobody's going to fall under that, particularly for kinship carers who aren't regulated in the same way as foster carers are…but I do think you're still always going to get that variation, particularly from the independent providers who will try to pay more than local authorities to attract carers for fostering. The SRA has not helped with that." (TSO)

While the minimum was very much welcomed, the scope for continued discrepancies across the country remained open with this option and this undermined what the Scottish was hoping to achieve, it was felt:

> "I think in terms of it being essentially a minimum rather than a dedicated [sum], I think that's brilliant, I think it's aspirational, I think it's fabulous. We want to give carers as much money as possible in my view. The very obvious unintended consequence is that some fabulous local authorities will pay more so, once again, we end up with a postcode lottery." (TSO)

All but one **IFA** agreed that the Scottish Government should mandate minimum SRA rates across local authorities and IFAs, but they should still be able to choose to pay above this. IFA representatives were also the only group in the research to question the relevance of equal pay in all areas, their priority instead being equal pay between local authority and IFA providers within the same area:

> "I understand why an individual local authority might want to pay whatever the independent agencies are offering in terms of allowances because there's an element of competition for the foster carers. But across the local authorities, I'm not sure that's a valid argument." (IFA)

There was no consensus among IFAs on whether the Scottish Government should mandate SRA rates across local authorities and IFAs, which must be the rate paid (with views ranging from strong agreement with this approach to strong disagreement and some neutral views also expressed). Where people supported mandating rates, this was largely to achieve consistency for children and young people:

> "While I feel there should be a minimum in place, mandating for the same rate of allowance would ensure all children have consistency." (IFA)

Across the research, some stakeholders also expressed a preference against future 'recommendations' which they felt were too soft and easy to overlook:

> "They [the government] will pass these recommendations but that's all they are is recommendations…If it's taken you 10 years to get to this point, why are you still putting this get out clause as a 'recommendation'? Because that's what it is. It's a get out clause." (Foster Carer)

Comments were also made that, instead of legislating for minimum or standard allowances, legislation should be introduced that forced providers, both local authorities and independent agencies to publish their allowances annually. This would 'shame' those paying below what might be reasonably expected into taking action, it was felt.

Miscellaneous

A small number of other issues were raised across the research which could be traced to specific stakeholder groups.

Several foster carers stressed the need to review the overall amount of money paid to them. They highlighted the lack of uplift in payments over many years (with some indicating this had not increased in 20+ years), the increasing cost of living and inflation, the limited amount of paid holidays, and the lack of a pension. They called for fair pay, inflationary increases, and workers' rights, with a few suggesting they should be made employees rather than treated as self-employed. A few also noted that the current financial situation for foster carers was making them reconsider their future:

> "I think foster carers always have to dip into their own pocket. There was a time when cost of living was not so high and it was not a problem but now it is dire. My winter bills have gone through the roof and inflation too. Yet the increases are not in line with these. Why? Considering we change lives for

> little children and are pivotal to this, the government really need to appreciate by rewarding us remuneratively. We are not a charity and have to make a living like the rest of society!" (Foster Carer)

One foster carer called for greater collaboration with the different local authorities to ensure payments across the country are consistent and set at a realistic level. Similarly, others perceived there to still be differences in the payments between local authority and IFA carers. Some suggested that local authority carers receive less than those fostering via IFAs (however, it was not clear to what extent this related to the allowance, fee, or other payments). One respondent, however, noted that SRA back payments had not been made by IFAs (due to local authorities not passing on the necessary funding for this to the IFAs).

The insecure nature of the placements and income associated with fostering was also discussed. One respondent highlighted the financial challenges that can occur when placements come to an end and there is a gap until a new placement starts or involves a slow introduction period. Another highlighted that foster carers often have bigger houses to accommodate more children, require bigger/more cars, etc., with the cost of these continuing while the carers are between placements. It was suggested that retainer fees should be provided for these periods to ensure that knowledgeable and experienced carers are not lost.

There were also several calls across the research elements for a review of fostering fees to complement any future review of allowances:

> "I don't think we can consider allowances in isolation without fees when we're looking at financial support, and that is the problem." (TSO)

Many kinship carers and TSOs also argued for reduced complexity with kinship care arrangements:

> "The kinship care system in Scotland is just so unnecessarily complicated, tricky to navigate and inexplicably unfair. The SRA is just another part of that system." (Kinship Carer)

Kinship carers also described feeling undervalued and taken advantage of compared to foster carers, with lower levels of overall financial support, no fee for the carer, less formal/practical support available, little/no access to specialist support such as counselling or therapy for the child, no training for the carer, etc. Indeed, several felt that greater parity was still needed overall between foster and kinship carers:

> "When you get kinship child or children they want us to fight for them…so it feels like we're begging for everything. It's 2025, nothing much has

changed in 22 years, we shouldn't have to go through what we do, everything should come to us naturally, foster carers that's a job with wages and more than we get, more allowances for each child, we do it out of love, I've said for years we're forgotten about." (Kinship Carer)

Various other issues were raised in the course of the fieldwork which, although were not related explicitly to the SRA, were aligned with it and the focus on reducing child poverty. This included comments from carers that the Scottish Government could consider:

- entitlement to additional free nursery hours for pre-school children;
- free school meals for cared-for children of all ages;
- free access to all local authority activities and events for cared-for children (including school holiday clubs/camps/activities and local authority gyms/sports centres);
- housing benefit entitlements for carers;
- reducing or foregoing council tax for carers; and
- hardship payments or grants being routinely available, especially for kinship carers who often find themselves caring at very short notice.

In addition to these measures facilitating better opportunities and outcomes for cared for children and their families, it was felt they could help aid recruitment and retention of foster carers, which was seen as a pressing concern for Scotland as a whole.

There were also calls among TSOs for better inspection and regulation of the fostering and care sector as a whole.

The main other comments received from local authorities in relation to the SRA were calls for future uplifts and the need for advanced warning of any increases to the SRA to be aligned with the start of the financial year to enable local authorities to implement any future changes efficiently.

Similarly, authorities reiterated that the lack of Scottish Government uplift to date had left some with a deficit and cited other budget constraints at the local level which had meant that they had been unable to offer any increase in payments for carers directly. They again urged the Scottish Government to make more money available for carers going forwards to allow payments to increase and assist with the cost of living crisis.

Finally, several stakeholders, including TSOs, IFAs and local authorities noted that, while carers had welcomed the introduction of the SRA and the increased consistency and parity that it had brought, for the SRA to continue to be meaningful, it was important that it was subject to regular review, annual inflationary increase and other modifications to remain fit for purpose over time. Engaging all those affected in any future discussions in this regard was also encouraged.

Discussion

The Policy Intention

The SRA was intended to bring consistency and transparency to the allowances paid to foster and kinship carers, ensuring that all caregivers, no matter where they live, receive at least a set rate to cover the costs of the child[ren] they are looking after. While the SRA was very much welcomed by all stakeholders who contributed to the research, there was little in the evidence collected to suggest that the desired consistency and transparency had been achieved.

On consistency, while most local authorities now appear to be paying at least the SRA for most children, the evidence suggests that there is still wide variation in the allowances and fees that are being paid across the country (albeit the variation may be less than the pre-SRA landscape). While many kinship carers feel that they are being treated more equitably when considered alongside foster carers, the evidence also suggests that kinship carers may still be 'worse off' financially (compared to foster carers) despite the introduction of the SRA, primarily because of the deduction that occurs when families are entitled to or in receipt of other benefits as well as having less access to additional payments and expenses. The wide variation in practices relating to additional payments also suggests that there is some way to go towards achieving consistency in the wrap-around financial support being offered to carers Scotland wide.

On transparency, the differences between the reported payment practices by local authorities and the data (or absence of data) published by them online means that there remains a certain degree of opaqueness with regards to if and how the SRA has been implemented around the country. This is compounded by a lack of transparency in the remittance notices given to carers regarding their regular payments. A lack of clear, current and readily available SRA rate information for carers and the public alike means that transparency at even the most basic level has not been achieved. This is compounded by a lack of self-reported data from IFAs on the rates that they pay, as well as a lack of understanding among carers about what they receive for whom and why (with allowances often conflated with fostering fees, other benefits and additional payments).

The Research Questions

The research generated a large volume of feedback from all parties regarding the way that the SRA had been implemented and received. While there were some gaps, especially in terms of feedback from IFAs, the research addressed each of the research questions that were posed to at least some degree.

Are individual local authorities paying the SRA or above the SRA?

The absence of reliable published and readily accessible data makes this a difficult question to answer. While all local authorities that took part reported that they were paying at least the SRA for all age bands, this was not born out in independent checks. The absence of readily available data also make verification challenging (and impossible in some cases), alongside differences in the way that rates are presented, which makes like-for-like comparisons hard to achieve (for example, some rates are presented as 'inclusive' of fostering fees while some are 'exclusive' and some rates are presented as 'before' benefits deductions are made and others 'after'). It is also not clear in all cases if the published rates online are current or historical.

Based on the data that are available, it appears that most (but not all) authorities are now paying at least the SRA for some, but not necessarily all eligible children. There also appears to be remaining inconsistency between local authorities in terms of the range in value of payments being made, with some still offering notably above the SRA.

The very limited data that were available regarding rates being paid by independent fostering agencies means that no reliable conclusions can be reached in relation to payment practices in this sector.

Do the current allowance rates at each SRA age band reflect the needs of the child at that age?

Both foster and kinship carers welcomed the new rates overall, especially where this represented an increase in rates previously paid at the local level. That being said, there was still evidence across the research that allowances were failing to meet the full costs of looking after a child, and that many carers were relying on additional income streams, credit and savings to help provide positive childhood experiences for their looked after children and young people. The widely varying differences reported in relation to payment of additional expenses for carers by local authorities and IFAs were also seen as resulting in some children receiving less overall compared to their peers, and this was a key area that was flagged for more to be done to help achieve consistency across the country.

Feedback from carers suggests that there are two main age groups where the SRA is not perceived as currently meeting the needs of the child, those aged 0-4 and those aged 11-15. The cost of nappies, milk and equipment for babies and those aged under 2 in particular appears to be placing a strain on carers' finances for children in the pre-school years, while costs of clothing, phones/IT and money to facilitate more independence for older children were the pressing concerns for carers of secondary school aged children.

Although not a part of the SRA, the research also uncovered a great deal of dissatisfaction (particularly among carers, TSOs and local authorities) with

regards to continuing care. The main sentiment appears to be that continuing care may be being used inappropriately and disproportionately as a cost saving measure, i.e. moving young people to continuing care to reduce the higher fees and allowance costs that would be associated with keeping young people in care. There were also concerns about inconsistencies in continuing care practice and the lack of transition planning and wider support to help families and young people as they moved into adulthood from a care environment. The other main sentiment was that financial support for young people in the continuing care age band was simply not enough.

Across the age bands, the research shows clear frustration that there has been no uplift in the payments since the SRA was introduced. This was viewed by many as unacceptable and may have served to undermine confidence in the SRA as a whole. The cost-of-living crisis meant that all stakeholders viewed the need for an uplift as a pressing concern.

Should there continue to be four SRA age bands, or is an alternative approach to banding more appropriate?

Across the various stakeholder groups who engaged with the research, there were no clear messages in this regard except to note that most people felt the collapsing of age bands 5-10 and 11-15 was not appropriate and did not reflect the differing needs of children as they progressed from primary to secondary school. There was evidence that the use of four age bands, with the same rates paid for those aged 5-10 and 11-15 years old may have had a negative impact on some children who had to wait longer for any increase in payments due to the new age bandings which were misaligned with old local authority bandings (i.e. and who had to remain at a lower SRA rate for longer). This was perhaps an unintended consequence of the SRA.

While there was no support for any specific alternative model, there was again unanimous feedback that age bands and payment rates for each should be continuously reviewed and uplifted in line with inflation.

How many kinship carers are impacted by how the SRA interacts in practice with both Scottish and Reserved Social Security benefits?

A large number of kinship carers appear to be impacted by the interaction of the SRA with other benefits and there is a lack of clarity and understanding (among both carers and also, anecdotally, some professionals) with regards to the interaction of kinship payments with welfare benefits, particularly Universal Credit. This lack of understanding is compounded by lack of clarity in the detail provided to carers around the payments that they receive, with some not knowing how their allocations are made up (e.g. how much is for each child, how much has been deducted due to other benefits, how much is attributable to additional payments or expenses, etc.) At the worst extreme, this can mean some carers receiving deductions in payments even when no other benefits have been sought, but having no understanding of why this is the case.

For all families, especially those with no previous contact with the benefits system, it was felt that more information needed to be shared proactively by local authorities and/or the Scottish Government making it clear how kinship allowances interact with benefits and making the system easier to navigate overall. Additional training for those who support carers may also be needed, as there is evidence from the research to suggest that queries to local authorities in this regard can be met with inadequate responses.

Again, while not a 'benefit' per se, problems around lack of clarity with regards to additional payments and expenses that carers may be entitled to from their local authority or IFA appears to be compounding the challenges experienced as a result of benefits deductions. Differences in support given within and between areas and insufficient funding for special events such as birthdays, religious holidays and school holidays is exacerbated by carers' perceptions that professionals infer that they should not be asking for additional help when needed. The complexity of the claims process for additional expenses also appears to be a barrier to some families asking for the additional financial support that they need.

How has the implementation of the SRA affected the contracts between local authorities and independent fostering agencies and how do IFA allowances compare to the SRA?

There is little evidence available to provide a robust answer to this question; however, IFAs who did take part concurred with local authorities that impacts of the SRA on IFAs had (to date) been minimal. The absence of sufficient data on allowances paid by IFAs also means that this remains a gap in knowledge.

The main frustration for carers working in the independent sector was around their not being eligible for backdated payments (where they were already receiving a higher rate than the SRA) and/or frustration that dedicated monies for the SRA that had been passed to local authorities by the Scottish Government had not been passed on to IFAs. This impacted some private and voluntary providers who attempted to ensure that their rates were equitable with new SRA rates by meeting any shortfall themselves.

The impact of the SRA on contracts between local authorities and IFAs was considered as something that remains to be seen, i.e. when new agreements come into place, the predicted costs presented by IFAs is likely to be higher to allow them to remain competitive with local authorities in remunerating carers, as well as to recover any costs incurred during the SRA transition phase. Various stakeholders stressed that it would be important to keep IFAs on board going forward, and to respect them as equal partners in the care-provision sphere (alongside local authorities) since they play an essential role in meeting the increasing demand for fostering services. Having consistent allowances offered by IFAs and local authorities would also ensure that decisions by families to take on the fostering role were not unduly or

negatively influenced by financial interests. Many expressed aspirations that there should be no difference in the allowances paid across the public and private sectors since both were working towards the same goal of alleviating child poverty and maximising best outcomes for children and young people.

What is the distribution of foster and kinship carers in Scotland, and are more foster and kinship carers receiving the SRA residing in areas of high deprivation, measured by the SIMD, than in areas of affluence?

The survey of carers attracted a strong response and, among those who took part, there was representation across a wide range of SIMD communities. Notably, there were no obvious trends in the main issues reported by carers living in both high and low areas of deprivation, with issues such as the reliance on savings, credit and other income sources being reported by carers of all socio-economic and demographic backgrounds. Based solely on the sample reached by this research, kinship carers do appear to be marginally more likely to live in areas of high deprivation compared to foster carers, and are also likely to be older and of retirement age (although several foster carers were also of comparable ages). This observation, however, is limited by the fact that there is no way of knowing how representative the survey sample is of their respective peer groups - the sample simply reflects the characteristics of those who opted to take part and share their views as part of the work, and this self-selection may mean that there are inherent biases in the data gathered.

What is clear is that carers are united in their desire to give their cared-for children access to life-enhancing experiences such as holidays, membership of sports and other activity clubs, opportunities to learn new skills, etc. While some carers find it harder than others to give their cared-for children access to such opportunities, the shared desire is underpinned by strong views that young people should not be penalised as a result of their ‘cared for’ status. Carers, despite their own financial backgrounds, unanimously reported investing as much as possible (financially, practically and emotionally) into the well-being of their cared-for children.

Do carers and professionals know where to find information about the SRA?

Local authority staff, IFAs and TSOs all reported knowing where to find information on the SRA and, indeed, many who took part reported making proactive efforts to reach carer communities to raise their awareness of the SRA too. Despite this, there was evidence that not all appropriate information was being cascaded by professionals to those in caring roles. Kinship carers in particular appear to be facing challenges in accessing information, with several being made aware of their entitlements quite late into their care journey instead of routinely being supported from the start (although some of the negative feedback reported may be due to legacy failings linked to the

status quo when those carers first took on their kinship status, rather than reflecting current practice and recent efforts to engage them more).

While the Scottish Government information online was welcomed, there remains scope, it seems, to more proactively engage with carers to make them aware of the SRA, its intentions and how it could/should be used to maximum effect.

Is it clear that the SRA is to pay for the costs of the child and does not cover foster carers' fees?

While carers reported a clear understanding that the SRA was to pay for the costs of the child, many reported that it was neither practical nor desirable for families to differentiate income from different sources day-to-day, the preference instead being to combine all available income to try and best meet the needs of the child. Again, many carers reported using savings, their fostering fees, borrowing from family/friends, accessing credit or taking on alternative employment to help boost their overall family income, and to help meet any shortfall in the SRA in allowing them to cover all of the costs of the child. These extra sources of income were typically again used to provide positive life experiences for the child, although many carers also reported challenges meeting even their basic family needs, e.g. heating, clothing and food.

Comments that fostering fees also needed to be reviewed bolster the overall sense that foster carers feel that more financial support is needed to help them effectively deliver their role, i.e. fees and allowances should not be considered in isolation. Considering fostering fees alongside any future review of fostering allowances, rather than viewing the two in isolation, was encouraged.

Is there any additional information that it would be helpful for Scottish Government to publish centrally (e.g. interaction with benefits, annual allowance rates for all local authorities)?

Across the research, there was feedback regarding lack of timely communication about the SRA - this was principally among IFAs who did not feel sufficiently well engaged in the pre- or post- implementation phases, as well as carers who felt that information was not proactively provided to them by the local authorities regarding any change in allowances (including backdating). As above, kinship carers in particular raised a lack of early/immediate and proactive engagement about entitlements as an issue.

Raising awareness of kinship care status as a whole was seen as something that would maximise the reach of the SRA in ensuring that all eligible carers were receiving what they were entitled to in order to provide the best outcomes for the children and young people in their care.

Do stakeholders hold the view that the Scottish Government should legislate for the SRA to ensure consistency and transparency of allowances in Scotland?

Carers welcomed consistency rather than local authorities making their own autonomous decisions regarding allowances and rates. Carers in particular felt that the Scottish Government should mandate minimum SRA rates across local authorities, but they should still be able to choose to pay above this. Among other stakeholders, however, there was mixed feedback in this regard with no clear preference for legislating for either minimum rates or standard rates (the former would help achieve consistency but the latter would potentially mean that more support could be given to families where authorities felt able). On balance, there did however appear to be a preference for local authority and IFA rates to be aligned.

Stakeholders were also unanimous on the point that allowances should increase on an annual basis with inflation and also that the SRA should be kept under regular review. This was seen as essential to help with future recruitment and retention of carers in the fostering community and to reinforce the valuable work done by kinship carers across the country. It would also aid improved consistency and transparency, it was felt.

Many consulted across the research also expressed a desire for local authorities and IFAs to publish their allowances and fees data in an accessible, consistent and up-to-date way. This was seen to be the single biggest step that would help achieve transparency.

Conclusions

While all stakeholders welcomed the SRA and efforts to improve consistency, the increase in payment amounts that were experienced in some areas were seen as long overdue. The research also indicates that allowances are still perceived and experienced as being insufficient to meet families' needs, especially in light of the current cost of living crisis, with views that the SRA did not go far enough to address the cost of caring for children and young people in the current climate.

Despite implementation challenges and some areas of discrepancy that still need to be ironed out, all stakeholders agreed that, fundamentally, the SRA had been a crucial first step forward improving the lives of foster and kinship carers and the children and young people in their care. It was seen as a positive step forwards but would need to be continually reviewed, in collaboration with all those affected, to ensure that it remains fit for purpose now and in the future.

Appendix A - Carer Survey Sample Characteristics by Region

Region (and Local Authorities)	Foster Carers (number and %)	Kinship Carers (number and %)	Total Sample (number and %)
North East (Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Moray)	23 17%	17 13%	40 15%
Highland (Argyll and Bute, Eilean Siar (Western Isles), Highland, Orkney, Shetland)	5 4%	3 2%	8 3%
Central (Angus, Clackmannanshire, Dundee City, Falkirk, Fife, Perth and Kinross, Stirling)	14 10%	52 39%	66 25%
South East (City of Edinburgh, East Lothian, Midlothian, Scottish Borders, West Lothian)	24 17%	31 24%	55 20%
South West (Dumfries & Galloway, East Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Ayrshire, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Ayrshire, South Lanarkshire, West Dunbartonshire)	71 52%	29 22%	97 37%
Total	137 100%	132[1] 100%	269 100%

[1] Base = 132 as two respondents did not live in Scotland but had caring experience in Scotland prior to moving and/or had placing authorities in Scotland

Appendix B - Carers' level of agreement with statements regarding the future of the SRA

Statement	Carer Type	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
(a) The Scottish Government should mandate minimum SRA rates across local authorities, but they should still be able to choose to pay above this	Foster	39%	41%	12%	3%	6%	**137**
	Kinship	29%	42%	21%	5%	3%	**131**
(b) The Scottish Government should mandate SRA rates across local authorities, which must be the rate paid	Foster	13%	27%	31%	15%	13%	**136**
	Kinship	17%	44%	29%	7%	2%	**127**
(c) There should be no legal mandate and local authorities should determine their own allowance rates	Foster	5%	6%	21%	31%	37%	**135**
	Kinship	1%	10%	22%	30%	37%	**126**

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