

July 2019

Report by

Research & Citizen Insight Team

**Special Guardians Survey and Service User Engagement Report**

*'Listening and learning from the views of Special Guardians to improve the assessment process and user experience'*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the end of April 2019, Essex County Council (ECC) set up a new Special Guardianship Assessment Team (SGAT), to undertake all Special Guardian (SG) assessments and preparatory work. One of the aims of the team is to provide specialist preparation training to prospective SGs.

In order to ensure that the training met the needs of prospective SGs, the Research and Citizen Insight (RCI) team were asked to undertake research to understand the needs and experiences of current and former SGs in order to inform the preparation training, and ensure that this group received the support they needed in the SGO process.

RCI engaged with current and former SGs in Essex and gathered qualitative and quantitative information about their views and experiences. The research findings, as detailed in this report, will be used to inform the SGO training preparation courses run by ECC. The primary research took place in March 2019.

**RCI research activities**

RCI sent a survey to current and former SGs whose details were held on the SGAT database.

195 SGs were sent the survey, with a further 140 receiving a paper copy. In total there were 91 respondents (27% response rate)

RCI lead a focus group with SGs at a support group

In total, five focus groups were held across Essex, in which around 32 SGs were engaged

**Key quantitative findings**

67 (73%) received enough or more than enough visits from social workers

22 (24%) did not have enough time to read the assessment and give feedback

56 (61.5%) were satisfied with the assessment process 13 (14%) found the assessment process unsatisfactory

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - CONTINUED**

**Key themes from the survey**

Lack of information about financial support Coping with child behavioural issues

Lack of information about legal rights

The need for guidance around contact with birth parents Mixed experiences of the assessment process

How to access information, advice & guidance Experiences of social isolation & loneliness

Contrast to the fostering, kinship carers and adoption processes

**Key themes from the focus groups**

Digital (access and awareness) Aftercare & support (SGs and child) SGO assessment process

**Next steps and opportunities**

To ensure that the new training package and Special Guardianship Assessment Team are meeting the expectations of new SGs, an ongoing survey will capture feedback from SGs. This will help to support continual improvements to service delivery.

Further research is being planned to capture the experiences of children placed under an SGO.

**INTRODUCTION**

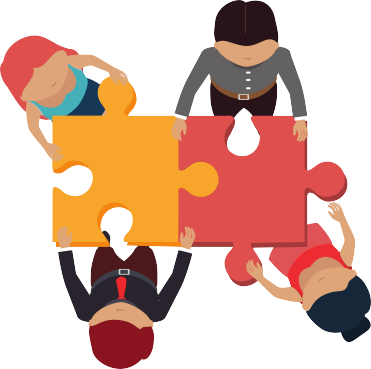
A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) secures a permanent home for a child with someone who is not their parent and offers a route to a permanent placement for children in care and those on the edge of the care system. Statutory regulations set out Local Authority responsibilities in relation to assessing the suitability of Special Guardianship and providing support to children subject to an SGO.

In Essex SGO assessments were previously undertaken across all children’s social care teams. In recognition of pressure on teams, and the need to understand the complexity of the matters around SGOs, the decision was taken to review the SGO assessment process.

At the end of April 2019, ECC amended this process and established a service dedicated to undertaking all Special Guardian assessments and preparatory work. One of the aims of the new team was to provide specialist preparation training to prospective SGs. The team needed to make sure that this course was delivered effectively and gave SGs the support they needed through the SGO process.

**Quote from ECC, Knowing Me, Knowing You article, 5th May 2019:**

***“Something we have never done before is to provide specialist training to prospective guardians.***

***Under our new improved offer, we are aiming to provide Essex County Council’s first ever SGO Preparation Training Course in June, which has been co-created with existing Special Guardians from across the county.***

***They gave us some great feedback about what they feel would have made the process easier for them and the children involved, and we’ve taken that feedback on board to develop our new training package.”***

# THE PROCESS

**Previous engagement**

In previous research, SGs have been a hard to reach group. For example, some SGs do not use, or have access to, online technologies such as e-mail, which makes it difficult for some to complete an online survey.

**November 2015 research**

The SGO Support Team sent the survey link to approximately 100 people who were known to the service. People were also contacted directly by the service and given the opportunity to complete the survey over the phone with Healthwatch Essex facilitating the call. This yielded a 16% response rate.



Methodology

The target group for this research was current and previous SGs who were, or had been, supported by ECC. In order to gather the insight and data needed the research team (RCI) used a mixed methodology.

RCI designed an online survey, which was hosted on Citizen Space, ECC's consultation platform. Hard copies of the survey were made available to those who were not able to access or use digital systems. This survey was sent to all SGs on the team database. 195 SGs were sent the link to complete the survey online and a further 140 were sent a hard copy of the survey.

In order to understand the experiences of SGs and capture the 'user voice' effectively, several focus groups were held, one of which was lead by RCI. Focus groups were held at venues where SG support groups already took place. These were in the following areas - Braintree, Basildon, Chelmsford, Canvey island and Clacton.

In this research, RCI may also have collected the views of SGs supporting children where the placement originated outside of ECC’s jurisdiction.

Members of the newly formed Special Guardianship Assessment team facilitated the four focus groups and RCI lead the final session in Clacton. In total, around 32 SGs attended the sessions.

**THE PROCESS CONT.**

**Focus group questions**

1. Tell us about your informal networks and how this helps you as an SG
2. What types of support did you receive before becoming, and as, an SG?
3. What worked for you and why?
4. What could have been better?
5. What wasn’t available that could have supported you (and the child/ children) better?
6. What do you think should be included in the training and why?
7. How would the training improve things for SGs in the future?

**Summary of information asked for in the survey**

Location (SG & child/children)

How and when they became an SG

Background information about the child of an SGO

How prepared and informed SGs were at the time of becoming an SG around the following:

* Legal rights and responsibilities
* Long-term commitment to the child/children
* Financial support
* Potential challenging behaviour from the child/children
* Knowing how to access support for yourself
* Understanding the challenges of contact with parents

Suggestions for other subjects for the preparation training course Information about social worker assessments and visit(s)

**DETAILED FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY - QUANTITATIVE**

**Response rate**

**91 SGs**

**completed surveys**

There were 91 responses to the survey, which represented a 27% response rate.

**Online responses vs paper copies**

**32%** replied by paper

**68%** replied online

62 (68%) completed the online survey

29 (32%) completed the paper survey

**Survey findings**

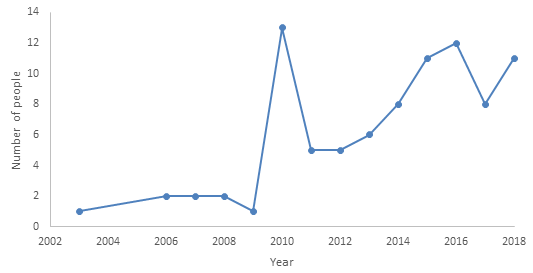
(58%) of respondents said the child/children lived in the same district prior to the SGO being granted

**53**

**90** (99%) of respondents were currently special guardians

**60** (67%) of respondents were grandparents

The graph below highlights the increased number of SGOs granted per year since 2002.



**See Citizen Space report for personalised bar charts related to below.**

**When taking on the role, how well prepared and informed did Special Guardians feel?**

When did respondents feel very prepared and informed?

20 (22%) about **their legal rights**

31 (34%) about their **long-term commitment to the child/children**

When did respondents feel prepared and informed?

38 (42%) about **understanding the challenges of contact with the parents**

41 (45%) about **what financial support was available**

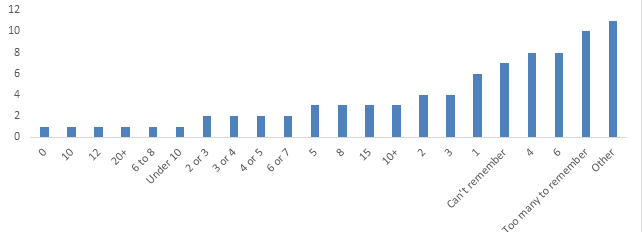
When did respondents not feel prepared or informed?

46 respondents (50.5%) about **potential challenging behaviours from the child/children**

59 (65%) about **how to access support for themselves**

While going through the assessment process to become an SG, 67 (73%) respondents said that they had received either enough, or more than enough, visits from the social worker. A total of 69 (76%) respondents said that there had been sufficient time to read the assessment and give their feedback, while 22 (24%) respondents said they did not have time to read the assessment and gave feedback.

The graph below shows how many social worker visits each respondent had.



Overall experience of the assessment process

56 (61.5%) respondents (61.5%) said that they were satisfied with the overall assessment process and the checks that had been done, with 22 (24%) respondents being unsure and 13 (14%) finding the process unsatisfactory.

## What did our qualitative research tell us?

In order to understand what is needed to be included in the training package for new SGs, it is important to listen and learn from those who had already been through the process. The insight below is gathered from current SGs through comments from the survey and the locality focus groups.

The survey

We collected around 120 free text comments from 70 survey respondents. This has enabled us to gather insight into the lived experiences of current SGs, and explore what they thought they needed to know when becoming an SG.

The insight gathered from the free text comments are as follows:

Finance

Respondents were vocal about the lack of information around finances, and the negative impact of being less informed, and reported it would have been beneficial to have had information around the below prior to the SGO being granted:

Clearer explanation around the financial procedures and, specifically, their entitlement to financial support and how long they would be in receipt of this support.

To be clearly informed that payments were income based and that it would be assessed, and information on how these payments are calculated.

Information about what other benefits (i.e. Universal Credit) or grants that they, or the children, may be entitled to, i.e. help with furniture, school uniforms and activities.

Advice on money management skills, particularly in relation to mortgage, savings and pension situations.

*“Although the financial aspect of looking after family members is not paramount, to be informed of this would have helped massively on financial decisions made ongoing, for example paying off a mortgage impacted on the SGO payments so maybe a different decision might have been made.”*

Some SGs suggested that payments should be aligned with that of foster carers and should be paid until the child or children leave full time education. It was considered important that SGs were provided with clear and honest information about what financial support is available and for how long.

The financial pressure is worrying for some SGs. For example, some, as a result of the SGO, had to make changes to their lifestyle and employment status, with some having to leave work to care for the children, whilst others having to take on a job to survive financially.

One person said the financial pressure is making them consider putting the child back into care.

*"We will be forced now to consider putting our grandson back into care as we simply can’t support him financially as my husband has a long-term back problem causing him to be unable to work and I’m nearing 60 our financial future looks bleak, we just want to give our grandson a better future, but we need help."*

**Behavioural issues**

Respondents spoke about having to cope with the child and/or children’s behavioural issues, which had a negative impact on their lives. Some had already been on courses i.e. 'Nurturing Attachment', but said, although the course good, it was too late for them in the SGO process. To help manage behavioural issues and be prepared, people said it would have been beneficial to know about the following prior to becoming a SG:

Preparation for dealing with children's potential behavioural issues/problems Guidance on what a child would go through due to not living with birth parent(s) How the child could potentially be affected in later life and what help could be provided for the child

How to parent and look after a child after early year trauma, and support with challenging behaviours;

An in-depth knowledge of Attachment Disorder

Understanding of early life trauma and how this affects behaviour

Dealing with difficult behaviour of the foster carers after child has been placed under an SGO after being in foster care

To help deal with behavioural issues, respondents said it would be beneficial to know more about the previous history (including medical) of the child and

that schools should be aware and prepared for any issues that the child and/or children have. References were made around what support services could be available to help the child/children:

Help in areas such as sensory issues, therapy and emotional well- being & mental health

Some of the children had experienced trauma and would have benefited from specialised mental health support or counselling

*"I would genuinely say, let the prospective SGOs know all the worst problems that can occur, so that they can be prepared for tough times with their children's emotional and behavioural problems. Let them also know of the wonderful moments they can share with the children, and by showing the child they are loved, wanted and safe.*

*It has certainly been a roller-coaster for us during the past 16 years with our grandson, but he has grown into a lovely young man, will soon be leaving school and hopefully going onto 6th Form College."*

**Legal rights**

Respondents said it would have helped prepare them better for becoming a SG, if they had been more informed about:

Their legal rights and the biological parent’s legal rights over the children once the SGO was granted The legal process and any costs that they may incur The court proceedings and likely outcomes following court appearance

SGs also suggested that the Local Authority should keep SGs informed during the proceedings. Some said they were not prepared for the many court appearances and some had sought information themselves. There was also a financial cost to some families.

*“All of the preparation was self-directed. We gathered our own information and found ourselves a very good solicitor who represented us well."*

Contact

Some references to contact were captured with respondents saying it would have been useful to:

Be more informed on how to prepare the child/children for postal contact from their family.

Have information on how to deal with potential problems arising from contact with birth parents.

Guidance around what and when it is acceptable for contact between family and SG child/children.

*"But we weren't given info on problems we might face around contact with birth parent and the behaviour we would have to deal with as a result."*

**Assessment process**

We received a high number of comments in relation to the assessment process and support from ECC. For some SGs their experience of the assessment process was poor, whilst others reported it was positive. It should be noted that these comments reflect the views of just over 25% all SGs who have been through the assessment process in Essex. Positive feedback about the assessment process included reports that:

Essex has honest and committed social workers

The assessment process described as 'brilliant' for some SGs SGs felt well supported and looked after by the social work teams

*“At the time we weren’t given any help or advice as the SGO was set up through social care/court and a solicitor. After we had made contact with the SGO team they were amazing and helped us a great deal accessing additional therapy for our child and helping us to deal with contact with biological parents and offering support groups with people in the same position as us.”*

**Suggestions for improvement included:**

Better, and more regular, communication with social work teams

Regular meetings between social worker and SGs for first year would be helpful

More support at the beginning at the SGO process Standardisation of the assessment process

Following the implementation of the new countywide SGO Assessment Team, the ambition is to offer a seamless, standardised service approach and to improve service delivery and enhance the lives of SGs and the children of SGs.

*“It would off been nice to know that after the first year of having a social worker to help and guide you for that year after it was up, you could not get help at all if you had got issues. You are left on your own because the services want you to fall and not be able to cope with everything.”*

Support and Information

Respondents told us that it is important to be able to access information and support for themselves and the child/children they care for; although, for some SGs this has been difficult.

**Areas for consideration:**

What information is held online, and is this where the majority of SGs would search for information and support?

For SGs who are less tech-savvy, how can they be supported better to access information about SGOs?

SGs reported that the following would be helpful in terms of information and support:

Community support which is easy and convenient to access A support line or online support group

Set up a 'buddy system'

A better understanding of how to access external support agencies Support groups specifically for teenagers

Linking prospective SGs to people who are well established in their role as a SG

*“The more information the better for any prospective SG and to speak with other SGOs to know what’s available like a buddy system.”*

Social isolation and loneliness

Some SGs reported that they experienced social isolation and loneliness. This may have have a detrimental impact on the child and/or children.

*“...very hard to accept the loneliness, because of different people’s opinions of you.”*

**Feedback in relation to fostering, kinship carers and adoption**

Respondents described their experiences, and the process, of fostering and adoption in comparison to becoming an SGO. Whilst this goes beyond the remit of this research, we have included some headline themes from these comments which may be useful for referencing in the future.

Themes:

Some stated it would have been better to remain as a kinship carer, as they would have been better off financially

Suggestions that financial support for SGs should be the same as foster carers

Process for SGO compared to adoption were reported as vastly different and that checks were more rigorous for adoption

Reports of better support from fostering agencies

The Focus Groups

In the focus group conducted by RCI, we asked seven questions and below we cover the key themes and recommendations from these meetings. The top themes from the focus groups, including those conducted by the Special Guardianship and Connected Persons Assessment Team at ECC, were:

**Digital** - ECC website and how that can be used to support SGs & understanding how children use the internet (social media etc.)

**Aftercare and support** (financial/practical/legal) - before becoming an SG and supporting children if they have experienced trauma

**Assessment process** - improving the assessment process to become an SG

1. Tell us about your informal networks and how this helps you as an SG

Overall, it was agreed by participants that the support group was a useful informal network for SGs and an opportunity to support one another and share experiences of being an SG. One participant commented that the SGO support group helps to let you know that “you are not the only one”. Participants suggested that local support groups could be better advertised to those new to the role. There was an example of a SG meeting a parent at school who had recently become an SG and told them about the support group, as they were not aware of this opportunity to meet monthly with other SGs.

*“As an SG you are left.”*

*“We are 20 years older than when we had our own children.” “Everything is so different compared to when we had children who were at school.”*

The group reported that there were few informal networks. Everyone agreed it would be helpful for SGs to have more support in setting up informal networks, as there is currently no formal training for SGs to meet as a group and develop those networks.

Additional notes:

DWP sometimes refer to SGs as a ‘kinship carer’. Some organisations do not always understand what an SGO is.

Difficulty with children at school who are under an SGO, as they may not be assessed by the school, or the school doesn’t fully understand what an

SGO involves.

It can be a postcode lottery in terms of what support SGs can access.

1. What types of support you did you receive before becoming and as an SG?

Most SGs in the focus group said they had very little support before becoming, and as, a SG. Some reported that the process of becoming a SG was quite quick or rushed. For example, one participant recalled how they were “in

shock jumping through hoops”.

Some participants had to make drastic changes to their life, either moving from their home in another country or having to redecorate and rearrange the house to accommodate the child. Others compared it to foster care, which they thought had more structured support.

Participants agreed that in future it would be helpful to have a financial package set up in advance and a long-term financial breakdown of being an SG.

*“My solicitor did not even know what an SGO was, they had to look it up.”*

*“I can never make a life for children (because of poverty).”*

1. What worked for you and why?

Focus group participants identified that the ‘happiness and security of the child’ was one of the most important parts of being a SG. The focus group was also very positive about the SG Support team who set up the support group meetings.

1. What could have been better?

Some stated that the experience of working with social workers could be improved. Some participants felt that there was pressure put on them by social workers to become a SG.

*“A Social Worker said take him/her on or he/she will go up for adoption.”*

Financial support and advice could have been better, and it also would have been helpful to have a process map of what is involved in becoming a SG.

1. What wasn’t available that could have supported you (and the child/children) better?

The focus group suggested several things that could have helped either in being more aware or informed, and practical support for being a SG:

Digital support – children of SGs could potentially be more digitally advanced than their carers. SGs will need to be able to support their children educationally.

Training for social media and how children use it and work through it together. We live in a fast-paced world and SGs feel some pressure to ask children about social media and how they use it.

Educational support - children of SGs may be more likely to be pulled out of class.

Family fallout – the potential for families to fall out.

*“I have taken on my (family member) as SG. They don’t like me now and I now get threats via text & messenger from (family members) to get the LO (Little One) back.”*

*“The Social Worker put pressure on me to take the baby. They were physically abused by the (family member). As an SGO, there was a lot of pressure because orders sit within families, families can resent you or put pressure on you. With adoption there is a clean legal break.”*

*“As SGOs we give up our jobs to look after LO’s, but local council do their best to cut down financial support.”*

*“Have had to give up everything, gave up home in (location) to have the children. I resent my (family member) for putting me in this situation.”*

Financial support and advice could have been better, and it also would have been helpful to have a process map of what is involved in becoming an SG.

Child trauma – being prepared that children may have experienced trauma and how to support them.

Being out of area – If child comes from out of area, Essex don’t have information on them (‘missing link’). It makes it difficult to understand the process as regulations vary.

SGs unaware of any courses and are largely not advised of any courses. The role of SG can have unique strains. E.g., in one case the biological parents had not contacted the child for several years - “There has been no x-mas cards. It would be nice to have some recognition for the child”.

1. What do you think should be included in the training and why?

The location of the training is important. It should be held somewhere central and near a train station.

It should offer ‘brutal honesty’ insight about the process of becoming an SG and the realities of being an SG and having the order.

The SGs need to be offered practical support and be informed about the process of becoming a SG.

Recommendations that SGs have a card or passport which shows that they have parental rights over the children.

Information about rights as an SG and how much contact parents can have with children. Guardians don’t always fully understand their rights.

What it is like being part of the legal process – “don’t want to go up against family members”.

Solicitors/legal advice – there is not enough time, some solicitors do not know what an SGO means. Some solicitors have specialist knowledge in SGOs and you have to pay a lot of money for getting involved in legal proceedings.

Information about the social care system – need to understand what is involved and who is responsible for doing what.

Be made aware of how much pressure you could be under by becoming an SG.

1. How would this improve things for SGO’s in the future?

People becoming SGs would be better informed and more prepared and be able to care for the children better.

Report by Maura O'Malley and Cate White, Research and Citizen Insight Team

**This information is issued by:**

Strategy, Insight and Engagement

Essex County Council, County Hall, Chelmsford, Essex, CM1 1QH

**You can contact us in the following ways:**

[maura.o'malley@essex.gov.uk](mailto:maura.o%27malley@essex.gov.uk)

Visit our Council website:

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