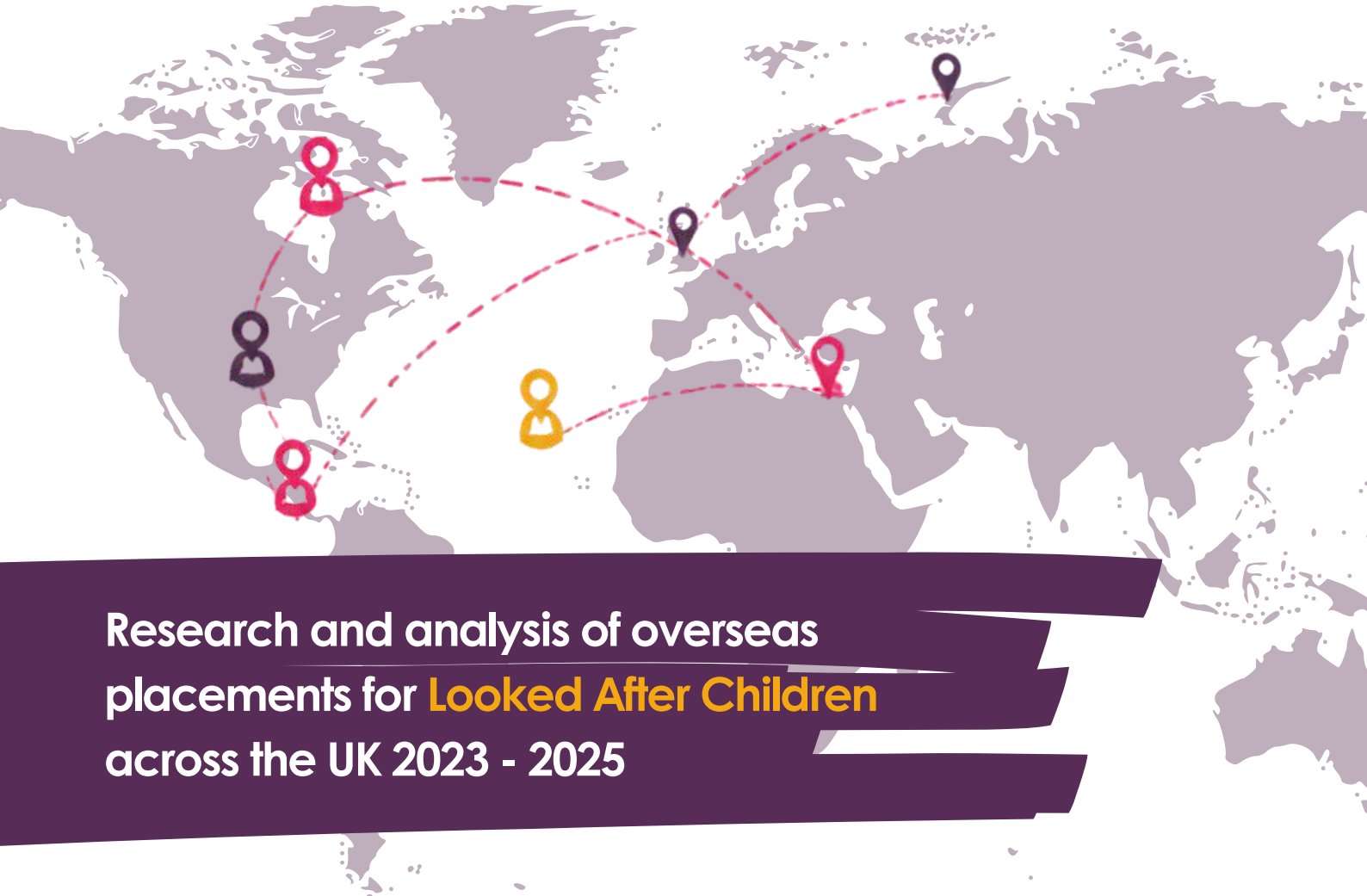
CFAB

protecting CHILDREN and uniting FAMILIES ACROSS BORDERS

BEYOND BORDERS

International kinship care in practice



Research and analysis of overseas placements for Looked After Children across the UK 2023 - 2025

October 2026

Contents

01. Introduction 2
1.1 About Children and Families Across Borders (CFAB) 4
02. Definitions 5
2.1 Abbreviations 8
03. Background to this research 9
3.1 Child migration context 9
04. Questions asked 10
05. Methodology 11
5.1 Gathering the data 11
5.2 Calculations across the dataset 12
5.3 Interpreting data across the four UK nations 12
06. Key findings 13
07. CFAB's key recommendations 14
08. Exploring connected persons overseas as potential carers 15
8.1 Summary of findings 15
8.2 Comparison across reporting periods 16
8.3 Wider cross-border context 16
8.4 Recommendations 18
09. Number of children placed with connected persons abroad 19
9.1 Summary of findings 19
9.2 Comparison across reporting periods 20
9.3 Wider context 24
9.4 Recommendations 26
10. Types of orders used for placement overseas 27
10.1 Summary of findings 27
10.2 Comparison across reporting periods 27
10.3 Wider context 29
10.4 Recommendations 34
11. Financial support for overseas placements 35
11.1 Summary of findings 35
11.2 Comparison across reporting periods 36
11.3 Wider context 36
11.4 Recommendations 39
12. Conclusion 40
13. Bibliography 41

1. Introduction

Across the United Kingdom (UK), kinship care is increasingly becoming recognised as a fundamental component of a child-centred approach to alternative care and permanence planning. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UNCRC) recognises that children who cannot remain in the care of their families are entitled to 'special protection' and assistance from the state, including access to an appropriate form of alternative care(UNCRC Article 20). Kinship care is a recognised form of alternative care. A child's right to preserve their identity and to have their best interests taken into account are also enshrined in the UNCRC (Articles 3 and 8) and reflected in the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009).

Geographic borders should not, in themselves, prevent suitable relatives or connected persons from being identified, assessed and considered as part of a child's permanence planning. International family connections should be explored where deemed appropriate, rather than assumed to be impractical or excluded solely because relatives live outside the country in which a child becomes known to authorities. Any decision to pursue an overseas placement must remain grounded in the child's individual circumstances, best interests and safeguarding needs. The International Social Service Equity in Permanency Principles reinforce the importance of ensuring that children with family connections overseas have equitable opportunities to achieve safe, stable and lasting family care.[1]

Although keeping children within a family network is prioritised by care systems worldwide[2], it is currently not known how many looked-after children (LAC) in the UK have connected persons overseas that could potentially care for them. Official ONS data indicates that four in ten babies born in England and Wales in 2025 had at least one parent born outside the UK, continuing a longer-term demographic trend. In Scotland, the equivalent figure in 2023 was approximately one in five.[3] This demographic reality means increasing numbers of children are likely to have international family networks and connections beyond UK borders.

Yet despite this changing reality, there is limited evidence about the extent to which children's services consistently identify, explore and record family connections beyond the UK. This research report examines how local authorities ("authorities") identify and explore international family connections and what their reported data reveals about the consideration of overseas relatives as potential carers.

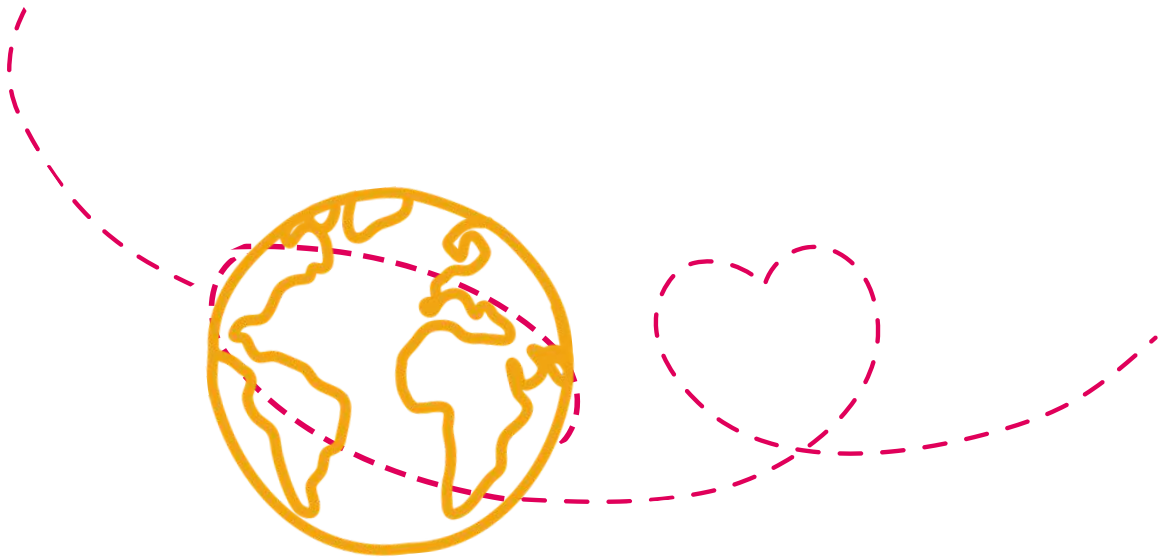
[1] International Social Service (ISS) (2023) *Equity in Permanency: Principles and Recommended Practices for Governments to Achieve Equity in Permanency for Cross-Border Families*. October 2023. Available at: https://iss-ssi.org/storage/2023/08/ISS-Equity-in-Permanency-Aug-2023.pdf (Accessed: October 2026).
[2] Family for Every Child (2024) *How to Support Kinship Care*. Available at https://familyforeverychild.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2559-FEC-Kinship-Care-Guideline_web.pdf (Accessed: October 2026).
[3] Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2026) *Births in England and Wales: 2024*. Available at: https://cy.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2024#live-births-to-non-uk-born-parents-by-geography (Accessed: October 2026).

CFAB has conducted this research every three years for more than a decade. Over this period, our findings indicate that international kinship care placements have increased by 42%. However, in absolute terms, placing children with connected persons overseas remains a relatively uncommon outcome within the UK care system. The under-exploration and under-utilisation of international kinship care may mean that some children are not being given the opportunity to have suitable overseas family members fully explored as part of their permanence planning. Where appropriate family connections are not identified or assessed, children may lose opportunities to remain within their family networks and maintain important relationships and aspects of their identity, culture and heritage.

In an increasingly interconnected world, children's family networks may extend across several countries and legal systems. This requires care systems to look beyond UK borders when identifying, assessing and supporting a child's connections. Authorities and children's services need the skills, knowledge and international partnerships to engage relatives overseas and properly consider whether they can play a role in a child's care and protection.

The findings in this report highlight the need for clear operational and monitoring processes, appropriate expertise and contextual knowledge, and effective international cooperation to ensure that overseas family connections can be identified and explored where relevant to a child's care and permanence planning.

Children and Families Across Borders is here to help make this possible.



1. 1 About Children and Families Across Borders

Children and Families Across Borders (CFAB) is the UK member of the International Social Service (ISS) network, a global federation operating in more than 120 countries and territories, and a member of Family for Every Child. For over 70 years, CFAB has worked to protect children whose lives cross national borders and to ensure that their international family connections are considered in safeguarding, care planning, permanence and family justice decisions.

CFAB is the UK's only charity specialising exclusively in international child protection and social work. Working through a global network of professional partners worldwide, we help authorities, courts, solicitors and guardians obtain the information and professional insight needed to make safe, informed decisions for children.

Our services include international family assessments, welfare and safeguarding enquiries, family tracing, home studies and support with kinship care, reunification and cross-border placements. We also provide case consultation and facilitate cooperation between UK professionals and overseas authorities, helping to overcome the practical and legal challenges that arise when children and families are separated by national boundaries.

Alongside direct casework, CFAB delivers training, research and policy development to strengthen international social work practice. By combining social work expertise with a global network of partners, CFAB helps ensure that children can maintain safe family relationships, have their family networks explored and achieve safe, lasting care arrangements, **wherever their family connections may extend.**

It all starts with a conversation.

Our **free Advice Line** supports social work professionals and individuals dealing with cases involving children and families across borders.



Call us on 020 7735 8941



2. Definitions

Assessment: An assessment evaluates whether a relative or connected person can safely and appropriately care for a child, taking account of the child's individual needs, the prospective carer's circumstances and the support required. In international cases, assessments may range from an initial viability or preliminary assessment to a comprehensive parenting or kinship assessment, depending on the circumstances, proposed legal arrangement and applicable statutory requirements. Assessments may require cooperation with professionals or competent authorities in the country where the prospective carer resides. Identifying a potential carer or exploring an overseas family connection does not, in itself, constitute an assessment.

Authorities: For the purposes of this report, authorities refers collectively to the statutory bodies responsible for children's social care across the four UK nations: local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland, and the five Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. The term is used for ease of reference when discussing UK-wide findings but does not imply that these bodies operate under identical statutory duties, legal frameworks or care arrangements.

Connected person: A connected person is a relative, friend or other person with an existing connection to a child who may be considered as a potential carer. This includes individuals outside the child's immediate or extended family, where an established relationship makes them a suitable person to consider for the child's care. In this report, the term is used broadly to describe people connected to a child who may be considered as potential carers; it is not intended to imply that the specific legal definition applicable in England applies across all four UK nations.

Equity in Permanency Principles: Seven international principles developed by the International Social Service (ISS) network, including CFAB as the UK Member, to promote equitable and non-discriminatory consideration of family-based care for children who cannot remain with their parents, including where relatives or connected persons live overseas.[4] Grounded in children's rights, the principles emphasise family participation, children's identity and cultural connections, the identification and challenge of bias, appropriate care planning and accountability. They seek to ensure that geographical borders do not prevent suitable family care options from being explored, while prioritising children's safety and best interests.

International kinship care: For the purposes of this report, international kinship care refers to the identification and exploration of family connections outside the UK, the assessment of overseas relatives or connected persons as potential carers, and arrangements in which children move overseas to live with them following local authority involvement in care planning. This research focuses on activity recorded by UK children's social care authorities, rather than informal care arrangements made independently of statutory services, which would not ordinarily be captured through these Freedom of Information requests. While the principal focus is on

[4] ISS (2023) *Equity in Permanency*.

connections and placements between the UK and countries overseas, the research also includes data on cross-border placements between the four UK nations for comparison. These are distinguished from international placements throughout the report.

Kinship care: Kinship care is defined by Family for Every Child's Global Guidance on Kinship Care as "family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature." Kinship care can therefore encompass a range of arrangements through which relatives or people with an existing connection to a child provide care when their parents are unable to do so or when care by family or connected persons is otherwise considered appropriate to meet the child's needs.

Looked-after child: A child who is in the care of, or provided with accommodation by, a local authority under the applicable children's social care legislation. The legal definition and circumstances in which a child is considered looked - after differ across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. For this report, the term is used in accordance with the relevant national framework and does not imply that children remain looked after following every type of kinship placement.

Overseas: For the purposes of this report, 'overseas' refers to any country or territory outside the United Kingdom (UK). This includes relatives or connected persons residing outside the UK and placements made from any of the four UK nations to another country. Placements between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are classified as cross-border placements within the UK and are not considered overseas placements.

Overseas connected persons exploration (family finding): The process through which a local authority identifies, traces or considers relatives or connected persons living outside the UK who may be able to provide care or contribute to a child's family relationships, identity and wider support network. Exploration does not necessarily involve a formal assessment or result in a placement.

Overseas placement: For the purposes of this report, an overseas placement refers to an arrangement in which a child goes to live with a relative or connected person outside the UK following local authority involvement in their care planning. We recognise that terminology differs across the four UK nations. In Scotland, reflecting the principles of The Promise, language emphasising children living in kinship care is preferred over describing children as being placed. The term overseas placement is retained in this report for consistency with the FOI questions and reporting, rather than to characterise the nature of children's family relationships. These arrangements may take place under different legal frameworks, and a child's legal status may change before, during or following the move overseas. The term does not necessarily mean that the child remains legally looked-after after moving overseas. The term describes the child's living arrangement and does not, by itself, determine the legal status of the child or carer.

Permanence: The process of securing safe, stable and lasting care arrangements and relationships for a child, supporting their long-term wellbeing, identity and sense of belonging. Permanence can be achieved through different forms of care, including reunification with parents, kinship care, guardianship or adoption, depending on the child's individual needs and best interests. Terminology, legal arrangements and approaches to permanence planning vary across the four UK nations. This report uses the term permanence throughout.

Placements: For the purposes of this report, the term placements refers to arrangements in which children go to live with relatives or connected persons following local authority involvement in their care planning. We recognise that terminology differs across the four UK nations. In Scotland, reflecting the principles of The Promise, more child-centred language, such as children placed with family or children living in kinship care, is preferred over referring to family care arrangements simply as placements. This report retains the term placements for consistency with the original FOI questions and statutory reporting, while recognising that kinship care is fundamentally about children's family relationships, stability and sense of belonging.

Post-placement support: The financial, practical, professional and other assistance provided or arranged to support a child and their carer following a kinship placement. This may include financial allowances, access to services, ongoing social work involvement and support with the child's welfare and family relationships. The nature and availability of support depend on the child's legal status, the applicable national framework and the individual circumstances of the placement, including where the child and carer live in different countries.



2.1 Abbreviations

CFAB – Children and Families Across Borders

CSO – Compulsory Supervision Order

FFEC – Family for Every Child

FOI – Freedom of Information

GDPR – General Data Protection Regulation

HCCH – Hague Conference on Private International Law

HCCH 1996 – Convention of 19 October 1996 on Jurisdiction, Applicable Law, Recognition, Enforcement and Co-operation in Respect of Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children

ICACU – International Child Abduction and Contact Unit

ICO – Interim Care Order

ISS – International Social Service

KCO – Kinship Care Order

LA – Local authority

LAC – Looked-after children

NI – Northern Ireland

NRS – National Records of Scotland

ONS – Office for National Statistics

SG – Special Guardianship

SGO – Special Guardianship Order

SRA – Scottish Recommended Allowance

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

3. Background to this research

CFAB supports authorities and international partners in cross-border child protection and kinship care cases and periodically surveys authorities to identify practice challenges and evidence gaps relating to children whose family connections extend across national borders.[5]

In May 2026, CFAB sent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to 212 children's social care authorities across the UK to examine practice relating to overseas family connections and placements. This research builds upon CFAB's previous FOI exercises covering the period 2015 - 2022. Together these studies provide a rare longitudinal perspective on international kinship care and overseas placements within UK children's social care systems.

8.1 Child migration context

The history of Britain's child migration schemes provides a powerful historical reminder of the need for safeguards and accountability when children move overseas. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, children in the care of public authorities and voluntary organisations were sent overseas under state-supported and voluntary migration schemes, including to countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Rhodesia. Subsequent inquiries found that some children experienced severe neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, exploitation and lasting separation from their families and loss of identity. Evidence presented to inquiries and documented by the Child Migrants Trust demonstrated that concerns about inadequate safeguards and monitoring were often known but not acted upon, while the absence of effective oversight made it difficult to identify children at risk or intervene when placements failed.[6]

Contemporary international kinship care is fundamentally different from historic child migration schemes: it seeks to preserve family relationships and promote children's welfare by enabling children to remain within their wider family networks. Nevertheless, the lessons of history remain relevant. Where a child is placed overseas from local authority care, the placement should, at a minimum, be formally recorded and capable of being tracked. Without reliable data, it is difficult to establish how frequently these arrangements occur, what legal frameworks apply and what outcomes children experience.

[5] While national datasets allow disparities in children's social care to be examined by characteristics such as ethnicity, age, geography and placement type, they do not enable equivalent scrutiny of whether a child's family network extends overseas or whether an international kinship placement has been explored. This research therefore uses Freedom of Information requests to examine local authority practice and provide greater visibility of international kinship within the children's social care system.

[6] Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) (2018) *Child Migration Programmes Investigation Report*. London: IICSA. Available at: https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/investigation/child-migration.html (Accessed: October 2026); House of Commons Health Committee (1998) The Welfare of Former British Child Migrants. Third Report of Session 1997–98, HC 755-I. London: The Stationery Office. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmhealth/755/75504.htm (Accessed: October 2026); Child Migrants Trust (n.d.) The history of British child migration schemes. Available at: https://www.childmigrantstrust.org/child-migration-history (Accessed: October 2026).

Across the world, unprecedented numbers of children are living away from their homes or moving within and across borders, for reasons ranging from conflict and persecution to poverty, climate change, education and the search for safety and opportunity. UNICEF estimates that, by the end of 2024, 48.7 million children had been displaced by conflict, violence and other human rights violations, up from 16.3 million in 2010.[7] The circumstances in which children move vary enormously, but the scale and complexity of global child mobility underline the importance of robust safeguarding, reliable data and effective cross-border cooperation. Wherever children move, and whatever the reason, systems must be capable of identifying where they are, ensuring that their rights and family relationships are protected, and maintaining appropriate oversight of their welfare.

4. Questions asked

1. ***Number of Looked After Children with connected persons abroad:*** *In the period 2023 – 2025, did you explore connected persons overseas as potential carers for a child in your care?*

2. ***Number of children placed with connected persons abroad:*** *In the period 2023 – 2025, for each calendar year, how many children were actually with connected persons outside England (a) or outside the UK(b)?*

3. ***Court orders used for placement overseas:*** *For each calendar year, between 2023 – 2025, what number and types of court orders were used to place children with family and/or connected persons outside of the UK? Please report for the full three-year basis (2023 – 2025 inclusive).*

4. ***Post-placement support for overseas placements:*** *Has your local authority made any financial support payments to kinship carers living overseas in the past three calendar years (2023, 2024, 2025)? This is regardless of order type and could include: section 17 payments, kinship allowance, SG support, discretionary welfare payments etc. Please list countries of residence of the formerly LAC.*

[7]UNICEF (2026) *Protecting migrant and displaced children: What you need to know about the numbers, causes and rights of children affected by migration and displacement*, 11 March 2026. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/stories/protecting-migrant-children. (Accessed October 2026).

5. Methodology

CFAB periodically uses FOI requests to examine how authorities across the UK identify and explore overseas connected persons and record resulting placements. This is the fourth exercise in this series. The previous research covered 2015 to 2017, 2018 to 2020 and 2020 to 2022, with reports published in 2019, 2021 and 2024.[8] The 2026 report covers 2023 to 2025. CFAB now holds data covering ten years, from 2015 to 2025. For the first time, this report analyses all four datasets to examine changes in reported international kinship care activity over time. Comparisons are made cautiously because the questions and response coverage have evolved between exercises.

5.1 Gathering the data

For this report, CFAB refined its questions and issued FOI requests in May 2026 to authorities across England, Wales and Scotland and Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. Responses were tracked centrally, followed up where necessary, and collated, cleaned and analysed. A number of practitioners across the four nations also provided feedback on the report before it was finalised.

Under the FOI Act 2000, authorities are required to respond promptly and within 20 working days.[9] Some authorities requested extensions or provided responses after CFAB's analysis had begun. Given the publication timetable, responses received after the analysis cut-off were excluded. **The findings therefore reflect the information available when analysis was finalised, rather than a complete national dataset.**

CFAB received responses from 169 of the 212 authorities contacted - an 80% response rate. However, a response did not necessarily provide usable data for every question. Many Authorities reported difficulties retrieving information about children with family connections overseas in a form that could be extracted and supplied within the FOI timeframe. These gaps limit consistent monitoring of international kinship care across the UK.

Authorities varied in how they recorded and reported overseas placements. Most reported placement episodes rather than individual children, while some appeared to include placements active during the reporting period rather than only those commencing within it. Some authorities also provided aggregated or suppressed figures, limiting the precision of the analysis. Consequently, placement totals are indicative and should not be interpreted as definitive counts of individual children.

[8] CFAB (2024) *FOI Report 2020-2022* https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5f35add6489ebf598108eb78/65d32d3f5192f123bf775587_FOI%202020-2022%20Final%20Report.pdf (Accessed October 2026); *CFAB (2021) FOI Report 2018-2020* https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5f35add6489ebf598108eb78/61efd0fc5892a176405fe7dd_FOI%20report%20pdf.pdf (Accessed October 2026); CFAB (2019) *FOI Report 2015-2017* 619675a6d26aa78d568d73ba_Community Care 2020 article carolyn FOI.pdf (Accessed October 2026).

[9] *Freedom of Information Act 2000*, s 10(1).

Similar limitations apply to the legal-order data, where differences in reporting practices, including the possible recording of multiple or successive orders for the same child and orders made before the reporting period, may contribute to discrepancies between the number of orders and placements reported. These limitations also affect comparisons between reporting periods and nations.

5. 2 Calculations across the dataset

The 169 authorities that replied to the FOI request (80% of the 212 authorities contacted) will form the denominator for percentage calculations throughout this report. This denominator includes every responding authority, whether it provided complete data, partial data, a refusal or an explanation that the requested information was unavailable. The 43 authorities that did not respond are excluded because their position is unknown.

Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent percentages refer to responding authorities across the UK or within the relevant nation. Refusals and partial responses are not treated as substantive data; this approach provides a consistent denominator while allowing data gaps to be reported separately.

5. 3 Interpreting data across the four UK nations

Children's social care systems differ across the four UK nations, while family justice operates within three distinct legal jurisdictions: England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Statutory frameworks, legal orders and terminology differ, as do the number of responsible authorities and the size and distribution of the LAC population.

Comparisons are made where appropriate. For example, some England and Wales order data are presented together where comparable legal orders operate across both jurisdictions. Data for Scotland and Northern Ireland are presented separately where legal frameworks differ.

The same caution applies to comparisons over time. Changes in reported figures may reflect changes in practice, but can also result from the questions asked, authorities' recording systems, response coverage and their ability to retrieve information within the FOI timeframe. The ten-year analysis is therefore used to identify patterns and changes in the available evidence, rather than to attribute every difference between reporting periods to changes in practice.

The FOI data relates to all LAC; however, the questions did not distinguish between children involved in active care proceedings or alternative care planning and those already living in stable, long-term arrangements. In England, for example, LAC may include those accommodated voluntarily under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 and those subject to Interim Care Orders or Care Orders.[10] Not all LAC will require exploration of alternative carers,

[10] *Children Act 1989*, sections 20, 22 and 31.

particularly where an existing arrangement continues to meet their needs.

Consequently, comparisons between the number of overseas placements and the overall LAC population should be interpreted cautiously. The findings cannot establish how often overseas family exploration was appropriate, whether it occurred in individual cases or whether suitable family-care opportunities were missed. The data also does not distinguish between children subject to care proceedings and those already looked after in long-term arrangements.

6. Key findings

- Authorities across the **all UK four nations** face challenges in consistently recording and reporting, in an extractable format, the **exploration of overseas family connections** and **placements** with **connected persons overseas.**
- **Sixty-five** responding authorities, across **all four UK nations**, reported **exploring connected persons overseas** between **2023 and 2025.** This is the **highest** number reported across CFAB's four FOI exercises over the past decade.
- **Forty-four** responding authorities reported **overseas placements with connected persons** between **2023 and 2025**. Those authorities reported an estimated **193 overseas placements**. Placements were reported in **all four UK nations**.
- Reported **overseas placements** have increased by approximately **42%** since CFAB's first reporting period (2015-2017).
- Reported **overseas placements** remain a very small proportion of the overall LAC population, generally **below 1%.**
- **Special Guardianship Orders** remain the **most commonly reported** legal route for overseas placements from England and Wales. **Care Orders** and **Interim Care Orders** continue to be used for some overseas placements.
- **Thirty-four** responding authorities reported **providing financial support to carers living overseas**; in countries that do and do not have a relationship with the UK under the 1996 Hague Child Protection Convention.
- Support included **Special Guardianship allowances**, **kinship payments**, **Section 17 support** and **discretionary payments**.

7. CFAB's Recommendations

1 Make international kinship placements visible in national data.

UK and devolved governments should require consistent recording and reporting of children placed from local authority care with connected persons overseas, including destination country, relationship to the carer and legal basis for the placement.



2 Strengthen guidance on overseas family finding and assessment.

UK and devolved governments should require consistent recording and reporting of children placed from local authority care with connected persons overseas, including destination country, relationship to the carer and legal basis for the placement.



3 Provide a clear framework for placements outside the HCCH 1996 system.

National guidance should set out how authorities should obtain safeguarding information, undertake assessments, establish legal security and plan support where the HCCH 1996 does not apply between the UK and the receiving state.



4 Review whether existing legal orders work effectively across borders.

The Family Justice Council, Family Division, Central Authorities and specialist international organisations should examine whether orders used for overseas kinship placements provide children and carers with secure, recognised and enforceable arrangements in the country where they will live.



5 Build international recognition into future kinship care reform.

Any new Kinship Care Order or other legal reform should be designed from the outset – insofar as is possible – to create legal relationships that will be understood in other jurisdictions. Kinship Care Orders may need to be recognised in other legal jurisdictions under the 1996 Hague Child Protection Convention, or "mirrored" within overseas legal systems where the 1996 Hague Convention does not apply. The parental responsibility conferred on kinship carers, and the implications for existing holders of parental responsibility, must be clearly defined to support legal permanence for children placed overseas.



6 Clarify support provisions for children with connected persons overseas.

National guidance should clarify local authority responsibilities for financial, practical and post-placement support for children placed from care with connected persons overseas.



8. Exploring family members and connected persons abroad as potential carers

CFAB asked: *In the period 2023 – 2025, did you explore connected persons overseas as potential carers for a child in your care?*

8.1 Summary of findings

Across the UK, 65 responding authorities (38%) reported exploring relatives or connected persons overseas for children in their care, compared with 42 (25%) that reported no such activity. A further 62 authorities (37%) did not provide a usable response. This represents the highest number of authorities reporting overseas family exploration since CFAB began collecting data in 2015.

These findings show that overseas family exploration is taking place across the UK and can play an important role in upholding children's rights to family life and identity.[11] Timely identification of family networks is essential to effective permanence planning.[12] However,inconsistent approaches to identifying and recording overseas relatives make it difficult to determine whether children with internationalfamily connections are given equitable consideration of potential family care options compared with children whose relatives live in the UK.



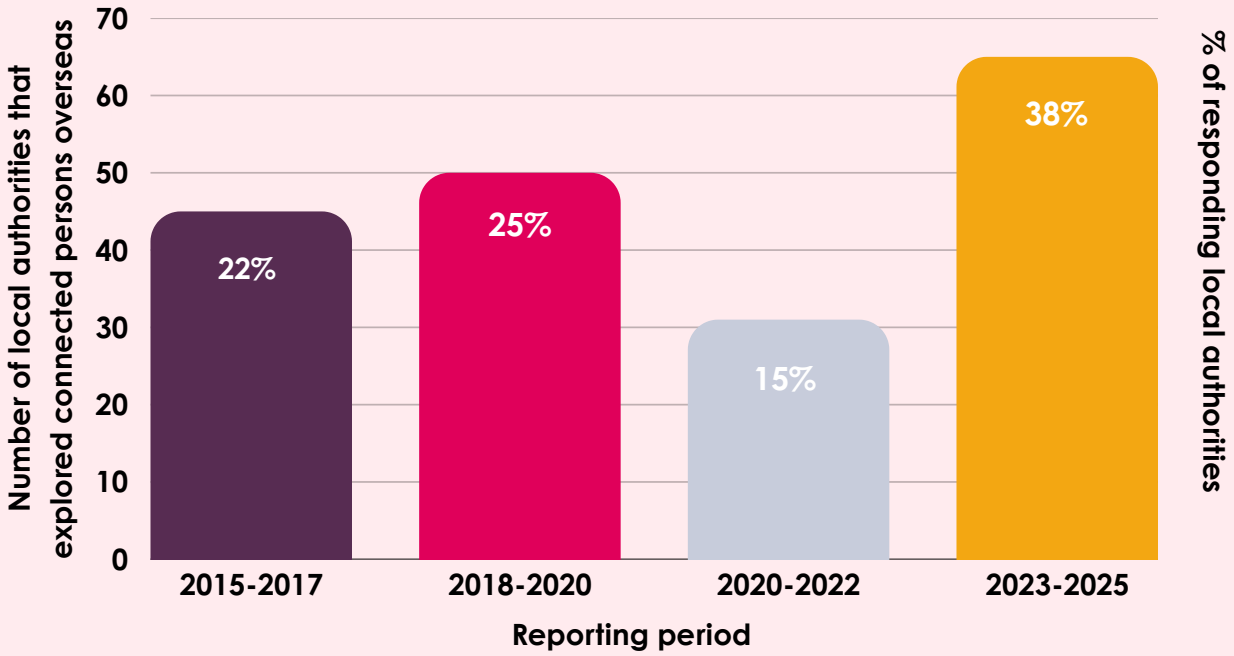
[11] Department for Education (2026) *Kinship Care Statutory guide for local authorities.* Available at: Department for Education (2026) Kinship Care Statutory guide for local authorities (Accessed: October 2026).

[12] ISS (2023) *Equity in Permanency.*

8.2 Comparison across reporting periods

As shown in **Figure 1**, the number of authorities reporting overseas family exploration was lowest in 2020–2022, potentially reflecting the disruption to international casework during the COVID-19 pandemic.[13] In contrast, 2023–2025 recorded the highest number, with 65 authorities reporting overseas family exploration compared with 45 in 2015–2017.[14] This represents a 44% increase in the number of authorities reporting this activity over the past decade, although differences in reporting and response rates mean this cannot be taken as evidence of an equivalent increase in actual practice.

Figure 1: Number of authorities that explored connected persons overseas and % of responding authorities over each reporting period



8.3 Wider cross-border context

Central Authority statistics provide further evidence of the scale of international child protection cooperation beyond that captured in CFAB's FOI research. Under the Convention of 19 October 1996 on Jurisdiction, Applicable Law, Recognition, Enforcement and Co-operation in Respect of Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children (HCCH 1996), authorities in Contracting States can request cooperation on cross-border child protection matters.[15]

[13] CFAB (2024) *FOI Report* 2020-2022.
[14] CFAB (2019) *FOI Report* 2015-2017.
[15] Central Authority statistics under the HCCH 1996 are not directly comparable with CFAB's FOI findings. ICACU records cases involving international child protection cooperation, rather than the number of children whose overseas family networks have been explored or who have subsequently been placed with relatives or connected persons abroad. Multiple cases may also relate to the same child.

However, around 70% of countries worldwide are outside the Convention, meaning Central Authority statistics do not capture the full extent of cross-border child protection and social care activity. According to published statistics relating to the work of the International Child Abduction and Contact Unit (ICACU) (England's Central Authority), a total of 1,864 HCCH 1996 outgoing requests for cooperation were made in the period 2023-25, although it is worth noting that multiple requests may be made for one placement.[16] This compares with 215 outgoing requests between 2015-2017. The substantial increase partly reflects changes in request handling following the UK's departure from the European Union.

In Wales, CFAB is contracted to deliver the Central Authority services under HCCH 1996.[17] In the period 2023 – 2025, data on requests for cooperation indicates continued cross-border activity under the Convention. While these figures cannot be reproduced in this report, they provide further evidence of cross-border child protection activity that is not fully visible in the local authority FOI data. The Scottish and Northern Irish Central Authority information on requests handled under the HCCH 1996 was not available to CFAB at the time of publication. However, the 1,864 outgoing requests recorded by England's Central Authority, alongside the evidence of activity in Wales, indicate that cross-border cooperation extends beyond the activity captured by the FOI responses.

The extent to which this activity is captured in local authority data varies. Information about overseas relatives may be recorded within individual case notes, assessments or family-network documents without being identifiable through a dedicated reporting category. Practice feedback suggest that, while some Scottish local authority case-management systems, such as Mosaic, may enable searches of addresses, postcodes, family relationships and legal arrangements, establishing whether overseas relatives have actually been explored or assessed may require further examination of individual case records. Practice feedback also highlighted that overseas relatives may be identified through family group decision-making, genograms and wider family-network assessments without this activity being separately recorded as "overseas family exploration". This suggests that some activity may not be captured through routine reporting systems, limiting the extent to which FOI responses reflect overseas family-finding practice.

Consequently, an authority's inability to provide extractable data on overseas family exploration does not necessarily indicate that such work has not taken place. The FOI findings nevertheless confirm that overseas family exploration is reported by authorities across all four UK nations, while highlighting limitations in how consistently this activity can be identified and measured.

[16] Ministry of Justice (2026) *Royal Courts of Justice and Judicial Sitting Days Annual Tables 2025*, Table 7.1. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/civil-justice-statistics-quarterly-january-to-march-2026 (Accessed: October 2026).
[17] CFAB (2024) *CFAB's Partnership with the Welsh Government: 6 Months On*. Available at: https://www.cfab.org.uk/post/cfabs-partnership-with-the-welsh-government-6-months-on (Accessed: October 2026).

8.4 Recommendations



National guidance should promote early identification of children's wider family networks, **including those overseas**, and encourage the consistent use of family-network tools and recording practices. Whilst there are existing kinship tools and practice guides available to support family finding and assessment domestically, authorities need **clearer guidance** on how to identify, assess and plan accordingly for connected persons overseas.



Local authorities should be provided with **access to specialist support to navigate cross-border enquiries and coordinate effective multi-agency assessments.** As recognised in *Re K, T and U [2019] EWFC 59*, no single professional may be able to gather all the necessary information to provide a sufficiently robust and comprehensive assessment. Specialist advice lines, such as **CFAB's free advice line** for social workers, solicitors and local authorities, can provide professionals with accessible, impartial advice on cross-border checks, assessments and permanence planning.

9. Number of children placed with connected persons abroad

CFAB asked: *In the period 2023 – 2025, for each calendar year, how many children were actually placed with connected persons outside of the nation or outside the UK?*

9.1 Summary of findings

Overall, 44 responding authorities across the UK reported an estimated 193 overseas placements across 2023–2025.[18] This represents a 42% increase in reported placements compared with CFAB's first reporting period in 2015–2017, when 36 authorities reported 136 placements.[19] However, these figures are likely to underestimate the full extent of overseas placement activity, as 55 responding authorities could not provide a usable answer to this part of the question, while 70 reported '0'. The reporting of overseas placements across successive research periods indicates that international kinship care is a recurring, albeit relatively uncommon, feature of child protection and permanence planning in the UK.

Based on the data reported by authorities, overseas placements accounted for less than 1% of the LAC population in each year of the reporting periods. This should be understood as a minimum reported figure rather than a reliable estimate of the true prevalence of international kinship placements. Responses were incomplete, recording and retrieval were inconsistent, and not all LAC will require alternative carers to be explored.

This relatively small number of reported placements sits within an increasingly international demographic context. In 2025, 40.2% of babies born in England and Wales had at least one parent born outside the UK.[20] While parental country of birth cannot establish whether an individual child has suitable connected persons overseas, it illustrates the potential reach of children's international family networks. CFAB estimates that more than one third of children in England and Wales may have connections overseas.[21] The contrast between these

[18] Some figures shared by authorities were suppressed for GDPR reasons.
[19] CFAB (2019) *FOI Report 2015-2017.*
[20] ONS (2026) *Births in England and Wales: 2025.* Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2025 (Accessed: October 2026) Office for National Statistics reports that 40.2% of live births in England and Wales in 2025 had either one or both parents born outside the UK.
[21] ONS (2025) *Information on parents' country of birth statistics.* Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2025 (Accessed: October 2026) CFAB's estimate is based on ONS data trends on parents' country of birth across the childhood age range. The estimate is intended to indicate the potential prevalence of connected persons overseas rather than to measure children with connected persons overseas. It is likely to be conservative because parental country of birth does not capture all international family networks, including children born to UK-born parents with grandparents or other relatives living overseas, or children who migrated to the UK during childhood.

demographic patterns and the small number of reported overseas placements reinforces the need for consistent identification and recording of overseas family connections as part of care and permanence planning.

It is important to distinguish between a child's right to have connected persons explored as potential carers and any presumption that the child should ultimately live with relatives overseas. Across all four UK nations, legislation and statutory guidance recognise the importance of considering relatives and connected persons when determining suitable care arrangements for LAC. While the specific duties differ, these frameworks support the identification and consideration of family-based care where appropriate and consistent with the child's welfare and best interests.[22] However, CFAB's previous research found that where a full assessment of overseas family members was undertaken, between 30% and 50% of children were subsequently placed within their family network.[23] This suggests that where appropriate and consistent with the child's welfare and best interests, international family placements can be successful.

9.2 Comparison across reporting periods

Across the last decade, 15-25% of responding authorities reported placing a child from care with connected persons overseas. As illustrated in Section 8.3, wider data from the Central Authorities under the HCCH 1996 provide additional context for cross-border child protection activity. The volume of international requests highlights the need for authorities and professionals to navigate complex international child protection and family arrangements.[24] The combination of FOI and Central Authority data provides complementary evidence that cross-border child protection activity is ongoing, although the datasets measure different aspects of this activity.

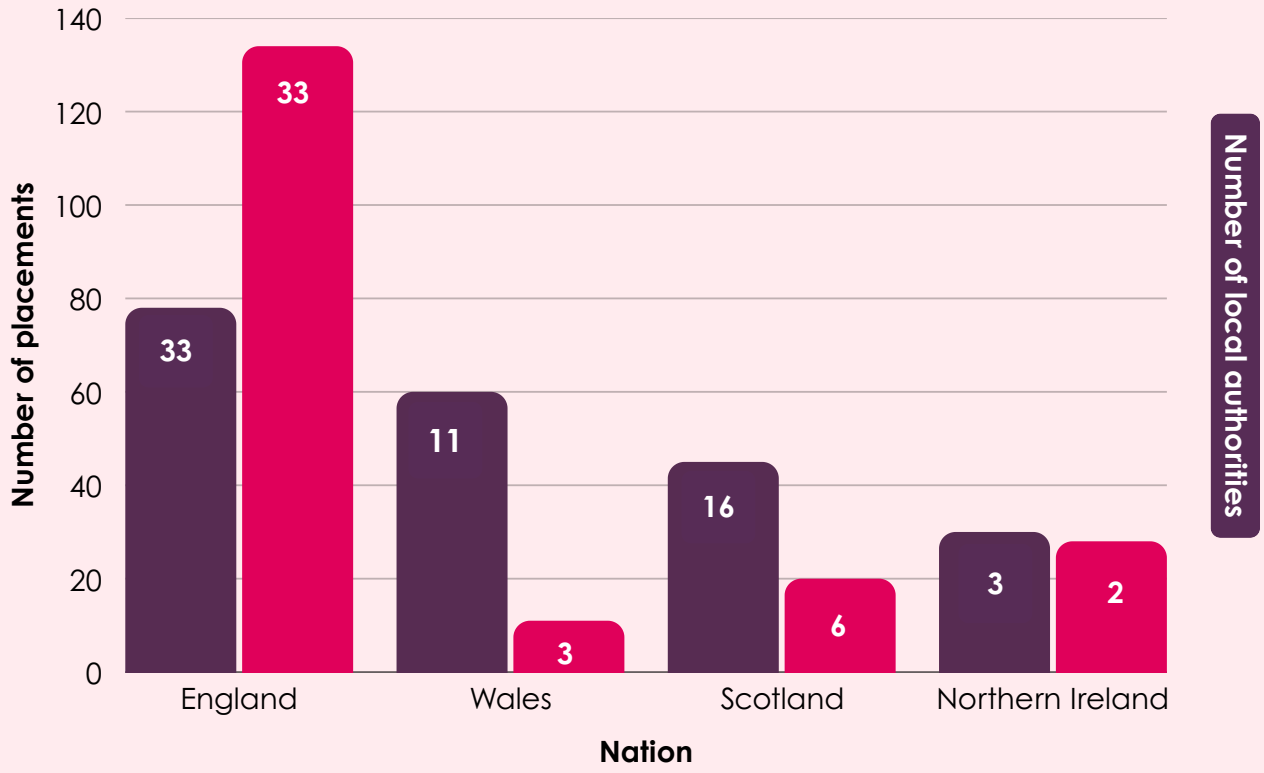
As illustrated in **Figure 2**, more placements were reported with connected persons in another UK nation than overseas. In CFAB's experience, cross-border placements within the UK can present similar challenges to those arising in international placements, particularly where legal jurisdictions, care orders and entitlements to support differ between England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. These findings highlight the need for clear guidance on arranging and supporting placements across UK jurisdictions.

[22] *Children Act 1989*, s.22C(5)–(7), which requires local authorities to give preference to suitable placements with relatives, friends or other connected persons. Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, s.81(5)–(7), which establishes a corresponding placement preference. Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009, Part V (regulations 10–11), and Scottish Government (2011), Guidance on Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, Part II, which states that a child's extended family and friendship network should normally be the first option considered for placement. Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, Article 27(7), which requires authorities to make arrangements for looked-after children to live with relatives, friends or other connected persons unless this would be impracticable or inconsistent with their welfare.

[23] CFAB (2018) *Minimising Placement Breakdown in International Family Placements*. Available at https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2025(Accessed October 2026).

[24] Ministry of Justice (2026) *Royal Courts of Justice and Judiciary Sitting Days Annual Tables 2025.*

Figure 2: Number of placements within the UK but outside the placing authority's nation, and placements outside the UK, including the number of placing authorities by nation (2023–2025)



Responses to CFAB's FOI request also revealed possible uncertainty about the legal framework for cross-border placements. For example, one English local authority stated:

> *"We are not legally able to place Looked After Children outside of our legal jurisdiction i.e. England & Wales."* **– Local Authority (England)**

This response suggests that some authorities may be unclear about the legal routes available for overseas placements. In England, Schedule 2, paragraph 19 of the Children Act 1989 sets out provisions governing arrangements for children in local authority care to live outside England and Wales.[25] Under paragraph 19(1), a local authority must obtain court approval before arranging for a child in its care to live outside England and Wales. Under paragraph 19(2), other LAC, including those accommodated voluntarily under section 20, may be supported to live outside England and Wales with the agreement of every person holding parental responsibility.

[25] *Children Act 1989*, Schedule 2, paragraph 19(1)–(5). Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/schedule/2 (Accessed: October 2026). See also Department for Education (2015) *The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations: Volume 2 – Care planning, placement and case review*, paragraph 3.49.

These provisions demonstrate that overseas placements are not prohibited as a matter of principle. However, the appropriate legal route depends on the child's circumstances and legal status, and authorities must ensure that the proposed arrangements safeguard the child's welfare and provide an appropriate legal and practical framework in the receiving country. Clear guidance and access to specialist cross-border advice are therefore essential to support lawful, informed decision-making.

Placements with connected persons overseas continue to be reported across a broad range of authorities rather than being concentrated solely within large metropolitan areas, as reflected in the authorities' reporting placements across the four reporting periods (Table 1 shows the ten authorities reporting the highest numbers in each period). It is important to note that some authorities that previously reported higher numbers of placements overseas in previous years did not respond to this question in 2026, including Edinburgh City Council in Scotland, Birmingham Children's Trust in England and Monmouthshire in Wales.

An authority's absence from subsequent reporting periods does not necessarily indicate that overseas family exploration or placements are not happening. Authorities reported various reasons for being unable to provide numerical data, including difficulties retrieving informationwithin FOI cost limits, the absence of centrally recorded data and the suppression of small numbers for confidentiality reasons. The authorities reporting overseas placements and family exploration vary considerably across the four reporting periods, although some appear repeatedly. Liverpool, for example, repeatedly reported overseas placements, while Inverclyde and the Northern and Southern Trusts in Northern Ireland repeatedly reported exploring connected persons overseas. This suggests that international kinship care is relevant across a range of authorities, rather than being confined to a fixed group.

Table 1: Highest-reporting authorities for overseas placements, by reporting period

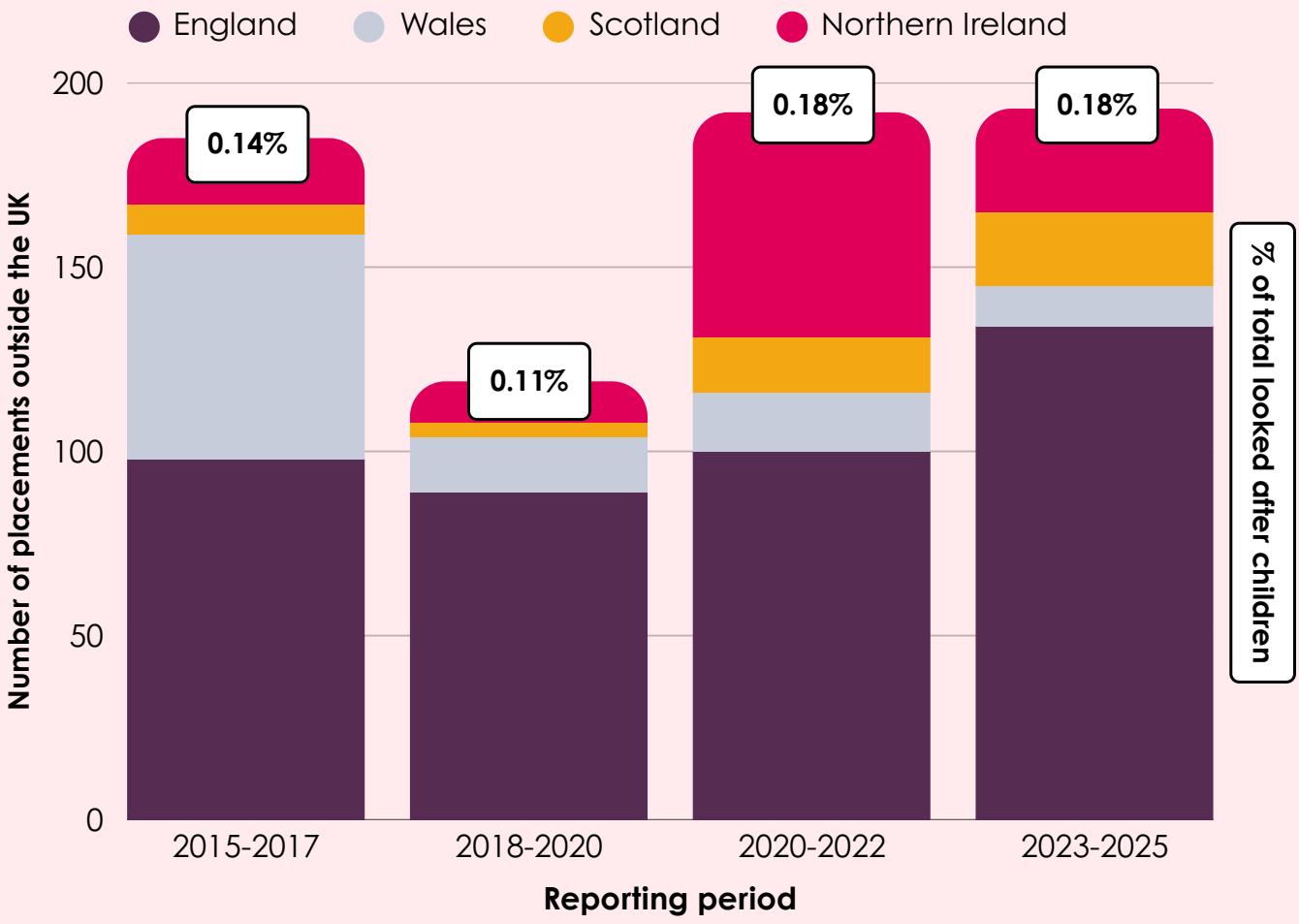
Rank	2015-2017	2018-2020	2020-2023	2023-2025
1	London Borough of Westminster (E)	Halton (E)	Western Health and Social Services Board (NI)	London Borough of Lambeth (E)
2	Southern Trust (NI)	London Borough of Enfield (E)	Southern Health and Social Services Board (NI)	London Borough of Islington (E)
3	London Borough of Hounslow (E)	Belfast Trust (NI)	Cumberland Council (E)	Western Health & Social Care Trust (NI)
4	Staffordshire (E)	Calderdale (E)	Birmingham Children's Trust (E)	Lincolnshire Council (E)
5	Bradford (E)	London Borough of Croydon (E)	Flintshire Council (W)	London Borough of Camden (E)
6	Northern Trust (NI)	Oxfordshire (E)	Highland Council (S)	Liverpool City Council (E)
7	Southampton (E)	Hertfordshire (E)	Liverpool Council (E)	London Borough of Havering (E)
8	Warwickshire (E)	Wolverhampton (E)	Monmouthshire County Council (W)	London Borough of Tower Hamlets (E)
9	Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (E)	Leeds (E)	North Lanarkshire Council (S)	Moray Council (S)
10	Western Trust (NI)	Cambridgeshire (E)	Rutland Council (E)	Orkney Islands Council (S)

(E) = England, (NI) = Northern Ireland, (S) = Scotland, (W) = Wales.

9.3 Wider context

As shown in **Figure 3**, placements with overseas connected persons remain a very small part of care planning across all four UK nations. Across the reporting periods, the UK-wide figure ranges from 0.11% to 0.18% of the average annual LAC population. These are minimum reported figures and calculations based on average LAC populations, rather than complete national counts.

Figure 3: Overseas connected persons placements across the four UK nations: Number of placements, reporting authorities and proportion of LAC (2015–2025)



The rate of placement seems low when set against wider demographic change. ONS data shows that 31.8% of births in England and Wales in 2023 were to a non-UK-born mother.[26] In Scotland, the equivalent figure in 2023 was 20%.[27] If foreign-born fathers are included, the rate

[26] ONS (2025) *Information on parents' country of birth statistics.*

[27] National Records of Scotland (2024), *Vital Events Reference Tables 2023.* Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/schedule/2 (Accessed: October 2026). According to the National Records of Scotland's Vital Events Reference Tables, there were 45,935 live births in Scotland in 2023. Of these, 36,842 births were to mothers born in the UK and 9,093 births were to mothers born outside the UK. This means that 19.8% of babies born in Scotland in 2023 had a foreign-born mother. The total number of live births is also confirmed by National Records of Scotland's 2024 publication.

proportion of children with at least one foreign-born parent would be higher. While having a foreign-born parent does not mean that a child has a suitable relative overseas or that an overseas placement should occur, it highlights the potential for children to have family connections overseas. This, coupled with a history of migration from the Commonwealth or the European Union, suggests that international family connections are a significant consideration for the wider UK population and potentially for children in care.

England accounts for the largest number of overseas placements, reflecting its much larger LAC population. The placement rate as a proportion of the LAC population remained remarkably low (between 0.14% and 0.16%), however it is worth noting that the overall LAC population increased by nearly 20% between 2015 and 2025.[28] In Wales, 11 overseas placements were reported between 2023 and 2025, equivalent to approximately 0.15% of the average annual LAC population.[29] Although reported placement numbers remained relatively low, overseas family placements continued to feature in Welsh local authority practice. Differences in response rates and recording practices limit conclusions about changes across the reporting periods.

In Scotland, there was an increase in the reported number of placements overseas (rising from 0.05% of the LAC population in 2015 to 0.16% in 2025) and in the number of authorities reporting placements (rising from 3 in 2015 to 6 in 2025).[30] These findings sit within a wider Scottish policy context shaped by The Promise (2020) and the strengthening of children's rights through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024. The Promise has informed Scotland's approach to supporting children to remain safely within their birth families, with ongoing support to help families stay together. Where this is not possible, it emphasises the importance of actively exploring kinship care and ensuring children living with relatives receive the support they need to thrive.[31] The overseas placements reported through CFAB's FOI data show that this family-based approach also extends beyond the UK.

Northern Ireland reported the highest number of overseas placements relative to its LAC population in 2023–2025, with 28 placements equivalent to approximately 0.70% of its average

[28] Department for Education (2023, 2024, 2025), *Children looked after in England including adoptions 2022/23, 2023/24 and 2024/25.* Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2025 (Accessed: October 2026).
[29] Welsh Government (2024, 2025, 2026), *Children looked after by local authorities: April 2022 to March 2023; April 2023 to March 2024; and April 2024 to March 2025.* Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2025 (Accessed: October 2026).
[30] Scottish Government (2024,2025, 2026) *Children's Social Work Statistics: Looked After Children 2022/23, 2023/24 and 2024/25.* Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-social-work-statistics-looked-after-children-2023-24 (Accessed: October 2026).
[31] Independent Care Review (2020) *The Promise. Edinburgh: Independent Care Review*, pp. 15, 74. Available at: https://thepromise.scot/resources/2020/the-promise.pdf; Scottish Government (2024) *Keeping The Promise to our Children, Young People and Families: Progress Update 2024,* Part 2, 'Kinship Care'. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/keeping-promise-children-young-people-families-update-progress-2024/pages/2/ (Accessed: 14 October 2026).

annual LAC population.[32] Although Northern Ireland has a substantially smaller LAC population than the other UK nations, overseas placements feature more prominently relative to its size. Its geographical proximity and family connections with the Republic of Ireland may be relevant factors, although the FOI data does not establish the destinations or reasons for these specific placements.

9.4 Recommendations



UK and devolved governments should introduce mandatory national recording and reporting of children placed from local authority care with connected persons overseas in an extractable format. National children's social care datasets which record whether a child is placed outside the UK, the destination country, the relationship to the carer and the legal basis for the placement should be efficiently traceable. This would enable governments to understand the scale and nature of international kinship placements, monitor outcomes and identify where additional guidance or support is required.



Clear guidance is needed on how professionals and competent authorities should work with authorities in countries where the 1996 Hague Child Protection Convention does not provide a framework for cooperation. Placements with connected persons overseas are not limited to Contracting States, yet the route for obtaining safeguarding information, undertaking assessments, establishing the status of UK orders and planning post-placement support may be less straightforward where Hague 1996 mechanisms are unavailable. UK and devolved governments should provide practical, context-dependent guidance on the steps authorities should take in these cases, including when to seek specialist legal advice, how to engage competent authorities overseas, what safeguards should inform decision-making, and how responsibilities for the child will be maintained following placement.

[32] Department of Health (Northern Ireland) (2023, 2024, 2025) *Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2022/23, 2023/24 and 2024/25*. Available at: https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/childrens-social-care-statistics-northern-ireland-202223 (Accessed: October 2026).

10. Types of orders used for placement overseas

CFAB asked: *For each calendar year, between 2023 – 2025, what number and types of court orders were used to place children with connected persons outside of the UK?*

10.1 Summary of findings

The legal orders used to arrange placements with relatives and connected persons overseas determine parental responsibility, carers' legal authority, ongoing support, supervision and contact arrangements. They also affect whether arrangements are recognised and enforceable in the receiving country. Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) were the most frequently reported legal route in England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland reported a wider mix of arrangements, with "no order" and "other order" the most frequently reported categories. These responses do not necessarily mean that children lacked appropriate legal arrangements. However, limited detail and inconsistent recording make it difficult to establish the legal basis for placements, the responsibilities of carers and authorities, and whether arrangements will be recognised overseas.

10.2 Comparison across reporting period

The number of legal orders reported exceeds the number of overseas placements recorded during 2023–2025. As outlined in the methodology, differences in recording and reporting practices limit direct comparisons between these figures.[33] The legal-order data should therefore be interpreted as indicative of the types of arrangements reported, rather than a definitive count of distinct placements.

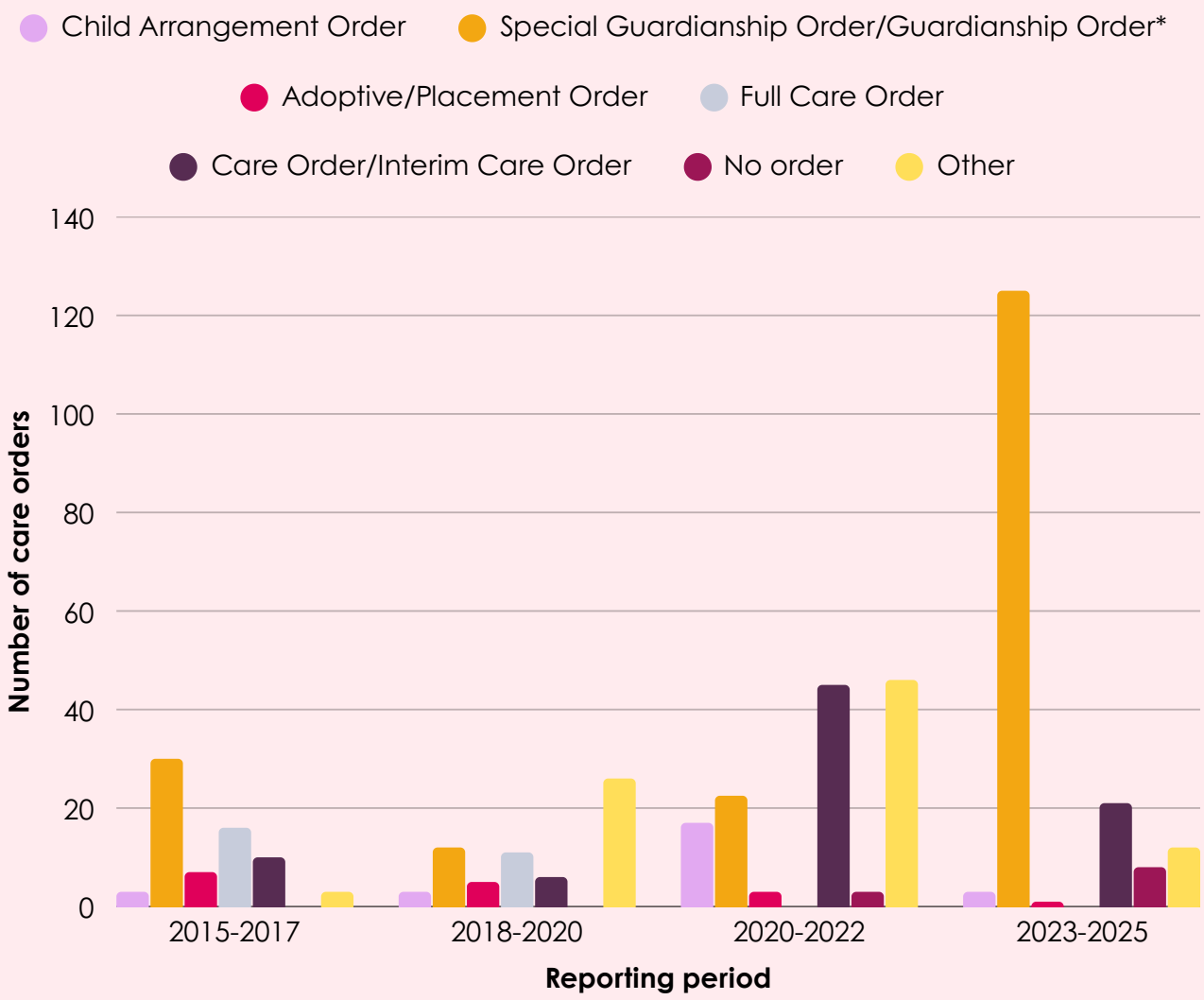
Previous CFAB FOI exercises asked authorities across all four UK nations about the legal orders used for overseas placements. However, the 2026 request was refined to reflect differences in the legal frameworks and orders available within each jurisdiction.

Between 2015 and 2020, Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) were the most commonly reported legal route for placing children from care with connected persons overseas in England and Wales. Although widely used in domestic kinship care arrangements, SGOs do not necessarily have an equivalent in other countries, raising concerns about their recognition and enforceability overseas. Limitations in national recording have been highlighted by the

[33] This discrepancy may reflect differences in recording and reporting practices, including the use of aggregated or estimated figures where small numbers were suppressed for confidentiality reasons. It may also arise where multiple or successive orders were recorded for the same child, orders made before the reporting period remained in force, or the same placement or order was counted across multiple calendar years. As the FOI responses do not consistently link individual orders to specific children or placements, CFAB cannot determine the precise reasons for these discrepancies. The figures should therefore be interpreted as indicative of the types of legal arrangements reported, rather than a definitive count of distinct overseas placements.

CoramBAAF Outbound Permanence Service. In England, the Department for Education's SSDA903 return requires authorities to record a single reason when a child ceases to be looked-after. Although separate categories exist for children moving abroad and those leaving care under a Special Guardianship Order or Child Arrangements Order, these circumstances cannot both be recorded within the same field. Consequently, national statistics based on this field may not fully identify children who leave care to live with relatives overseas under these orders. This highlights a structural recording limitation that cannot be addressed through improved practice guidance alone and reinforces the need for national data collection to capture both the destination and legal basis of overseas family arrangements.

Figure 4: Types of orders used in England and Wales to place children with connected persons overseas 2015-2025



Note: Some figures include estimates where authorities suppressed small numbers in their FOI responses (for example, reporting "fewer than five"). In these cases, indicative midpoint values were used for analysis, resulting in fractional totals. These figures do not represent partial court orders and should be interpreted as estimates rather than exact counts.
*For the reporting period 2023-2025 Special Guardianship Order (SGO) does not include data from Wales. For this reporting period the number of SGOs reported is 4.

By 2023, CFAB's research identified a significant decline in the reported use of SGOs, from the majority of orders in earlier periods to approximately 22.5%.[34] CFAB's 2023 report suggested that this may have been influenced by the Best Practice Guidance: Special Guardianship Orders, which cautioned against making final SGOs before a child's placement with the proposed special guardian had been sufficiently assessed.[35] The report also identified a possible shift towards Care Orders and Interim Care Orders, under which local authorities retain parental responsibility.[36]

The 2026 responses appear to reverse this pattern, with SGOs again the most frequently reported legal route in England and Wales. This does not necessarily indicate a change in practice: differences in recording, case characteristics and the stage at which orders were reported may also explain the variation.

10.3 Wider context

The legal framework governing overseas placements also depends on the child's looked-after status and the nature of the authority's involvement. This distinction is relevant when interpreting placements recorded under the category "no order". Such responses may reflect arrangements made with parental consent rather than an absence of any lawful basis for the child's move. The Children Act 1989, schedule 2 para 19, is relevant: 19(1)A local authority may only arrange for, or assist in arranging for, any child in their care to live outside England and Wales with the approval of the court. (2)A local authority may, with the approval of every person who has parental responsibility for the child arrange for, or assist in arranging for, any other child looked after by them to live outside England and Wales.

Court approval to move a child outside the jurisdiction is also distinct from an order establishing the child's longer-term legal status and the carer's authority.[37] CFAB's FOI data does not identify the legal basis, consents or authorisations relied upon in individual cases. Authorities should therefore record the relevant legal basis as well as the type of court order, where applicable. The continued prominence of SGOs reported in England and Wales is significant because they provide a route to secure, long-term family care while preserving children's legal relationships with their birth parents.

Practice feedback provided to CFAB by CoramBAAF's Outbound service reported that SGOs have remained the principal legal order considered by authorities approaching its service about overseas connected persons placements over the past decade, with no corresponding

[34]CFAB (2024) *FOI Report 2020-2022.*
[35]Public Law Working Group (2020) *Recommendations to Achieve Best Practice in the Child Protection and Family Justice Systems: Special Guardianship Orders.* Family Justice Council, June 2020. Available at: https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PLWG-SGO-Final-Report-1-1.pdf (Accessed: October 2026).
[36]CFAB (2024) *FOI Report 2020-2022.*
[37] *Children Act 1989*, Schedule 2, paragraph 19(1) requires court approval where a local authority arranges for a child in its care to live outside England and Wales. However, paragraph 19(2) permits an authority to arrange for another LAC, including a child accommodated voluntarily under section 20, to live outside England and Wales with the agreement of every person holding parental responsibility. In such circumstances, a separate court approval under paragraph 19(1) is not necessarily required

shift towards or away from their use observed in its practice. Recent research by Cardiff University into Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) in Wales identified substantial variation in their use across local authorities, alongside lower rates of children leaving care through SGOs among some minority ethnic groups and disabled children. The study also found a strong association between existing kinship placements and children subsequently leaving care under an SGO.[38] Although the research does not specifically examine international placements or establish the reasons for these disparities, it raises important questions about equitable access to family-based permanence. For children with connected persons overseas, these findings reinforce the need to identify and assess family networks consistently and consider whether geographical or other barriers affect access to suitable kinship care. CFAB's International Kinship Care Guide (2020) was developed to help local authorities making international placements to consider barriers to permanence and establish clear agreement between authorities about responsibilities before the child moves.[39]

However, an SGO made in England or Wales cannot be assumed to have the same legal effect overseas. CoramBAAF's Outbound Service also highlighted that an SGO may be used as the initial legal arrangement, with overseas relatives subsequently relying on the SGO documentation to obtain an appropriate order in the receiving country. Recognition is critical to carers' legal authority, including decisions about education, healthcare, travel and access to services.

The HCCH 1996 provides an important framework where the receiving country is also a Contracting State. Under Article 23, qualifying measures taken in one Contracting State are recognised by operation of law in other Contracting States, subject to the Convention's grounds for refusing recognition. Article 24 also allows an interested person to seek a decision on recognition or non-recognition. The Hague Special Commission has specifically confirmed the importance of courts clearly describing the protective measure and its Convention jurisdictional basis to facilitate recognition and enforcement. Separately, under Article 33 of the HCCH 1996, certain proposed cross-border placements require prior consultation with, and consent from, the competent authority in the receiving Contracting State.[40] These requirements underline the need to establish the legal basis for a placement, confirm whether recognition or cooperation procedures apply, and agree responsibilities before a child moves overseas.

The continued use of Interim Care Orders across England raises a different set of considerations. Where a child remains looked-after under a Care Order or Interim Care Order after being placed abroad, the local authority retains parental responsibility and continuing

[38] Warner, N., Dorrans, E.M., Bennett, V., Rawlings, A., Onayade, M., Shelton, K.H., Paine, A.L., Evans, G. and Stabler, L. (2026) *Special Guardianship Families in Wales: Characteristics and Care Pathways.* Cardiff: Cardiff University, CASCADE. Funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Available at: https://cascadewales.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/01/Special-Guardianship-Characteristics-and-Care-Pathways.pdf (Accessed: October 2026).
[39] CFAB (2020) *International Kinship Care Guide*. Developed in collaboration with the Cross-Border Child Safeguarding (CBCS) Working Group. Available at: https://www.cfab.org.uk/resources/international-kinship-care-guide (Accessed: October 2026).
[40] HCCH 1996 Article 23, 24 and 33.

obligations towards the child. CFAB's 2023 report noted that these arrangements may allow a family placement to be tested before a final permanence order is made, an approach also relevant to proposals considered in the Law Commission's 2026 kinship care consultation.[41] However, exercising parental responsibility overseas can be challenging. Local authorities must maintain effective oversight of the child's welfare, arrange statutory visits and reviews, cooperate with receiving authorities, respond to safeguarding concerns and plan for placement breakdown.

The FOI questions did not establish how long children remained subject to these orders overseas, whether placements progressed to final permanence orders, or how statutory visits and reviews were undertaken. It is therefore unclear whether these arrangements provided a temporary route towards permanence or resulted in prolonged placements without a settled legal outcome.

In Scotland, the number of order types used for placements overseas is significantly higher than the placements recorded in the previous section. Practice feedback highlighted that legal orders are not always mutually exclusive in Scottish practice, as a child may be subject to a Compulsory Supervision Order (CSO) alongside an order made under section 11 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. This may partly explain why the total number of order categories reported by Scottish authorities exceeds the number of overseas placements. However, the FOI data cannot establish whether children were counted under multiple orders or whether successive orders were recorded during the reporting period.

Practice feedback also raised practical challenges where a child subject to a CSO moves overseas, particularly concerning changes in habitual residence, continuing jurisdiction and arrangements for participation in future Children's Hearings. These issues underline the need to establish how oversight and participation will continue before a child moves abroad. The FOI data does not show how authorities addressed them in individual cases.

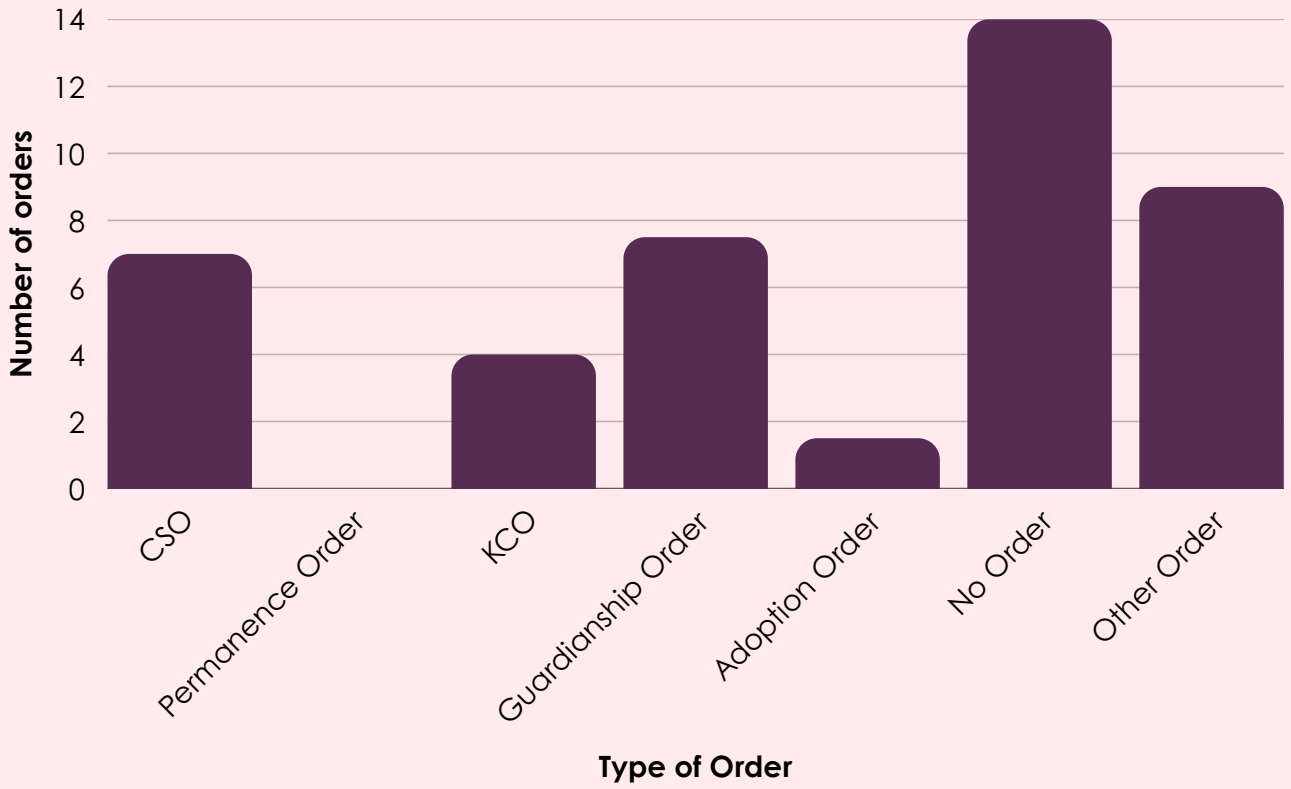
As shown in **Figure 5** authorities in Scotland reported a range of legal arrangements for overseas placements, with "no order" forming the largest category, accounting for an estimated 14 reported cases in this category. However, the FOI responses do not establish the legal circumstances underlying this classification and recording practices and differences in legal terminology may have affected the legal arrangements reported to CFAB.

The category may encompass different arrangements, including children accommodated by local authorities under section 25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, informal family arrangements or cases in which a child's looked-after status changed before or following the move overseas.[42] Section 25 enables local authorities to provide accommodation without a compulsory court or Children's Hearing order. Children accommodated under this provision remain legally looked-after, and the responsible local authority retains its statutory

[41] Law Commission (2026) *Kinship Care: Consultation Paper*. Consultation Paper No. 278. London: Law Commission. Available at: https://lawcom.gov.uk/publication/kinship-care-consultation-paper/ (Accessed: October 2026).
[42] *Children (Scotland) Act 1995*, sections 25.

responsibilities for their care. A response of "no order" therefore does not necessarily mean that the local authority has no continuing responsibility.

Figure 5: Types of Orders Used to Place Children with Families Overseas from Scotland



CSO = Compulsory Supervision Order, KCO = Kinship Care Order

The reporting category must also be distinguished from Scotland's statutory "no order" principle. Under section 11(7)(a) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, a court must not make an order under section 11(1) unless it considers that making the order would be better for the child than making no order.[43] This principle governs judicial decision-making; it does not explain why an authority may have recorded an overseas placement as having "no order".

Differences in terminology and reporting may also affect the classification of legal arrangements. Under section 72 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, a Kinship Care Order (KCO) is not one single freestanding order, but encompasses specified orders made under section 11 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, including qualifying residence and guardianship arrangements.[44] Depending on the circumstances, a child may also be subject to more than one order concurrently or to successive orders during the reporting period. The FOI data does not show whether authorities counted every order, only the order in force when the child moved, or orders made or discharged at other stages.

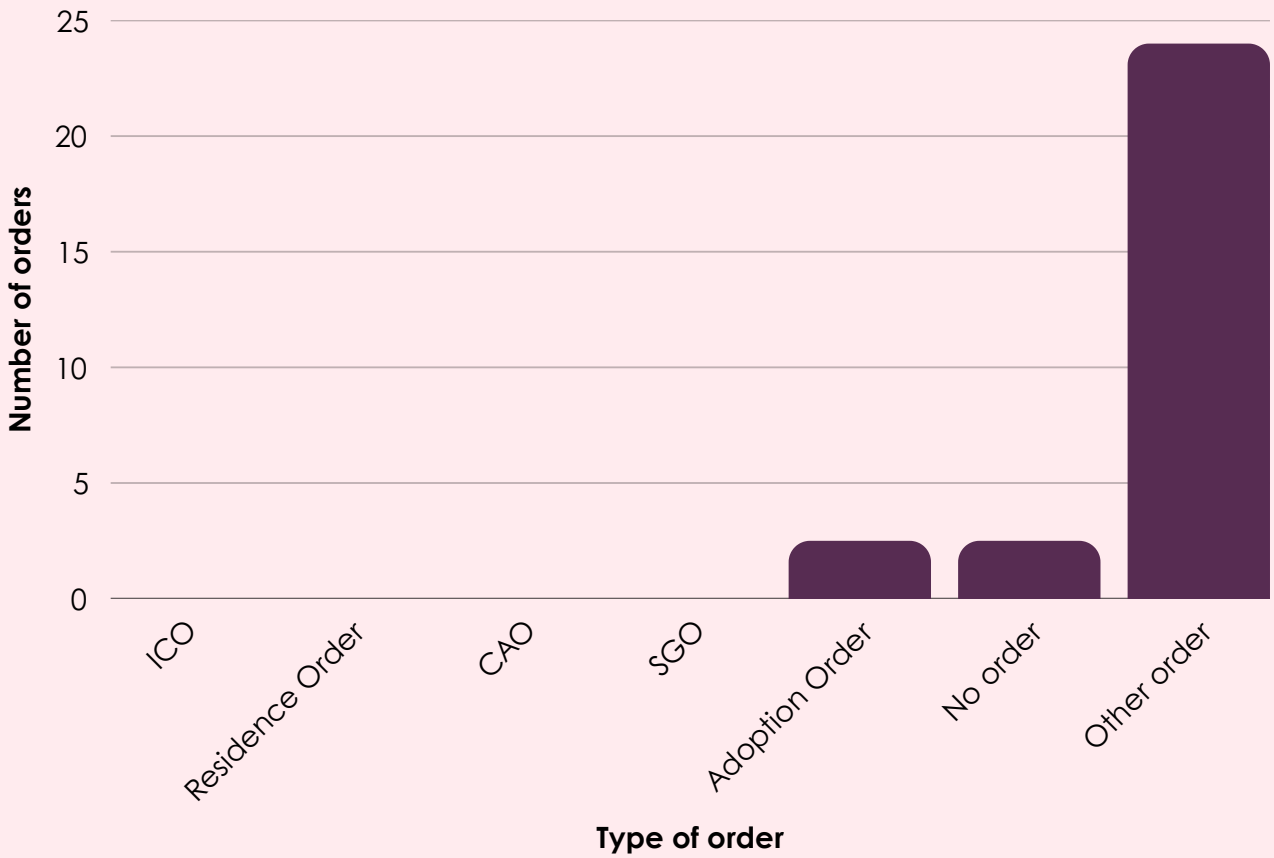
These distinctions have important implications for children and families living overseas. Where a child remains looked-after, including under section 25 or while subject to a Compulsory Supervision Order (CSO), the responsible Scottish local authority retains statutory responsibilities

[43] *Children (Scotland) Act 1995*, sections 11.
[44] *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*, section 72.

relating to the child's care, planning, review and safeguarding.[45] Where a child is living with relatives under a KCO alone and is no longer looked-after, the legal authority of the carer and availability of statutory support are governed by a different framework. Financial or other support may nevertheless continue where the relevant eligibility criteria are met. Authorities must therefore consider the child's legal status, any continuing statutory responsibilities, and whether the arrangements will be recognised and work in practice in the receiving country.

As shown in **Figure 6**, in Northern Ireland, "other Order" accounts for the majority of reported placements. Given Northern Ireland's comparatively high rate of overseas placements, the data suggests that overseas placement is an established feature of practice, but the order data does not provide enough detail to establish the legal mechanisms supporting those placements.

Figure 6: Types of orders used to place children with families overseas from Northern Ireland



ICO = Interim Care Order, CAO = Child Arrangements Order, SGO = Special Guardianship Order

Some "other" responses may represent jurisdiction-specific orders that do not fit the categories set out in the request. Others may refer to private-law arrangements, foreign orders, administrative arrangements, or legal statuses that respondents were unable to classify. Without further detail, CFAB cannot establish who held parental responsibility, whether

[45] *Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009.*

placements were intended to be temporary or permanent, or what responsibilities continued after the child moved abroad.

Nevertheless, the absence of an identifiable legal route is a concern. Without clarity about the basis of the placement, it may be difficult to establish the carer's legal responsibilities, the local authority's continuing responsibilities, eligibility for support, arrangements for contact and review and the procedure to follow if the placement breaks down. A child should not become less visible to the placing authority because their placement crosses an international border.

10.4 Recommendations

Authorities should consistently record and report the legal order or other legal basis under which a child is placed with connected persons overseas. Nationally consistent data would allow governments to monitor the legal routes used and assess whether they provide children and carers with appropriate legal security and support.

The Family Justice Council, working with the Family Division, relevant Central Authorities and specialist international organisations, should review whether the legal arrangements used for overseas kinship placements provide children and carers with effective and secure protection in the receiving country. The review should examine how Special Guardianship Orders, Care Orders and Interim Care Orders operate across borders, including their recognition and enforceability, the exercise of parental responsibility, and arrangements for cross-border cooperation, monitoring and review. It should also establish how often carers need to obtain a new or equivalent order overseas, whether this creates additional legal or financial burdens, and how children's legal security is maintained during any transition between orders. Particular consideration should be given to placements between Contracting States to the 1996 Hague Child Protection Convention, where established Central Authority mechanisms provide an opportunity to examine how recognition and cooperation operate in practice, and to the challenges where no equivalent international framework applies.

Any new legal order developed for kinship care should be designed with international placements in mind from the outset. The Law Commission has recognised that the legal recognition difficulties experienced with SGOs could also arise in relation to its proposed Kinship Care Order and has specifically sought views on how a KCO should operate where carers live overseas. Any reform should therefore consider the order's recognition and practical effect in other jurisdictions, including how parental responsibility will be exercised and how the order will interact with the 1996 Hague Convention, rather than addressing international recognition only after a new order has been introduced.

11. Financial support for overseas placements

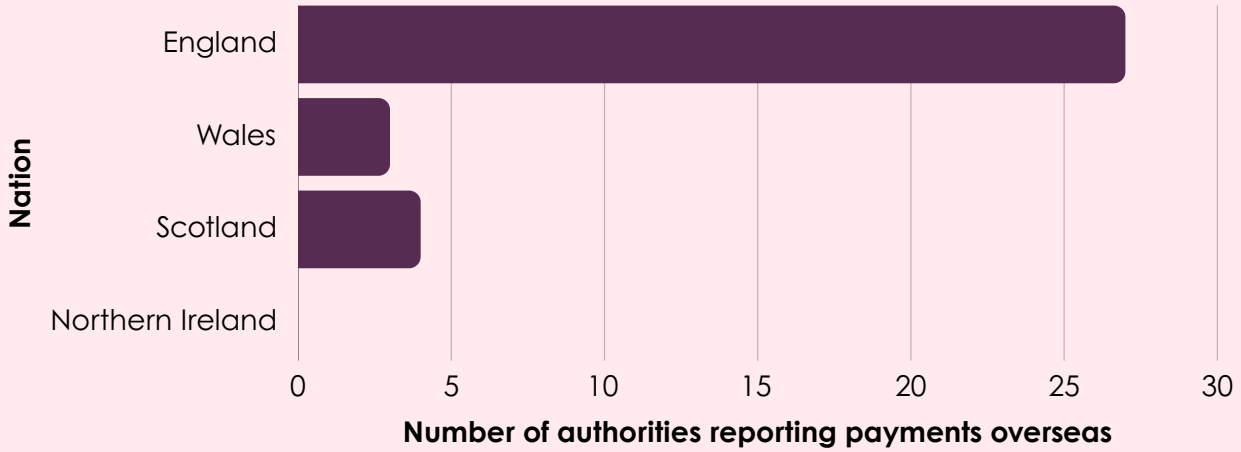
CFAB asked: *Has your local authority made any financial support payments to kinship carers living overseas in the past three calendar years (2023, 2024, 2025)? This is regardless of order type and could include: section 17 payments, kinship allowance, SG support, discretionary welfare payments etc. Please list countries of residence of the formerly LAC.*

11.1 Summary of findings

Between 2023 and 2025, 34 authorities, representing 20% of responding authorities, reported making financial support payments to kinship carers living overseas. These included 27 authorities in England, three in Wales and four in Scotland. No Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trust reported making such payments, despite reporting overseas placements. Authorities reported different forms of assistance, including special guardianship allowances, kinship allowances, Section 17 support and discretionary payments.

As shown in **Figure 7,** authorities reported different forms of assistance, including special guardianship allowances, kinship allowances, Section 17 support and discretionary payments

Figure 7: Authorities reporting financial payments overseas by nation 2023-2025



The findings show that some authorities continue to provide financial support across international borders through a range of mechanisms. However, the FOI responses do not establish how many children received payments, the amounts or duration of support, or whether it met families' needs. With only one in five responding authorities reporting payments, questions remain about the consistency of support available to overseas kinship carers, particularly where international placements bring additional costs.

11.2 Comparison across reporting periods

Between 2020 and 2022, 38% of children placed overseas were reported to have received post-placement support, based on responses from 31 authorities. The research also identified considerable use of Care Orders and Interim Care Orders for overseas placements, under which local authorities retain parental responsibility and continuing statutory duties. It is possible that some of the reported post-placement support related to children subject to these orders. However, the data does not establish a direct relationship between the legal orders recorded and the children receiving support, particularly as some support may have been provided to children placed overseas before the reporting period.

Taken together, the findings highlight the need for more consistent information about support following overseas placements, particularly where authorities retain responsibility for children who remain looked-after. Without this, it is difficult to assess whether support is adequate, consistent and sustained.

11.3 Wider context

In England and Wales, in 2023 – 2025, 84.6% of the reported orders were Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs). Section 14F of the Children Act 1989 requires authorities to make arrangements for special guardianship support services, including financial support. The Special Guardianship Regulations 2005[46] in England and the Special Guardianship (Wales) Regulations 2005[47] set out the circumstances in which financial support may be provided, including where it is necessary to enable a special guardian to care for the child or to support the continuation of the arrangement and recognise that financial considerations may be relevant to whether an arrangement can be established or sustained. Neither set of regulations expressly excludes families living overseas from support.

In Scotland, responsibility for financial support differs according to the child's legal status. Where a child remains looked-after, including while subject to a Compulsory Supervision Order (CSO), eligible kinship carers fall within the Scottish Recommended Allowance (SRA) framework and the child remains subject to the local authority's looked-after responsibilities and there is no explicit limitation to carers residing in the local authority.[48] By contrast, once a Kinship Care Order (KCO) is made, the child is no longer looked-after, although eligible KCO carers may continue to receive kinship care assistance, including the SRA, where the child was previously looked-after or was at risk of becoming looked-after.[49] For these non-looked-after arrangements, however, the statutory framework is residence-based i.e. kinship care assistance must be made available to eligible persons residing within the local authority's area, and the

[46] *Special Guardianship Regulations 2005*, s 2005/1109.
[47] *Special Guardianship (Wales) Regulations 2005*, s 2005/1513 (W.117).
[48] *Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009*, reg 33; Scottish Government (2025) *Foster & Kinship Carers – Scottish Recommended Allowance: implementation review*. Available at https://www.gov.scot/publications/review-implementation-scottish-recommended-allowance-foster-kinship-carers/ (Accessed October 2026).
[49] *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*, Part 13; Scottish Government, *Kinship Care: Part 13 Updated Guidance 2024*, paras 15–18, 63–65.

2024 guidance directs carers seeking financial assistance to apply to the authority where they reside.[50] The guidance therefore does not clearly establish entitlement to the SRA for KCO carers residing overseas. Adoption Orders similarly bring looked-after status to an end, but adoption allowances are governed by a separate statutory assessment and payment framework rather than the SRA and there is no explicit limitation to carers residing in the local authority.[51] The legislation and guidance are therefore clearer about support where a child remains looked-after than where a KCO or Adoption Order is in place and the carer lives overseas.

In international cases, these distinctions raise additional questions about eligibility, the responsible authority and the practical delivery of financial support where kinship carers reside outside Scotland. Nevertheless, four Scottish authorities reported making financial payments to carers living overseas during 2023–2025. Two of these authorities also reported Kinship Care Orders (KCOs), although the FOI data does not establish whether the payments were made under these orders or related to other legal arrangements. These findings highlight the need for greater clarity on the availability and provision of financial support to kinship carers living abroad. The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 introduces reforms to strengthen kinship care needs assessments and the reporting of kinship care assistance, which may improve the consistency and oversight of support once implemented.[52] However, the new assessment provisions remain linked to persons within a Scottish local authority's area and do not expressly address eligibility for financial support or continuing local authority responsibilities where kinship carers reside overseas, leaving uncertainty about how these arrangements will apply to overseas carers.

In Northern Ireland, no financial payments were reported to have been made overseas despite placements being reported. The frequent use of "no order" or an unspecified "other" category in Scotland and Northern Ireland further limits what can be concluded about financial support. Without a clear legal basis for each placement, the FOI data cannot consistently establish whether a child remained looked-after, which authority retained responsibility, what support a carer could access or what monitoring arrangements applied. Where authorities were able to disclose the destination, payments were reported to carers across a wide geographical range. Some authorities did not disclose the destination because the small number of children could create a risk of identification. The countries listed below are therefore those identified in the FOI responses, not a complete list of destinations for financially supported placements.

[50] *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*, s 71(1); Scottish Government (2024) *Kinship Care - Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 - part 13: Updated Guidance 2024*, para 67. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/part-13-children-young-people-scotland-act-2014-support-kinship-care-kinship-care-assistance-scotland-order-2016-updated-guidance-2024/ (Accessed October 2026).

[51] *Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007*, s 71; *Adoption Support Services and Allowances (Scotland) Regulations 2009*.

[52] *Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026* (asp 16), sections 1–7, 12, 17–18 and 36; *Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 (Commencement No. 1) Regulations 2026 (SSI 2026/258)*, regulation 2 and Schedule. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2026/16 and https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2026/258/made (Accessed: October 2026).

The 22 overseas countries identified in the FOI responses include both countries where the 1996 Hague Child Protection Convention is in force in relation to the UK and countries where it is not. Of these, 12 are reported to be covered by the Convention and 10 are not.[53] The United States has signed but not ratified the Convention. This distinction is important because the Convention provides a framework for jurisdiction, recognition, enforcement and cooperation in child-protection matters between Contracting States.

Payments to carers in countries where the Convention does not apply in relation to the UK reinforce the need for country-specific legal and practice advice. Authorities need to understand whether additional domestic proceedings are required and how safeguarding and post-placement responsibilities will be fulfilled, rather than assuming that a UK legal arrangement will have the same effect overseas.[54]

Table 2 lists the countries identified as destinations for financial support payments and indicates whether the 1996 Hague Child Protection Convention is in force in relation to the UK. The United States is identified separately because it has signed but not ratified the Convention.

Table 2: Application of the HCCH 1996 in relation to the UK

Algeria N	Croatia Y	Latvia Y	South Africa N
Australia Y	France Y	Lithuania Y	Spain Y
Austria Y	Ghana N	Netherlands Y	Suriname N
Bangaldesh N	Republic of Ireland Y	Nigeria N	USA/America N
Brazil N	Jamaica N	Poland Y	
Bulgaria Y	Kenya N	Portugal Y	

Y = Yes, N = No

[53] *Hague Conference on Private International Law (HCCH) (2025) Convention of 19 October 1996 on Jurisdiction*, Applicable Law, Recognition, Enforcement and Co-operation in Respect of Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children: Status Table (Convention No. 34). Available at: https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/status-table/?cid=70 (Accessed: October 2026).

[54] Importantly, a country's status as a Contracting State does not, in every case, establish that the Convention applies between that country and the UK. Under Article 58(3), an accession may not establish treaty relations where another Contracting State has objected. Authorities must therefore establish whether the Convention applies between the UK and the receiving State, rather than relying solely on the receiving country's ratification or accession status.

11.4 Recommendations



National guidance should clarify responsibility for post-placement support when children are placed overseas, including how this varies according to the legal order used.



Before a child moves, authorities should establish what support is needed, what is available in the receiving country, who will provide and fund it, how any payments will be made internationally, and how support will be reviewed.



A child or kinship carer should not receive less support solely because the placement is overseas, where that support would have been considered necessary for an equivalent domestic placement.

CFAB's **International Kinship Care Guide** and **Support for Overseas Carers Guidance Note** provide guidance on the risks and practical considerations associated with making payments overseas.

12. Conclusion

This research highlights both the increasing recognition of international kinship care in UK children's social care practice and the significant gaps that remain in understanding how children with family connections overseas are identified, considered and supported. Across the four UK nations, 65 responding authorities reported exploring relatives or connected persons overseas between 2023 and 2025, while 44 reported approximately 193 overseas placements. Separately, 34 authorities reported making financial support payments to kinship carers living abroad. Although these findings demonstrate that international kinship care is a recurring feature of practice, inconsistent recording and incomplete data mean that its full scale, and the outcomes experienced by children, remain unclear.

England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland operate under different legislative, family justice and children's social care frameworks, with distinct approaches to kinship care, legal orders and post-placement responsibilities. Nevertheless, this research identifies common challenges across all four nations. These include difficulties identifying and assessing family members overseas, uncertainty about the legal recognition and practical effect of care arrangements across jurisdictions, and inconsistencies in the availability and recording of post-placement support. Some of these challenges also arise when children move between jurisdictions within the UK. Addressing them requires clearer guidance, effective cross-border cooperation and safeguards tailored to the legal and practical circumstances of each placement.

The HCCH 1996 provides an important framework for international cooperation and recognition between Contracting States. However, its application does not eliminate the need for careful legal planning, appropriate assessments or clear agreements about ongoing responsibilities. Where children are placed in countries outside the Convention, these arrangements may be more complex. Whatever the destination or legal order, safeguarding, legal security and appropriate support must remain central to placement decisions and planning.

At its heart, international kinship care is also a question of children's rights to identity, family relationships and cultural belonging. This research contributes to the wider aims of Family for Every Child's Children on the Move campaign, which calls for children to be supported to retain their family connections and cultural identity. Recognising these rights does not create a presumption that overseas placement is always in a child's best interests. Rather, it requires that suitable family connections are identified and meaningfully considered, wherever those family members live, and that any resulting decisions are informed by robust assessments of the child's individual circumstances, wishes, welfare and safety.

CFAB therefore calls on governments, relevant oversight bodies and family justice stakeholders across the UK to strengthen the recording of international kinship arrangements, improve guidance and access to specialist expertise, review the effectiveness of legal orders across borders, and clarify responsibilities for financial and practical support following placement. Future kinship care reforms must also consider their implications for children whose family networks extend beyond the UK.

Ultimately, the measure of progress should not be an increase in overseas placements alone, but whether every child receives fair and thorough consideration of their family connections, whether placements are safe and legally secure, and whether children and carers receive the support they need for lasting stability.

National borders should neither erase a child's family connections nor weaken the protections owed to them.

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