

Outcome of public consultation on Proposed changes to the Special Guardianship Allowance Scheme

Report

July 2015

Brenda Vincent and Jenny Packeer

Introduction

This report provides feedback regarding the outcome of the public consultation that ran between 23 February and 03 April 2015 to the way in which the Special Guardianship Allowance scheme is managed and in the amount that is awarded.

In addition to the electronic questionnaire being available on the AskWarwickshire website and promoted in local press releases, questionnaires were sent directly to existing recipients of special guardianship allowances from Warwickshire County Council; to members of specialist interest groups such as the Grandparents Association and professional bodies like CAFCASS (The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) and advocacy and advice organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Offers were made to visit organisations such as the Guardian Angels support group but none were taken up. Assistance was provided through a dedicated phone line which was available throughout the consultation period. The Co-production team provided a dedicated officer to provide advisory support pre & post consultation that helped in putting the questionnaire together and considering the responses provided.

Following the questionnaires being received and the findings being collated, the majority of respondents were found to be in favour of the proposed changes. The proposals were submitted to the Warwickshire County Council Cabinet meeting held on 11 June 2015. WCC Cabinet agreed the proposed changes in full and these will be implemented from 07 September 2015.

Below you will find a summary of the consultation findings with a selection of views expressed by respondents.

This is followed by a section detailing what we will do as a result of the consultation and Cabinet's agreement with the proposals.

This report also provides a breakdown of the equality monitoring information provided by respondents.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank those of you whom responded to the consultation and shared your views.

Summary of consultation findings

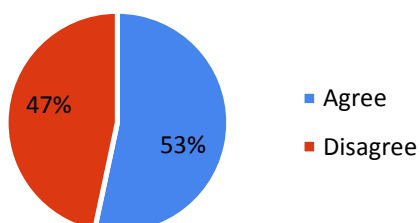
Proposal 1. We propose to introduce a new assessment process to determine whether to award a Special Guardianship allowance. We feel this is a more equitable and transparent approach to awarding Special Guardianship Allowance. This new assessment process will consist of:

(1a. A Pre- Order discussion will be held with the proposed Special Guardianship holder at an early stage to clarify whether financial support is *necessary to ensure that the prospective special guardian can look after the child*. The prospective special guardian will need to explain why their circumstances are such that they will require financial support in order to care for the child.

Do you agree or disagree with proposal (1a)?

Agree	24
Disagree	21
Grand Total	45

1a. A Pre- Order discussion will be held with the proposed Special Guardianship holder at an early stage to clarify whether financial support is necessary to ensure that the prospective special...



Comments of those in agreement included:

You should not have to clarify you need a payment. When you take on a child the payment should be automatic.

Comments of those not in agreement included:

I think financial support should be discussed at an early stage, as some guardians may have to give up employment to look after a child or make changes to their home to accommodate another child or children. I think when opening your home to children, most people like myself will think with their heart first and head second, and without financial support would not be able to give a child the life they deserve.

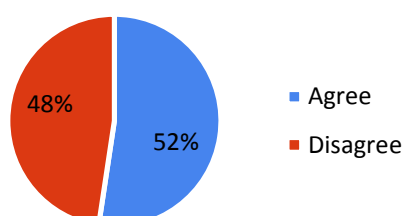
(1b). Financial Assessment calculation will be undertaken **by** the Warwickshire County Council Benefits, Assessment and Income Control Team.

Following the social worker discussion, should a financial assessment be required, we are proposing to move the responsibility for the financial assessment and annual review of special guardianship allowances to the Warwickshire County Council Benefits, Assessment and Income Control Team (BAIC) who are also welfare rights experts. A revised financial assessment form would be produced, to provide greater clarity around the eligibility criteria and the information required in order that the financial assessment can be completed. This will be based on the Department of Education guidance.

Do you agree or disagree with proposal (1b)?

Agree	22
Disagree	20
Grand Total	42

1b. Financial Assessment calculation will be undertaken by the Warwickshire County Council Benefits, Assessment and Income Control Team.



Comments of those in agreement included:

It is good that the financial dealings should be under 1 managerial team. The results and reasons for the calculations should be of a better clarity for the recipient to understand and the working explained in Good working English. Also a copy of the guidelines shared at the interview or copy enclosed with the financial assessment so that the recipient can understand how the assessment was made. The current way is often inexplicable in its calculations.

Comments of those not in agreement included:

We don't feel that S.G.A. should be means tested - not for older people (like grandparents) who offer to give up every-Thing to care and take on all Parental Responsibility but it should not be costing them to do so!!

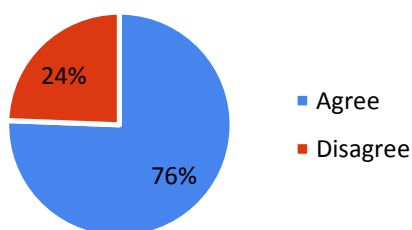
Proposal 2

(2a) Increase the amount of Special Guardianship allowance payable by 10%

Do you agree or disagree with proposal (2a)?

Agree	31
Disagree	10
Grand Total	41

2a) increase the amount of Special Guardianship allowance payable by 10%



Comments of those in agreement included:

In our case, being of pensionable age, and bringing up two grandchildren, any increase is welcome to meet the increasing costs of supporting children, as well as having been made redundant in mid-2014 my income has reduced significantly.

Comments of those not in agreement included:

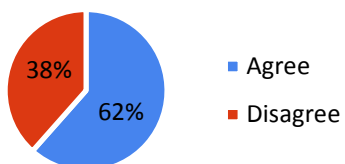
To increase the S.G.O by 10% will only put stress on the government to take from somewhere else. A S.G.A. is enough at present.

(2b) To remove the non means tested additional needs based allowance which could be phased out over a 2 year period.

Do you agree or disagree with Proposal (2b)?

Agree	24
Disagree	15
Grand Total	39

2b) remove the non means tested additional needs based allowance which could be phased out over a 2 year period.



Comments of those in agreement included:

We agree to remove the no means test, phased out so it will be better for everyone and fairer to everyone.

Comments of those not in agreement included:

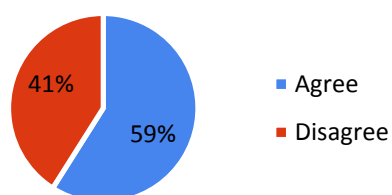
Guardians should not be means tested. It's all about the child.

(2c) To replace the additional needs based allowance with an 'exceptional circumstances' payment that Special Guardianship Carers may request which will be assessed.

Do you agree or disagree with Proposal (2c)?

Agree	23
Disagree	16
Grand Total	39

2c) replace the additional needs based allowance with an 'exceptional circumstances' payment



Comments of those in agreement included:

Think it would be good because I feel at times they would be exceptional circumstances - loss of earnings etc.

Comments of those not in agreement included:

Special guardianship carers should be recognised for the things that they do not penalised by having their allowance taken away and then having to ask for exceptional payment its difficult enough stretching the already in force payment without having to beg which a lot of people won't do, therefore who will be affected?

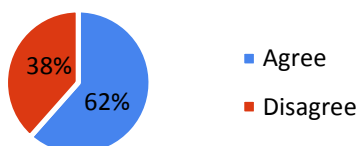
Proposal 3

We propose that the eligibility threshold will be that the first 20% of income is discounted as recommended by the Department of Education and that the income support level + 25% rate is applied as used in Adult Social Care assessments. This is to provide a more equitable and fair process for everyone.

Do you agree or disagree with Proposal 3?

Agree	24
Disagree	15
Grand Total	39

3) We propose that the eligibility threshold will be that the first 20% of income is discounted as recommended by the...



Comments of those in agreement included:

This needs to be fair right across the board and we think anything that helps all the children and carers, is a good thing.

Comments of those not in agreement included:

I strongly feel that whatever income the carer has coming in before taking on the children should not be interfered with and that a set allowance paid for each child placed to include childcare if the carer works.

HAVE YOUR SAY ON THE PROPOSALS

Respondents were also asked if they had any other ideas or suggestions they would like to share. The range of responses to the proposed changes and additional ideas and suggestions were varied. They demonstrated the concerns and commitment many of these Special Guardianship Order carers have for the children they care for including the need for additional non-financial support:

- When you have given up your whole way of life to take on the Parental Role to keep your grandchild in the Family we don't feel we should be penalised. At our ages we are obviously more financially secure than someone younger - so to means test is wrong!! Plus it costs us more now for many things i.e. holidays - we could go whenever we want if on our own - but now can only go in school holidays which cost more! It costs a lot of money to provide for a child but when you have taken on that role AGAIN takes some of the stress away if money is no problem. Love and security cost nothing BUT unfortunately every-thing else does!!
- Myself and my husband are glad of this opportunity to have a little input as this procedure has not been explained at all in anyway and as things are so intense through the whole procedure of S.G.O all this seemed above our heads, and still does. Thank you.
- We are aware that all our comments disagree with all proposals, for the reason stated. We very much value the support offered to us and our three grandchildren and consider the love and support given by ourselves and WCC will enable the children to have a much better life than they would have had.
- Personally I think it should be one flat rate per child and age appropriate regardless of income.
- Foster carers and special guardians to be paid the same, as they do the same job. Sometimes it is more difficult for special guardians, as it is family based and brings with it extra issues with the child's parents and contact. Parents of children in foster care/special guardianship, should be made to contribute financially to their children's upbringing, if the parents are working.
- Proposals seem to take everything into account.
- Although not financial, I believe that more should be done for SGO holders and the child. More meetings so that they can "off load" with others MORE training to help their child with its difficulties. To be treated just like a foster carer as the child feels it is in foster care albeit with a family member, but NOT mum and dad. Just like its foster care counterparts. The child needs all the counselling and ancillary support it doesn't get as an SG but the feelings are the same, anger, frightened, bewilderment etc.
- We hope that these proposed changes are beneficial to the children so that they can lead a normal life (that is our aim).

You Said, We did.

This section shows the outcome of the consultation and the changes that will be implemented as a result of responses to proposals.

Proposal 1a 53% of respondents were in agreement that **A Pre- Order discussion will be held with the proposed Special Guardianship holder at an early stage to clarify whether financial support is necessary to ensure that the prospective special guardian can look after the child.**

Outcome

Therefore from 7th September 2015 we will ensure that **A Pre- Order discussion will be held** with the proposed Special Guardianship holder at an early stage to clarify whether financial support is *necessary to ensure that the prospective special guardian can look after the child*. The prospective special guardian will need to explain why their circumstances are such that they will require financial support in order to care for the child.

Proposal 1b 52% of respondents were in agreement that the **Financial Assessment calculation will be undertaken by the Warwickshire County Council Benefits, Assessment and Income Control Team.**

Outcome

Therefore from 7th September 2015 we will transfer the **Financial Assessment calculation** which will now be undertaken **by** the Warwickshire County Council Benefits, Assessment and Income Control Team.

Proposal 2a 76% of respondents were in agreement of an **increase the amount of Special Guardianship allowance payable by 10%.**

Outcome

Therefore from 7th September 2015 we will **increase the** Special Guardianship allowance rate by 10%.

Proposal 2b 62% of respondents were in agreement that we **remove the non means tested additional needs based allowance which could be phased out over a 2 year period.**

Outcome

Therefore from 7th September 2015 we will **remove the non means tested additional needs based allowance** by phasing this out over a 2 year period. Commencing with a 25% reduction in September 2015, a further 25% in March 2016 and again in September 2016 with non means tested benefits no longer being paid from March 2017.

Proposal 2c 59% of respondents were in agreement to **replace the additional needs based allowance with an ‘exceptional circumstances’ payment**

Outcome:

Therefore from 7th September 2015 we will **introduce an ‘exceptional circumstances’** payment. The Special Guardianship Carer will need to make representation of what those ‘exceptional circumstances’ are to the Operation Manager of the Children Team for any assessment and decision to be made regarding an exceptional payment being agreed.

Proposal 3 62% of respondents were in agreement **that the eligibility threshold will be that the first 20% of income is discounted as recommended by the Department of Education and that the income support level + 25% rate is applied as used in Adult Social Care assessments**

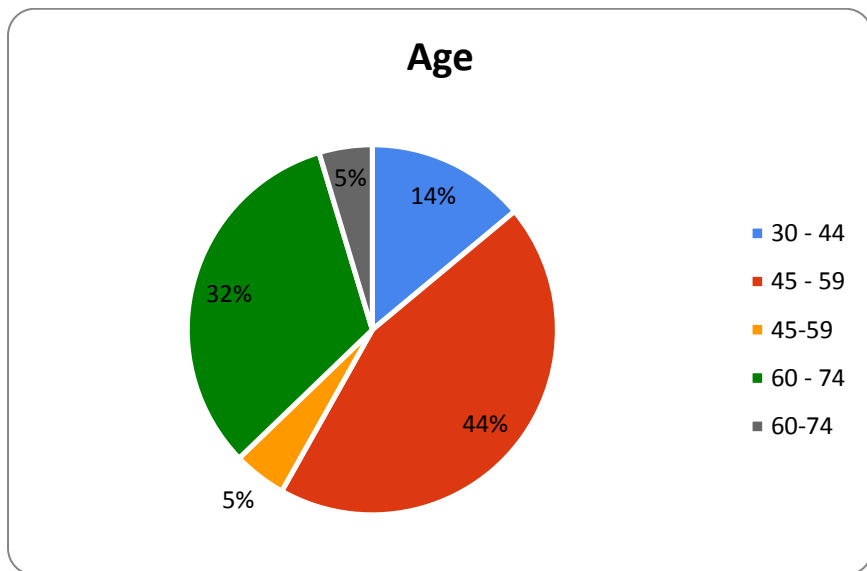
Outcome:

Therefore from 7th September 2015 we will **establish a standardised means tested assessment** with an eligibility threshold that will be the first 20% of income is discounted as recommended by the Department of Education and that the income support level + 25% rate is applied. This will provide a more equitable and fair process for everyone.

- The outcome of the responses we have received to **have your say on the proposals** is : We will **continue to work in partnership with current service providers to develop the range of support services** Special Guardianship Carers require to ensure we offer appropriate and timely post-order support to children and their carers’.

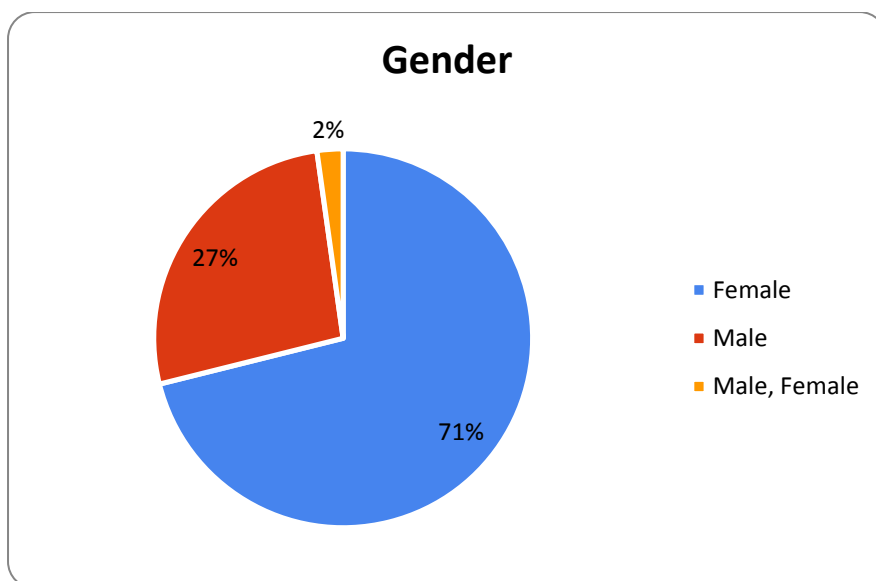
Equality monitoring information

1. Age group



30 - 44	6
45 - 59	19
45-59	2
60 - 74	14
60-74	2
75 +	2
Grand Total	45

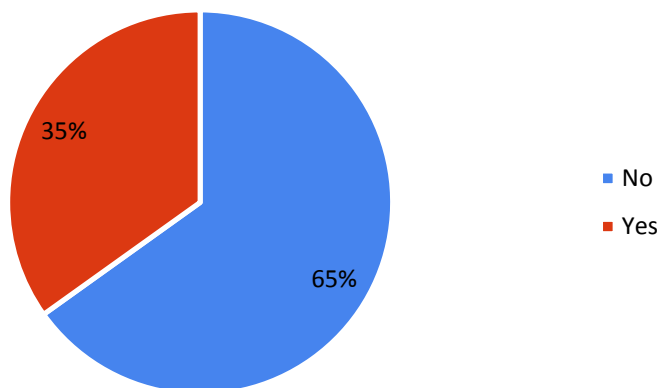
2. Gender



Female	32
Male	12
Male, Female	1
Grand Total	45

3. Long term Illness or Disability

Do you have a long standing illness or disability?

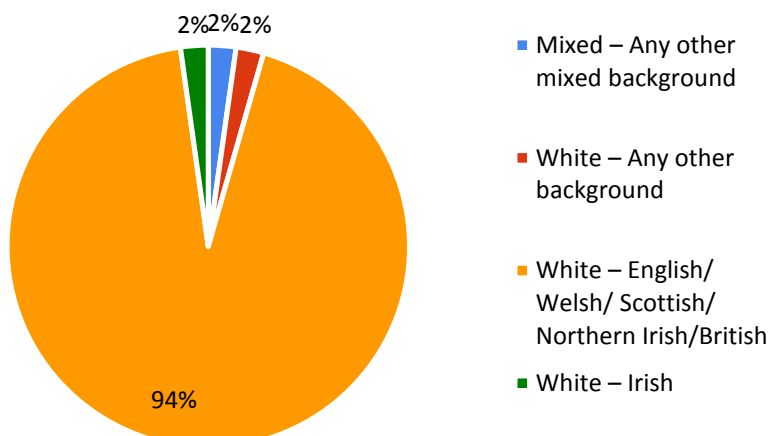


No	28
Yes	15
Grand Total	43

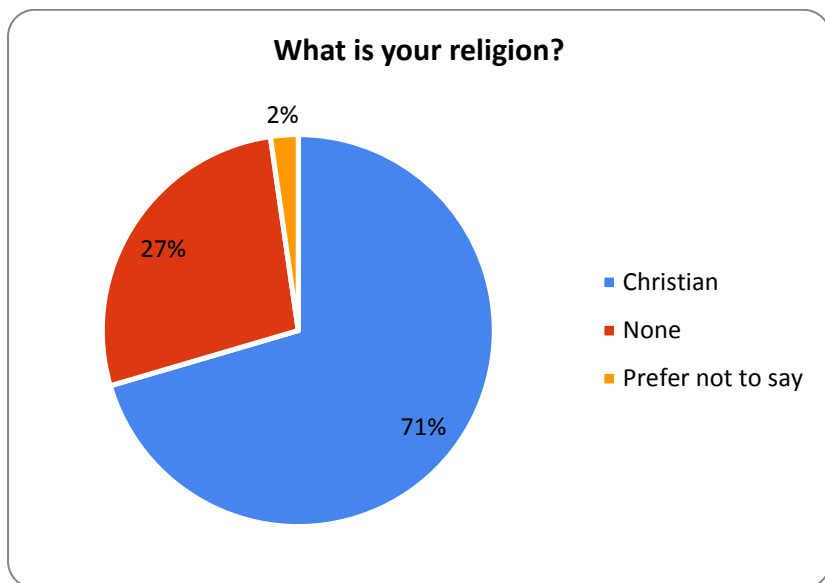
4. Ethnic origin

Mixed – Any other mixed background	1
White – Any other background	1
White – English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/British	42
White – Irish	1
Grand Total	45

How would you describe your ethnic origin?

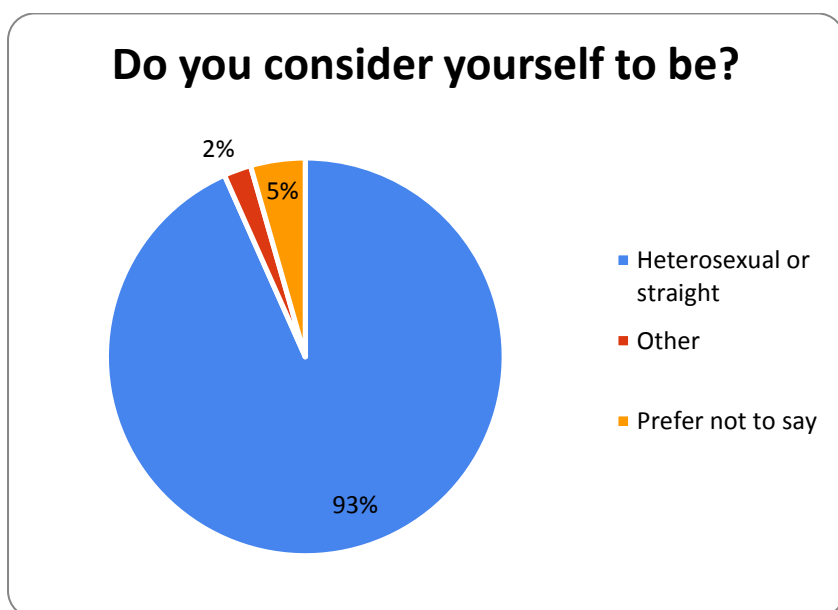


5. Religion



Christian	31
None	12
Prefer not to say	1
Grand Total	44

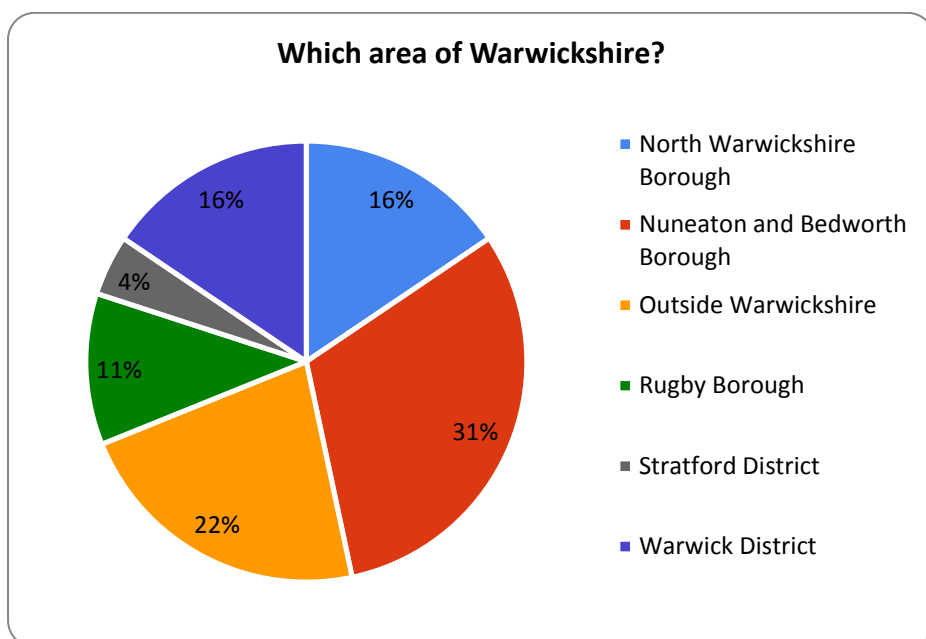
6. Sexuality



Heterosexual or straight	42
Other	1
Prefer not to say	2
Grand Total	45

7. Area of Warwickshire

North Warwickshire Borough	7
Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough	14
Outside Warwickshire	10
Rugby Borough	5
Stratford District	2
Warwick District	7
Grand Total	45



Thank you for having taken the time to read this report and as noted at the beginning of this report, we would again like to take this opportunity to thank those of you whom responded to the consultation and shared your views, as these are not only valued but have also enabled us to further appreciate some of the wider support issues for Special Guardianship Carers.