



**The KCV Longitudinal Study of Kinship Carers
2015**

About the KCV Longitudinal study

In 2011 KCV established a longitudinal study into the lives of 113 kinship carer families. The carers agreed to be interviewed every twelve months and to share in their lives and the lives of the children/young people for whom they care.

The outcomes of the study inform the work program of KCV and are used to inform a range of decision makers who have the authority to make decisions that affect the lives of kinship carer families.

This is the fifth in a series of reports.

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1 Summary of the 2015 findings

1.1 About the kinship carer families

Generally, the kinship families are reporting that things are going well.

The shape of the kinship care families is stabilising, as only a few changes (such as children/young people entering or leaving the kinship care arrangements) have occurred in the past 12 months. Carers are still reporting high level of financial pressure, particularly when it comes to finding funding for medical assistance and counselling services.

In 2011 the study started with 113 kinship care families. In 2015, 53 of the original 113 kinship carer families are still caring for children and young people:

- Half of these carers are regularly attending kinship care support groups and report high levels of satisfaction with the support they receive at them – both from facilitators and other carers.
- 32 of these carers have permanent care of the children/young people, 18 are managed by DHHS or a community service organisation, and 3 are informal carers. Many of those who have permanent care are surprised that they had access to less or no support as a permanent carer, increasing their financial pressures
- 32 of these families have had an assessment by DHHS, while 21 have not. The DHHS assessments that went well and ensure ongoing support for kinship carers are few in number. Most carers who had an assessment report that there was no follow through with resources.
- 36 of these families have had a family conference, and 17 have not. The few family conferences that went well were well planned and involved a wide range of people other than just family members.
- 45 of these families have attended court. Most carers were dismayed by the court processes they had to endure and some have spent huge amounts of money to secure the court decision they were seeking.
- 22 of these families have access visits with one or both of the children's parents. a few of these visits go very well, some go well and others, although there are orders in place, never happen.

1.2 About the children and young people

Since 2011, 190 children/young people have been part of this study.

In 2015, 89 children/young people remain in kinship care arrangements. Generally, the carers are reporting that the children in their care are as healthy and happy as can be expected. There have been reports of physical and mental illnesses among the children/young people, but most carers report that the children/young people are receiving the support they need from medical professionals. A common complaint among some carers this year was that they have been put under pressure by the usual problems associated with children/young people reaching puberty and transitioning into teenagers. The children/ young people no longer in care have moved on as outlined below.

- contact has been lost with 32 of these children/young people
- 24 children/young people have been reconciled with one of their parents – for 13 of these children/young people the reconciliation has been successful, and for 8 the reconciliation was not successful
- 3 children/young people have been placed with alternative kith or kin
- 4 children/young people have been placed in other forms of out-of-home care
- 38 young people have transitioned out of kinship care by turning 18

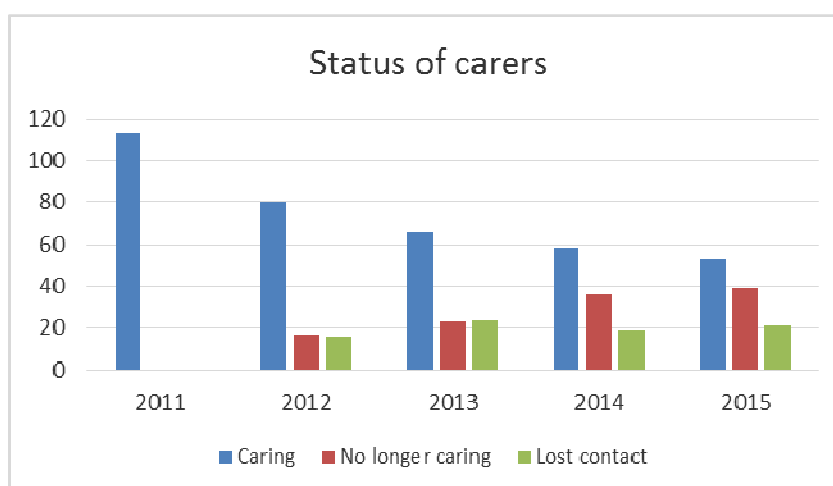
2 The overall changing shape of the kinship care families

For the first time since this study began in 2011, the number of existing kinship care arrangements is less than half of the original sample. This reduction can be accounted for in several ways:

- The number of children/young people who have turned 18 and officially left the kinship care arrangement continues to rise.
- The number of children/young people either being reconciled with a parent or moved to another form of out-of-home care.

It should be noted that the number of carers with whom KCV has lost contact continues to slowly rise. The following charts map the movement of kinship care arrangements in the study over the past five years.

Status of the care arrangements since 2011					
Status	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
The number of carer families with whom contact has been lost	0	16	24	19	21
The number of carer families no longer caring because the children/young people have moved on	0	17	23	36	39
The number of carer families providing kinship care	113	80	66	58	53
Total	113	113	113	113	113



2.1 Lost contacts

By 2015, 21 carer families who started with the KCV Longitudinal Study are listed as 'lost contact':

- 19 of these carers' phone and e-mail addresses have been disconnected
- 2 of the carers' telephones ring out

It is known that at the time of last contact:

- Many of these carer families were raising children/young people with serious health problems – some both emotional and physical.
- Many of the children/young people had been through severe trauma prior to being placed in kinship care.
- Several carers had reported that they were also struggling with their own emotional problems.
- Several carers were also caring for disabled adult children/young people of their own, in addition to their grandchildren.

Housing was an issue for many of these carers, and it is probable that some of them had to move to find accommodation that was both larger and cheaper. It is known that just prior to contact being lost some of these carers were searching in rural areas for such accommodation.

The loss of these contacts means that the exact circumstances of 34 children/young people previously tracked by this study are currently unknown. An analysis of the case notes from previous years tells us that of the 34 children/ young people with whom contact has been lost,

- 13 have turned 18 since the beginning of the study
- 21 are still under 18.

2.2 No longer caring

39 of the original 113 care families in this study are known to have ceased their role as carers because the children/young people have moved on:

- 21 of these carer families have seen all the children/young people in their care turn 18.
- 13 carer families have seen all the children/young people in their care reconciled with one of their parents.
- 2 carer families have seen the children/young people placed with alternative kin, in both cases an uncle.
- 1 carer family saw all the children/young people in their care placed in foster homes.
- 1 carer family had one child turn 18 while the other was placed in boarding school.
- 1 carer family had one child turn 18 while the other was placed in foster care.

2.3 Still caring

In 2015, 53 care arrangements involving 89 children/young people are still in place and being tracked. There are several cases where one or more of the children/young people in a care arrangement have turned 18, but younger children remain with the carer. In the past twelve months there are also several cases where carers have been given new children/young people to raise. In one case DHHS had removed the child 2 years ago, but the child has since been successfully returned to the grandmother.

In many cases, although the young people have turned 18, they are still living in the kinship family home. The financial pressures attached to having these 18 year olds still living in the kinship home are considerable. Whilst some of these young people qualify for Centrelink benefits, not all do. Take, for example, the 18 year olds whose emotional issues are so pronounced that they are unable to cope with further education or work, but not so pronounced and documented that they qualify for disability payments.

Since joining the study in 2011, the circumstances surrounding the personal relationships of some carers have changed.

- 2 carers have remarried, changing their status from single carers to couples.
- 1 carer's husband passed away, making her a single carer.

This means that of the 53 carers remaining in the study, 33 are single arrangements and 20 are couples.

3 Support for kinship care families

3.1 Support groups

The 53 kinship care families who are still actively caring for related children or young people were asked whether they are currently attending any support groups. Over half regularly attend a support group:

- 20 regularly attend 1 support group
- 6 attend 2 or more support groups

Carers who regularly attend support groups appreciated:

- Access to up to date information
- The social benefits of regularly meeting with people in similar circumstances
- Being able to share their experiences with other people who understand and have similar experiences

One former carer still regularly attends a local support group to assist new carers. He said:

"I enjoy being with this group of people so much. They all were such support for me through the years; I want to help support other new carers that come along."

A carer who attends 2 support groups run by 2 different agencies said:

"The support group has been fantastic, wished I went earlier. I realised after attending the KCV/Centrelink Families week luncheon in May & after speaking to other carers at the event that I should go to a support group. KCV helped me find the ones closest to me. The groups I attend have a slightly different culture but they are all fantastic."

Some reasons given for carers not being able to attend support groups included:

- No groups running in their local area
- Groups running at inconvenient times
- Groups not meeting their personal needs – for example, carers finding it difficult to listen to the stories of other carers
- Some groups were thought to be dysfunctional and loosely facilitated

Some carers reported that they did not need to attend support groups because they get adequate support from their own family and friends.

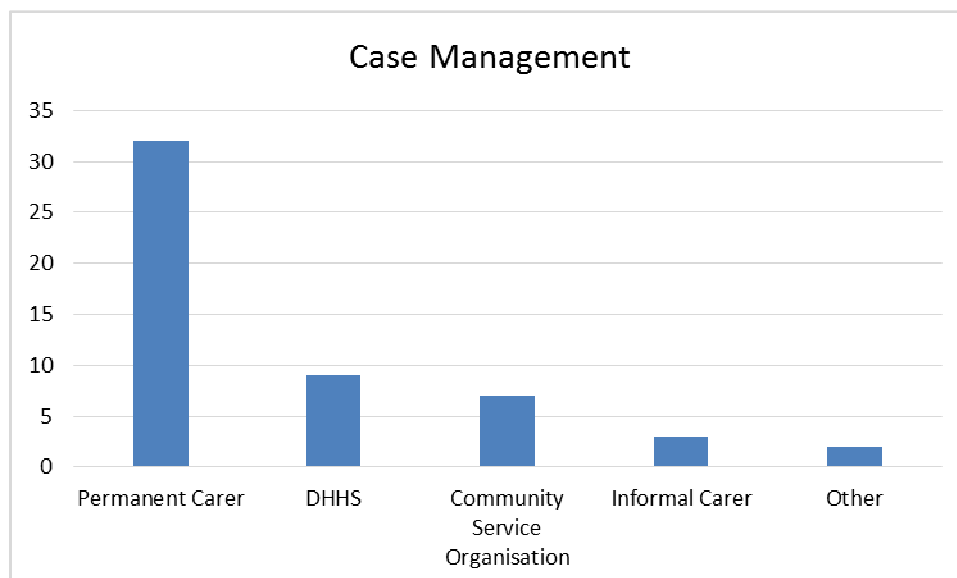
3.2 Case management

The 53 kinship care families still caring for children/young people were asked who was case-managing their placement:

- 32 are permanent carers with no case manager
- 9 are managed by DHHS
- 7 are managed by a community service organisation
- 3 are informal carers with no case manager
- 2 are permanent carers for some children/young people, but have a case manager for others (one with DHHS and one with a community service organisation)

The two cases where carers have permanent care of some children/young people and have a case manager for others are both cases where a new child has been introduced into the kinship care family in the past 12 months. The carers have permanent care of the children/young people previously in their care, but have not yet been given orders for the new child.

The movement to permanent care has been recent for some of the 32 permanent carers. The results of this change needs to be monitored because some carers reported that they did not know the full consequences of becoming a permanent carer.



3.3 DHHS Assessment

The 53 kinship care families were asked whether at any time their needs had been assessed by DHHS (child protection):

- 32 had a DHHS assessment
- 21 did not have a DHHS assessment

Between them, the 32 kinship care families who had an assessment reported some disturbing circumstances surrounding the process and the outcomes of the assessment:

- The vast majority of carers said that they had an assessment but promises made at that assessment were never delivered, one carer reported that the funding required for the child's medical services was never delivered, and that many arguments with DHHS ensued. Another carer reported that the access to respite funding promised at their assessment was stopped after a short period because DHHS said it was too expensive. Many carers who had received an assessment which was not acted upon report that their approaches to DHHS are consistently rebuffed, resulting in them giving up the battle to have their services delivered.
- A few carers reported that their assessment was satisfactory.
- One carer said that their DHHS assessment *"was fantastic, they did everything they could for us, if we needed anything they went out of their way to get it for us."*
- One carer reported that they were assessed by DHHS, and that the hand over to a community service organisation went smoothly and that the support is ongoing.

Amongst these 21 carers who had no assessment:

- Most of the carers who have never had an assessment also report receiving very little support from DHHS.
- One carer family reported that the children/young people were handed to it with assurances that DHHS would contact within a few days - 9 years later they still haven't returned.
- Two carers reported that the children/young people were left with them, and without an assessment having been done, DHHS closed the case within days
- One carer had to go to the Director of the DHHS Division to get a cot for the child, and made a complaint that DHHS didn't put any support in place.

3.4 Family Conferences

The 53 kinship care families were asked whether at any time they had been involved in a family conference:

- 36 have had a family conference
- 17 have not had a family conference

Of those carers who did have a family conference, most report that they were poorly organised and unsatisfactory.

- Many carers reported that they only family members to attend.
- Some carers reported that when other family members did attend the conferences became adversarial and nothing was finalised. No further attempts to follow up were made.
- In two cases out of the 36 it was reported that the family conferences were very successful. They were well-organised, well attended, and included psychiatrists, school teachers, a doctor and both sets of grandparents amongst the attendees.

3.5 Interaction with the justice system

The 53 kinship care families were asked whether they had been to court:

- 45 carer families had attended court at some point, not necessarily early in the placement
- 8 carer families did not attend court at any point.

Those kinship care families who had been to court were asked to describe whether their experience had been *satisfactory* or *unsatisfactory*:

- 27 families described their court experience as satisfactory
- 11 families described their court experience as unsatisfactory
- 7 families indicated that their experience had both satisfactory and unsatisfactory elements

Seven carers described their experience as 'satisfactory' because they eventually got the result they were hoping for despite the unsatisfactory process.

The court experience can be stressful for everybody, including the DHHS workers who have been reported by some carers as behaving combatively, and even screaming at them during court proceedings.

Regardless of whether they found the experience satisfactory or unsatisfactory, many, but not all, carers had complaints about the court process, including:

- A lack of privacy, with key discussions being held in corridors where everyone can hear what is said
- Multiple adjournments requiring multiple court visits. Those carers who work had to continually take time off for court appearances and some had to travel significant distances.
- Carers were concerned about the lack of information they received, and found the process more intimidating because they didn't know what to expect.
- Carers faced high costs associated with court appearances – one carer family spent over \$50,000, while another spent \$138,000, lost the family house, the business and went bankrupt.
- Grandparent carers are not eligible legal aid while the child's parents are eligible
- The child's parents sometimes repeatedly take the matter back to court
- Carers felt intimidated in court and felt that when being questioned they were also being blamed for the situation
- In already trying circumstances (such as the death of a child's parent), going to court can make the experience more difficult.
- One carer described court as the "worst experience" of her life.

The highest levels of satisfaction with the process and the outcome came from carers who engaged their own solicitors.

In a few instances, when the carers report that the experience was satisfactory, they mean that both the process and the outcomes were satisfactory. Most appreciated in regards to a satisfactory court experience was a lack of adjournments and return visits to court.

It must be noted that amongst those carers who attended court, many to this day do not understand or can recall the type of court order which governs their placement.

In a few cases, the carers have not needed to go to court because they are happy with the agreements they have made with DHHS, and DHHS have dealt with the courts on their behalf.

3.6 Interaction with the parents

The 53 kinship care families were asked whether the children/young people in their care have access visits with their parents:

- 22 families have visits with one or both parents
- 29 families do not have visits with either parent

Where visits between parents and children/young people do occur, there are varied arrangements being followed:

- Many parents, both mothers and fathers, visit their children/young people in the kinship care home. Many of these visits are frequent and regular while others are less regular and predictable. When they happen they are all successful.
- A few mothers visit the children/young people whenever they wish, sometimes twice a week. These parents also contact the children/young people regularly by phone.
- In one instance the father has the child in the school holidays and every third weekend. This internal family arrangement ensures that the father has a relationship with the child/children, and that the carers have respite.

Many carers reported that when access visits have been arranged, the parent sometimes does not turn up, largely because they do not like the idea of being supervised with their own children

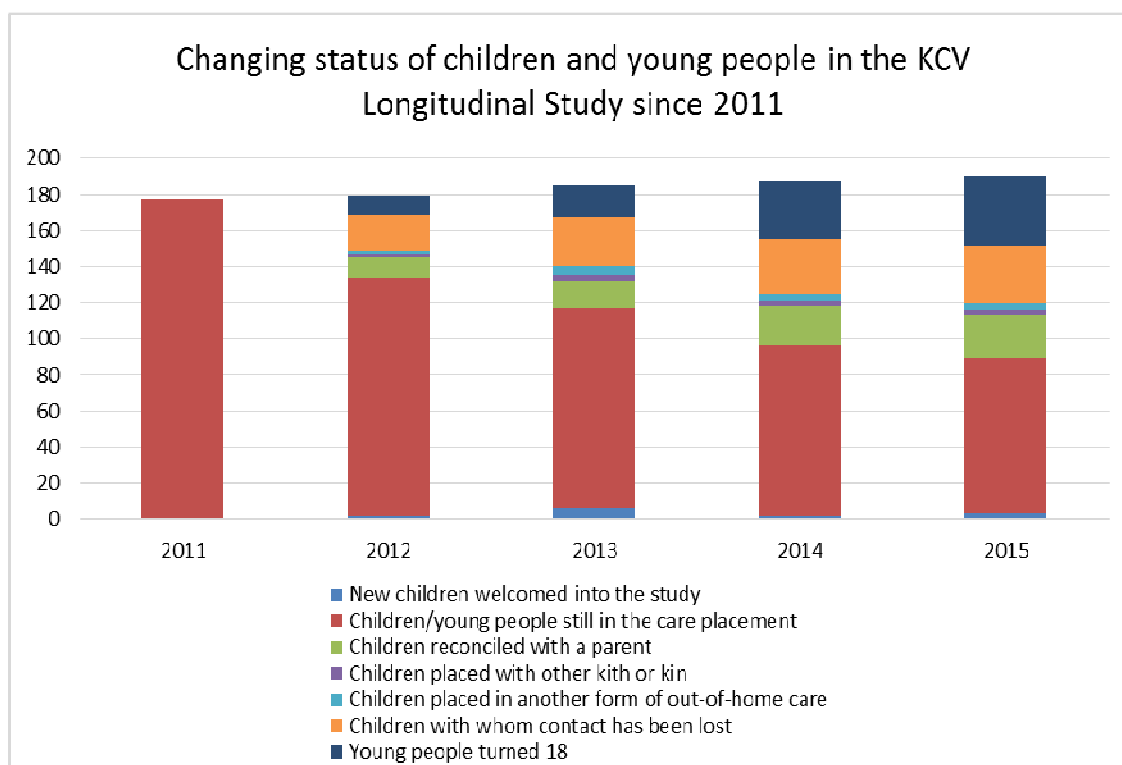
In cases where the parents never visit the child:

- One or both parents have died
- In some cases one parent is unknown to the carer, and in others the carers have lost contact with the parent
- Some parents have chosen not to visit the child
- In a couple of cases the child has asked not to see the parents anymore

4 Outcomes for the children/young people

Since 2011, a total of 190 children/young people have passed through the KCV Longitudinal Study. This figure includes 177 children/young people in the original care arrangements, and an additional 13 children/young people who have since joined the kinship care families already in the study. The following chart shows the changing status of all 190 children/young people

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
New children/young people welcomed into the study	0	2	6	2	3
Children/young people still in the care placement	177	132	111	94	86
Children/young people reconciled with a parent		11	15	22	24
Children/young people placed with other kith or kin		2	3	3	3
Children/young people placed in another form of out-of-home care		2	5	4	4
Children/young people with whom contact has been lost		20	27	30	32
Young people turned 18		10	18	32	38
	177	179	185	187	190



There remain in the study 158 children/young people (190 minus the 32 for whom contact has been lost):

- 89 of the 158 children/young people are still in kinship care.
- 69 have left the kinship care arrangement for destinations as outlined in the table below.

Where are the children by 2015?	
Children reconciled with a parent	24
Children placed with other kith or kin	3
Children placed in another form of out-of-home care	4
Young people turned 18	38
	69

It is important to note that only the immediate destination of the children/young people after they left their original kinship carer is displayed. In some cases these destinations were not the final destinations for the young people. For example, the child who was placed in boarding school was, after a short period, placed in residential care. Since that time the whereabouts of the young person has become unknown to both DHHS and the family in another case the child was.

4.1 New children/young people welcomed into the study

Since 2011, 13 new children/young people have been entered the study and were placed with 9 different families – 5 families welcoming one new child and 4 families welcoming two. The ages at which these children/young people entered the kinship care placement are:

- 3 were aged under 1 year old
- 1 was aged 1
- 1 was aged 3
- 1 was aged 4
- 1 was aged 5
- 1 was aged 8
- 1 was aged 9
- 1 was aged 11
- 1 was aged 12
- 2 were aged 16

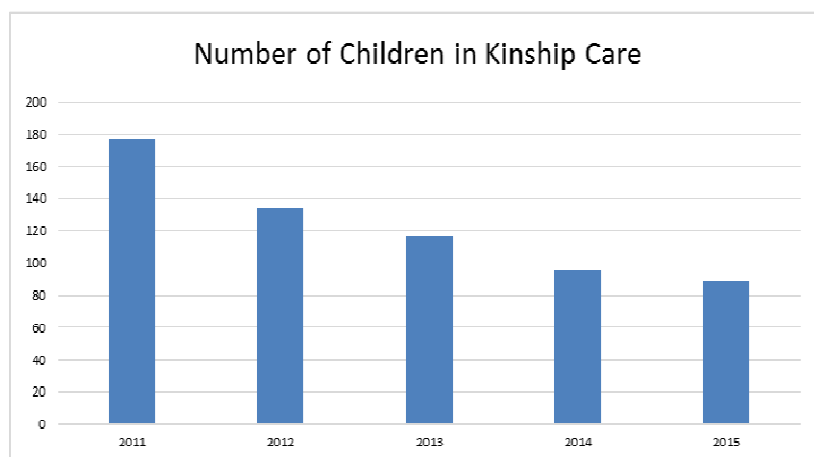
The majority of the children/young people brought into the study after 2011 were babies and toddlers, some as young as a few weeks or months old. Even young children are reported by the carers to suffer long-term trauma associated with their early life experiences. Carers also report instances of children with foetal alcohol syndrome.

Four of the children/young people who came into the study after 2011 have already transitioned out of kinship care, 3 having been returned to their parents, and 1 turning 18.

4.2 Children/young people still in the care placement

The following charts display the changing number of children/young people in kinship care arrangements over the past 5 years.

Number of children in care arrangements	
2011	177
2012	134
2013	117
2014	96
2015	89



The 89 children/young people still in kinship care arrangements are spread across 53 kinship care families. Of these 53 families:

- 34 report that all the children/young people are doing very well
- 15 are under pressure because of the children's physical or mental health
- 4 report vast improvements since 2014, but are still dealing with mental and physical health issues

The children/young people who are doing well are achieving in school and other social settings, they are mentally and physically well and are happy. However, some of these families also report the usual stresses and strains attached to children entering the teenage years.

Of the 15 families who are still under pressure:

- 13 are dealing with mental health issues
- 1 is dealing with physical health issues
- 1 is dealing with both mental and physical health issues

Of the 4 families who have reported improvements in their situation, 3 have been receiving additional support over the past 12 months, one family from their extended family, one from the school and dance therapy, and one from medical professionals. The fourth is recovering from grief at the death of her grandfather.

4.4 Children/young people reconciled with a parent

24 children/young people have been reconciled with parents during the course of the study:

- 21 children have been reconciled with a parent, closing the kinship care placement altogether. In most cases only one child was reconciled, however in several cases multiple children, up to 4 in one case, were returned to a parent. 11 of these children were reconciled with their mothers and 10 with their fathers.
- 3 children have been reconciled with a parent, while other child/children remain in the kinship care placement.

The children/young people reconciled with their parents were returned after a number of years in the kinship placement as outlined below:

- 3 children were returned after 1 year
- 4 children returned after 2 years
- 1 child returned after 3 years
- 1 child returned after 4 years
- 5 children were returned after 5 years
- 1 child was returned after 6 years
- 3 children were returned after 7 years
- 3 children were returned after 8 years
- 1 child was returned after 13 years
- 1 child was returned after 14 years
- 1 child was returned after 16 years

17 (69%) of these children/young people were returned after more than 2 years in the kinship arrangement. In several of these cases the reconciliations between children/young people and parents have been very successful – even after up to 16 years in the kinship care arrangement.

For 13 children/young people the reconciliation was successful:

- All but two of the kinship carers enjoy ongoing access to the children for whom they cared. Two carers have no access to the child/children they raised, and one carer has since passed away.
- In two cases the former carer provides occasional care for the child. This allows continuation of the previous close relationship and assists the parents.
- In one case the reconciliation was successful with a father after he was released from a jail sentence.

It should be noted that the vast majority of kinship carers found it difficult to give up the children, but recognised that it was in the best interests of the children that reconciliation be attempted.

For 8 children/young people the reconciliation clearly did not work:

- In one case, the 4 children/young people who were reconciled with a single parent were separated from each other within 12 months. The children/young people after a short time, 3 of these children asked to be reunited with each other and the other parent. One is now in a youth hostel, the other 3 remain with the second parent. Grave concerns are held for the health and wellbeing of the child/young person in the youth hostel and nothing is known about the welfare of the other 3, who moved interstate.
- In one case a child/young person who was reconciled with a parent chose to move in with another relative, before returning as an adult to live with the original kinship carer.
- In one case a child/young person was placed in residential care after she was unsuccessfully relocated with her parent to a provincial town. The placement in residential care was also unsuccessful and the whereabouts of this child/young person is now unknown.
- In one case a child/young person did not wish to be reconciled with his father, but the carer insisted that a trial be made. The child/young person was unhappy with the situation and has since turned 18.
- In one case a child/young person moved back and forth between the kinship carer family carer and a parent for some time, before turning 18 and finally transitioning out of kinship care.

In the case of 3 children it is difficult to determine whether the reconciliations have been successful or not:

- In one case the reconciliation has taken place too recently for a judgement to be made about the long term outcomes for the child/young person
- In one case the carer has been denied access to the child, and does not know how the reconciliation is going
- In one case the carer has not shared their views on the current success of the reconciliation

4.5 Children placed with other kith or kin

Three children/young people left their kinship care family to live with other kith or kin, 2 with uncles and one with a god-parent.

4.6 Children placed in another form of out-of-home care

Four children were moved out of their original kinship care family and into other forms of out-of-home care:

- 2 moved into foster care
- 1 moved into residential care
- 1 to boarding school

Of the 2 children placed in foster care the kinship carer reports that 1 is very happy. For the other child nothing is known about the success or otherwise of the foster care placement.

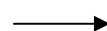
The underage child moved into residential care quickly ran away and has not been located for twelve months. DHHS regularly contacts the original kinship carer to see if the child has made contact.

Little is known by the original kinship carers about the current circumstances of the other children/young person.

4.7 About the young people who have turned 18

Since 2011, 54 of the young people tracked by this study have turned 18. This number includes 18 young people who KCV records indicate will have turned 18, but with whom contact has been lost, or who were reconciled with their parents:

- For 35 of these young people, little is reported about their fate since turning 18
- For 12 young people, little is reported about their current situation as contact has been lost with the kinship family
- For 5 young people, nothing is reported about their current situation as the young people had been reconciled with their parents and contact with the KCV Longitudinal study lost
- For 2 young people, nothing is known about their current situation because the carer has lost contact with the young person.



4.8 Living arrangements

Of the 35 young people with whom KCV still has some contact:

- 23 are known to still live in the kinship family home
- 11 are known to live elsewhere.

Most of those who are living elsewhere are living in share houses or with partners. However, two now own their own homes.

4.9 Work and study

Of the 35 young people with whom KCV still has some contact:

- 17 are known to be studying full or part time
- 14 are known to be working full or part time, or actively looking for work
- 5 are not known to be working or studying

In several cases, the young person is working part time while studying full or part time.

In those cases where the young person is not known to be working or studying, there are significant barriers to their entering the workforce, such as:

- physical and or intellectual disability
- severe mental illness