

# 'A Lifeline To Our Families' : Kinship Carers Project Report

Feeding Liverpool is the city of Liverpool's food alliance, connecting and equipping people and organisations to work towards good food for all.

For the last six months, Feeding Liverpool has been working with Kinship Carers Liverpool to support between 30 and 40 kinship families each week by providing them with fresh fruit and vegetables.

This project began in December 2023, after the need for additional support for Kinship Carers was identified by Liverpool's Healthy Start working group and the Good Food Taskforce; it forms part of Feeding Liverpool's Healthy Boost Project<sup>1</sup>, which seeks to improve access to good food for those who are at risk of food insecurity.

This report shares the difference Kinship Carers Liverpool's project with Feeding Liverpool has made to the families who attend the centre by drawing on case studies and information provided by those who benefit from this initiative and those who operate it.

Amongst it's key information, it finds that:

- Families now have healthier diets, eating both more and a wider variety of fruits and vegetables
- Recipients have noted that the project has had a positive impact on both their physical and mental wellbeing, allowing them to enjoy a healthy lifestyle and the relief this brings
- The project has enabled kinship families to save money and have access to healthy food items, regardless of their financial situation
- Families can access healthier food in a way that is convenient and easy for them, reducing the health and financial disparities they are vulnerable to
- The project has fostered a sense of community, encouraging families to share recipes and ideas about how to cook healthy meals on a budget
- The project has addressed specific kinship needs, making families feel they are being heard instead of being overlooked

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<sup>1</sup> The Healthy Boost Project aims to provide targeted food support to those most at risk of food insecurity in Liverpool by supporting families with uptake of fruit and vegetables from the Queen of Greens. Indeed, families identified as requiring this support are given Alexandra Rose vouchers to spend on the bus, which, in turn, also helps to assist both the Queen of Greens service and the local economy.

## What is Kinship Carers Liverpool?

Kinship care occurs when a child or young person lives full-time with a relative or family friend as a result of not being able to live with their birth parents, which is the case for thousands of people. Kinship carers are important members of the community: many grandparents, relatives and family friends are dedicated to bringing up others' children who may otherwise be in local authority care, providing them with a safe home and keeping the family together.

Kinship care is essential, as it provides children in this circumstance with a sense of continuity and stability. Indeed, by allowing children to stay in a familiar environment and maintain their cultural and familial connections, their emotional and psychological well-being remains supported. As such, kinship carers provide not only a home, but also the continuation of family traditions and support - all of which are essential for a child's development.

Kinship Carers Liverpool – based at Ellergreen Children's Centre in Norris Green – was initially established as a registered charity in 1996 and naturally developed into a Kinship Project after identifying that many families they worked with were in the process of taking on full-time care of their grandchildren. The project has since seen younger kin carers attend, who have taken on this role for reasons varying from bereavement, chaotic lifestyles, substance misuse to imprisonment.

Kinship Carers Liverpool wishes to support anyone who lives within a kinship household, offering a number of different services for families from all walks of life and at different stages of their journey. This support includes:

- Having experienced team members to speak to
- Help and advice in regard to concerns and issues relating to caring for a kin child
- Signposting to helpful and relevant services
- Free activity programmes
- Connections with other kinship families

In addition to direct support, Kinship Carers Liverpool actively engages in numerous campaigns, lobbies and research projects in order to ensure better support for kinship families. The families they work with have been key to this work, having been empowered to ensure their voices are heard and their lived experience is shared to bring about the change needed to meet their needs. Kinship Carers Liverpool are also an active member of the Kinship Care Alliance: this is a group of organisations that subscribe to a set of shared beliefs on the issue of family and friends care, and meet regularly to agree on strategies to promote their aims.

This report shares the difference Kinship Carers Liverpool's project with Feeding Liverpool has made to the families who attend the centre – namely, with between 30 and 40 kinship families being provided with fresh fruit and vegetable bags each week – by drawing on case studies and information provided by those who benefit from this initiative and those who operate it.

## How Have We Gathered Information For This Report?

The information gathered for this report was collected through a combination of surveys and conversations conducted and held with kinship families and staff members at Kinship Carers Liverpool. The data collection was led by Antonia Parry – Feeding Liverpool's Project Support Officer – and supported by University of Liverpool PHD Student Neha Ghelani.

A physical survey was available to everyone attending the weekly wellbeing session at Kinship Carers Liverpool on Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2024. Families and staff either filled in the survey alone or with a Feeding Liverpool staff member. Survey questions were based around the families' experience of receiving fresh fruit and vegetables on a weekly basis and the staff's feelings about the project, with a focus on health and wellbeing, access to healthy food and food security.

Nine kinship carers and two staff members at Kinship Carers Liverpool filled in the physical surveys, equating to approximately 23% of the families benefiting from the project.



## Who Attends Kinship Carers?

There are growing numbers of people who are becoming kinship carers in the UK, with an estimated 180,000 children in the care of relatives.

More than 1,000 households in Liverpool have children looked after by relatives or family friends, with a census from 2021 estimating that there are at least 1,370 children looked after by 1,745 kinship carers. As information on family relationships is only available for households with fewer than 6 members, the true figures for this circumstance may be higher.

Kinship care can also be known as 'family and friends care', 'connected care', 'relative care' or 'kincare' – names that are reflected in the groups of people who attend Kinship Carers Liverpool. Indeed, the project supports grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, cousins and close friends who have come forward to keep children within the family when a crisis occurs.

The term 'kinship care' covers families who find themselves in a variety of situations, such as:

- Informal or private kinship arrangements
- Registered private foster care
- Local authority foster care
- Kinship care with Residence Order, Special Guardianship Order, Adoption Order or Child Arrangements Order

Kinship Carers Liverpool prides themselves on offering help to everyone, regardless of their age or circumstances:

- Carers Programme - families can receive 1-2-1 support, help in accessing a range of advice services, and guidance in navigating through the range of complex issues they have to cope with on a daily basis
- Free Activities Programme for children living with family members or family friends full-time – this ensures that the children can have fun and meet other young people who are going through the same life experience
- 'Inter-Gen Sessions' - open to both carers and their children, these fun activities are run by support workers to help families improve their communication, break down barriers and enjoy spending time together outside of the house

The weekly wellbeing session at Kinship Carers Liverpool welcomes families from a widespread range of ages and circumstances, and is a service that promotes equality, health and education.

## Our Partnership

Feeding Liverpool has been working with Kinship Carers Liverpool to support between 30 and 40 kinship families each week by providing them with fresh fruit and vegetables.

Feeding Liverpool began this project in December 2023, after the need for additional support for Kinship Carers was identified by Liverpool's Healthy Start working group and the Good Food Taskforce. We work in partnership with Kinship Carers Liverpool - who identify families that will benefit from this project and distribute the fruit and vegetable bags during their weekly wellbeing meetings - and The Big Help Project, who have sourced good quality produce for the families.

Kinship's Breaking Point 2022 Report found that 'kinship care and experiences of poverty are inextricably linked'. Indeed, kinship families are more likely to:

- Live in deprived areas
- Have lower incomes than any other group raising children
- Include people who are economically inactive and deprived across all measures – including employment, education, health and disability, and housing

The ongoing costs of caring for a child and a lack of financial and employment support for kinship carers – coupled with the effects of the cost-of-living crisis - compounds this and results in too many families experiencing chronic financial insecurity. As such, kinship carer families are at a higher risk of experiencing food insecurity and have higher levels of financial insecurity than other cohorts, including the general population and households caring for children.<sup>2</sup>

Our project relieves this pressure on the household budgets of kinship families by providing kinship carers with a reliable supply of locally sourced fresh fruit and vegetables each week.



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<sup>2</sup> <https://kinship.org.uk/breaking-point/>

## What Difference Has This Project Made?

### Improved Diets:

Every person who was surveyed at the wellbeing session confirmed that the project had enabled them to increase the amount of fruit and vegetables eaten by their household, with multiple carers describing it as a 'life saver'. Various other people mentioned that they were now able to make their family meals healthier, which they believe has made a huge positive impact on their diets. Another carer stated that despite their best efforts, they can't always provide the children they care for with their 5-a-day; this project, however, has enabled them to have healthier snacks as an alternative.

Families also commented on how much they appreciate the quality and variety of the fruit and vegetable parcels, with one person stating that the food they receive lasts a lot longer than what they get from the supermarkets. This was corroborated by the staff member who oversees the project at the centre, who praised the freshness of the produce and the fact that each delivery provides different food items for the families to try.

By diversifying the array of fruits and vegetables, the project has meant that the families at Kinship Carers Liverpool have often been introduced to food items they have never heard of or eaten before, such as dill, ginger and aubergine. This has enabled them to experiment and cook new meals; trying new things has been made easier for them, as they don't have to risk spending money on things they are not sure they'll like or wouldn't think to try.

### Improved Physical And Mental Wellbeing:

Everyone who was surveyed said that the project had improved the state of their physical health, with one carer even saying that they would be 'lost without it'. One carer mentioned that her financial situation meant that she could only provide her family with cheap microwave meals, which she was aware wasn't healthy. Having the food parcels, however, has enabled her to step away from eating processed food and incorporate more nutrition into her household's diet. An elderly carer mentioned that eating a more varied and healthy diet has helped with her bowel movements, providing her with a better quality of life.

The project has also had a positive impact on the wellbeing of the families who attend Kinship Carers Liverpool. Multiple carers stated that it was a relief knowing that they had regular access to fruit and vegetables, and that the deliveries had taken away the financial stress they were facing. Carers are not the only ones who the project has benefitted; indeed, the staff said that the children who attend the centre are excited to go to the wellbeing sessions each week as they have the food parcels to look forward to.

### Helped Financially:

When experiencing periods of financial difficulty, families at Kinship Carers Liverpool mentioned that they would often forfeit their consumption of healthy food due to having a limited budget. Everyone who was surveyed at the wellbeing session, however, agreed that the project had enabled them to save money on both their food shopping and other general living costs on a weekly basis, with one staff member going so far as to say that it had been 'a lifeline' for those who attend the centre.

Indeed, being provided with free fruit and vegetable bags each week has meant that the families' weekly spending budget has been freed up to purchase other necessities, as they don't have to spend money on buying these items themselves. One person said that they use this extra money to buy protein, which they can add to meals in order to bulk them up and give their child a more varied diet. Another carer mentioned that receiving these parcels allowed them to batch cook, which provided their family with healthy and nutritious meals for the whole week – highlighting their value for money.

The project, therefore, has enabled kinship families to have access to fresh fruit and vegetables on a weekly basis – regardless of their financial situation.

## Convenient And Local:

The majority of families who attend the weekly wellbeing sessions at Kinship Carers Liverpool also attend the other services provided at the centre; having this project at a place they already go to allows them to receive this additional support in a way that is convenient for them.

Every person who was surveyed commented on how easily accessible the service is. One elderly carer said that she often struggles with going shopping, as it means she has to carry multiple heavy bags on her way home – a problem that is eliminated now that she can pick up a food parcel from her local centre.

Having the opportunity to access healthy and nutritious food close to their home has meant that families have also reduced the amount of money they have to spend on public transport in order to get to their nearest supermarket, with one person mentioning that they can also rely on a staff member to deliver their fruit and veg bag to their house due to them not being able to drive.

By making it easier for kinship families to access healthier food, this project has been able to reduce the health and financial disparities that they are vulnerable to – enhancing both the nutrition and life prospects of the individuals in this circumstance.

## Fostered A Sense Of Community:

Comments made about the project by both families and staff at Kinship Carers Liverpool highlight the extent to which the initiative has been able to bring people together around good food.

Both staff members who were surveyed mentioned that the influx of fruit and vegetables at the centre each week had encouraged families to share recipes amongst themselves and pass ideas to other families about how to use the items provided to cook healthy meals on a budget. Indeed, one said that she had witnessed families speak about the soups and fruit kebabs they had made with their parcel, passing on the ideas to others.

According to some families who were surveyed, creating meals out of the items in the fruit and vegetable bags has also been assisted by the slow cooker courses held at Kinship Carers Liverpool. As slow cookers are simple to use and typically require less energy than ovens, these courses aim to teach community members how to make nutritious, low-maintenance meals on a budget in a friendly atmosphere. As such, kinship families have found the courses invaluable in encouraging them to come together in order to cook and learn how to use the ingredients in their parcels – some of which they have been introduced to for the first time.

## Addressed Specific Kinship Needs:

A concern prevalent amongst kinship carers is that they are not providing the best options for the children they care for, whether that is due to financial issues, time constraints or lack of knowledge. The project, however, has helped to combat this, with multiple surveyed families stating that it been a 'massive help' in enabling their children to increase the amount and range of fruit and vegetables they were eating. Providing children with early access to fruits and vegetables is essential for meeting their nutritional requirements, allowing for healthy growth, development and enhanced cognitive function – factors that contribute to their ability to socialise, learn and achieve their maximum potential. Introducing these nutritious foods to children in early life will help to instil healthy habits that are likely to persist into adulthood, highlighting the project's ability to improve the long-term health outcomes of those at Kinship Carers Liverpool.

The centre also aims to assist with helping kinship families navigate their new family dynamics, which can be impacted hugely by the circumstances they find themselves in. The project itself has been efficient in aiding with this, with one carer mentioning in their survey that they were 'very grateful' for how it has helped them to build a more caring and stronger relationship with their child. Indeed, having raw ingredients has encouraged their household to cook more meals from scratch together and spend essential time together as a family.

Perhaps most importantly, the project has made the families at Kinship Carers Liverpool feel as if they are having their voices heard. As one staff member explained in their survey, kinship is often overlooked, and the provision of

fruit and vegetable bags has managed to develop in a way that meets the needs of the families at the centre – being 'a godsend' to both kinship carers and children alike.



## The Year Ahead

With the project initially due to end in July 2024, Feeding Liverpool put forward a proposal to extend the project for another year as part of the food element of Household Support Fund 5. This has been accepted and the organisation now has the funding to continue support of Kinship Carers from September 2024 to July 2025. This extension means that kinship families across Liverpool can continue to have better and more frequent access to fresh fruit and vegetables.

Feeding Liverpool wishes to continue ongoing consultation with Kinship Carers Liverpool and the kinship families who attend the centre to guarantee the success of the project and ensure that it effectively caters to their specific needs. The organisation also plans to conduct more comprehensive discussions as the project continues in order to gain deeper insights into the families' and staff's experiences.

