

What do we know about special guardianship and what do we need to know? Early findings from a national study*

Professor Judith Harwin

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Contact: Judith.Harwin@brunel.ac.uk

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The contribution of supervision and special guardianship orders to family justice, children's services and child outcomes (2015-2017)

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Research team:

Brunel University London

Professor Judith Harwin

Dr Stephen Swift

Melanie Palmer

Lancaster University

Professor Karen Broadhurst

Dr Bachar Alrouh

Dr Lisa Morriss



Phase 1 and phase 2 of our study: Aims

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Phase 1

Describe overall patterns and trends in the use of special guardianship orders between 1st April 2007 and 31st March 2014 and to compare them with usage of other permanency options.

Phase 2

Provide information on individual child outcomes over time and investigate national disruption rates.

The study findings will inform the DfE Review on Special Guardianship.

Special guardianship orders (SGOs) – the original purpose

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New route to legal permanence for children unable to live with their birth parents - first proposed in the *Prime Minister's Review of Adoption* in 2000

Child leaves care system when an SGO is made - LA no longer involved

Originally intended to be used when:-

- an older child cannot return to birth parents but does not want to legally separate from birth family
- children are living with relatives and adoption would not be appropriate because of links between relatives and birth parents
- adoption conflicts with religious and cultural values
- to provide unaccompanied asylum seeking children who may have strong ties with birth families abroad with a permanent home
- child has pre-existing relationship with the proposed special guardians

Methodology for phase 1

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Based exclusively on Cafcass case management system database.

Draws on methodology developed in a related study of recurrent care proceedings by some of the team members*.

Inclusion criteria:

- at least one child was included in the set of proceedings
- the case included at least one S31 (care or supervision) or placement application
- start date of first application in a set of child proceedings was during the research timeframe (1/04/2007 until 31/03/2014)

Unit of analysis - a set of child proceedings (child's case)

*(Broadhurst et al, 2014, Family Law, eScholarID:[227563](#))

Strengths and limitations of the methodology in phase 1

Strengths:

- Large sample size
- Records likely to be complete for the profiling data on which Cafcass collects information

Limitations:

- Not possible to distinguish private law applications that involved the safeguarding of a child and those that did not
- Does not deal with subsequent sets of child proceedings
- Adoption applications and orders not extracted
- Relative paucity of child profiling data beyond age and gender

Summary of key preliminary findings

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Our preliminary findings are confirming a number of trends:-

- The use of special guardianship is increasing
- The proportion of SGOs has risen in recent years whilst placement orders have decreased
- The median age of children on SGOs has remained stable

Emerging trends

- Some indications of an increase in the proportion of SGOs for very young children
- The length of proceedings for all legal orders (care, placement, residence, special guardianship, supervision)
- An increase in supervision orders to accompany the making of an SGO
- Regional variations in the use of all legal order types including SGOs made with or without supervision orders

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Questions the study raises

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1. Should we be concerned about the changes in the ratio of use of SGOs and placement orders?
2. Should we be concerned about the age profiles of the children on SGOs?
3. Why are local authorities using supervision orders to accompany an SGO more frequently today than previously?

How are we going to answer these questions – next steps

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What we need to know:

- How far preliminary Phase 1 findings are confirmed or vary when national scale and pattern data updated to cover 2014/2015
- How well special guardianship works for individual children and provides lasting stability and promotes child well-being

What we are going to do in Phase 2

- Carry out entirely new **per child** analysis to provide a longitudinal picture of the child's individual pathway and legal and well-being outcomes - to include use of supervision orders + SGOs
- Link Cafcass child data over time & aim to link with DfE records
- Through work with LAs obtain views of SGO carers and children if SGO accompanied by a supervision order