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I had a dream retirement plan – now I'm raising grandchildren and used food banks

Story by UK grandmother Aasma Day

A grandmother whose retirement dreams suddenly changed when she gave up work to bring up her four grandchildren says she was forced to use food banks because of a lack of Government help. Korreena, 62, says thousands of other kinship carers – relatives or friends who raise children when their parents are not able to – are struggling to survive without financial support.

Becoming kinship carers had a massive financial impact on the couple. Korreena had to give up her manager's job at a supermarket to do school runs and be at home for the children. Korreena said: "I went from earning a good income to relying on universal credit and sleeping on the sofa for six years. The children came to us with nothing, just what they were standing in and we weren't offered any help. We relied on friends to bring us bedding, clothes, books and toys."

Korreena says one of the most difficult things was going from being a grandparent who took the children on days out and bought them treats to being their parents, setting rules and boundaries. They endured almost five years without financial support and for the first time Korreena found herself having to use a food bank for around six months to make ends meet. "It was traumatising using a food bank after working all my life and never needing help," she said. "Luckily, my husband who had been working part-time, went back to full-time as a forklift driver and works away all week to make extra money."

Korreena and Anthony now receive financial support from their local authority with the help of Kinship, the charity for kinship care. The grandmother will be one of 50 kinship carers marching towards Westminster today with trolleys to emphasise they cannot pay for essentials for these children with love alone.

There are 130,000 children being looked after by kinship carers in England today.

Kinship, in partnership with the Centre for Care based at the University of Sheffield, has revealed that kinship carers contribute more than £4.3bn a year to the economy by caring for children who would otherwise be in the care system. However, because kinship carers do not get the support they need to cover the cost of raising them, one in eight might need to make the heart-wrenching decision to give up caring for a loved child. Dr Lucy Peake, chief executive of Kinship, said: "Kinship carers contribute billions to the economy and yet most are left unsupported by the Government. It's time for the Treasury to take notice of the commitment and collective sacrifices kinship carers make to raise children against all odds so that they can keep them in a family home and out of the care system. They must deliver the urgent support needed by choosing to invest in kinship care as part of the forthcoming Spending Review to guarantee a financial allowance for every kinship family in England." She added: "It is a disgrace that kinship carers are plunged into poverty when other carers such as foster carers receive financial support."

Korreena's grandchildren are now 20, 17, 16 and 12 and are all thriving. With two of them having autism and ADHD, she says it would have cost the state a fortune without kinship care. "They are my world," she said. "It wasn't our choice to

become kinship carers but we love them so much and wouldn't have it any other way."

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "We have inherited a children's social care system in need of wholesale reform – and kinship care has been overlooked for too long. We are determined to change that and have already announced £40m to trial a financial allowance for kinship carers in 10 local authorities and are introducing a new law to make sure councils set out clear support for local carers – breaking down barriers to opportunity for children across the country as part of our Plan for Change."