

Working together with the NENC Healthwatch Network

Case Study

Insight: Listening to Kinship Carers and Young People – What WorkWell Could Mean for Them

September 2025



Why We Listened

Kinship carers are often the quiet heroes in our communities, grandparents who step in to raise their grandchildren when parents are unable to, often due to addiction or poor mental health. Many of these carers have had to give up work, face financial hardship, and carry the emotional weight of grief and responsibility.

We met with the Bridges Kinship Group to hear their thoughts on the new WorkWell service, which aims to help people with health conditions stay in work or return to work. We also heard from young people affected by Fetal Neonatal Syndrome (FNS), a condition caused by alcohol exposure in the womb that can lead to lifelong learning and behavioural challenges.

What we heard

Carers' Stories

Many carers shared how their working lives were disrupted when they became full-time caregivers. They spoke about:

- Losing jobs due to inflexible employers.
- Feeling judged or misunderstood at work.
- Struggling financially, especially when benefits go to the parent rather than the carer.
- Experiencing mental and physical health issues from years of putting others first.

"I didn't get time to grieve my child.

I had to become a full-time carer for my grandkids straight away."



Young People's Voices

Young people with FNS described how their condition affects their ability to learn, communicate, and feel confident in work settings. One young woman shared her dream of working in a care home but fears her behaviour will be misunderstood.



"I just need someone to show me things slowly and be patient. I want to help people, but I'm scared they'll think I'm difficult."

Another young person rarely leaves his room and struggles with aggression. His grandad worries about how he'll ever manage in a workplace.

"We've tried everything, counselling, holidays, support. But until FNS is recognised, these kids won't get the help they need."





What could help

The group shared thoughtful ideas about what would make services like WorkWell more accessible and effective:

- Flexible support starting with part-time hours and building up.
- Work buddies or mentors someone consistent to guide and support.
- Face-to-face inductions not just online.
- Employer education especially around hidden disabilities like FNS.
- Life skills and confidence-building starting in schools and continuing into adulthood.

Why this matters

This conversation reminded us that employment isn't just about having a job, it's about feeling understood, supported, and valued. For kinship carers and young people with complex needs, WorkWell could be a lifeline, but only if it's built with empathy, flexibility, and real understanding of their lived experiences.

Next steps

Healthwatch Stockton-on-Tees will continue to share these insights with local partners and decision-makers. We'll advocate for services like WorkWell to be shaped by the voices of those who need them most, and to ensure no one is left behind because their journey looks different.

Importantly, we will share these findings with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) as the WorkWell programme is developed, ensuring that the voices of people with lived experience help shape the service from the ground up.

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