



Australian Government

**Australian Government Response to the Senate Community Affairs References
Committee Report:**

Grandparents who take Primary Responsibility for Raising their Grandchildren

Foreword

On Monday 9 December 2013, the Senate referred the matter of grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren to the Community Affairs References Committee (the Committee) for inquiry and report.

On 29 October 2014, the Final Report (the Report) of the Committee's Inquiry into Grandparents who take Primary Responsibility for Raising their Grandchildren (the Inquiry) was tabled in Parliament.

The Australian Government welcomes the Report and the Committee's recommendations.

The wellbeing of children is important to all Australians and essential for the future of the nation. It is therefore important for governments at all levels to support families to raise their children, including non-parent carers such as grandparents.

The Australian Government notes the key findings of the Report and acknowledges the important role played by grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren, and the challenges frequently associated with this caring role.

As the Report highlights, this is a complex issue and there are no overnight solutions. Moving forward, the Australian Government remains committed to supporting grandparent carers by offering a range of financial and non-financial services and supports where possible. In addition, the Australian Government will continue to monitor these services and supports to ensure that they are efficient, effective and appropriately targeted to give children the best start in life and provide these carers with the support they need.

This document represents the Australian Government's response to the recommendations of the Inquiry.

The Australian Government considers that a large number of the recommendations made by the Committee are already being addressed, either directly or indirectly, by existing financial and non-financial supports and services. Governments at all levels may, however, need to improve existing information resources and channels to ensure grandparent carers are more aware of these supports and services.

Where recommendations are specifically directed at the state and territory governments, or at whole-of-government, the Australian Government is keen to work with jurisdictions as appropriate to achieve better outcomes for Australia's children and their carers.

Responses

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that:

- the Department of Social Services and the Department of Human Services initiate a comprehensive review of support provided to grandparents raising grandchildren.

As part of the review:

- the Department of Human Services establish a sub-committee within the Older Australian Working Group to enable ongoing engagement with grandparents raising grandchildren;
- the Department of Human Services puts in place and maintains processes to more accurately collect and review data received from the Grandparent Adviser 1800 telephone number;
- the Department of Social Services' Children's and Families Secretaries' Group, as the primary platform for jurisdictions to collaborate on innovative approaches to child and family issues, makes grandparents raising grandchildren a priority topic for discussion at a meeting to be specifically convened to address this issue or at its next meeting; and
- the Department of Social Services' Children's and Families Secretaries' Group, using an appropriate model, undertake a trial programme that makes available to grandparents vouchers to assist meeting the cost of educational tutorial expenses, including the cost of ICT training for grandparents raising teenage grandchildren.

The Australian Government supports this recommendation in part.

The Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Department of Human Services (DHS) are working collaboratively to address and progress the issue of grandparents raising their grandchildren.

The Older Australians Working Group is an external stakeholder group supported by the DHS, which seeks views from Older Australians advocacy groups on current service delivery arrangements. The Working Group is convened on a biannual basis. At its June 2015 meeting, the DSS and DHS discussed the Report's recommendations with attendees and examined the feasibility of establishing a grandparent carer focussed sub-committee within the Working Group. Given the broad interest in the topic from all attendees, it was agreed that a sub-committee was not required, but that the role and needs of grandparent carers would be a standing agenda item for the Working Group in the immediate future.

Since October 2014, DHS has been collecting quantitative call data received through its grandparent's line, which is supplemented by manual qualitative data collected by the Grandparent Adviser staff. DHS is now looking at ways to utilise these data to help identify the purpose of grandparent carers' calls, identify service gaps, and to better position the department's service delivery strategy for this customer group. The data will also be used by DHS and DSS to assist with the evaluation of the trial expansion of the Grandparent Adviser programme, which is discussed in more detail under Recommendation 3.

The issue of grandparents raising their grandchildren was also discussed as a priority topic at the Children and Families Secretaries Group (CAFS)¹ meeting on 29 April 2015. CAFS members agreed to the establishment of an Out-of-Home Care (OoHC) Working Group that will examine this issue and relevant recommendations made in the Inquiry in addition to other matters of relevance to OoHC.

In relation to supporting grandparent carers with the costs of educational tutorial expenses, including for ICT training, the Australian Government notes that existing services and supports such as the Broadband for Seniors programme are already available to help meet this need. The Broadband for Seniors programme provides older Australians with free access to computers, internet and basic training.

¹ Note – The Children and Families Secretaries Group (CAFS) comprises heads of Commonwealth and state/territory departments responsible for children and families. The Department of Social Services represents the Australian Government on CAFS.

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that the Department of Human Services investigate means of identifying kinship care arrangements in applications for Commonwealth benefits, with a view to better identifying grandparent-headed families to whom financial support(s) should be provided, subject to any eligibility criteria.

The Australian Government supports this recommendation in principle, and notes that since 2011, the Department of Human Services (DHS) has collected quantitative data for grandparent carers who are in receipt of Family Tax Benefit (FTB). It is also noted that there are limitations to these data, as they rely on self-identification by grandparent carers. In addition, and as noted within the Report, some grandparent carers do not claim family assistance payments from the department due to complex and sensitive relationships with their own children.

Noting these limitations, DHS will continue to encourage grandparent carers to identify as such, and to claim the payments and services to which they are entitled. It is an important part of the role of Grandparent Advisers to promote these payments and services, and to facilitate seamless access to them by grandparent carers.

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that the Department of Human Services review the number and geographical allocation of grandparent advisor positions, with a view to ensuring:

- that needs are being met in high-demand service areas;
- the specific needs of grandparents raising grandchildren in rural and regional Australia are being adequately met; and
- if required, increasing the number of grandparent advisors employed under the Grandparent Advisor Program.

The Australian Government supports this recommendation.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) has been working in collaboration with the Department of Social Services (DSS) to review the existing Grandparent Adviser programme. Commencing in 2015-16, this programme will be expanded on a trial basis until 30 June 2017, with two additional Grandparent Adviser positions and funding for outreach activities.

Under the trial, the number of Grandparent Advisers will increase from six to eight, ensuring coverage of all states and territories, noting that grandparent carers in the Australian Capital Territory will continue to be supported by the two Grandparent Advisers based in New South Wales. In addition, the eight Grandparent Advisers will conduct outreach activities with grandparent advocacy groups and organisations within their respective geographical footprints to promote the Grandparent Adviser role within the community, and to increase awareness of available supports and services.

The expansion of the Grandparent Adviser programme will boost service efficiency and timeliness, as well as access to services and supports by grandparent carers. Prior to the completion of the trial in 2017, the Australian Government will evaluate the delivery of the Grandparent Adviser programme (including reviewing the funding for all Grandparent Adviser positions) to determine if it meets the needs of grandparent carers. DHS will consult on the evaluation approach with the DSS.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that the Australian Government considers:

- providing dedicated funding for community legal centres and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, to enable the better provision of legal assistance to grandparents who have taken on the primary care of their grandchildren; and
- funding for relationship supports and services, to assist grandparents raising grandchildren to better manage intra-family relationships which are complicated by the assumption of primary care responsibilities.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation on the basis that there are a number of existing legal and family relationship services currently available to support grandparent carers and their families.

Funding to legal assistance services is not generally dedicated to specific client groups, although there are some specialist services: for example, women's legal services, youth and Indigenous services. Legal assistance providers require flexibility to meet the most pressing legal needs of clients within the limits of finite resources. Indigenous legal assistance providers, which are fully funded by the Australian Government, are required to focus on clients who are, or are likely to be, detained in custody or face a real risk to their physical, cultural or personal wellbeing. Most funding for Indigenous legal services is used to assist clients in state and territory criminal law matters. Due to the demand for these services there is limited capacity for other law types.

However, there are a range of Australian Government funded legal assistance and relationship support services that grandparents may and do use.

Legal aid commissions in each state and territory provide significant assistance in family law matters, including to grandparents. Grandparents may meet eligibility criteria to receive assistance from legal aid commissions, including grants of aid for representation where children are concerned. Minor advice and assistance are available from legal aid commissions, community legal centres, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services for a range of family law and child protection issues. Duty lawyers at family court registries may also assist self-represented litigants with minor representation, task assistance and advice.

Government funding already supports various family law services which are available to assist grandparents when family relationships break down and disputes arise.

Grandparents are already able to access family law services, including the national Family Relationship Advice Line (1800 050 321) which provides information, simple legal advice and referrals relating to parenting, separation, legal questions, and dispute resolution to anyone affected by family relationship or separation issues and difficulties, including parents, grandparents, carers, children, young people, step-parents or friends. In addition, Family Relationship Centres and Family Dispute Resolution services also provide advice and assistance to resolve disputes arising out of family separation, including where a grandparent assumes primary care for the children.

In relation to family relationship supports and services there is a range of existing relationship education and counselling services currently accessible to facilitate support for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren and to assist in the management of intra-family relationships where breakdown has occurred.

For example, in 2014-15, the Australian Government invested over \$63.4m in annual funding to deliver Family and Relationship Services (FaRS) by 83 providers across 376 outlets. FaRS aim to strengthen family relationships prevent breakdown and ensure the wellbeing and safety of children through the provision of broad-based counselling and education to families of different forms and sizes, including grandparents who have caring or other relationship responsibilities for their grandchildren. These services primarily focus on early intervention and prevention and are targeted to critical family transition points including formation, extension and separation. These transition points include situations where grandparents may assume the role of primary carer of their grandchildren.

Some FaRS are permitted to charge fees on a sliding scale depending on income. However clients must not be refused services or referred to other organisations on the basis of incapacity to pay fees. Priority access is given to grandparents if they are financially disadvantaged or vulnerable. Services provided under this model are culturally sensitive and must be accessible to all target groups, including Indigenous people and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Recommendation 5

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, investigate how access to and the availability of professional counselling services can be enhanced for grandparent-headed families.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

Nationally, counselling services are already well-established and accessible to grandparent-headed families. As outlined in the response to Recommendation 4, FaRS are one avenue through which grandparent carers and their families can access such support.

There are also currently 40 Australian government funded family law counselling providers with annual funding of \$15.4 million. Family law counselling helps couples and families to manage relationship issues arising from relationship changes, separation and divorce. Anyone, including grandparents and other family carers, can use these services, including intact, separated or extended families. These services include counselling, therapeutic intervention, support and information and referral.

In addition, the Australian Government funds a range of mental health and suicide prevention services and programmes which are available for grandparent-headed families and children to access. These services include counselling and support services, online and telephone counselling, clinical mental health and suicide prevention services. More information on these services and resources is outlined below:

1) Frontline Counselling and Support Services include:

- **Beyondblue** (www.beyondblue.org.au; 1300 22 4636) is a national organisation that has a range of information and resources associated with depression and anxiety.
- **Lifeline Australia** (www.lifeline.org.au; 13 11 14) provides a free, confidential and anonymous, 24-hour telephone counselling service for adults needing emotional support.
- **Mensline Australia** (www.menslineaus.org.au; 1300 78 99 78) provides a free, confidential and anonymous, 24-hour professional telephone counselling service for men needing emotional support or in crisis.
- **Kids Help Line** (www.kidshelp.com.au; 1800 55 1800) is a free and confidential, telephone counselling service for 5 to 25 year olds in Australia.
- **Black Dog Institute** (www.mycompass.org.au) provides a 24 hour free mobile phone/computer-based programme to assist those with mild to moderate depression, anxiety and stress (myCompass).

E-Health Telephone and Media Services include:

- **Mindhealthconnect** (www.mindhealthconnect.org.au) is an online mental health portal to provide a single gateway to information and online mental health treatment programmes, ranging from self-directed to low/high levels of therapist assistance.
- **Mindspot** (www.mindspot.org.au) provides free real time, online and phone Cognitive Behaviour Therapy counselling with a trained counsellor for common mental disorders such as anxiety and depression.
- **eheadspace** (www.eheadspace.org.au; 1800 650 890) is a telephone and web-based support service for young people. It provides free, confidential and anonymous counselling services to young people between the ages of 12 and 25 years with, or at risk of developing, a mild to moderate mental illness.
- **The Suicide Callback Service** (1300 659 467) is a free nation-wide telephone support service available to support people at risk of suicide and their carers, and is well suited to people who are geographically or emotionally isolated. The service can support

callers through structured 50 minute telephone counselling sessions, scheduled according to the caller's needs. The Suicide Callback Service operates seven days a week.

- **Wesley LifeForce – Wesley mission** (lifeforcenetworks@wesleymission.org.au) aims to build community capacity to engage in suicide prevention activity, improve access to appropriate services and to support those at risk of suicide and bereaved by suicide by building suicide prevention networks and providing education.
- **StandBy Response Service – United Synergies Ltd** (www.unitedsynergies.com.au) delivers the StandBy Suicide Bereavement Response Service which provides a 24 hour face to face response service for those bereaved by suicide, training for front line emergency response services in the community, and coordination of suicide response services.

2) Clinical Mental Health Services - where people go on to develop a mental disorder and require clinical mental health services, their GP can refer them to a range of mainstream programmes, including:

- **The Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners** through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (Better Access) initiative aims to improve outcomes for people with a clinically-diagnosed mental disorder through evidence-based treatment. Under this initiative, Medicare rebates are available to patients for selected mental health services provided by GPs, psychiatrists, psychologists (clinical and registered), eligible social workers and occupational therapists.
- **The Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS)**² programme is currently funded through Medicare Locals and enables general practitioners to refer patients, including children, who have been diagnosed as having a common mental disorder of mild to moderate severity for sessions of short-term focused psychological strategies services.
- **The Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Areas (MHSRRA)**³ programme provides funding for mental health professionals in more than 200 rural and remote communities across Australia that would otherwise have little or no access to Medicare subsidised mental health services. Providers include the Royal Flying Doctor Service, Aboriginal Medical Services and Medicare Locals.
- **headspace** (www.headspace.org.au) provides a national coordinated focus on mental health and related drug and alcohol problems, and aims to improve access for young people aged 12-25 years to appropriate services and ensure better coordination between services.

3) Other Supports include:

- The Partners in Recovery (PIR) initiative aims to better support people with severe and persistent mental illness with complex multi-agency needs.
- The Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network (www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au) provides information to help people understand and respond to the needs of children experiencing trauma, loss or grief and their families.

² From 1 July 2015, ATAPS and MHSRRA services will be transitioned from Medicare Locals to Primary Health Networks. Services will continue to be delivered under the same arrangements. Medicare Locals can be found at www.medicarelocals.gov.au. Primary Health Networks can be found at: <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/phn-locator>.

³ The Royal Flying Doctor Service information can be found at www.flyingdoctor.org.au and the Aboriginal Medical Services can be found at: www.nganampahealth.com.au and www.wuchopperen.org.au.

- The Australian Psychological Society (APS) (www.psychology.org.au) has information and resources to assist people who are coping with traumatic events, as well as resources for people who are working with affected communities.
- The Australian Centre for Post Traumatic Mental Health (www.phoenixaustralia.org) assists individuals, communities and organisations to recognise and reduce the adverse mental health effects of trauma.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that the Australian Bureau of Statistics:

- include a question, or set of questions, in the Census of Population and Housing, commencing in 2016, to identify those households in which kinship carers have primary responsibility for children or young people, and the carer's relationship to that person; and
- begin compilation of a longitudinal dataset for grandparent-headed families, with a view to identifying relevant support and service needs, including for grandparents caring for grandchildren with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandparents raising grandchildren.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation, but recognises that the opportunity for new data collection in the 2016 Census is now closed. Opportunities to collect grandparent and kinship carer data can be explored in future information collections.

Consultation for the 2016 Census of Population and Housing content has closed. The 2016 Census will collect information across the full range of topics covered in the 2006 and 2011 Censuses, including relationship in household and caring responsibilities (time spent on unpaid child care, and assistance to family members or others because of a disability, a long term illness or problems related to old age). More information on the 2016 Census can be found at www.abs.gov.au/census. Given the complexity of this topic, the range of questions that would be required to establish the responsibilities and relationships of kinship carers noted above would require significant development and testing. A targeted survey approach may be better suited to collecting these data.

Compilation of a longitudinal dataset for grandparent-headed families is not possible within the existing ABS household survey programme; however the ABS is currently planning a major transformation of its population and household surveys. The transformation programme will include potential for longitudinal and cohort analysis, and increased flexibility to collect prioritised topics such as grandparent and kinship carers.

As part of this transformation, the ABS will be reviewing survey content and consulting with stakeholders on key priorities for future policy and research needs in an environment of increasingly integrated survey based and administrative collections. This will include a review of the collection of family characteristics, recognising modern complexities of family relationships within the household, such as kinship carers and shared care for children.

Possible ABS vehicles for new data on grandparent carers could include the 2018 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC), as it collects detailed information on care arrangements and carer/recipient relationships and is a suitable vehicle for examining informal caring for those with a need for assistance. Further opportunities leveraging from the SDAC are under consideration with potential funding partners, including new content and a possible longitudinal collection.

Informal custodianship by kin of children and young people could also be examined across other surveys (as it is based on relationship in household). The most recent data available for childcare provided by a grandparent is from the 2014 Childhood Education and Care Survey (CEaCS).

Recommendation 7

The committee recommends that the Australian Institute of Family Studies:

- include a longitudinal study in its Research Directions 2015-18 for endorsement by its Advisory Council and the Australian Government; or
- alternatively, conduct:
 - a national, cross-sectional, probability telephone survey of grandparents, including a nested sample of former and current grandparents raising grandchildren; and
 - a separate qualitative study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandparents raising grandchildren, to better inform government policies and practices which support grandparent-headed families.

The Australian Government supports this recommendation in part.

To inform policy and improve relevant services and supports the Australian Government is committed to undertaking research on the issue of grandparents raising their grandchildren and other non-parent carers to better understand the prevalence of, and circumstances experienced by these carers and their families.

While a national, large-scale or longitudinal study of grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren is not possible at this point in time, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Department of Social Services (DSS) have been working collaboratively to progress this issue as a priority research topic.

DSS is funding a national survey of formal non-parental carers, the early stage of which has commenced. The survey will collect both quantitative and qualitative data about a range of non-parent carers, including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous grandparent carers, who are raising children as a result of orders from the Australian Family Court or Federal Circuit Court or a state or territory Children's Court, Youth Court or Magistrate's Court. The survey is being developed collaboratively by DSS, AIFS and state and territory governments, and will be conducted in 2016.

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends that, the Australian Government, through the COAG process:

- convene a national forum specifically for grandparents raising grandchildren and their local support groups, non-government organisations and representatives from the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, and that this forum:
 - investigate a means of recognising the role and contribution of grandparents raising their grandchildren throughout Australia; and
 - consider effective avenues for raising community awareness and understanding of the role and contribution of grandparents who have the primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation acknowledging that the issue is best dealt with by Commonwealth, state and territory ministers with portfolio responsibility for carers, and therefore this will be raised in the context of future discussions at relevant forums such as the Children and Families Secretaries Group.

Recommendation 9

The committee recommends that state and territory governments consider:

- extending foster care allowances to grandparents who are raising their grandchildren without orders from a court exercising family law jurisdiction or care and protection jurisdiction; and
- investigating means of facilitating contact arrangements between children in grandparent headed families and their birth parents.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation and acknowledges that this recommendation is for the action of the state and territory governments.

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that state and territory governments consider:

- reviewing the rates of financial assistance paid to grandparents as out-of-home carers, with particular consideration to addressing the disparity in financial support between foster carers and grandparents raising grandchildren;
- the provision of training to grandparents raising their grandchildren to better support them in their daily parenting role;
- the provision of respite to services to grandparents raising their grandchildren, with a focus on enhancing and extending those services to all grandparents raising their grandchildren;
- the formal assessment of kinship care placements within six months of the commencement of the placement, with a view to ascertaining the specific supports and services required by a grandparent raising their grandchild; and
- existing policies and practices relating to the priority allocation to public housing, with a view to expediting accommodation suitable to the needs of grandparent headed families.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation and acknowledges that this recommendation is for the action of the state and territory governments.

Recommendation 11

The committee recommends that the Australian Government, in co operation with state and territory governments, examine increased and more certain funding for voluntary support groups which provide peer support to grandparents raising grandchildren to better facilitate the establishment, maintenance and operations of such groups.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

The Australian Government is already investing around \$891 million from 2015-16 to 2018-19 under the Families and Children Activity of the Families and Communities Programme to support families to improve the wellbeing of children and young people to enhance family and community functioning, as well as increasing the participation of vulnerable people in community life.

Children and those in a parenting or caring role, including grandparent and kinship carers are supported through the Children and Parenting Support (CaPS) Component of the Families and Children Activity. Under this component, the Australian Government funds a range of prevention and early intervention services including peer support groups, parenting education services, web-based resources and support services, playgroups, and school readiness programmes.

Support is also provided through the Communities for Children Facilitating Partners (CfC FP) Component of the Families and Children Activity. The CfC FPs aim to deliver positive and sustainable outcomes for children aged 0-12 and families in disadvantaged communities throughout Australia. CfC FPs are place-based and develop and facilitate a whole of community approach to support and enhance early childhood development and wellbeing through services such as parenting programmes and group peer support.

In addition, the Australian Government, through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, is investing over \$55.6 million per year for a range of early childhood services. These services include projects that aim to support parents and those with parenting responsibilities, including grandparents and kinship carers, for raising children.

In addition to the support provided through these services, the Australian Government, through the Department of Social Services, will strengthen its support for grandparent carers through investment in a new initiative to provide national information, resources and support for the target group. The Department will consult with key stakeholders in the development of this initiative and identify opportunities to build on existing and planned activities and resources.

Recommendation 12

The committee recommends that the COAG give attention to:

- collaborating on the development of guidelines, protocols and templates to ensure consistent implementation of Standard 4 of the *National Standards for Out-of-home Care*, which provides for each child and young person to have an individualised education plan; and
- considering facilitating education and awareness training within each jurisdiction on the special circumstances and needs of grandparents raising grandchildren.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation acknowledging that the issue is best dealt with by Commonwealth, state and territory ministers with portfolio responsibility for carers, and therefore this will be raised in the context of future discussions at relevant forums such as the Children and Families Secretaries Group.

Recommendation 13

The committee recommends that the COAG Education Council initiates a review into the practical supports and services that could be provided to children in out-of-home care (including grandparents raising grandchildren), to promote positive outcomes in education.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation acknowledging that the issue is best dealt with by Commonwealth, state and territory ministers with portfolio responsibility for carers, and therefore this will be raised in the context of future discussions at relevant forums such as the Children and Families Secretaries Group.

Recommendation 14

The committee recommends that the COAG, in conjunction with state-based community service providers:

- review the information currently available to grandparents raising grandchildren in relation to government and non-government supports and services;
- develop, and update as required, a comprehensive guide to the supports and services available to grandparents raising grandchildren in each jurisdiction;
- make the comprehensive supports and services guide widely available across a range of mediums and in a variety of formats, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandparents raising grandchildren;
- review, and develop if necessary, in consultation with the relevant courts, information materials that:
- identify and explain potential pathways for grandparents raising grandchildren who wish to formalise care arrangements for their grandchildren; and
- identify specific sources of potential legal assistance in each jurisdiction.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation acknowledging that the issue is best dealt with by Commonwealth, state and territory ministers with portfolio responsibility for carers, and therefore this will be raised in the context of future discussions at relevant forums such as the Children and Families Secretaries Group.

Recommendation 15

The committee recommends that, through the COAG Health Council, governments consider enhancing the provision of mental health services for grandparent-headed families, with special attention given to grandchildren affected by trauma.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation acknowledging that the issue is best dealt with by Commonwealth, state and territory ministers with portfolio responsibility for carers, and therefore this will be raised in the context of future discussions at relevant forums such as the Children and Families Secretaries Group.

Note also that the Australian Government currently funds a range of relevant mental health and suicide prevention services and programmes as outlined at Recommendation 5.

Recommendation 16

The committee recommends that:

- the Third Action Plan 2015-2018 elevates the strategic and policy areas associated with grandparents raising grandchildren;
- as an initiative under the National Framework, governments explore options to improve mental health services for all family members, to support the family unit and prevent children from entering the out-of-home care system; and
- governments recognise the special needs of and costs associated with raising children with disability, in determining eligibility for, and the extent of, supports and services provided to grandparents raising grandchildren.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 (the National Framework) aims to ensure that Australia's children are safe and well. A supporting outcome of the National Framework is that children and young people who have been abused or neglected receive timely, appropriate, high-quality child protection and other support services to secure their safety and promote their long-term wellbeing. The National Framework is implemented through a series of three-year action plans.

Achievements to date specifically related to assisting grandparent carers include the development of National Standards for out-of-home care, introduction of six Centrelink Grandparent Advisers, development and production of the Winangay Indigenous kinship carer resources and implementation of an online resource to improve carers' access to information about available services and payments.

The National Framework is based on a tripartite partnership involving the Commonwealth, state and territory governments and the non-government sector, through the Coalition of Organisations Committed to the Safety and Wellbeing of Australia's Children. The Third Action Plan reflects the outcomes of discussions between the partners about activities to be undertaken over the next three years, which includes consideration of how to give best effect to the National Standards for out-of-home care.

The Australian Government will continue to provide support through its Community Mental Health Activity, Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS), to improve mental health outcomes for children and young people at risk of mental illness and their families and carers. Children at risk of entering the out-of-home care system are a priority target group of FMHSS.

The Australian Government recognises the effort, dedication and challenges faced by carers, including grandparent carers of children with a disability, medical condition or a mental illness. Eligible carers are currently supported through the provision of financial assistance and a range of programmes and services.

From December 2015, a national carer gateway will be implemented to assist unpaid carers access information and support to help them maintain their caring role. The national carer gateway will comprise of a national telephone contact centre, including a new 1800 number, and a website that will include carer-specific information with a service finder to make it easier for all carers to locate and access support and services. The national carer gateway is the first step in a longer term plan to better support carers. Work on an Integrated Plan for Carer Support Services has commenced and will reflect Australian Government priorities for carers. The purpose of the Plan will be to outline practical actions to recognise, support and

sustain the vital work of unpaid carers. A key priority of the Plan will be to streamline and better coordinate carer support services and ensure that the needs of carers are recognised and supported.

In addition, where applicable, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) provides funding for long-term, individualised care and support that is reasonable and necessary to meet the needs of people with permanent disability, where a person's disability significantly affects their communication, mobility, self-care or self-management.

The NDIS is a new way of providing community linking and individualised support for people with permanent and significant disability, their families and carers. The NDIS funds supports that families need as a result of a family member's disability, as well as supports that enable sustainable caring by family members, including grandparents.

The natural supports that carers provide are critically important to a person's wellbeing and the scheme will take steps to support the sustainability of carers in their role. The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) will consider the assistance provided by carers when working with participants to develop individual plans and support packages.

Under the NDIS, participants with psychosocial disability will have increased choice, control and flexibility in how their supports are delivered. Supports funded by the NDIS will complement the clinical supports provided through the mental health system and will address the functional impact of a person's psychosocial disability. Funded supports might include help with planning and decision-making, accommodation, or assistance to participate in the community.

Recommendation 17

The committee recommends that the COAG:

- explores options for providing informal grandparents raising grandchildren with access to legal assistance (including legal representation) in relation to the care arrangements for the grandchildren;
- affirms support for the Commonwealth's Informal Relative Caregiver's Statutory Declaration, with a view to implementing a consistent means of recognising informal grandparents raising grandchildren within and across jurisdictions; and
- investigates means of supporting informal grandparents raising grandchildren who initiate proceedings in the family law jurisdiction and the care and protection jurisdiction, including a more active role for child protection authorities and an enhanced role for mediation.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

The issue of the Commonwealth's Informal Relative Caregiver's Statutory Declaration is best dealt with by Commonwealth, state and territory ministers with portfolio responsibility for carers, and therefore this will be raised in the context of future discussions at relevant forums such as the Children and Families Secretaries Group.

The Australian Government does not support the first and third points of the recommendation about COAG considering access to legal assistance and support in the family law jurisdiction.

The Family Law Council is currently considering the interaction between family law and child protection systems.

The information provided at recommendation 4 about legal assistance services and family law services is relevant. Applications for a grant of legal aid for representation are means and merits tested, to ensure that limited resources are targeted at disadvantaged people with complex legal needs. Grandparents informally caring for grandchildren can access legal information and minor assistance services.

Recommendation 18

The committee recommends that state and territory governments reconsider Recommendation 19-3 of the Australian Law Reform Commission and New South Wales Law Reform Commission's joint report Family violence-a National Legal Response, to enhance the assistance provided by child protection authorities to grandparents raising grandchildren in the family law jurisdiction.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation and acknowledges that this recommendation is for the action of the state and territory governments.