

Chapter 2

Recognising the role and contribution of grandparents raising grandchildren

2.1 Participants in the inquiry considered that the role and contribution of grandparents raising grandchildren is under-appreciated by governments and the community. Accordingly, participants argued that there is scope for better recognition of carers.

2.2 This chapter examines the following topics:

- the role and contribution of grandparents raising grandchildren; and
- how to better recognise grandparents raising grandchildren.

Role and contribution of grandparents raising grandchildren

2.3 The role and contribution of grandparents raising grandchildren was discussed in terms of the grandchildren in care and its value to society.

Role and contribution to children

2.4 Grandparents raising grandchildren play a significant role in the lives of the grandchildren for whom they care. In addition to raising the children in a safe and secure environment,¹ grandparents provide 'familial connection, usually warmth and love, and a desire for the best future for their grandchildren'.²

2.5 Some participants argued that this family connection and higher level of emotional investment makes the care provided by grandparents unique from other forms of out-of-home care (in particular, foster care), resulting in greater placement stability.³ Dr Marilyn McHugh, for example, submitted:

International studies tell us of the many advantages for children in kinship placements. They feel loved and wanted. Compared to foster care, their placements are more stable and longer lasting; children have a better sense of identity and belonging; and are able to maintain contact with family and friends. Recent Australian research found kinship carers deeply committed to raising their grandchildren, providing them with security and the chance to live happy and fulfilling lives.⁴

2.6 Wanslea Family Services Inc. (Wanslea) similarly commented:

1 The Salvation Army (TSA), *Submission 108*, p. 3.

2 Relationships Australia, *Submission 58*, p. 1.

3 See, for example: Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Inc., *Submission 169*, p. 10; Ms Jenni Perkins, Acting Commissioner, Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia (WA Commissioner), *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 6 August 2014, p. 1.

4 *Submission 17*, p. 2. Also see, for example: Gosnells Community Legal Centre Inc., *Submission 37*, p. 2; UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families, *Submission 85*, Attachment 1, p. 3; TSA, *Submission 108*, p. 3; Mrs Anne McLeish, Director, Grandparents Victoria and Kinship Carers, Victoria, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 17.

Grandparents provide their grandchildren with care that has emotional and social benefits to the community and their grandchildren. There is often already an attachment relationship, meaning the child enters the care of someone who already knows and loves him or her. The importance of family history and identity can therefore be respected. Grandchildren can be kept in ready contact with cousins and other relatives, depending on family circumstances. Often such access is difficult to achieve in formal foster care arrangements. Grandchildren being cared for by their grandparents have the opportunity to experience a stable, consistent and loving home and family.⁵

2.7 For some submitters, the ability of grandparents to ensure their grandchildren's connection to spiritual and cultural identity was critical.⁶ The circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandparents is discussed further in Chapter 7.

Context of the care placement

2.8 While the evidence suggested many positive outcomes for grandchildren, it also highlighted that grandparents often undertake the role of raising their grandchildren in very difficult circumstances. In addition to practical challenges (see Chapters 3-7), participants described the complex context of the placement and the emotional burden borne by grandparents.

2.9 Dr Jan Backhouse, a social researcher based at the Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, explained, for example:

The grandparent-as-parent experience is marked by both deep pain and pleasure. The many challenges faced by grandparents who take on the primary care of their grandchildren include financial issues, legal battles, physical and emotional health problems (their own, as well as those of their grandchildren), social isolation and lifestyle changes, parenting problems and conflict with the children's parents.

Nevertheless, grandparents are totally committed to the care, safety and happiness of their grandchildren, often at the expense of their own lives. They routinely place their grandchildren's financial needs before their own, often drawing on very meagre income to provide for the children's health, education, out of school/sporting activities etc. in an attempt to give their grandchildren the same opportunities available to other children.

Research also reveals the significant loss of the traditional grandparent role by grandparent carers. Instead of the 'mythical' grandparent role involving 'pleasure without responsibility', they must now take on the parenting roles of disciplinarian, provider and authority figure. This shift to the grandparent-as-parent role has impacted on grandparents in a number of different ways, including provoking feelings of being unrecognized,

5 Submission 150, p. 5.

6 For example: Tangentyere Council, *Submission 112*, p. 2; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (Qld) Ltd. (ATSILS Qld), *Submission 134*, p. [16].

disadvantaged, misunderstood and isolated within the community, together with a strong sense of injustice in relation to their experience.⁷

2.10 A few participants presented the views of grandchildren, who are, or who have been, in the care of their grandparents. Notwithstanding the numerous difficulties associated with the arrangement, the children and young people generally expressed a preference for kinship care.⁸

Role and contribution to society

2.11 Some participants argued that grandparents raising grandchildren make a substantial economic contribution to society, by preventing future costs to the social welfare, education and health budgets.⁹ Other participants focussed on short-term savings achieved through the lack of financial support to grandparents who provide care through informal arrangements (see Chapter 3),¹⁰ and the decreased need for alternate out-of-home care options (in particular, foster care).¹¹

2.12 Dr Backhouse submitted 'many grandparents believe that they are 'saving the government money' by raising their grandchildren'¹² and COTA Australia (COTA) explained:

Grandparents and other kinship carers are providing a service that would otherwise have to be paid for with the children being in foster care or possibly some form of institutional care. Given the difficulty we have in getting an accurate estimate of how many grandparent carers there are, it is hard to estimate the savings to community service budgets[.]¹³

Comparison with foster carers

2.13 At the Melbourne public hearing, Mrs Nicole Patton from The Mirabel Foundation advised that there is a 'massive' difference in the supports and services provided to foster carers and kinship carers:

A big part of that is access to carer payments, ongoing financial support, but with that financial support also comes practical support that is often available too. There is orthodontic work that children might need—just all the practical things that you come across when you are raising a child.

7 *Submission 51*, pp 1-2.

8 For example: CREATE Foundation, *Submission 136*, p. 5.

9 See, for example: Relationships Australia, *Submission 58*, p. [2]; UnitingCare Tasmania, *Submission 65*, p. 14; Mr Moray McSevich, Manager, Albany Branch, Wanslea Family Services Inc., *Committee Hansard*, Albany, 7 August 2014, pp 1-2.

10 For example: Grandparents Rearing Grandchildren WA (Inc.), *Submission 50*, p. [2]; Family and Relationship Services Australia, *Submission 81*, p. 2.

11 For example: TSA, *Submission 108*, p. 3.

12 Dr Jan Backhouse, *Submission 51*, p. 2. Also see: Mr Bernie Geary, Principal Commissioner, Victorian Commission for Children and Young People (Victorian Commission), *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 28.

13 *Submission 113*, p. 7. Also see: Mr Michael Tugwell, grandparent, *Committee Hansard*, Albany, 7 August 2014, p. 2.

They are not available to grandparents. Foster carers have access to some limited resources.¹⁴

2.14 By way of example, Mr Bernie Geary, Principal Commissioner for the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People, referred to a funding disparity in his jurisdiction, where the Foster Care Association of Victoria receives annual funding of \$400,000, compared with Kinship Carers Victoria which receives \$50,000 per annum:

Clearly this level of funding for [kinship carers] cannot begin to meet the existing and impending growing need. We are happy to make [kinship care] a growth industry, but we are also not funding it. This is despite how...the majority of carers are kinship carers and the trend and rapid growth is obvious. Foster care is a shrinking type of care. The equation is surely inverted.¹⁵

2.15 Witnesses suggested that the differential treatment in supports and services might be due to various factors, such as governments not being aware of the extent of grandparent provided care and cost considerations.¹⁶ In relation to the latter view, Ms Meredith Kiraly from the Australian Psychological Society indicated that there is a struggle to shift attitudes away from the traditional view of 'it is their family; why do you pay your own family to look after children'?¹⁷ Ms Heather Gridley countered that there is now recognition that:

...the system is bigger than the family...[and] the family is in an environment that is bigger than itself and, while some of the problems certainly come from the family, some of the solutions can be in there also, if they can be supported to support the child or the parent.¹⁸

2.16 Throughout the inquiry, participants remarked on the contrast in recognition, supports and services provided to grandparents raising grandchildren.¹⁹ Several witnesses expanded on Ms Kiraly's comment, stating that there is an expectation that grandparents will fulfil the role,²⁰ regardless of the availability of supports and services, as the children involved are family. For example, Mission Australia stated:

The perception around the grandparents is that it is that way because grandparents will take the children anyway. The grandparents think,

14 Manager, Kinship Care and Research, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 8.

15 *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 28.

16 For example: Ms Meredith Kiraly and Ms Cynthia Mifsud, Member, Expert Reference Group, and Ms Heather Gridley, Fellow and Manager of Public Interest, Australian Psychological Society, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, pp 11-12.

17 *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 12.

18 *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 12.

19 For example: Mr Roy Cox, grandparent, *Committee Hansard*, Albany, 7 August 2014, p. 23 (citing as an example the provision of a motor vehicle).

20 See, for example: Professor Gillian Triggs, President, Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 63.

'No-one will give us these things, because it is not like we are going to leave the children on the doorstep somewhere'.²¹

2.17 Dr Backhouse told the committee:

There is...a belief that foster carers are 'appreciated' for the job they do, however, grandparent caregivers are 'expected' to do the same job without any recognition. Foster carers are also viewed as being able to avail themselves of ongoing support from welfare agencies in raising foster children, whereas when children are placed with grandparents it is assumed that 'they're okay, they're with family' and no further support is required.²²

2.18 The Aged-care Rights Service Inc. argued that grandparents raising grandchildren should have access to the best available supports and services,²³ and the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia considered that these could be provided by redirecting the current cost savings:

Providing such services and supports is, in itself, an important recognition of the contribution [grandparents raising grandchildren] make and acknowledgment of the challenges that come with being the primary carer for their grandchildren. For those with informal care arrangements providing access to the same services and supports would also provide such recognition.²⁴

How to better recognise grandparents raising grandchildren

2.19 Participants highlighted that grandparents do not always want to be identified as carers for their grandchildren.²⁵ The Salvation Army identified as one example the situation in which there has been parental dysfunction: some grandparents 'live with a sense of shame, as though the actions/inactions of their children are reflective of themselves'.²⁶ The evidence of Mrs Helen Hinkley typified another comment heard from some grandparents as the committee held public hearings across the country:

Sometimes you think: 'Where did I go wrong? I ended up with these beautiful grandchildren. I had five children of my own. One went wrong. Why? What did we do? For a long time there we were punishing ourselves for that, thinking we must have done something wrong, but it does not work that way.'²⁷

21 Mr Brett Fahey, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 45.

22 *Submission 51*, p. 2.

23 *Submission 64*, p. 5.

24 *Submission 34*, p. 4.

25 See, for example: Mr Brett Fahey, Mission Australia, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 46.

26 *Submission 108*, pp 2-3. Also see: Dr Jan Backhouse, *Submission 51*, p. 2; UnitingCare Tasmania, *Submission 65*, pp 6-7; Dr Caroline O'Neill, Board Member and Founder, Permanent Care and Adoptive Families, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 53.

27 *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 6 August 2014, p. 37.

2.20 Further, the committee heard that some grandparents raising grandchildren believe the role is stigmatised:

Many grandparents report...feeling fearful of people's reactions, being accused of being bad parents, and that their grandchildren get teased and bullied about being cared for by "their oldies". Sometimes this fear means they do not access services that are available, including financial assistance, and often withdraw from social networks.²⁸

2.21 Many submitters and witnesses stated however that, rather than remain invisible, grandparents raising grandchildren want to be recognised for the role they have assumed and for there to be better recognition of its value to society.²⁹ Dr Bridget Jenkins, a research associate at the Centre for Social Impact, explained:

[Grandparent raising their grandchildren] feel invisible, really. And it grates...They want recognition that what they are doing is valuable and worthwhile, that they are a legitimate family and that they can give love and affection and meet the needs of their grandchildren.³⁰

2.22 Evidence to the committee offered numerous suggestions for the practical recognition of grandparents raising grandchildren (see Chapters 3-7) but also suggestions aimed at enhancing the legal, social and political recognition of the grandparents. The topics discussed included: identification of the needs of grandparents; recognition of informal care arrangements; recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship arrangements; more explicit recognition from governments; respect and consideration from authorities; and increased levels of public awareness.

Identification of the needs of grandparents raising their grandchildren

2.23 As discussed in Chapter 1, participants supported enhancing the Australian Bureau of Statistics' data collections, to better identify the number and circumstances of grandparents raising grandchildren in Australia. Wanslea, for example, submitted:

[B]y having their profile evident in Census statistics [grandparents raising grandchildren] shift from being an invisible to visible family form, which can then be recognised, provided and planned for in service delivery. When services are planned and provided according to their needs, the practical challenges...are not only recognised but managed.³¹

28 COTA Australia (COTA), *Submission 113*, p. 4. Also see: Mrs Nicole Patton, Manager, Kinship Care and Research, The Mirabel Foundation, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 7.

29 For example: Dr Marilyn McHugh, *Submission 17*, p. 4; Relationships Australia, *Submission 58*, p. [5]; COTA, *Submission 113*, p. 4; Dr Stephen Nicholson, President, Grandparent and Kinship Carers Association Inc., Mid North Coast New South Wales, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 10; Dr Jan Backhouse, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 19.

30 *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 3.

31 *Submission 150*, p. 5.

2.24 Family and Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) argued that, if appropriately recognised, the grandparents could be supported with more 'imaginative' shared care arrangements:

For example, in the Northern Territory, Kinship Carer assessments made by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) take into account the health of the carer and the ability of the carer to provide support to children in the long term...[T]he DCF has refused grandparents the role of carer for their grandchildren on the basis of their health status. In some cases this is an unfortunate decision and results in the child being removed from family and placed in foster care. Shared care arrangements could, on the other hand, seek to balance the physical health demands of the carer role while still recognising the strengths of grandparents.³²

Recognition of informal care arrangements

2.25 Participants in the inquiry contended that there is a need to recognise informal care arrangements, to facilitate grandparents' access to supports and services,³³ and to enable them to sign consents on behalf of their grandchildren. Witnesses described the many difficulties they have experienced in signing permission forms for school activities, making medical and dental appointments, and applying for birth certificates and passports.³⁴

2.26 Women's Legal Services NSW (WLS NSW) referred to the Commonwealth's Informal Relative Caregiver's Statutory Declaration, a version of which has been implemented in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. The statutory declaration provides certain people—including grandparents—with a means of proving that they have the primary care of a child.³⁵

2.27 The committee heard that the statutory declaration may be of limited use due to: few grandparents being aware of its availability; and variable acceptance among state and federal agencies.³⁶ Ms Janet Loughman from WLS NSW noted also that the statutory declaration does not affect legal responsibility for the child (and cannot therefore be used in conjunction with passport applications):

It is primarily a document that...assists with access to Centrelink benefits or access to a Medicare card [or] for decisions such as serious medical

32 Submission 81, p. 2.

33 See, for example: Dr Marilyn McHugh, *Submission 17*, p. 4; AHRC, *Submission 133*, p. 12.

34 For example: Ms Pam Cox, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 20. Also see: Relationships Australia, *Submission 58*, p. [4].

35 See, for example: NSW Government, Justice and Attorney General, *NSW Statutory Declaration for Informal Relative Caregivers, Frequently Asked Questions*, p. 1, available at: <http://www.lpcld.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/agdbasev7wr/lpclrd/documents/pdf/statdecfaqs.pdf> (accessed 4 September 2014).

36 Women's Legal Services NSW (WLS NSW), *Submission 138*, pp 3-4; Mr Bernie Geary, Victorian Commission, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 32; Ms Josephine Root, National Policy Manager, COTA, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 20 June 2014, p. 21. Family and Relationship Services Australia noted also different practices between federal and state agencies: see *Submission 81*, p. 3.

interventions for a child or enrolling a child in school. Those sorts of decisions can require parental responsibility. These declarations do not transfer parental responsibility, they just acknowledge who has the day-to-day care of a child.³⁷

2.28 A representative from the Department of Social Services indicated that the statutory declaration by itself is not sufficient proof of the day-to-day care responsibility.³⁸ In this regard, WLS NSW suggested that it would be beneficial to promulgate the 'kind of evidence required and when it is best to collect such evidence', perhaps through a community awareness program.³⁹

Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship arrangements

2.29 In 2004, the Family Law Council (Council) acknowledged the need for functional recognition of particular child rearing and kinship-based parenting practices within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities:

[I]t is important to recognise in law that a relative who is not a parent may actually be exercising the primary parental responsibility for the child, in order to determine specific legal and administrative questions. For example, this is required to ascertain whether a person is entitled to:

- Receive Family Tax Benefit A
- Receive child support
- Consent to medical treatment on behalf of a child, and
- Enrol a child in school.

It is for this reason that Council sees the need to develop special processes for that recognition in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. In short, Council sees merit in considering easier ways of recognising the parental responsibilities of non-biological parents in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The aim would be to devise processes which do not in most cases require a full scale court application with its attendant costs and difficulties.⁴⁰

2.30 Ten years later, some participants in the inquiry expressed the view that out-of-home care systems still do not adequately recognise the concept of kinship care arrangements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.⁴¹

2.31 WLS NSW, for example, called for greater recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship practices, and supported the creation of a special procedure to recognise non-biological parents as having parental responsibility:

37 Principal Solicitor, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 20 June 2014, p. 3.

38 Ms Elizabeth Hefren-Webb, Acting Group Manager, Families, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 20 June 2014, p. 26.

39 *Submission 138*, p. 4.

40 Cited in Family Law Council, *Improving the Family Law System for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Clients*, February 2012, p. 90.

41 For example: ATSILS Qld, *Submission 134*, p. [5].

This legislation would allow an appropriate person under Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customary law to be recognised as having parental responsibility for the purposes of Federal [and State] law where both biological parents indicate their consent without having to go through a complex and court-based process. Simple registration with a Government agency familiar to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people such as Centrelink would be all that is required.⁴²

More explicit acknowledgement from government

2.32 A few participants suggested ways in which governments could explicitly recognise grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. Grandparents Rearing Grandchildren WA (Inc.), for example, proposed the creation of a 'special category in Centrelink', which would expedite grandparents' interactions with the agency.⁴³ Relationships Australia suggested 'a letter from a state authority to thank grandparents for the role they have undertaken'.⁴⁴ COTA referred to the *Carer Recognition Act 2010* (Cth), which defines a 'carer' as:

...an individual who provides personal care, support and assistance to another individual who needs it because that other individual:

- (a) has a disability; or
- (b) has a medical condition (including a terminal or chronic illness); or
- (c) has a mental illness; or
- (d) is frail and aged.⁴⁵

2.33 COTA argued that grandparents raising grandchildren should be included within the definition of 'carer' as 'their role is equivalent to that of people caring for frail elderly relatives or children with a disability'[,].⁴⁶ Ms Josephine Root, National Policy Manager for COTA, emphasised that the role played by grandparents is not within 'normal family caring responsibilities':

They are actually...saving the community money and hassle and they believe providing a better outcome for their grandchildren. For most of them it was about that and it was seen as something that was not the normal family structure in Australia...that it was different from raising your own children or providing some child care to your grandchildren on a one, two, three days a week or overnight basis when your adult children want to go somewhere for a holiday and so on.⁴⁷

42 Cited in Family Law Council, *Improving the Family Law System for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Clients*, February 2012, pp 90-91. WLS NSW suggested that a non-government agency should be the repository of registrations: *Submission 138*, p. 6.

43 Ms Kaye Bendle, President, *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 6 August 2014, p. 29.

44 *Submission 58*, p. [5].

45 Section 5 of the *Carer Recognition Act 2010* (Cth).

46 *Submission 113*, p. 4.

47 *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 20 June 2014, p. 21.

Respect and consideration from authorities

2.34 Across Australia, witnesses reflected on the perception of grandparents raising their grandchildren within departments and agencies, and called for a cultural change where grandparents are given non-judgemental understanding and support. Mr Tom Cowen from the Aged-care Rights Service Inc. told the committee:

[Staff] need to recognise the situations that grandparents are in and the stresses and onerous nature of the tasks they face, and, having come to that recognition, are then able to help them with whatever resources are available.⁴⁸

2.35 Similarly, the Australian Human Rights Commission suggested that:

...people in the government agencies be trained to work with grandparents so that it could be a more user-friendly, pleasant environment in which the staff would not be seen as social-welfare police who were going to challenge what the grandparents were doing or question why the parents were not looking after the children or interfering too much in the family arrangements. So you would have people who were trained to be sensitive and trained to understand what sort of support a grandparent really needs.⁴⁹

2.36 Other participants commented on the need for child protection authorities to better involve grandparents raising their grandchildren in decision-making processes.⁵⁰ Mr Bernie Geary from the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People, stated, for example:

[Kinship carers'] views are not given suitable weight and they are not included in planning and decision-making about the child, and this is inconsistent with the legislative requirements...under the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* [Vic]...But this never attracts significant attention or acknowledgement. In fact, this aspect of the legislation appears to be disregarded by many within the [Department of Human Services (Vic)].⁵¹

2.37 Mr Andrew Jackamos, Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, agreed, stating that Koori kinship carers feel that they have 'no voice with decision-makers and no direct line to raise their concerns and advocate for change about their grandchildren'. Where family-led decision-making occurs, which is often subsequent to a placement and infrequent, 'the right family members [are not included]'.⁵²

2.38 At the Sydney public hearing, Ms Merilyn O'Neill, Policy Officer for the Grandparent and Kinship Carers Association Inc., Mid North Coast New South Wales,

48 Manager, Legal Services, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 45.

49 Professor Gillian Triggs, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 60.

50 WA Commissioner, *Submission 34*, p. 4. Also see: Ms Kelly Bucknall, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 28; Mr James Pilkington, General Manager, Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, *Committee Hansard*, Darwin, 5 August 2014, p. 15.

51 *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, p. 28.

52 *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 10 June 2014, pp 29-30.

referred to a recent New South Wales Government initiative (Carer Reference Group), which aims to give carers a voice in the out-of-home care system.⁵³

Increased levels of public awareness

2.39 Submitters and witnesses argued that there is a general need for heightened awareness of the role and contribution of grandparents raising their grandchildren.⁵⁴ COTA and the AHRC supported:

...an education campaign that challenges stereotypes and entrenched norms about caring roles and grandparent carers...to enable Australian society to recognise a diversity of caring structures, households and relationships for women and men of all ages.⁵⁵

2.40 Professor Gillian Triggs, President of the AHRC, referred to the commission's publication *Your Rights at Retirement* as an example of a successful means of providing information to the community:

That would be one way to go in making sure that people are more aware of grandparent carer needs and support and what their rights and responsibilities are.⁵⁶

Committee view

2.41 A complex set of circumstances often results in grandparents assuming the primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren at a time in life when such a role may be neither contemplated nor planned. The decision to raise these children has consequences, many of which are adverse (see Chapters 3-7). In the circumstances, there is a strong argument in favour of recognising grandparents raising their grandchildren for the difficult role they have voluntarily undertaken and the significant contribution made by these grandparents to the lives of their grandchildren and to the community generally.

2.42 The committee considers that the Australian Government, through the Council of Australian Governments process, should investigate a means of recognising the role and contribution of grandparents raising grandchildren throughout Australia.

2.43 During the inquiry, submitters and witnesses described a stigma associated with grandparents raising grandchildren, citing this negative attitude as a reason why grandparents might choose not to identify themselves as carers for the children or to avail themselves of available supports and services. The committee considers that stigmatisation of the care provided by grandparents needs to be addressed, to better identify and support grandparent-headed families.

2.44 The committee agrees with COTA and the AHRC that a campaign would inform attitudes about the role and contribution of grandparents raising grandchildren. In certain circumstances (see Chapter 3), the committee sees merit in the production of

53 *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 13.

54 For example: Dr Jan Backhouse, *Submission 51*, p. 3; TSA, *Submission 108*, p. 4.

55 *Submission 133*, p. 17. Also see: COTA, *Submission 113*, p. 4.

56 *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 13 June 2014, p. 59.

a single comprehensive publication. However, in the context of broader education, the committee considers that the Australian Government should 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.

2.45 As a related issue, the committee acknowledges that some governments have adopted the Commonwealth's Informal Relative Caregiver's Statutory Declaration, to enable grandparents (among others) to identify themselves as the primary carer for their grandchildren. The committee considers this to be a highly useful mechanism, and recommends that all governments affirm support for the statutory declaration, with a view to implementing a consistent means of recognising informal care arrangements across all departments and agencies.