

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This road grandparents are on is long, hard, tough, bumpy, painful, soul-destroying and exhausting, but much love, determination and courage is given by grandparents to raise healthy and happy grandchildren. This caring role has been pushed upon them by the inability of their own children to care and take responsibility for their children. Grandparent carers need moral support, emotional support and financial support from everyone in the community to raise these grandchildren so they are not a burden on the taxpayer but become role models in society in their adult lives.¹

8.1 Throughout the inquiry, the committee heard many personal accounts of grandparents who have taken, or are taking, the primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren. For many grandparents, assumption of this responsibility has enormously complicated their lives, yet the grandparents who participated in the inquiry emphasised their love for and commitment to their grandchildren. The committee acknowledges these grandparents for providing their grandchildren with a loving and safe home in which to flourish and achieve their full potential.

8.2 As detailed in the evidence, the circumstances of the grandparents, as well as the grandchildren, entail significant challenges that are severely affecting the quality of life for grandparent-headed families. The desperate circumstances of grandparents raising grandchildren need to be recognised and addressed.

8.3 Commonwealth, state and territory governments have been working together for several years to improve the lives of families involved in the family law, child protection and out-of-home care systems. The committee notes particularly the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) initiative, the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 (Framework).

8.4 Much of what the committee has inquired into is relevant to the COAG's National Framework deliberations and this report contains recommendations which are intended to help shape proposals for consideration by the COAG. The committee considers that a collaborative approach is the best means to address the circumstances of grandparents raising grandchildren and the children for whom they care.

8.5 This chapter draws together a number of recommendations that largely focus on those matters which the committee believes should be brought to the attention of the states and territories, as well as the Australian Government, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

1 Mrs Sharyne De Young, Secretary, Grandparents Rearing Grandchildren WA (Inc.), *Committee Hansard*, Perth, 6 August 2014, p. 31.

Recommendations to the Australian Government

8.6 The committee makes the following recommendations in recognition of the increasing numbers of grandparents raising grandchildren in Australia:²

Recommendation 1

8.7 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.**

8.8 The committee makes the following recommendation to improve grandparents raising grandchildren's access to Commonwealth financial assistance:³

Recommendation 2

8.9 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.

8.10 The committee makes the following recommendation to ensure that the need for grandparent advisors is being met in high-demand and rural and regional service areas throughout Australia:⁴

2 See Chapter 3.

3 See Chapter 3.

4 See Chapter 4.

Recommendation 3

8.11 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.

8.12 The following recommendation is made with a view to encouraging increased funding for legal service providers and professional relationship services:⁵

Recommendation 4

8.13 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.

8.14 The committee makes the following recommendation to enhance the provision of mental health services to grandparent-headed families:⁶

Recommendation 5

8.15 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.

Enhanced data collection and statistics

8.16 The committee makes the following recommendations to better identify the incidence and circumstances of grandparent-headed families in Australia, and to plan appropriate supports and services for those families:⁷

Recommendation 6

8.17 The committee recommends that the Australian Bureau of Statistics:

5 See Chapters 5 and 6.

6 See Chapter 5.

7 See Chapter 1.

- **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.**

Recommendation 7

8.18 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.**

Recommendations for consideration by states and territories

8.19 The committee makes the following recommendation to promote recognition of the role and contribution of grandparents raising grandchildren, and to facilitate greater awareness and understanding of grandparent care:⁸

Recommendation 8

8.20 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**

8 See Chapter 2.

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- **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.**

8.21 The committee acknowledges the role and contribution made by foster carers in the out-of-home care system. These carers are supported to varying degrees however, although kinship care is increasing throughout Australia, grandparents raising grandchildren do not receive supports and services equivalent to those provided to foster carers. The committee considers that this distinction should be eradicated on a national level:⁹

Recommendation 9

8.22 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.**

Recommendation 10

8.23 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 roles;**
- **the provision of respite services to grandparents raising their grandchildren, with a focus on enhancing and extending those services to all grandparents raising grandchildren;**
- **the formal assessment of kinship care placements within six months of the commencement of a placement, with a view to ascertaining the specific supports and services required by a grandparent raising grandchildren; and**
- **existing policies and practices relating to the priority allocation of public housing, with a view to expediting accommodation suitable to the needs of grandparent-headed families.**

9 See Chapters 3-5.

8.24 The following recommendation is made with a view to encouraging increased funding and more certain funding for voluntary support groups:¹⁰

Recommendation 11

8.25 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.

8.26 The committee makes the following two recommendations to improve educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care, and to encourage the provision of informed and sensitive supports and services to grandparents raising grandchildren:¹¹

Recommendation 12

8.27 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.**

Recommendation 13

8.28 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.

8.29 Acknowledging that a lack of knowledge prevents grandparents raising grandchildren from accessing supports and services, and disempowers them, the committee makes the following recommendation:¹²

Recommendation 14

8.30 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;**

10 See Chapter 4.

11 See Chapters 2 and 4.

12 See Chapters 3 and 6.

- **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.**

8.31 The committee makes the following recommendation to enhance support for grandparent-headed families with physical and mental health needs:¹³

Recommendation 15

8.32 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.

8.33 The committee makes the following recommendation in regards to the Framework:

Recommendation 16

8.34 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.**

8.35 To address the specific needs of informal grandparents raising grandchildren, the committee makes the following two recommendations to more consistently

13 See Chapter 5.

recognise informal care status and to improve access to justice (particularly in the federal family law courts):¹⁴

Recommendation 17

8.36 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.**

Recommendation 18

8.37 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 rearing grandchildren in the family law jurisdiction.

Senator Rachel Siewert

Chair

14 See Chapters 2 and 6.