

Grandcarers SA



South Australian Parliament – Economic and Finance Committee Inquiry into Home Care for Children and Young People

Submission from Grandcarers SA, March 2024

Introduction

Grandcarers SA

Grandcarers SA is a small 'for purpose' registered charity, supporting grandparent and other informal kinship carers (Grandcarers) who are providing primary care for a child or children. Most Grandcarers are not officially recognised as carers and therefore receive little or no government provided financial or practical support.

Grandcarers SA currently support over 1200 South Australian clients, who care for more than 2000 children, by providing peer support groups, information workshops, a telephone helpline, face to face discussions and some limited financial support.

The majority of our clients are informal grandparent carers, with 85% being female and an average age of 65 yrs.

In an effort to change government policy and legislation, Grandcarers SA advocates to both state and federal governments, and other connected agencies, to raise the plight of our clients and the many financial, practical, emotional and trauma issues faced by both the carers and the children in their care.

Our operational costs are funded through small grants received from the SA Departments of Child Protection and Human Services. This funding supports operational, office and administration expenses, four part time employees and costs associated with including about 15 volunteers.

Occasional limited philanthropic grants currently support our vehicle and our Education & Development Fund which helps Grandcarers to purchase education items for the children in their care (e.g. laptops, school shoes, sports equipment etc.).

Grandcarers SA is supported by Dr Meredith Kiraly who kindly wrote the body of this report on a pro-bono basis. We would like to acknowledge the deep knowledge and commitment of Dr Kiraly and thank her for her support in developing this submission.

About the writer

Dr Meredith Kiraly is a psychologist with over 30 years experience in child welfare practice and 15 years in research and consulting. <https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/profile/169314-meredith-kiraly>.

She has specialised in kinship care research, consulting and advocacy, and has an extensive publication record in this area.

She is currently collaborating with Mr Mike Feszczak, CEO of Grandcarers SA on a pro bono basis in a national advocacy initiative regarding recognition and support for informal kinship care families.

Further discussion

The CEO of Grandcarers SA, Mike Feszczak CEO@grandcarers.au and consultant/writer Dr Meredith Kiraly mkiraly@unimelb.edu.au would be pleased to discuss the issues outlined in this Submission with the Inquiry Panel.

Structure of the submission

This submission has 4 parts:

1. Overview of kinship care in South Australia.
2. Informal kinship care: Economic and social impact on Australian children, families and society.
3. Specific responses to the Terms of Reference.
4. Recommendations.

1. Overview of kinship care in South Australia

Kinship care is family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature (United Nations, 2010).

Formal (statutory) kinship care

Formal kinship care is care approved by an authorised child protection authority or State/Territory Children's Court. A non-means tested allowance for the costs of care is payable to formal kinship carers.

Figure 1 below shows the numbers of SA children in foster care, kinship care and residential care over the years 1997 to 2022 (data collected by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2023)). In 2012, statutory kinship care overtook foster care as the predominant form of 'Out of Home Care' ('OHC') in SA. This trend is set to continue.

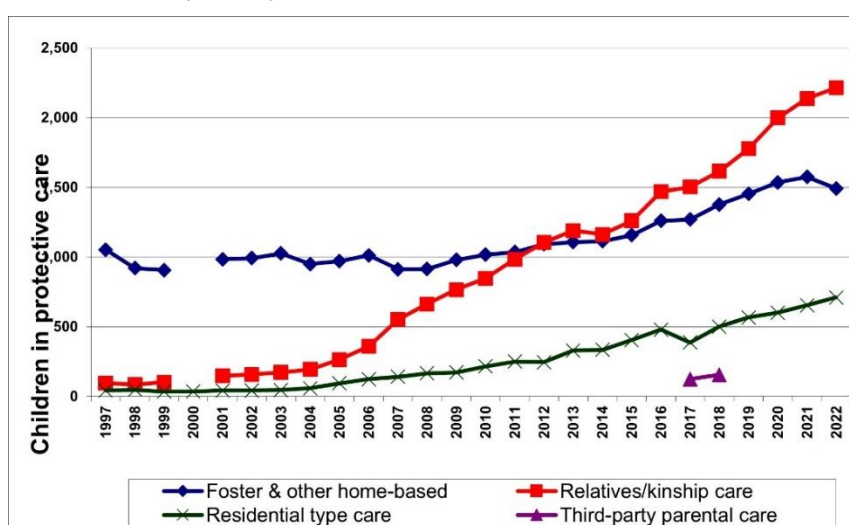


Figure 1 Out of Home Care in South Australia

The focus of attention on kinship care has been mainly on grandparent carers. While the exact percentage of grandparent carers is unknown, current best estimates suggest that around half of kinship carers are grandparents, with the other half comprising aunts and uncles, older siblings, other relatives, family friends, and members of the child's social network (e.g. teachers, care workers, neighbours, members of faith communities) (Kiraly, 2018).

Informal kinship care

An *informal kinship care arrangement* is an agreement, usually verbal, within the child's family about caring for the child, in the absence of an order from the State Children's Court or formalisation by the Department for Child Protection. The child's parents remain the legal guardians. Such care is also sometimes called 'informal fostering'.

There is no financial support from the SA Department for Child Protection for informal kinship arrangements.

There is no population-based data on the prevalence of children in informal kinship care in South Australia. However data from the national census suggests that **over 80% of all Australian kinship care families are caring for children informally** (Kiraly, Hoadley, & Humphreys, 2021). **Informal kinship carers are the population served by Grandcarers SA.**

2. Informal kinship care: Economic and social impact on Australian children, families and society

Prevalence and characteristics of informal kinship care families

The prevalence and circumstances of Australian children in informal kinship care arrangements are little known and little recognised (Kiraly, 2023).

Based on census data, UK and USA sources estimated that 95% of kinship care arrangements were informal (Selwyn & Nandy, 2014; The Annie E Casey Foundation, 2012).

The Australian census cannot provide comparable data, however a proxy figure obtained from the 2011 census indicated that over 80% of two-generational kinship care households were providing care informally (Kiraly et al., 2021). This equated to at least 100,000 children in informal kinship care in 2011, more now due to population increase.

We also know the numbers are higher than this when multigenerational households are included, figures that could not be estimated from the census. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented. Many carers look after multiple children due families' strong motivation to keep siblings together.

Children in informal kinship care are a significant cohort of Australian children.

Carer Recognition legislation

A major barrier to the support of informal kinship carers is that they are not recognised in legislation as 'Carers' under either the Commonwealth Carer Recognition Act 2010 or the South Australian Carers Recognition Act 2005. Statutory kinship carers and foster carers are specifically excluded, and informal kinship carers are not mentioned.

Informal kinship carers are thus excluded from services provided by Carers Australia and Carers SA.

Some States and Territories of Australia recognise specific categories of kinship carers as 'Carers'. Formal kinship carers are recognised in the ACT Carers Recognition Act 2021 and the Victorian Carers Recognition Act 2012. The Tasmanian Carer Recognition Act 2023 recognises informal kinship carers, but not formal kinship carers. The Queensland Carer Recognition Act 2008 recognises grandparent carers, both informal and formal, but not other kinship carers.

It is self-evidently true that kinship carers are carers. All Australian kinship carers should be formally recognised.

The South Australian and Commonwealth Carer Recognition Acts require amendment so these carers can be identified and their needs for support attended to as for other carers.

Poverty in informal kinship care

Poverty is the predominant issue for informal kinship care families, both in Australia and internationally (Kiraly, 2015, 2023).

In a literature review of research about informal kinship care MacDonald, Hayes, and Houston (2018, p.81) commented:

Financial assistance to alleviate poverty was identified across most studies as the inexorable priority for supporting informal kinship placements.

Older Australians such as grandparent carers can lose their retirement savings in raising grandchildren. Young kinship carers such as siblings and young aunts/uncles lose opportunities for post-secondary education and training, and thus experience loss of income over a lifetime. Carers in mid-life can lose the chance to own their own home and provide educational extras for children in their care such as remedial tutoring and school camps.

- Through analysis of data from the 2006 census, Hill (2013) identified that approximately 35% of Australian sole grandparent families and nearly 18% of couple grandparent families had a family income of less than \$499 per week, a relatively low income even at that time.
- In a NSW survey, Yardley, Mason, and Watson (2009) reported that over half (56%) of kinship carers were on a pension/benefit, and over one-third (36%) had a partner on a pension/benefit. One-fifth (20%) indicated that their income was low, while 22% had levels of low-medium income.

In a survey of 335 Australian grandparent carers, Brennan et al. (2013) reported that over half (56%) of the grandparent respondents were receiving a government pension or benefit. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents reported they were “just getting along”, “poor”, or “very poor”. The following quotes are from this survey.

The major challenge is financial. It is a continual battle to make ends meet.

I have no other problems with my grandchildren, I love them dearly and they bring me so much joy, but I need money.

I wish we didn't have to raise our grandchildren ... with our retirement fund.

Children growing up in poverty have poorer educational, health and socioeconomic outcomes than other children (Tucker, 2016).

The Australian policy and service environment

There is little articulated Federal or State policy that relates to informal kinship care.

- Centrelink (Services Australia) provides limited benefits to all low-income Australian families that are however far below the statutory foster/kinship care allowances payable to formal kinship carers. A small Double Orphan Allowance is payable in limited circumstances such as where both parents are dead, or one is dead and one is missing or in long-term custody.
- Child protection policy across Australia provides for minimum intervention in family life consistent with protecting the safety of children (see National framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031 (2021)). Where informal care can be effected within the child's extended family or community network, this is the preferred response.
- **Kinship carers have no control over whether Child Protection takes a matter before the Children's Court or not.** The child protection decision determines whether financial and other supports will accrue to the kinship care family, and will influence their long-range wellbeing, financial and psychological.
- Many kinship families are encouraged by child protection to initiate their own legal action via the Family Court. Such action however entails costly legal representation preventing most carers from taking this path. Action in the Family Court may secure the carers legal status but **does not lead to financial or casework support.**

- A huge weight of responsibility is placed on carers to manage complex and often conflictual family dynamics. Some community services provide access to support groups that are mainly set up for formal kinship carers, however they are not funded to provide casework service to this group. Mainstream counselling and support services do not have specialist knowledge of the complex intrafamilial dynamics of kinship families.

The current child protection policy preference for informal kinship care where possible has generated the unintended consequence of a two-tiered approach to children in kinship care. While children in statutory kinship care are provided with financial and casework support, large numbers of children in informal kinship care live in poverty without support.

Support to informal kinship care families in Australia

South Australia and Western Australia are the only States that have organisations providing dedicated support to informal kinship care families. Both services are quite limited in size and scope.

In Western Australia, the multi-program community service organisation Wanslea has a program of support for informal grandparent carers which provides support and guidance regarding the grandparent carer role, and advice about other resources and services. Wanslea also administers a State-funded Grandcarers Support Scheme, an annual payment of \$1000 per child per annum designed to help with the demands and financial pressures that full time grandparent carers experience. www.wanslea.org.au/programs/grandcarers-support-scheme

International responses to poverty in informal kinship care

The problem of financial support being provided on the basis of legal status rather than need has long been recognised in the US, the UK and New Zealand. New Zealand has made real headway in rectifying this problem. A campaign is now underway in the United Kingdom to create a national kinship allowance.

United States

Twenty years ago, a prominent kinship care expert articulated the problem of poverty in kinship care thus:

It is clear that the present mixed system of [child benefits] and foster care payments provides the least support to those in greatest need (Hegar, 1999, p.237).

In 2013, The Annie E. Casey Foundation published a report on the policy and practice implications of 'Kinship Diversion', from which the following quote is taken:

'We have to ask ourselves if the families have similar needs, why shouldn't they receive the same amount of money as licensed foster parents to meet those needs?...Diversion without support isn't good for families....' (page 13).

Poverty in informal kinship care remains in most parts of the United States.

United Kingdom

A decade ago, three British research studies all identified the need to address the lack of financial assistance to informal kinship carers.

In a report entitled *Understanding family and friends care: the relationship between need, support and legal status: Carers' experiences* (Hunt & Waterhouse, 2012, P.6), the first point under the heading Carers' messages to local authorities was:

Sort out the money. Carers want a funding system that is clear, transparent and consistent across the country. One based on entitlement not discretion, independent of the child's legal status, not means-tested, and set at the same level as the allowances paid to unrelated foster carers.

The first two Recommendations in the report entitled *The Poor Relations: Children & Informal Kinship Carers Speak Out* (Selwyn, Farmer, Meakings, & Vaisey, 2013, p.79) are:

1 At present whether kinship carers receive help in cash or kind in the UK is not related to children's needs or to the financial situation of the carers. Whole system change is needed to replace the current unjust arrangements for kinship care.

2 A national kinship financial allowance is required which is funded by central government to cover the costs of bringing up the children.

The report *It's Just Not Fair! Support, need and legal status in family and friends care* (Hunt & Waterhouse, 2013, p.177) includes a heading Deliver services which meet needs and are not determined by legal status. The second recommendation under this heading is:

2 Equalise the allowances available to carers looking after children who would otherwise be in the care system, whether they are caring informally [or] under [specific British orders], and align them with the basic fostering rate.

Nearly 10 years later (2022), Kinship <https://kinship.org.uk>, the foremost British organisation representing the interests of kinship care families, has launched a campaign for financial allowances:

#ValueOurLove. We're calling on the Government to value the love of kinship carers and take urgent action to improve support available for kinship families. <https://kinship.org.uk/> (accessed 21 November 2022).

New Zealand

Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Kin Children in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Worrall, 2005) is the first of three large surveys by the NZ Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust [/www.grg.org.nz/](http://www.grg.org.nz/) This research led to the NZ Unsupported Child's Benefit being raised to parity with the foster care allowance, as reported in the 2009 GRG Trust survey report.

The evidence gained in the 2005 research showed that kin/whanau carers who received the Unsupported Child Benefit received considerably less financial support than if that child had been placed in foster care outside the family, and that most families were struggling financially. That evidence has been a major contributor to the fact that from April 1st 2009 Orphans and Unsupported Child Benefit weekly rates have been increased to align with Foster Care Allowance weekly board rates (Worrall, 2009, p.4).

The website of the NZ Department of Work and Income

<https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/products/a-z-benefits/unsupported-childs-benefit.html>

describes the Unsupported Child's Benefit:

Unsupported Child's Benefit is a weekly payment which helps carers supporting a child or young person whose parents can't care for them because of a family breakdown. You may be able to get the Unsupported Child's Benefit if the child or young person you care for is...financially dependent on you [and] not able to be cared for by their parents.

The 2015 Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care

The 2015 Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care included a number of recommendations about kinship care, some of which related to kinship care specifically. **Recommendation 34** follows:

COAG [Council of Australian Governments] to include in the 3rd Action Plan of the National Framework [for Protecting Australia's Children] (2015-2018) a project to develop and implement nationally consistent financial and practical (including training and caseworker) support for statutory and informal relative/kinship carers. This should include:

- **Establishment of a national peak body for relative/kinship carers**
- *Accreditation and training of relative/kinship carers*
- **Increasing allowances available to relative/kinship carers, and**
- *Evaluation and development of nationally consistent best practice models of supported relative/kinship care.*

Recommendation 34 was never implemented. Grandcarers SA is spearheading representations to the (Federal) *Parliamentary Friends of Grandparent and Kinship Carers* to revisit the recommendations of this Inquiry, as well as the unimplemented recommendations of the *2014 Senate Inquiry into Grandparents who take Primary Responsibility for Raising their Grandchildren*.

3. Specific responses to the Terms of Reference

The long-term economic and social costs of supporting children in and out of home care.

The mid 20th Century move away from institutional care across Australia has clearly been positive from an economic point of view, saving large outlays on staffing costs. The late 20th Century move to favour kinship care over foster care was driven by increasing difficulty in recruiting and retaining foster carers as much as by growing awareness that where safe, children are best cared for in their extended families and communities.

It is widely believed that kinship care is 'cheaper' than foster care. This is however a circular argument, which is essentially based on providing less financial and casework support to kinship care families than for foster care.

It is harder to measure the long-term costs of providing inadequate support to children who have experienced significant trauma, and to those caring for them. Economic analyses of similar cohorts point to increased costs down the track including income support, subsidised housing, physical and mental health care, justice responses and imprisonment.

Evidence about the long-term economic and social impact of foster and kinship care, and outcomes for children and young people in foster and kinship care as compared to impact & outcomes for those in non-family based out of home care.

Kinship care has been identified at least as safe as foster care; placements are more stable, and mental health outcomes are better (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2018). Kinship care affords children a sense of normality that is important to them (Nixon, 2008). It also provides a greater chance of enduring relationships with a range of family members beyond children's nuclear families (Messing, 2006).

The burden on carers is however considerable. Most care arrangements have been necessitated by parental drug misuse, leading to traumatic experiences for children, and ongoing difficulties for both children and carers (Patton, 2003). Children who have experienced trauma frequently have mental health and behavioural challenges.

Many kinship families are dealing with complex, troubled intrafamilial relationships, including conflict with children's parents (Kiraly, 2011) that sometimes include violence (Bremner & MacRae, 2017). Contact visits are at times traumatic for all parties (Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016),

These pressures come on top of the range of practical challenges including poverty, overcrowded housing, and for many grandparent carers, health issues (Kiraly, 2011). Even when kinship care is formalised by child protection, there is evidence of striking inequality in support for children in kinship care as compared with foster care.

Informal kinship care provides the greatest number of alternative care arrangements for children across Australia. It also constitutes a model of care that eliminates the cost to the State of court processes and statutory monitoring. It is, however, risky to leave these families without recourse to financial assistance and the support of specialised services with experience in addressing the psychological and intrafamilial entailed.

Unsupported care arrangements of vulnerable children are at risk of breakdown and the attendant consequences of children's deteriorating mental health, educational delay, alienation from school, disaffection and offending.

The economic and social contribution of foster and kinship carers.

Foster carers and kinship carers share the cost of caring for society's vulnerable children with the State. Unlike residential care workers, they are not paid for their time. Care allowances are intended to cover the full cost of children's actual care (food, clothing, education, health, additional needs, recreation, travel etc) however frequently fall short.

Informal kinship carers carry the full burden of financial costs of caring for vulnerable children alone, often placing a barely tolerable burden on themselves for the sake of the children. Breakdown of care arrangements arise from the combination of financial and psychological stress involved.

Innovative successful models for attracting and retaining foster and kinship carers, including in regional areas and for respite.

Recruiting foster carers has been difficult for many years, and is becoming more so with ongoing change to women's roles in society. It has been suggested that foster care may disappear within a decade.

As residential care is progressively reduced and the pool of foster carers diminishes, more and more pressure falls upon child welfare staff to create formal or informal kinship care arrangements in circumstances of crisis rather than as planned responses. The risk of placements being made in desperation with limited assessment is significant, contrasting with the assessment and training that occurs for foster care placements.

When family members are not available to provide care, 'kinship care' arrangements are sometimes made with community members who have limited pre-existing relationship with the children in need of care.

Some family arrangements made by child protection become formalised and some do not; a large proportion of kinship care arrangements are also made by family stepping in to provide alternative care before they come to the notice of child protection.

All these informal care arrangements lack the financial and casework support they so sorely require.

Informal kinship carers are available for vulnerable children in large numbers. What is missing is a network of support under them to ensure quality and stability of care.

Innovative models of support for foster and kinship carers

In 2003, US researcher Geen (2003, p.254) articulated the key issue for the wellbeing of kinship care families as a mismatch of needs and service response:

Part of the solution to designing a public policy approach to kinship care is understanding why kin are caring for children, the needs kin have as a result, and how best to meet those needs. . . . An effective kinship care policy would better match kin needs with public support and match state intrusion and oversights with safety concerns. . . . Children in kinship care, whether informal or formal, clearly need access to health and social services to address the consequences of traumatic pasts such as specialised casework support, family counselling, mediation, therapeutic care and supervision and support for parental contact visits as needed.

Recognition of informal kinship care arrangements is critical. Financial and casework support is needed to generate a more robust alternative to statutory kinship care and foster care.

The programs provided by **Grandcarers SA** and the *WA Wanslea Grandcarers Support Scheme* provide innovative models for support to informal grandparent/kinship carers. With limited funding, however, the capacity of these programs to provide support is also restricted.

The Recommendations that follow pave the way for better quality and stability of informal kinship care arrangements in South Australia.

4. Recommendations

The four recommendations below recognise the unmet needs of informal kinship carers in South Australia and their important role in keeping children out of formal kinship care.

Recognise that informal kinship carers exist.

1. Amend the SA Carers Recognition Act 2005 to recognise all South Australian kinship carers in the definition of a Carer.

Recognition is a first step to responding to the pressing needs of informal kinship carers in South Australia.

Operationalise recognition with a small financial contribution to the costs of care.

2. Create a non-means tested South Australian Informal Kinship Support payment of \$1000 per annum per child with administrative arrangements modelled on the Western Australian government payment, however inclusive of all kinship carers rather than only grandparents.

\$1000 per year per child represents a very small contribution to the expenses of raising a child. Nevertheless, it constitutes some practical recognition of the existence of such children and the costs of their care. It would be much appreciated by SA kinship carers, as has been the case in Western Australia.

Recognise the emotional strain of caring for troubled children

3. Provide an additional \$60,000 per annum funding to Grandcarers SA to engage a 0.4EFT professional counsellor with expertise in kinship care family dynamics.

Accessible specialised counselling constitutes a cost-effective approach to support and retention of informal kinship carers, and stands to promote the wellbeing of children and reduce care breakdowns.

Promote systemic change to improve the wellbeing of children in kinship care

4. Provide in principle support to the aspiration and groundwork of Grandcarers SA to create a new National Kinship Care Organisation that would be a voice for informal kinship care families in advocating for better Commonwealth and State support.

A national advocacy organisation would begin the process of moving beyond a 'bandaid' approach to the support of children in informal kinship care, allowing attention to systemic barriers to real and effective recognition and support for these most vulnerable children.

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