

Informal Kinship Care Review

Summary Report

February 2021

Acknowledgement

The Department of Communities extends our sincere thanks to the informal kinship carers for their participation in the Informal Kinship Care Review (the Review). The carer's experiences and views have influenced the Review's recommendations.

The Department also extends our thanks and acknowledges the participation of other interested stakeholders who dedicated their time and participated in the Review.



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Executive Summary

The Department of Communities Tasmania commissioned Mr Frank Ogle to undertake a review of informal kinship care. Mr Ogle provided the Informal Kinship Care Review Report (Review Report) to Communities Tasmania on 22 December 2020. The Review has four clear Terms of Reference and delivered eight recommendations to improve the supports available to informal kinship carers.

Kinship care is a type of care where a child or young person resides with a relative or someone they already know, for example a grandparent. Non-parent care is a common practice across some cultures, but it is important to note that the term kinship care may have different meanings for different cultures.

Generally speaking, there is world-wide recognition that kinship care most closely aligns with the principles of selecting best non-parental care placement and achieving improved outcomes for children and young people who are unable to be cared for by their parent/s.

Kinship carers (both formal and informal) may experience financial, legal, physical and emotional health, social isolation, lifestyle changes, and conflict with the children's parents challenges. Notwithstanding these issues, children, young people, carers and relevant agencies have conceded a preference for kinship care (formal or informal) over other types of non-parental care, as the children have a better sense of identity and belonging when placed with kin, which leads to greater stability and connection.

Whilst formal and informal kinship carers can experience similar challenges, there are challenges unique to informal kinship carers. The Review is focussed on the needs and circumstances of informal kinship care in Tasmania. The main factor that distinguishes between the two types of kinship care is formal kinship care is characterised by formal court orders or arrangements. Informal kinship care is a private arrangement within family networks and not governed by court order/s. In such circumstances a child's parents remain the legal guardians. Accordingly, decision making for informal kinship carers can be limited. For example a grandparent may be the primary carer of their grandchild in an informal kinship arrangement but they may not be able to make some decision about the child without the parent's consent.

To identify improvements in supports to informal kinship carers, the Department of Communities Tasmania commissioned Mr Frank Ogle in June 2020 to undertake a review of Informal Kinship Care in Tasmania. Mr Ogle provided the Review Report to Communities Tasmania on 22 December 2020.

This document is an Informal Kinship Care Summary Review Report (Summary Review Report) prepared by the Department of Communities Tasmania. While the Summary Review Report contains the findings and recommendations made by the Reviewer it does not include any identifiable content arising from the case studies considered during the conduct of the Review.



Terms of Reference

The Review has four Terms of Reference:

1. recommend how an informal kinship care support and liaison service pilot program could operate; the preferred location for a pilot, and how a pilot program could better meet the needs of the relevant cohort;
2. examine the current funding to the Grandchildren Living with Grandparents Program (GLWGP) that is administered through the Department of Communities Tasmania;
3. identify the options to extend existing Tasmania Government programs and subsidies to improve support to the cohort, including the effectiveness of the GLWGP; and
4. align the components of the proposed services to the work being undertaken by the Foster and Kinship Carer's Association of Tasmania (FKAT).

Review Methodology

The review process included consultation with 25 internal and external stakeholders, a desktop review of the literature relating to all forms of kinship care and development and analysis of 28 case studies which examined specific concerns, gaps and positive outcomes experienced by Tasmanian informal kinship carers.

Literature Review and Stakeholder Feedback

The feedback from carers and external stakeholders participating in the Review is consistent with key national research findings. A summary of the key feedback is captured below.

- Backhouse and Graham (2012), and “*Grandparents Raising Grandchildren*” commissioned by the Federal Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2003, reported anecdotal evidence to suggest irrespective of location or socio-economic circumstances, a number of informal kinship carers (e.g., grandparents or other relatives) consider that they are under-valued and under-supported.
- A number of external stakeholders interviewed advocated that children in foster care, formal kinship and informal kinship care, should be treated consistently in relation to access to benefits and support services to recognise the fluidity and reality of care arrangements, and the importance of stability for the children and young people and the principle of funding following the child. There was acceptance that for informal kinship care this should require a degree of oversight involving carer registration, initial assessment and development and an ongoing review of ‘Safety Plans’.
- Historical research supports stakeholder feedback and indicates that some informal kinship carers felt let down by governments because, in undertaking what is often an unexpected role in caring for children, often with inadequate clothing, bedding and school uniforms, the carers find that any legal rights to support are difficult to exercise, and could entail actions that put the stability of placements and wellbeing of the children at risk.
- A number of external stakeholders indicated that this uncertainty, in relation to the status of informal carers and availability of support, has caused frustration. Stakeholders also expressed concern that there are occasions when an informal kinship care arrangement has arisen from a child safety concern and the child safety matter is closed by the Child Safety Service because the child’s placement is then considered safe. According to the national *Grandparents raising Grandchildren Report (2003)* this occurs with limited access to support and financial assistance, which then puts informal placements at risk because of insufficient resources to meet the child’s needs.

Current Informal Kinship Care Supports

The current supports available to informal kinship carers:

- The Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line (ARL) and Community Liaison staff based in all three regions of Tasmania. From December 2018 to November 2020 there were 220 contacts from informal kinship carers to the ARL. This accounts for 2 per cent of total contacts to the ARL between December 2018 and November 2020.
- The ARL includes non-government partner organisations, Mission Australia and Baptcare, with a Community Liaison role based in the Northern and Southern regions of Tasmania. These roles are responsible for the delivery of a component of the Integrated Family Support Services through the Grandchildren Living With Grandparents Program.
- The Grandchildren Living with Grandparents Program. This program commenced in 2011. The Review identified the program involved approximately 150 contacts each year and brokerage funding of \$15,000 per annum state-wide.
- In 2020, additional resources were made available to the Foster and Kinship Carers Association of Tasmania (FKAT) to liaise with Kin Raising Kids Tasmania to develop support, advocacy and training services for informal kinship carers.
- Commonwealth advisers are also available to assist non-parent carers, such as grandparents, who provide ongoing care for children to navigate payments and support services made available by the commonwealth government.

Review Findings

The Review made the following findings.

- The range of issues and challenges, for kinship carers and the children for whom they are caring, have been known and remain consistent over a significant period of time. While the research refers to kinship care, it is assumed the issues would be similar for both formal and informal carers. A majority of international, national and state reports and research, dating back to 2002 (DHHS, 2002-2003), considered that support for kinship carers was lacking.
- The findings and recommendations from the COTA National Seniors Report of 2003, Grandparents Raising Grandchildren, covers Federal and State/Territory Government jurisdictional issues, and are considered to be as relevant today as at that time. These, and the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee of 2014, emphasised the need for acknowledgement, recognition of kinship care, and actual assistance and support for this cohort, particularly to address key milestones in the lives of children and young people in care.
- Informal kinship care arrangements are different to formal kinship care arrangements that benefit from being framed by legal guardianship and protection orders arrangements. Informal kinship care does not have sufficient formal recognition, is not adequately acknowledged for its contribution to children's safety, the broader issues of well-being and development of children, and financial savings to Government if the alternative was that formal out of home care options would be required.
- To provide a platform for future programs, a primary objective needs to be established and articulated for informal kinship care as being "to create and maintain stability and permanency in kinship care placements, wherever possible without statutory intervention." To achieve this objective, two overarching principles are considered critical:



- Benefits and support should follow the child. External stakeholders consulted for this review considered that this would be better managed and brokered by community-based provider(s); and
 - A comprehensive strategy on kinship care arrangements (formal and informal) needs to be developed, to realise an effective and systemic shift to a child-centred approach that focuses on the well-being and development, as well as safety, and needs of these vulnerable children.
- The Tasmanian Government has embarked on long term reform to change the focus and approach in dealing with vulnerable children. This is illustrated in the Government's Strong Families Safe Kids Reform and commitment to develop Tasmania's first comprehensive, long-term Child and Youth and Wellbeing Strategy. The initiatives and current reform agenda, which expand the focus on vulnerable children, beyond safety to well-being and opportunities for them to reach their developmental levels, were considered in the review as providing the foundation for the reinforcement of sustainable and permanent change for informal kinship care.
 - While there have been positive outcomes in several ARL cases, there continues to be a level of confusion and frustration for clients seeking access to informal kinship care support through the ARL. The consistent barrier expressed through this review appears to be a knowledge gap and inconsistent awareness of access pathways to resources and programs, in relation to eligibility and relevant service contacts.
 - Informal kinship care case studies indicated priority action was taken to address the needs of an informal kinship carer within existing available supports when the ARL connected the informal kinship carer to ARL Community Liaison staff based in each region.
 - Quantifying the issue is made more difficult by the challenge to obtain accurate information about the numbers of informal kinship carers in the Tasmanian community. This is a common problem for all jurisdictions, as these arrangements are largely private, becoming visible only when serious difficulties arise. However, by examining different data (ABS population data and numbers of the Advice and Referral Line contacts, for example) it is possible that up to 1,200 informal kinship care arrangements (one or more children living with kin) are in place in the Tasmanian community.
 - Positive outcomes have been demonstrated in case studies regarding interventions from the Grandchildren Living with Grandparents Program. It is reasonable to assume a proportion of the situations have prevented children from entering foster care. However, the Review concluded there appears to be a disconnect between what program recipients report is provided by the Program compared to the feedback from external stakeholders.
 - The Review found the current funding and scope including eligibility criteria of the Grandchildren Living with Grandparents Program limits support to those transitioning into informal care, which does not recognise the reality is that care arrangements in these situations are fluid and trauma may manifest itself at various points including transitioning into, maintaining and sustaining, and transitioning out of informal kinship care.

Recommendations to Improve Support

The Review makes eight recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Establish and pilot an Informal Kinship Care Support and Liaison Service

- Establish and fund a pilot program located in the North West (or North of the State as an outpost from the ARL, dedicated to improving advice, support and referral to assist informal kinship carers navigate the complex systems and arrangements. The primary functions and responsibilities will involve a focus of overseeing and/or coordination in order to:
 - Inform policy and practice within the ARL and Family Support Services through action learning and contributing to practice review, including information changes to the Children, Youth and Families (CYF) Practice Manual.
 - Educate internal and external participants, through targeted information to understand the demographics and issues of practical concern to this carer cohort.
 - Deliver community campaigns to remove stigma and normalise informal kinship care arrangements.
- Undertake targeted audit and case review of historic cases to identify best practice approaches to inform the ARL.

Recommendation 2: Expand the eligibility of the Grandchildren Living with Grandparents Program

- Extend coverage of the Grandchildren Living with Grandparents Program; and
- Consider renaming the service to a more inclusive informal kinship care service and to build ready access, and agile and integrated family support services, by:
 - Supporting families to return to programs with targeted episodes of support;
 - Supporting transfer of guardianship and/or primary care; and
 - Extending access to a life stage approach matched to milestones in children and carers' real needs, such as early adolescence, moving into high school and then college.

Recommendation 3: Expand the availability of training and awareness raising programs

- Expand the availability of existing training and awareness programs delivered by the community sector to informal kinship carers, to build capacity across an identified range of practices and capabilities that enhances coping mechanisms specifically for informal kinship carers, such as:
 - Parenting and behavioural management training;
 - Bringing Up Great Kids Program;
 - Mediation, Conflict Resolution and Communication; and
 - Leadership and mentoring training for members of voluntary support organisations to enhance peer support in managing complexities and relationships.
- Match funding levels to enable support groups or community support providers to access these programs and resources.



Recommendation 4: Improve the availability of information and resource material for informal kinship carers

- Develop digital information that facilitates links to information to and from other agencies (state and federal) through an easy to access portal for informal kinship carers and support services.
- In the interim, provide one-off grants for voluntary kinship care support groups. Compile and distribute a fact sheet and digital information that is reliable, easy to access and uses simple language for use by informal kinship carers, covering eligibility for financial assistance and services, access to service providers and peer group contacts; and undertake peer support and mentoring of informal kinship carers.

Recommendation 5: Review relevant Child Safety Service Client Files

- Undertake targeted audits and case reviews to examine the decision making rationale of Child Safety Service cases where the classification of children in care with grandparents, from the same situation and same parents, may be presently both informal and formal.

Recommendation 6: Examine policy options to improve support

6A. Explore government policy options and definitions that might be available to improve access to informal kinship carers, who are the responsible adults and have primary care responsibilities to meet the needs of children in their care, to improve support in:

- Education and schooling;
- Health and professional counselling; and
- Household and travel expenses.

6B. Consider options for extending criteria to existing Government programs to improve the Government's support to informal kinship carers, including:

- Ticket to Play Program to children living in informal kinship care arrangements
- Concessions on the cost of Tasmanian Government services including electricity, water and public transport
- Relevant training available to formal kinship carers
- Companion Card to informal kinship carers, entitling informal kinship carers and children in their care to free tickets at participating venues and events; and
- Quarantine a portion of funding for community based respite services for informal carers.

Recommendation 7: Consider changes to the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997*

Examine the requirements for informal kinship care to be referenced as a specific carer cohort in need of support services and assistance in the *Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1997*; and to embed the objective of ensuring children remain connected to their families, communities and culture “to create and maintain stability and permanency in the kinship care placements”.

Recommendation 8: Continue national advocacy

Tasmanian Government Ministers and Officials continue to utilise national forums to actively advocate for kinship care including prioritising the following key recommendations from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Senate Enquiry (2014):

- Undertake a comprehensive review to establish the additional costs associated with all kinship care and predict the savings if these children were required to enter foster or residential out of home care;
- Establish a national registration system to better identify kinship care families to whom financial assistance and support services should be provided;
- Children in kinship care have health cards in their own right and a Medicare card in their own name held by the primary carer; and
- Review the allocation of Commonwealth Grandparent Advisor positions, under the Grandparents Advisor Program, to ensure high demand and regional area needs are adequately met.

Conclusion

In closing, the Informal Kinship Care Review acknowledges the valuable role of non-parent carers and the significant role they play in a child's life. The Review also formally acknowledges the resilience of all kinship carers given the day to day challenges they can experience.

The Recommendations flowing from this Review are focused on both short and long term strategies designed to improve and better respond to the needs of informal kinship carers in Tasmania whilst recognising the reality of timeframes to achieve change.



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