

**Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust New Zealand**



*Te Tautoko i nga Mātua Tupuna, me nga Mokopuna.*

*Te Ao mai rano, aianei, a muri ake nei.*

*Supporting grandparents/kin and grandchildren.*

*Our past, present and future*

# **Raranga: Weaving the Strands Together and Moving Forward**

**Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust NZ**

**Response to the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children**

**Friday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2012**

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# Raranga: Weaving the Many Strands Together and Moving Forward

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background Research to Submission

- 1.1.1 The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust's response to the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children builds on our two research documents (produced 2005 and 2009), other papers and discussions with various groups of grandparents/kin, Trust staff and volunteers.
- 1.1.2 We look at some of the key issues (and how these often become compounded) and identify ways to weave together currently very fragmented and inadequate resources to most sensitively and effectively weave a protective structure that will gently nurture our grandchildren and provide all the opportunities they need to develop full and rewarding lives.

The submission stresses that the multifaceted needs of grandparents/kin carers and the vulnerable children they care for must be better understood to ensure policies, services and resources are designed to accommodate this diversity. Quotations (not sourced) are representative of the feelings and concerns of many of our members and have not been edited.

### 1.2 Grandchildren being Raised by Grandparents/kin in the legal context and legislative framework

- 1.2.1 The object of the Children Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989 (the Act) is to “promote the wellbeing of children, young persons and their families and family groups by – (*inter alia*) establishing and promoting, and assisting in the establishment and promotion of, services and facilities within the community that will advance the wellbeing of children...that are – (*inter alia*) accessible to... children and young persons and their families and family groups.”<sup>1</sup>
- 1.2.2 The guiding principles to be applied in exercising the powers conferred under the Act include the principle that “wherever possible, the relationship between a child or young person and his or her family, whanau, hapu, iwi and family group should be strengthened and maintained.”<sup>2</sup> And furthermore the principles in section 13 specifically provide that the “primary role in caring for and protecting a child...lies with the child’s...family...and that accordingly a child’s family...should be supported, assisted and protected as much as possible;<sup>3</sup> and: when a child...is considered to be in need of care and protection,...wherever practicable, the necessary assistance and support should be provided to enable the child...to be cared for and protected within his or her own family...”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Refer section 4 (a) (ii)

<sup>2</sup> Refer section 5(b)

<sup>3</sup> Refer section 13 (b) (i)

<sup>4</sup> Refer section 13(d)

- 1.2.3 These principles and objectives are concordant with the State's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the well recognised principle that, subject to being in the best interests of the child, a child's relationship with his/her family, identity, name and family relations should be respected and preserved by the State.
- 1.2.4 It is a well-established fact that, since the Act came into effect in November 1989, there has been a major shift from conventional foster care for children and young persons in need of 'care and protection' to placement with whanau/extended family, including grandparents/kin.
- 1.2.5 As is also well known, in addition to placement of children by the State in accordance with the Act, grandparent/kin care very often occurs informally rather than formally. As a result of these frequently informal arrangements, where the kin carers may or may not have parenting orders for the day to day care of the children and/or guardianship status, the exact number of children in extended family/whanau care, including grandparent care, is not known.

However at February 2012, the membership of the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust stood at 5,024<sup>5</sup> grandparent/kin carer families representing a significant number of grandchildren. It is conservatively estimated that the number of children in full time grandparent/kin care is well in excess of 10,000.

- 1.2.6 As evidenced by the experiences of grandparents raising grandchildren, whether the care arrangements are made through placement by the State under the Act, by Care of Children Act 2004 parenting order or by virtue of an informal full time care placement with the grandparents by agreement within the family group, the practical and financial support needed by the children cared for by grandparents is currently insufficient to adequately meet their physical, educational, mental and welfare health needs.
- 1.2.7 It is a tenet of this submission that the State must do more to support these particularly vulnerable children in terms of providing them with access to free and subsidised health and welfare services and providing greater financial support in the same manner as that conferred upon children being raised in foster care families. To do otherwise is in contravention of the State's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Membership number as at February 2012. Membership numbers have increased by 9% in the past 12 months from 4,606 in February 2011

<sup>6</sup> Refer: Article 2 being the State's obligation to respect and ensure and take all appropriate measures to ensure the rights set forth in the Convention to each child without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his/her legal guardian's status. Articles 3 and 4 being the State's obligation to take all appropriate legislative and administrative and other measures to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his/her wellbeing. Article 23 being the State's obligation in recognising the special needs of a disabled child to extend assistance, free of charge wherever possible. Article 26 being the State's obligation to recognise every child's right to benefit from social security and the grant of benefits taking into account the resources and circumstances of the child and their caregivers.

### **1.3 Role of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust NZ (GRG) in New Zealand**

- 1.3.1 Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (GRG) Trust provides support services that help to reduce stress and promote the wellbeing of both the grandchildren and the grandparents/kin carers who are primary caregivers. The Trust supplies a handbook dealing with all issues faced by grandparents/kin carers in their role and a “Help for Kinship Carers” brochure on financial matters which was produced with GRG Trust, Work & Income, CYFS, IRD and Studylink.
- 1.3.2 Clearly, for grandparents raising their grandchildren, the primary issue is one of feeling very committed to the children; to ‘seeing them through’ irrespective of any financial and other support received. An unknown percentage of grandparents/kin opt to bring up their grandchildren without any additional assistance whatsoever. But, for many others, this responsibility brings unexpected and difficult life changes, unattained dreams and changes in family dynamics, health status and economic vulnerability. This results in stress and uncertainty. And, for those grandparents/kin who care for many years, the passage of time does not mean the task becomes easier.
- 1.3.3 **Raranga** serves as a most applicable symbol for our response: the gradual weaving together of many strands of information, insight and knowledge. The spirit of raranga evokes feelings of spirituality, of togetherness and of unity, the belief that the past is also the future and the present, an eternal circle.
- 1.3.4 The art of weaving is not only sacred but it literally weaves together all the people of the tribes and their ancestors, ensuring that the tribes remain strong and that memories are kept alive. Weaving aids the physical and mental abilities of the craftsmen and the preparation of the necessary materials is a test of both patience and determination.
- 1.3.5 Our response presents a number of practical recommendations to ensure that grandparents receive the support they need to engender better outcomes for the children in their care. The best place for these vulnerable children is with the grandparents/kin who love them. If they are to recover from their trauma, their kin families need, at the very least, the same qualitative conditions as foster families caring for unrelated children.
- 1.3.6 Thus, with the needs and interests of many vulnerable grandchildren at the centre of our thinking, GRG Trust now urges action to:
  - i. **Prepare the necessary materials:** Tackle the financial and support inequity issues that affect grandparents/kin raising grandchildren;

- ii. **Ensure the grandparents/kin and those who support them remain strong so that all their knowledge and expertise is kept alive and utilised:** Redesign the ways in which relevant government departments work together to meet current and emerging challenges. This would not only streamline many current processes but would also lead to a far more efficient use of time, energy, information, financial and any other resources;
- iii. **Involve everyone in weaving the strands together:** Create a more responsive, protective and nurturing framework of support for those vulnerable children placed in grandparent/kin care in the future.

## **2. Key Issues**

### **2.1 On-going Financial Stress:**

- 2.1.1 The 2005 study commissioned by the GRG Trust, '*Grandparents and other Relatives Raising Kin Children in Aotearoa/New Zealand*', revealed the precarious financial status of many of the grandparents/kin. Alarming statistics emerged in this report: total family income being less than \$20,000 p.a. for 22% of respondents and less than \$30,000 for 25% of respondents. Solo carers, who represented 38.6% of participants, were particularly financially compromised. Several described a struggle to feed themselves and their children adequately. One carer stated a wish '*not to go to bed hungry, [for] clothes that fit, money to survive and not to have to worry about work and income and the situation of my daughter*'.
- 2.1.2 It is important to recognise that for the vast majority of children in grandparent/kin full time care; they are there because of abuse and or neglect experienced while in the care of their parent(s). These are not children who come to their grandparent's care from loving and nurturing home environments. Given their often-disturbed backgrounds, the majority of grandchildren experience emotional, behavioural and learning problems or additionally have some physiological disability and/or mental illness.

Our 2009 study, '*Grandparents and Whanau/Extended Families Raising Kin Children in Aotearoa/New Zealand: A view Over Time*' reports that children being raised by their grandparents have significantly higher levels of behavioural and emotional disturbances than children in the overall NZ population; 74% of children coming into care at ages 3-5 were cited as having psychological or behavioural problems.

However these children are less likely to receive treatment than those in stranger foster care. Specialised help for mental health (e.g. PTSD), psychological and learning difficulties can be hard to access. '*My grandson can't get extra help at school until SPELD test him – and that costs \$400 which I just don't have.*'

- 2.1.3 There are increasing instances of children being uplifted by CYFS and placed directly with grandparents with no financial assistance. If these children were placed in foster care then all the necessary supports and services would immediately be provided

both for their emotional and financial wellbeing. But CYFS are not doing the same for grandparents.

*'Suddenly I had 3 small grandchildren to look after, no bedding, etc. Couldn't apply for UCB as was told their criteria is expect to be caring for these children up to 12 months. But I don't know how long I will be caring for them. My only income is the Unemployment Benefit. What do I do?'*

- 2.1.4 In April 2009 the Unsupported Child Benefit was raised to the same base weekly payment afforded to unrelated foster carers. However, while this has assisted grandparents/kin raising grandchildren, these kin carers are not currently eligible for the ancillary payments available to foster carers for clothing, health/medical and education costs even though the children in their care are no less traumatised or less deserving of this assistance.

Consequently many grandparents/kin still face extreme hardship meeting the costs associated with caring for children who need ongoing specialist medical, therapeutic or educational help as a result of the abuse and trauma they suffered before their grandparents/kin stepped in to care for them.

- 2.1.5 Children being placed by CYFS in foster care now receive a thorough Gateway Assessment of their health and education needs prior to placement. Foster carers are then provided a comprehensive Home for Life support package.

A very recent survey of 694 GRG members revealed that only 129 children in grandparents' care (18.6%) were currently under CYFS and, therefore, eligible to receive this support package – 81.4% of extremely vulnerable children living full-time with their grandparents do not receive this support. Gateway Assessment and the Home for Life package should be available to all grandchildren/kin being raised by grandparents/kin whether they are under CYFS or not.

- 2.1.6 This disparity between grandparents/kin raising grandchildren (who have obtained Parenting Orders under the Care of Children Act 2004) and foster carers is, at times, perpetuating extreme hardship among the very carers most in need. To continue this discrimination seems to be wilfully blind to the hardship currently facing many such grandparents and their very vulnerable grandchildren.

## **2.2 Grandparents have very diverse needs:**

- 2.2.1 Grandparents wish to be able to speak to people who can help and understand but may be reluctant to engage/re-engage with CYFS when under stress.

They often feel mis-judged. '*We were looked on as overreacting to his behaviour'. 'Obviously they saw us as part of the problem and judged us accordingly'. 'Our relationship with CYFS was damaged from the outset and remains unbearable. They take exception to being challenged and we feel blacklisted. The review panel process has been a complete waste of time in our opinion and is not independent'.*

Many feel unsupported. ‘CYFS offer you the earth if you will take on the grandchildren but, once you have them, the department doesn’t come to the party’.

- 2.2.2 Problems are also experienced with other government departments, e.g. WINZ (where an understanding of benefits and eligibility varies from office to office): *‘I just won’t go near WINZ. They don’t even begin to understand the emotional and financial complexities of caring for grandchildren, no acknowledgement of our difficulties at all. They can be very rude. The whole culture of WINZ and the ability of its staff to understand the challenges I deal with every day require huge improvement.’*
- 2.2.3 Caring for grandchildren can have a negative impact on grandparents’/kin’s health status, especially when the child has psychological/behavioural issues. *‘This whole story has caused us to have health issues and has made us unable to work - this in turn makes financial matters very difficult.’* The effects of aging on the caring role and changes in health status, with grandparents’ health likely to be becoming more fragile and issues of mortality, are also well evidenced in our research reports. Grandparents tell of lowered energy levels, tiredness and caring for seriously ill spouses and disabled children.
- 2.2.4 When Grandparents are faced with the prospect of having to raise their grandchildren they are often confronted with unhelpful and destructive attitudes, obstacles and what they see as threats.

It is unhelpful to be asked “will you take these children into your care....if you don’t, they’ll be split up and placed in foster care”.

While, in fact, this may be the cold reality, it is often presented to, and experienced by, grandparents as “emotional blackmail” – a decision having to be made on the spot and often with no warning.

Grandparents often experience a somewhat insidious attitude right down the line – i.e. that they **should** care for their grandchildren/kin without much, if any, assistance. This is particularly the case in the first year of care where the grandchildren don’t qualify for the UCB.

There is so often a sense of shame/whakama – “finger pointing” on the basis that the grandchildren are in their care as a result of their bad parenting, and that the situation is actually their fault/responsibility.

- 2.2.5 Grandparents/kin face many personal issues – grief, loss, shame, depression. They are plunged into their grandchildren’s lives often without the tools necessary to raise children in a contemporary environment. Many aspects of their grandchildren’s lives are foreign to them – computer literacy (many do not have computers or internet access), school curriculum (for assisting with homework) and exams (NCEA) as examples.

- 2.2.6 With respect to the Unsupported Child Benefit the requirement that “the applicant is likely to be the principal care giver in respect of the child for at least 1 year from the date of application for the benefit” often causes unreasonable financial hardship. While there is no issue with a requirement for some sort of relevant criteria, grandparents/kin can find themselves in a position where they are looking after grandchildren well in advance of formalising the longer term care arrangements with no financial assistance available due to the current “1 year” criteria.

### **2.3 Legal Aid creates further financial hardship and other difficulties:**

- 2.3.1 Access to reliable information about legal rights, guardianship, etc, and assistance with Legal Aid (when seeking permanent guardianship or facing ongoing legal challenges by the parents) is often a problem. Specialist legal language and definitions is often confusing for grandparents involved in the court process whether in receipt of legal aid themselves or where other parties are granted legal aid and they are not. If granted Legal Aid, grandparents are required to repay the legal aid payments, thereby causing ongoing hardship.

Those that are not able to access Legal Aid are placed under heavy stress in not only raising the grandchildren but also to the point where some grandparents can lose their homes and any savings or resources set aside for their retirement to pay court costs, in circumstances where they have little or no ability to earn an income because of their age and stage in life. *‘We have used all our savings and had to remortgage our house. It has sucked us dry.’*

- 2.3.2 Applying for a parenting/guardianship order can be a gruelling process. *‘The family court process was not only expensive but brutal, cumbersome and dehumanising. It left us feeling more battered than before.’*
- 2.3.4 In the judicial process, grandparents are often under threat from the parents of the child(ren) and in particular those parents for whom the care of the child(ren) is primarily a financial incentive and they are seeking either to maintain or re-establish their rights to a benefit payable in respect of the child(ren), whether or not it is in the best interests of the child(ren).

### **2.4 Assessing information/Lack of links between government departments:**

- 2.4.1 Grandparents often don’t know what to look for, may be unsure of their entitlements. Information may not be reliable, consistent or easy to obtain. There are no/very few links between the information provided by CYFS, WINZ, Courts, NZ Law Society, etc. Even though GRG Trust has produced a ‘Help for Carers’ guide (available from WINZ) and provides this to all members, still the front-line staff and case managers do not know, or understand, this information. This is why GRG has had to employ a Benefits Advocate to work on behalf of our stakeholders.
- 2.4.2 Accessing appropriate information from government agencies is often difficult with conflicting advice and information received from front-line staff. Information about what financial assistance is available is complex, unwieldy, erratic and incomplete,

sometimes contradictory. '*It takes a lot of persistence and energy to find a way through the maze and then you find you are not eligible for extra help anyway*'.

- 2.4.3 There is often an inconsistency in the information received/decisions made from office-to-office and employee-to-employee. This causes un-necessary distress to care givers.
- 2.4.4 There is also a high turnover of social workers and other staff in some regions. Furthermore, any information that is online often won't reach a lot of grandparents due to lack of internet access. There is a need to explore ways of bridging the information gaps and improving communication.

## **2.5 Educational progress:**

- 2.5.1 The 2009 GRG research report also reveals that many children in kinship care appear to have serious school performance difficulties compared to their peers who are not in the care system. '*He's very uptight a lot of the time...and just can't seem to learn anything.....They are going to have a specialist come down and test him because he seems to have a plateau and that's it.*'
- 2.5.2 The special needs of some children mean that they need special educational assistance with help being accessed from the school: Special Education services, private tuition, etc.

There is a need to look at ways in which government can provide support for them to remain at school for as long as possible, e.g. being encouraged into "Gateway" programs (work experience plus supported learning) to give them survival skills in the workplace. The alternative is that the children often leave school without the self-esteem and skills required to find a job and end up on the street or on the dole.

- 2.5.3 Recent proposals to cut back special educational support staff (teacher aides, administrative staff, etc) are of great concern to GRG. This proposed reduction of teaching support staff will further overload the remaining teachers who are already working to capacity. It is essential that school support staffing levels are not reduced and that, in fact, additional resources be committed to areas such as "reading recovery".
- 2.5.4 Schools can play an important role in helping to manage the needs of all children raised by their grandparents. It would be very helpful if one staff member could be assigned to a support/liaison role for all custodial grandparents/kin-carers.
- 2.5.6 We strongly support the recommendation made by Fostering Kids that financial support should continue to be provided to grandparents for those young people who are succeeding in tertiary education.

## **2.6 Housing Issues:**

- 2.6.1 Housing issues (overcrowding, problems with paying increased housing costs, having to sell the family home to free up capital or remortgage in order to repay legal fees) often occur as a result of taking on the full time care of kin children. '*We were offered a two-bedroom house in a multi-housing complex area. No way was that ok as, prior to all this, I had owned my own home*'.
- 2.6.2 GRG's 2009 research study of 205 grandparents/kin carers who had been caring for at least 4 years revealed that 18.5% needed a larger house, 14.6% had moved to another district to ensure the family's safety or for educational reasons; 4.9% had moved to a State house for a variety of reasons and 21.5% cited other housing issues. The Trust is currently aware of some grandparents living in garages and others having multiple children in one room.
- 2.6.3 It is suggested that the family/ home/ situation is scrutinised by CYFS and/or WINZ before the placement is considered and that this is done with the future of the child as the prime motivation.

## **3. What is needed to weave the strands together and move forward?**

- 3.1 **A financial package for grandchildren being raised by grandparents/kin carers that is equivalent to that afforded to non-related foster carers:**

- 3.1.1 **Attach the funding to the child:** The need for all funding under all circumstances (UCB, Disability and Child Disability Allowances, Legal Aid, etc) **to be attached to the child** is frequently mentioned. Some form of a financial package (with all allowances being non-means and non-asset tested and non-taxable) would ensure that grandparents/kin do not lose their homes or exhaust their retirement savings and finite resources to the detriment of themselves and their own health in their elderly years.

This would enable them to feel more secure and more able to provide whatever is necessary to preserve the wellbeing of the family/whanau and maximise stability in the lives of their grandchildren. This is also a way by which extremely vulnerable children could be tracked.

- 3.1.2 **Grandchildren should have all the same benefits accessed by a foster child,** including medical and dental services, psychological and counselling services, special education tutoring/remedial support (for slow learners, gifted children or those who are behaviourally disturbed), clothing and school uniform allowance, accommodation advice and support, respite/day/after school care, etc. Full assessment of family, education and higher levels of support are imperative if kin placements are to be maintained.

Grandchildren being raised by grandparents/kin should receive a thorough "Gateway" Assessment of their health and education needs as well as a

comprehensive “Home for Life” support package; irrespective of whether they are under CYFS or not.

- 3.1.3 Ways the financial package could be administered:** One way in which such a financial package could be administered is for payments (including clothing and uniform allowances) to be made by an appropriate NGO according to agreed criteria (e.g. when court papers are lodged for those many grandparents who have no such formal arrangement, or CYFS’ verification that the placement is expected to last at least 12 months).

This should also cover instances where the grandchildren/kin are being raised by grandparents/kin on an informal basis; i.e. without the involvement of CYFS. An ID card could be held for the child to access all health and education benefits. The family doctor would assess health needs and Education Department (at school level) tuition needs. In the case of a gifted child, an offer of an educational opportunity would be assessed (and paid for by WINZ with annual reviews).

- 3.1.4 Legal Aid/Assistance:** When faced with legal challenges, grandparents should have access to reliable information about legal rights, guardianship, day-to-day care and contact and support generally throughout the whole process. The current 20-minute time allowance for legal aid interviews needs to be extended as situations are often very complex and more time is needed to adequately ascertain the factual and legal circumstances and status of the child’s case

Legal aid should be available as part of the financial package attached to the child (as outlined in 3.1.1 above) when grandparents need to access the court to gain parenting and care orders to protect the said child. Judges need to be more proactive in preventing ongoing custody challenges and courts should not be used as a weapon to cause hardship for grandparents.

- 3.1.5 Unsupported Child Benefit (UCB):** The qualifying criteria for accessing the UCB relating to the “1 year” period should be amended to reflect the fact that care givers may need access to financial support from the day they take on the caring responsibility which may be well in advance of the date that the arrangements are “formalised”.

## **3.2 Development of an Improved Communication and Support Strategy:**

- 3.2.1** Section 13(d) of the CYFS Act states that all support should be given to enable the child to be protected and cared for within his or her own family. Clearly this should apply to all kin carers with the State providing the resources and supports needed to ensure a healthy ‘fit’ between all aspects of the child’s environment (whilst recognising that one ‘fit’ does not suit all).

Grandparents raising grandchildren should be able to access a range of information/resources to help them deal with the financial, legal, emotional, social and practical issues of raising grandchildren. Information also needs to be two-way

with government and non-government organisations understanding and appreciating the issues and individual situations.

- 3.2.2** While we have not fully explored the mechanics of this, we believe that there is a need to develop an individual communication package for each child so that all appropriate people (schools, GP's, etc) have the information they require.
- 3.2.3** A 'one stop shop' service that can inform grandparents of all specific available financial and legal rights/supports as well as directing them to other appropriate services and supports such as support groups, early childhood services (e.g. PORSE), Barnardos, Parentline, SPELD, Skylight, etc. This is exactly what GRG Trust is doing now through its phone service and print resources, but the organisation needs to be better resourced to further expand this service to meet the needs of increasing numbers of grandparents and kin-carers needing its services.
- 3.2.4** Policies and practices need to be developed and urgently actioned so that **grandparents raising grandchildren are recognised as a customer group that needs assistance accessing government services** and making the links across different government agencies and/or departments.
- 3.2.5** Utilise current developments in the Wairarapa as a model for other areas. The Masterton WINZ office (in response to a need identified by Social Development Minister, Paula Bennett) recently assigned a dedicated case worker (the Integrated Services Coordinator who works one day **per** week out of CYFS) for grandparents raising grandchildren. This would indicate recognition of grandparents being a **special customer group** (as referred to in 3.2.4 above).

For Wairarapa GRG Support Group members, who have experienced many disappointments about the service they had been getting, this move has already begun to '*dispel some of these disquiets.*'

- 3.2.6 Establish a position for a National WINZ Grandparents Advisor** (comparable to the dedicated Grandparent Advisers in Centrelink offices in some States in Australia) to help grandparent carers access WINZ payments and services to which they are entitled, and provide referrals to other relevant services. This would involve a reciprocal agreement.

### **3.3 Implementation of a Support Package for Grandparents/Kin Raising Grandchildren**

A support package for grandparents/kin raising grandchildren should be put in place covering:

- 3.3.1** Counselling and therapeutic support for their own issues – grief, loss, shame, depression
- 3.3.2** Respite care that recognises the physical, emotional and financial toll that is taken on our grandparents/kin

- 3.3.3 Support from schools that recognises that grandparents/kin raising grandchildren need special advice and guidance and assistance on curriculum, exam structure, paying for school fees/stationery/trips etc.

#### **3.4 Build on GRG Trust's Efforts to Date:**

The GRG Trust has been operating for 12 years and in that time has built a strong reputation for offering a wide range of services to its member families. In this time the Trust has increased its member families to 5,024 and developed a high level of knowledge and expertise on the subject of grandchildren being raised by grandparents. The Trust makes information flow a priority and has already made recommendations (on its own or in conjunction with agencies such as the Families Commission) to government regarding some of the above issues. To date there has been virtually no response from government in this regard.

### **4. Recommendations**

In the spirit of Raranga it is recommended that all “grandchildren being raised by grandparents/kin carers” families be valued and strengthened through the following policy and practice changes.

#### **4.1 *Prepare the necessary materials***

The financial and support inequity issues that affect “grandchildren being raised by grandparents/kin carers” families should be dealt with by:

- 4.1.1 Instigating a thorough assessment covering all needs (social, emotional and physical health and wellbeing, education, etc) of each and every grandchild in care (whether formally under CYFS or not) similar to the Gateway Assessments provided for foster children; developing a comprehensive “Home for Life” support package for every grandchild;
- 4.1.2 Attaching a financial package to each grandchild (with grandchildren having all the same benefits accessed by a foster child and all allowances being non-means and non-asset tested and non-taxable) with free legal aid being available as part of this package;
- 4.1.3 Adequate housing and other necessary resources being provided where grandparents assume a long-term care role. Grandparents able to access an interest-free loan to increase housing size or to upgrade vehicles to a size that safely accommodates the whole family;
- 4.1.4 Respite care (still an unaddressed issue) being made separately available to both grandparents and grandchildren when needed;
- 4.1.5 CYFS staff being given culturally appropriate training in regard to the particular issues involved in placement and ongoing support of children with special needs in the care of grandparents;

- 4.1.6 Culturally appropriate learning opportunities relevant to grandparent stakeholders to build personal strengths/coping skills being specially designed and offered to all grandparents/kin carers who are caring for abused and/or neglected children.

**4.2 Ensure the grandparents and those who support them remain strong so that all their knowledge and expertise is kept alive and utilised**

The ways in which relevant government departments work together are redesigned to meet current and emerging challenges by:

- 4.2.1 WINZ formally recognising grandparents/kin raising grandchildren as a specific customer group by assigning a dedicated worker for grandparents raising grandchildren in each regional office and establishing one WINZ ‘Grandparent Advisor’ at a national level;
- 4.2.2 The establishment of equivalent ‘National Grandparent Advisor’ positions within CYFS and Ministry of Education (having an overview of all their respective departmental resources that are available to the grandchildren);
- 4.2.3 The development of specialised child-centred policies and practices for all those children being raised by grandparent/kin/whanau carers.
- 4.2.4 A support package for grandparents raising grandchildren should be put in place covering counselling and therapeutic support, respite care, understanding the education/school processes and opportunities, support in accessing computers and internet access as examples

**4.3 Involve everyone in weaving the strands together**

In addition to the above recommendations a more responsive, protective and nurturing framework of support for those vulnerable children placed in grandparent/kin care in the future is further created by:

- 4.3.1 All National Grandparent Advisors having a specific mandate to liaise closely with GRG Trust staff, thus ensuring the much-needed two-way flow of information;
- 4.3.2 Acknowledging that the GRG Trust has the profile that can draw grandparents, service providers, advocates, researchers and policy makers together to maintain the national network and concerted and ongoing efforts that will be required to foster these changes. The Trust will need to be sustainably resourced to do this – e.g. by strengthening its information/support service through increased funding for Field Officer and other positions.

**5. Acknowledgements**

This submission has been prepared by Diane Vivian, Chair, Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust; Geoff Lawson, CEO, Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust and Diana East, Field Officer along with input from Field Officers Nola Adams, Sharon Lee and Tricia Corin and the GRG Board of Trustees.

Most importantly we must acknowledge the input from our members who are the unsung heroes in our world.

They are the ones who toil daily to create a better life for their beloved grandchildren.

They deserve our help, love and support. We need to do better by them.

**Me awhina tetahi ki tetahi – let us work together!**

## **Appendix 1**

### **Additional Comments**

In the course of preparing this submission we received many comments, suggestions and ideas that we would like to share:

#### **1. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCROC)**

A review should be undertaken to assess the extent to which New Zealand policies and practice meet the standards defined in the Convention with regard to the “basic rights for children under 18”.

#### **2. Policy/Procedures**

- i. That where CYF or an NGO is involved the Partner to the Parent should have a background check
- ii. That if the biological father or mother is awarded the child/ren through the Court then a full police check be undertaken
- iii. That at Family Group Conferences and Judicial Conferences, only the biological parents should be involved. Partners (girl/boyfriends)should not be involved
- iv. That parents be required, by Court order, to undertake training programmes (for example covering drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, employment, parenting) where deemed appropriate or necessary and that this requirement be linked to access time and certification
- v. That children who have been uplifted by CYFS and placed with grandparents/kin should receive **immediate** financial assistance against reasonable criteria
- vi. That where children are removed by any government agency, CYF, the Police or any NGO, any payments that are being made (from a benefit or Working for Families or any other source should be paid from the removal date to the main care giver that the children have been placed with until such time as a FCG has been held and/or court orders obtained.
- vii. Parents should be given very strict guidelines about what the children can be told about their future – as set out in a Court Order as an example. Any new changes in the children’s circumstances should be advised to the care giver before the children are advised.
- viii. That it be mandated that where children are uplifted by the Police on a family violence call out CYF immediately undertake to obtain Care and Protection Orders relative the family/whanau carer where the children are residing. Without this parents are able to uplift the children from the residence where the children reside or from school/childcare/early childcare education centre. Temporary orders should be

obtained as an interim measure to meet the care, safety and protection requirements of the children

### **3. Education/Schools**

- i. That for grandchildren being raised by grandparents/kin and receiving the UCB, funding be made available (possibly through the schools) to cover school uniforms, fees, stationery and trips