

"Retired" but happy grandmother Viv Robertson often does a 12-hour day with her extended brood: Brynn, Keeley and Riely Robertson (front), twins Dominic and Oliver (rear) and baby Abigail Burkhardt.



The best thing about grandchildren is that after hours of happy chat and storybooks you can hand them back and head home to blessed silence and a G&T. Except, as JENNY CHAMBERLAIN discovers, grandparenting is changing, getting tougher, more demanding. For one battling band the familial ties are more like manacles. Welcome to

## The Grandparent Trap

**A**round age 50 a ritual started among the Westlake Swans — the women's crew I used to row for. At our North Shore reunion dinners photos are flourished and the score updated: Lyn, Robyn, Noelene, Pauline, Kay, Pennie, Jan and Jenny: nil; Liz: one; Kay and Brenda: two apiece. All eyes turn admiringly to Viv Robertson, 56, (above) who's acquired six grandchildren in six years: three-month-old Abigail, two-year-old twins Dominic and Oliver, Keeley, two, Brynn four and Riely six.

Awed, we listen to "retired" Viv's working week: nappies, meal preparation, music group, kindy pickups, baby bathing... it all sounds exhaustingly familiar. Some days she leaves home at 7.30am arriving back at 7.30pm to find husband Grant "patiently waiting".

But Viv, who nursed for six years and helped Grant run the family business for 20, is in grandma heaven. She has all the fun of confident, experienced mothering without the yoke of responsibility. "I'm fortunate. I'm still young. I retired early at 50 and I'm





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bouncier and fitter than six years ago. I'm doing what I love."

The two young families — belonging to son Scot and daughter-in-law Ngarangi and daughter Rachael and son-in-law Viggo — are now her priority four to seven days a week. Wednesdays are free but she'll give them up too if needed. Weekends at the beach house often entail taking grandkids so their parents can have time out. Viv counts herself privileged that her involvement is welcomed, that she can bond with her grandchildren in these crucial early years and lighten the load for her children.

It wouldn't occur to the Robertsons that their support translates into a sizeable economic contribution to two households and therefore the nation's GDP. They're just happy doing it.

Their storybook grandparenting causes heart pangs for other Swans with grandchildren overseas and an altogether different

anguish for those in sole income households, with demanding jobs and/or elderly dependants. For us this level of supergran support is dreamsville — yet it's increasingly what modern parenting requires.

Viv Robertson envisages resuming golf, bridge and genealogy three years from now — when the five older grandchildren are at school. She and Grant will travel. "I'll be as free as a breeze," she laughs.

Or will she? Will the Robertsons find themselves in just as much demand when/if all four parents return to the workforce and turn to their supergrands for after school and holiday backup? In fact, given their youth and health, it's not inconceivable this big-hearted couple will, during their late 70s, actively participate in the raising of a third generation.





South Taranaki grandmother Ngaraina Brooks (centre) and husband Doug nurture four generations including daughters Rhegan and Kaylee and their children Mheiajn and Ethan.

And for some less fortunate grandparents, as we shall see, the 70s is when a very different kind of grandparenting begins.

What's certain is that grandparents' significant economic and social contribution is currently unquantified. There are no statistics indicating their indirect contribution to GDP, in fact no-one bothers to count their input at all. According to Adele Quinn, Christchurch-based Statistics New Zealand census data output manager, the 2001 census doesn't even address the question of being a grandparent.

Given their increasingly crucial input into society the dearth of research is curious. A Wellington Age Concern spokesperson says grandparent issues "are not a prime focus of ours". Judith Davey, director of Victoria University's New Zealand Institute for Research on Ageing, had a recent Marsden Fund application for research into grandparenting turned down.

A ray of light has been unexpectedly shed on the work of this invisible army by Hamilton-based demographer Janet Sceats who runs Portal Consulting. Among Sceats' research interests are New Zealand fertility patterns and the compatibility between motherhood and career. She was commissioned in 2001 by the National Institute of Population and Social Security in Tokyo to research the policy implications of low fertility in developed countries. Japan's low 1.4 children per woman fertility rate (ours is two) has its government worried.

Sceats' research revealed, almost by accident, how important

it's becoming for parents to have healthy grandparents to share child-raising and how suddenly this need has emerged.

Everybody knows, says Sceats, about the "quiet revolution" — the number of young New Zealand mothers returning to the workforce — but even she was startled to discover it happened within a single generation. In 1975 about a quarter of women whose youngest child was under school age had returned to the workforce. By the 2001 census that had almost doubled and women are doing it sooner.

In the past, explains Sceats, women tended to wait until their youngest child was at school before going back to work part-time. "The really interesting phenomenon is that 58 per cent of women aged 20 to 29 are taking almost no time out. They're going back before their baby is one and increasingly going back full time. That raises issues about who is going to look after the children."

Another "quite upsetting" trend, says Sceats, is increasingly young professional women aged 30 to 34 are choosing not to have children — indicating New Zealand may be heading towards the entrenched low fertility Japan, Spain and Italy are experiencing.

It's an individual choice which has serious national implications: fewer young working adults to support growing cohorts of elderly.

Comparing her observations with fellow demographers in Australia, England, Wales and Japan, Sceats found, despite cultural differences, two common grandparental themes emerging: the growing importance of having young, fit grandparents close by to free mothers to return to work and grandmothers as the key

PHILIPPA GUTHRIE



mechanism permitting young urban professional women to risk embarking on motherhood.

Given the high cost of childcare in New Zealand, the lack of tax relief and subsidies, working mums who place their babies in the care of strangers can end up with almost no money in hand. "The availability of the grandmother to provide childcare can make or break matters," says Sceats.

**G**randparental geographic proximity, their relative youthfulness and health are becoming economic and social imperatives. Frail, lavender-scented old ladies aren't much use to hard-pressed working mothers.

Eight years ago Auckland architect Jane Aimer designed a town house to be built next to her family home in Remuera for her parents, Joan and Hugh Aimer. The closeness permitted the senior Aimers to continue the childcare support they'd been giving Jane, and husband Paul Kelly, since their first child, Nicholas, now 16, was born. Aimer says she, her two sisters and brother were raised to believe "we could have any career we wanted to".

Childcare for all 11 grandchildren of the four Aimer offspring — who all live near each other — was Joan and Hugh Aimer's contribution to ensuring this happened. Jane, who says she "didn't cope very well" with staying home and child-raising, would drop her pyjama-clad children off every morning and her parents always had breakfast waiting.

Hugh Aimer was a "fantastic help", fixing equipment at Parnell and Orakei kindergartens and the couple joined a Parnell young mums coffee group. When Hugh Aimer died in 2002 among his mourners were many mums for whom the couple had acted as surrogate grandparents. Joan Aimer, now 80, is still involved with raising the youngest grandchild.

Reports Sceats: "One woman said to me, 'Who else can you ring at 7.30am and say, 'Mum, I've had a terrible night, the baby has a fever, I can't take him to creche and I've got an 8.30am meeting'? My mother would be there in a heartbeat.' We are almost going back to an earlier generation where grandmothers were really actively involved in bringing up grandchildren."

Much of course hinges on age group swings: postwar parents, who had their children young, make young useful grandparents but baby boomer late starters may — if their children continue their pattern of delayed fertility — be a bit had it by the time grandchildren appear. "It means you can't necessarily look to the previous generation as role models," says Sceats.

Wellington relationship consultant Suzanne Innes-Kent says children need grandparents as much as ever but what's changing is grandparents' circumstances: "Families are scattered, grandparents are working to a much older age, there's all the pressure to keep young. There's no point where grandparents are actually let off the hook."

Younger grandparents may end up on several hooks: working, caring for elderly relatives, parenting and grandparenting. New Plymouth grandmother Ngaraina Brooks, 48, models her own grandmothing on the woman who raised her — her great-grandmother Rangimarie Wairangi Toro Hetaraka.

The third child in her family, Brooks was adopted under the whangai system by her great-grandparents. Rangimarie and Toro raised her in the family homestead in Okaiawa (south Taranaki) where they had already whangai-ed at least five other grandchildren, nieces and nephews. "I was the last of a line. The homestead was always full of whanau and our gardens were big enough to feed all my great-grandmother's children and her mokopuna. I think

this was my preparation for the grandmother role. When we have family gatherings now, although I'm not the eldest, I am the one they gravitate to."

For Brooks, providing 21st-century style childcare support for working offspring within the traditional Maori extended family structure works well. Four generations, including her great-uncle Pat Toro, 89, live harmoniously in her farmhouse in the heart of South Taranaki countryside. Brooks is a learning skills tutor at the Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki and juggles her working day round her husband Doug's shiftwork so they can care for four-year-old Ethan, the son of their single daughter Kaylee.

The Brooks' childcare frees Kaylee to work, continue studying for her degree and stay off the domestic purposes benefit. The Brooks' elder daughter Rhegan, also single, at home and tertiary-educated, is currently full-time mothering 15-month-old Mheiajn.

Brooks expects to help look after Mheiajn when Rhegan too returns to work. The mother of five children herself, she knows she'll eventually be grandmother to many mokopuna and will look to the memory of her kuia — Rangimarie — to show her how. She will teach them Maori and encourage them to "really appreciate elderly people... Treasure them because they are your link with the past."

Does she ever feel put upon? Does she dream of having her life back? "Sometimes I do. It's such a busy household that sometimes I think, oh, why are you doing this? And then you reflect on it again and you know it is for your mokopuna, you're doing it for the future, for them."

Brooks says when the pressure comes on her daughters talk about building their own houses in the next-door paddock. "They'll leave home eventually and then a few hearts will be broken."

**I**deally, whether you're a picturebook and playdough, full-on gran, or a squeeze them in around work, golf and Barossa Valley wine tours type, grandparenting should be primarily a support role: cheering encouragingly from the sidelines as your children sally forth into parenthood.

What happens to grandparents when drugs and alcohol, violence, abuse or mental illness render their children unfit to parent their grandchildren? As society's ills dismantle family life, more and more grandparents are falling into the second time around parent trap. Far from escaping home at bath-time, they are being left literally holding the babies 24/7.

At life's tail end, when strength and resources are limited, this form of grandparenting can be a life-sentence.

Diane Vivian's brick house on a hill in the North Shore suburb of Birkenhead looks like any other orderly, hospitable New Zealand home: flowers round a sunny patio, a trickling fountain and a swimming pool. Inside: generous rooms, big windows, panoramic views, a spotless kitchen and comfortable furniture.

Vivian, 53, an energetic blonde with a smoky voice and a piercing gaze has become a beacon of hope for a growing band of battling grands. She formed the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust in 1999 following a conversation in a carpark outside a North Shore access centre. That day she found herself talking to other struggling grandparents and realised she wasn't alone. These were ordinary grandmothers like her — who'd successfully raised families and mostly already had grandchildren but who had had one child go badly off the rails.

These grandmothers were raising abused, neglected and traumatised grandchildren and coping with Child, Youth and Family (CYF) social workers, court appearances and their own



health and financial problems with minimal community and government support.

Convinced they were the tip of an iceberg Vivian advertised in her local paper and her phone “never stopped ringing”. The Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust now has 2000 members caring for an estimated 4000 grandchildren. Vivian spends 30 to 60 hours a week writing newsletters, lobbying, and listening to heartbreaking stories. Totally unpaid.

The stories are all versions of her own — distressing, sometimes sickening scenarios: grandchildren discovered starving and filthy with drunk or drugged parents in cold houses; phone calls by concerned neighbours to CYF; sudden appearances of daughters beaten by violent boyfriends with frightened grandchildren in tow; these same daughters bolting back to the same violent men at the first opportunity; daughters constantly moving to escape unpaid bills; benefits squandered on drink and drugs; grandchildren neglected, beaten, confused, sexually abused...

These stories remain largely untold in public. Grandparents in this situation don't talk for fear of further raising the ire of their own children and thereby placing the grandchildren in more peril. “I've had grandparents who have been beaten by their children. I've grandparents who have had to go into safe houses. They're threatened with violence and rape, have their washing slashed on the line... some live in constant fear.”

The final scene has one of two endings: the grandparent, unable to bear the suffering of their grandchildren, arrives, scoops up the kids and drives them out of danger. Or a CYF social worker, with grandchildren in tow, arrives on the doorstep of an elderly widow, or a retired couple who long ago exchanged the family home for an easy-care unit. There isn't usually a shred of furniture, clothing or equipment necessary for raising kids in these grandparental homes. There is rarely the budget either.

**W**hen Aucklander Sally James, 69 (names altered to protect the children), first took her three grandchildren in eight years ago, she had the support of her retired husband and her younger daughter and, at 61, was still physically up to looking after them. James's older daughter Kim — the children's mother — was in a long-term de facto relationship with a controlling, violent man — the children's father. He physically and psychologically abused Kim and his children but Kim seemed incapable of leaving him or standing up to him — despite the fact that before she met him she'd been intelligent, strong-minded and had run her own business.

The Jameses offered Kim and children sanctuary numerous times but, says Sally James, Kim always went back — behaviour which she now recognises as battered woman's syndrome.

Drugs, alcohol and violence were features of the relationship from early on but Kim finally lost any remaining ability to control her life and protect her children when, as a result of a beating, she suffered a brain haemorrhage. As Kim sank into memory-loss and alcoholism her partner continued to abuse his children. CYF finally intervened when the oldest grandchild, then seven, received a beating from her father which left her with bruises covering her face and body. Following a doctor's checkup and a visit to Starship children's hospital, CYF placed the little girl in the care of her grandparents. Two weeks later, following the father's arrest for assault, the two boys were also placed with their grandparents.

It cost the Jameses \$8000 in legal fees to secure custody of the three children and they gave up any hope of a quiet retirement.

In the intervening years both Sally James' husband and younger daughter have died — losses for which she has had no time to grieve. She has developed diabetes and suffered a heart attack. Her determination to keep the children together, with her, in the only safe family home they have known — and to prevent their father regaining custody, which he has threatened to do — has not diminished, but her strength to cope with three lively youngsters (now aged 14, 12 and 10) is running out.

James' retirement savings have all gone and she battles to keep going on her superannuation and the unsupported child allowance which, as a grandparent raising grandchildren, is the only benefit she's entitled to.

Despite the fact she is doing exactly the same job as a foster parent, but alone and on fewer resources, she receives lower benefits. Foster parents receive bigger board payments for children they care for, plus an array of extras including weekly pocket money, clothing grants, Christmas and birthday gift allowances, medical and counselling expenses, holiday grants and assistance with dental bills and incidental school expenses. They also receive training and the support of an established national organisation.

Based on the April 2003 CYF caregiver schedule, if James was fostering her three grandchildren she would be receiving a total of \$487.03 per week and would qualify for all the extras too. She would be younger, healthier, almost certainly employed, or have an employed partner or husband helping to support her. As an elderly, sick, sole grandparent raising two grandchildren she receives a bare \$311.33 unsupported child allowance, with no extras.

By comparison, a single woman supporting just one nine-year-old on the domestic purposes benefit would receive approximately \$324 per week.

Because she owns her own home — and that's about all she owns now — Sally doesn't qualify for legal aid to pay a lawyer should the father of her grandchildren attempt to regain custody.

James' grandmothering instinct drives her — despite her difficulties — to keep the children together rather than separated and shunted round a series of foster placements.

It seems extraordinary that she, and thousands of others like her, should be penalised for doing this.

It's quite common, says Diane Vivian, for grandparents to take the children in, say nothing and try to cope without claiming any financial help. If they are awarded custody and guardianship through the courts and start receiving unsupported child allowance, Winz ensures the biological mother doesn't continue receiving the domestic purposes benefit. Explains Vivian: “Mum gets angry. She wants her money [source] back. Does she really want the children or does she want the money?”

Biological parents will then do and say anything to get the children back and extraordinarily usually have no trouble accessing legal aid — crucial financial help which grandparents are generally not entitled to.

Says Vivian: “Your marriage may not survive, even after 40 years. Your health may go downhill and at times the stress will bring you to your knees. You lose your retirement, the joy of being a real grandparent and go back to nappies, nits, homework, children who are severely challenging and broken sleep.”

**V**ivian was born and raised on Auckland's North Shore, has been a geriatric nurse aid, a community volunteer, ran a Herne Bay video store and was president of the Video Retailers' Association for five years. For eight and a half years she has been a consumer





Steel-willed grandparent advocate Diane Vivian with her girls Danielle (left) and Rachelle. She can't figure why foster children and their caregivers get suitable help and grandparents who face the same problems don't.

representative for the Video Film Labelling Body — screening films up to M classification on the large television in her sitting room prior to their release in video stores.

In 1999 she and husband Erin, a fencing contractor, suddenly found themselves responsible for raising two little girls — the daughters of a difficult foster child. Danielle, 10, and Rachelle, 11, are half-sisters — the offspring of two fathers and a foster daughter who the Vivians had cared for from age 14. They have three adult children of their own — all parents now — and three biological grandchildren. They fostered a second child and this second foster daughter now has a small son — their third foster grandchild. At one time they were raising five children under their capacious roof. If you combine their biological and foster offspring they have parental ties to 11 individuals and have clocked up a good deal of parenting and grandparenting experience — all of it tested to the limit by Danielle and Rachelle's mother.

This foster daughter, now 32, was a handful from day one. She has had three children to three different partners, a history of instability and undesirable and destructive behaviour — the full extent of which Vivian, to protect her granddaughters, will not divulge here.

The Vivians had only patchy contact with the girls during the

years their mother and her second partner moved around the country — always to the best house in the best street, “until the bailiffs arrived”, says Vivian. Sometimes one or other or both the girls would be deposited with the Vivians for a few days.

In 1999 the foster daughter and children moved from Nelson to the North Shore, swiftly followed by her partner. Following reports of violence, child neglect and abuse CYF's Takapuna office uplifted the children and put them into Barnardos' emergency care.

“CYF rang us and said will you take the children? It's the hardest thing you can ever imagine. We were finally free. We were going round the country buying antiques. We had a Saab convertible. We thought hey, this is it. My husband and I talked and talked and talked and we decided no. We had had the mother and gone through 18 years of hell. We felt we'd done our bit for society. We said no, we can't do this any more. It's going to kill us.”

A CYF social worker was picking the girls up from the home, running them to school and kindy, collecting them at the end of the day and keeping them in her office until 5pm. The girls were frightened, confused and upset.

In the midst of all this, to give the girls a treat, Diane took them home for a weekend to watch her niece compete in a jazz ballet competition. They had a wonderful time and on the



Monday morning Diane — struggling to keep her emotions in check — dropped them off at school and kindy.

“That afternoon there was a knock at my door. There stood the social worker with these two little girls. They had their bags packed. They were so excited to see me again. She said, ‘I’m sorry Diane, we don’t have any beds left, you’ll have to keep them.’ The look on those children’s faces. I couldn’t shut the door. That’s how it came about. Then came hell.”

Danielle and Rachelle’s mother accused the Vivians of being evil people who had never cared for her, or her children. Diane Vivian — in her work for the Video Film Labelling Body — was accused of showing pornography to the girls. (Films rated R13 and over are actually handled in Wellington.) She found herself being grilled by social workers.

“All of a sudden *you* become the problem. You have to stand up in court and prove your integrity. Excuse me! I had to go to all my friends and get affidavits saying we are of good substance, of good character. This is so wrong. I have had two grandparents ring me this week saying this is too hard. We can’t do this any more.”

Vivian gave up her unpaid video retailers’ presidency. She says a lot of grandparents have to give up paid employment because their grandchildren are so traumatised. “I couldn’t even go to the bathroom without these girls beside me. If they lost sight of me they would scream hysterically. They couldn’t hold a knife or fork, didn’t stay in bed at night and were terrified of wind and rain. They had to be retaught even basic skills from scratch.” It’s been, says Vivian, “a completely life-altering experience. My husband and I haven’t been out together alone for five years.”

Vivian found friends and acquaintances couldn’t cope with the dramatic change in her circumstances. “I felt isolated. Friends of 40 years disappeared because I had these two out-of-control children who knew things beyond their years. Who used the most offensive language. Many times I wanted to give up.”

Five years on and \$5000 in legal fees later things are going fairly well, though the Vivians’ daughter Kelly says she wishes her parents had never fostered Danielle and Rachelle’s mother.

Vivian says her biological grandchildren don’t miss out on her attention because they are still only babies and she will ensure that, as they grow, there will be enough of her to share around. “But Kelly looks at the horror of what we have been through and sees it continuing through another generation.”

In terms of raising Danielle and Rachelle, Vivian feels her role is much closer to mother — “albeit an old one” — than grandparent. The girls are settled in school and she’s made it a policy to be honest with them. “My girls are very aware of what has happened in their lives and how. I believe in telling kids the truth but only up to their level of understanding. They are proud that Nan’s helping other grands who are raising grandchildren. We went to the South Auckland GRG Christmas party and there were 70 grandchildren there and 49 grandparents. My little one said to me, ‘Nan are all these children being raised by their grandma and grandpa?’ I said yes and she said, ‘Boy, things must be really bad’.

“One grandmother I was talking to had a wee baby of what I thought was nine months. In actual fact he was 18 months. He had a scar — from being thrown by his stepfather — that ran from the centre of his head up to the crown and snaked back round his ear. That little baby had to learn to feed and crawl again and here were his grandparents teaching him.

“You will never know by looking at these children — and my girls — that they carry scars but the scars are there.”

Both Danielle and Rachelle are bright. Danielle at six couldn’t

hold a pen, form a letter, recite a nursery rhyme and had rarely been to school. Today she is in the top group in her intermediate school class.

The Vivians have custody and shared guardianship of Danielle and Rachelle but the girls no longer see their mother.

Why then do these damaging scenarios drag on and on before someone intervenes? Partly, says Vivian, because human beings stubbornly cling to the hope that biological parents will get their act together, emerge from their fog of addiction and dysfunction and begin parenting. But mostly it’s because these families are transient, making it “difficult for a grandparent to keep a constant eye on what’s happening. Ours moved every two months over a period of two years — 12 moves in all.” Grandparents are also reluctant to step in because they know they’re not really up to raising a second set of children.

The crunch comes when the situation is serious enough for CYF to get involved, the court issues a care and protection order and the children are taken out of the parents’ home and placed in 28-day care.

**V**ivian believes her membership represents perhaps half the grandparents in New Zealand who are officially in this situation. Data from the 2001 census indicates New Zealand has 6060 kin carers — that is family members caring for children — of whom 4416 are grandparents. There are no figures for how many children these grandparents are raising but Vivian estimates, by multiplying the figure by New Zealand’s two child per woman fertility rate, they are responsible for around 10,000 grandchildren. She stresses this is a very conservative estimate.

By comparison approximately 5000 New Zealand children are in stranger foster care, with all their education, food, clothing and medical costs paid for by the government. But there would be a lot more — with a corresponding cost to the state — if government policy had not changed in the late 1980s.

Jill Worrall says a major change in foster-parenting and child welfare policy occurred with the 1989 Children, Young Persons and their Families Act. Worrall, a grandmother, former foster parent and foster care social worker, was a founder member of the New Zealand Family and Foster Care Federation when it was established in 1976. In February 1996 she published *Because We’re Family*, a thesis on kinship care covering the particular plight of grandparents raising grandchildren.

The thesis contains many moving passages from family accounts but since she completed it, says Worrall, the situation’s got worse and help — in the form of realistic benefits and an agency dedicated to looking after the interests of this invisible but very needy group — has not been forthcoming.

The 1989 act sets out a hierarchy of placement options for children of unfit parents and family tops the list. During the 1970s, explains Worrall, 53 per cent of children in state care were Maori and most were placed with Pakeha foster parents. “You’d place them and they’d get into foster care drift — going from family to family.” For every five years in care children had an average 6.5 placements. These children tended to lose their identity and constant moving increased their sense of insecurity and rejection and resulted in institutional abuse, sometimes far worse than the situation they’d been removed from.

Maori leaders calling for the return of Maori children to their whanau spurred the change of direction — combined, says Worrall, with significant downsizing of the welfare state from



1984. This shift from foster (state) to family (kin) care mirrors similar changes in the UK.

"The state couldn't afford what it was costing to keep children in foster care and by placing children with family they cut the foster care budget."

Unfortunately — but predictably — the new act made no provision for supporting grandparents. The assumption seemed to be that blood ties somehow would solve everything. "Government should be saying we will pay as much as it costs to keep these children supported in these families. Instead they are saying the state shouldn't have to move in and pay. Until there's a crisis [the state] doesn't want to know."

"At one level the act appears to be working," says lawyer Kate Woodd, who is voluntary legal advisor to the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Trust and a trustee. "More and more children are being parented within the family by grandparents or other kin but the burden has shifted and financially the support is not there."

It was while Woodd was working as a Family Court lawyer in Henderson, West Auckland, from 1996 to 2001 that she became aware of the "staggering" number of grandparents in dire straits. "These were good citizens, who'd worked all their lives, saved and had pretty good family situations but had just one child who'd gone off the rails. They were dealing with drugs, alcohol, glue sniffing, fetal alcohol syndrome... things they weren't prepared for."

These grandparents came to Woodd for help in getting custody and in most cases weren't eligible for legal aid. Woodd began to recognise a pattern: while CYF was involved with settling grandchildren with grandparents extra resources such as counselling, psychotherapy, respite, clothing were freely available. But once settled CYF would "write that child and family off the books" and no further follow-up would take place.

CYF also has a tendency, says Woodd, to encourage grandparents to make application for custody via the Guardianship Act 1968, instead of the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act. "This absolves the agency from taking any action themselves."

"CYF would say you're the best person to have the children, go and see a lawyer. CYF realised the cases were serious but weren't putting priority on them because they could see

there was a person in the family who was reasonably secure."

This, says Woodd, saves a few public dollars at the outset but grandparents often use retirement savings to fund the legal work thereby running up large legal bills. Woodd has been stunned at the legal fees grandparents spend on custody cases — the longest case known to her lasted 11 years with fees of \$240,000.

Legal costs soar partly because there's nothing to prevent biological parents making repeated court applications challenging custodial positions or access arrangements — irrespective of which act they're made under. "It's never a done deal. Even when the final custody order has been made they can keep coming back," says Woodd.

"Even when custody is obtained the family and its dysfunctions and abuse do not go away. Without support, without therapy for the children, grandparents get worn down. The day they say, 'I'm too old, I'm not well enough to deal with this, it's up to someone else' is a very very sad one. It means they've lost hope and the children have lost their family."

Woodd believes CYF which is "stressed, stretched and run by burnt-out social workers" is part of the problem: "It's a dying monster which needs to be completely deconstructed." She says CYF's core services should be contracted out to specialist organisations which should be compelled by legislation to deliver.

In May 2002, Woodd sent an urgent open letter to all MPs outlining her concerns and calling for grandparents raising grandchildren to have recognition, benefit parity with foster parents and access to legal aid. Most MPs wrote back an acknowledgement — nothing more.

Grandparents raising grandchildren have gutsy Diane Vivian speaking up but what they really need is a champion in government. Right now it's hard to see where their phoenix will arise.

Commissioner for Children Roger McClay sees his office as the true advocate for the trust and says he feels "quite passionately about it because I'm a grandparent myself". But McClay retires in September and there's no word yet about his replacement.

He says he's met an Auckland woman in her 70s caring for a brand-new baby. "I don't know what's going to happen to that baby in 10 years." Quite.



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McClay says over time government has not given families as much help as the 1989 act indicated it might. He has hopes the new Families Commission will “develop policy” and has been instrumental in setting up an across-party children’s caucus for MPs interested in children’s issues.

The Families Commission was a key condition of United Future’s support for the minority Labour-led government. It will be set up by July 1 2004 and is well-resourced with funding rising from \$2.4 million in the first year to \$9.2 million in the fourth year and beyond — considerably more, as McClay points out, than his funding (\$2.5 million a year).

But it seems unlikely this new body will specifically champion grandparents raising grandchildren. Its vague, elastic brief is to advocate for families generally, encouraging debate and “promoting, stimulating, commissioning and publicising research”.

Diane Vivian and her trustees are pinning their hopes on United Future MP Judy Turner, 46, mother of three aged 16 to 21 and former foster parent herself. Turner admits she’s a novice in the House and sounds nervous about the weight of expectation resting on her power to make a difference. A former part-time teacher at Whakatane Intermediate School and community worker for Ohope Christian Fellowship church, Turner got into parliament on her third attempt on United Future’s party list in 2002.

Certainly Turner’s heart is with GRG. She has raised the issue in the House, has had other MPs approaching her about grandparents in difficulties in their electorates and says she’s on track to put some pressure on those who have real power.

But in reality this nice MP “on a learning curve” is still figuring out which end of which thread to grasp as she plunges into the legislative and policy tangle surrounding family issues. As soon as she looks at seeking benefit parity with foster parents for grandparents, “I come up against what is the legal status of these people? I’m beginning to wonder if guardianship is what I’ve got to start with. Things can be pretty slow to move around this place and I find it quite frustrating.

“The best thing I can do immediately is get some kind of dependable benefit and allowance paid to them and get them access to legal aid.”

The key will be finding out how many children there are being raised by grandparents. It would be simple then to calculate how much “they would cost us if they were in foster care”. Which just might spur the government into action.

As Turner says, Diane Vivian’s grands aren’t asking for much. “Just enough so that it doesn’t break them.”

“Resistant” is how Grandparents Raising Grandchildren legal advisor Kate Woodd describes Steve Maharey’s attitude to the trust and its gutsy grands. Maharey delegated responsibility for Child, Youth and Family to Ruth Dyson in the May 16 Cabinet reshuffle but, as Minister of Social Development and Employment, he remains lead minister on the trust and its issues — mainly because they are so wide-ranging.

Certainly it seems, despite the groundwork GRG has done with him and despite his inclination to be well-disposed (he describes Diane Vivian as “wonderful”), Maharey really hasn’t quite got it yet. He doesn’t perceive grandparents as a distinct group within the broader context of kin-caring (other family members caring for children) and he rejects the notion that old age, poverty, isolation and ill health give their situation special urgency. “At most meetings I’ve been to most grandparents are

quite lively and young. You get 40-year-olds who routinely — because of drug and alcohol abuse — find themselves looking after their grandkids.”

The trust says the reason Maharey is so cold on the issue of benefit parity with foster parents is because he is afraid such an initiative would open the floodgates on claims. Diane Vivian says Maharey told her categorically at a 2001 meeting with MP Ann Hartley that there would be no more funding. Maharey denies this: “What I told them was we had to go through the process of making sure they were well informed about their entitlements”. To him the problem is not that grandparents can’t manage on the unsupported child allowance but that many of them are unaware they are entitled to it and so are not coming forward to claim it.

And he does in fact worry that bigger benefits would trigger a claims grab: “Other caregivers are going to see any movement by government towards more money as the signal they should be approaching us and then you’re talking about sizeable sums.”

How much would it cost to give grandparents parity with foster parents? Maharey estimates about \$8 million a year.

One thing he does admit is that this newly-visible and fast-growing gang of grands represents a worrying trend: “Families fall apart more often in New Zealand which is a frightening thing. It means we are going to see more of what you are talking about.”

So what’s the way ahead? Is a stand-alone agency the answer? One which deals directly with struggling grandparents and helps them sort out their problems? An official version of the GRG in fact? Maharey says the government “wouldn’t countenance a stand-alone arm of state dealing only with grandparents and grandchildren”. A better way would be to “build up the capacity of the network that Diane Vivian runs”.

Vivian spends as much time as she can raising awareness by speaking to groups like Probus, on maraes, to gerontologists, hospitals — any organisation which may have a shred of influence.

Maharey gave GRG a small amount of administrative money in the 2002 budget: \$11,250 of government funds annually for four years. Vivian is accountable and writes an annual report to CYF which rings her regularly “to see what we’re doing”.

The money covers some expenses: Vivian’s phone accounts, website and postage costs and reprinting the trust’s booklet. “We are just squeaking by.”

Vivian is keen to step up her activities however because she’s worried monthly newsletters are not reaching her grandparents — mainly because support groups in poorer areas don’t have money for photocopying and postage — “another way these grandparents are held in isolation with no information”.

Beefing up GRG into a fully functioning support agency is the ideal solution, she says. Among other things “we could organise courses for grandparents that reflect their needs”.

But the most urgent worry is how much longer can she keep advocating for this increasingly desperate group of people.

If these children flow back into the foster care system the state will have to pick up the tab. It seems only logical to give support and assistance to grandparents now to prevent that happening.

Vivian simply can’t figure why foster children and their caregivers get suitable help and grandparents who face the same problems don’t. “These children are severely disturbed and can’t access help. Are some of them going to be the child-killers of tomorrow? Unless something is done the answer is yes.” ■