Summary
Carers play a vital and usually hidden role in supporting families and individuals. Their work provides a major underpinning of Australia’s prosperity, but they need greater acknowledgement and support. There are many aspects to the issue of better supporting carers, but on the basis of first-hand consultations with a large number of carers over the past 1-2 years, Families Australia wishes to focus attention on two aspects: (i) grandparents who act as primary care givers for children and those who act in child care roles, and (ii) barriers to workforce participation by carers of children with disability and/or ageing family members. We make 16 recommendations to better support these people.

Recommendations
To better assist grandparents in their various roles as carers, Families Australia recommends that:

- A national grandparent information service (such as a 24-hour telephone line and/or a website) be established, which provides information about financial assistance, family law and other legal matters and referral to local services and supports. This ‘one-stop-shop’ would assist grandparents who, for example, unexpectedly find themselves in primary caring roles.

- Grandparent liaison officers be placed within child protection and other support agencies to act as a contact point for grandparents; this would benefit grandparents, in particular those from culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous backgrounds, as well as other vulnerable grandparents who may be unfamiliar with, or who experience difficulty in navigating, government systems. This model could be extended to include all Centrelink Offices, as in the Western Australian model.

- Emergency or discretionary payments from Centrelink or other State/Territory government agencies be provided to assist particularly necessitous grandparents in cases where children are placed in grandparents’ care at short notice.

- To ensure that grandparents who provide primary care receive the appropriate income support payments, strategies could be developed to address cases where Centrelink recipients claim child-related income supports when they are not caring for the child (in other words, where “the money does not follow the child”).

- A review of Legal Aid income assessment processes for grandparents providing primary care of grandchildren be undertaken, so it is based on disposable income as opposed to
assets; this could lessen the disadvantage that some grandparents face in accessing legal assistance.

- Innovative ways be examined to provide information about grandparent carer eligibility for the Family Tax Benefit, to help grandparents access this benefit in greater numbers.
- Options be explored, such as the use of ‘open adoption’ and increased use of high quality foster care, to reduce pressures felt by some grandparents that they are obliged to take their grandchildren into their care.
- A program, within the National Family Relationship Services Program, be developed which specifically targets the needs of grandparents to enhance the usefulness of the FRCs for grandparents and their grandchildren. FRCs could also play a role in the prior assessment of grandparents’ capacities to cope with the caring role before children are placed with them. Dispute resolution services should be encouraged to include grandparents in parenting plans, as this may help to ensure that grandchildren have contact with both sets of grandparents after a family separation.
- In the context of the current review of the requirements placed on people to demonstrate that they are actively seeking work in return for receipt of public unemployment benefits, that grandparents who are primary carers and foster carers continue to be exempt and that foster carers who are between placements for short periods are also exempted.
- Further research be undertaken into the differing needs of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse grandparents to fill a gap in current understanding; this may lead to the development of specific interventions to assist these groups.
- Improving the Internet website interconnectivity between the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Centrelink and Family Assistance Office to help to improve grandparents’ understanding of and access to services and supports.
- The provision by local councils and other community organisations of information materials about free, local activities grandparents can do with their grandchildren to assist grandparents when they are providing child care.

To help overcome participation barriers, Families Australia recommends that:

- **Service provision**: The Federal Government should develop strategies to enhance access to, and the quality of, aged and disability services. These strategies should ensure the greater integration and resourcing of services.
- **Workplace flexibility**: The Federal Government should encourage employers to ensure greater access to the full range of flexible work practices (that is, beyond part-time work) for all carers (that is, beyond the current focus on child care). In addition, employers should be encouraged to work towards greater consistency of implementation by managers across their organisations.
- **Financial supports**: The Federal Government should commit to increasing the level of financial supports for employees who are concurrently caring for an aged dependent and/or a person with a disability to enable real choices to be made about work and care.
- **Legislation**: The Federal Government should commit to introducing a Family Responsibilities and Carers’ Rights Act, as recommended by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.