

Wanslea

Evaluation snapshot:

Retreats as a model of respite for grandmother kinship carers

June 2024

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Table of contents

1 Acknowledgements

2 About Wanslea's Grandcare service | Who are grandparent carers?

3 Wanslea's wellness retreats for grandmothers | Retreats as respite

4 Evaluation of the retreats | Methodology

5 Key findings: importance of access to the retreats

6 Key findings: strengths of the retreat model

8 Key findings: positive impacts of the retreat

10 Andrea's story

11 Limitations and areas for improvement

12 Why are these findings important?

13 How does this inform Wanslea's work to support grandparent carers?

14 What other action is needed to support grandparent carers?

15 References

Acknowledgements

This project was undertaken on unceded Whadjuk Noongar boodja/Country. We acknowledge the Wadjuk Noongar people as the rightful Custodians of this land on which we live and work, we pay our respect to Elders, past and present and recognise their continuing connection to land, sea and community.

We sincerely thank the grandmothers who took part in this project for their time and for sharing their lived experiences and recommendations for improved support for grandparent kinship carers. We also thank and extend our appreciation to the retreat facilitators for their participation and insights, and Wanslea's Grandcare team for their valued feedback on this report and recommendations.

About Wanslea's Grandcare service

Wanslea's Grandcare service (Grandcare) supports and connects grandparent carers who are 'informally' raising their grandchildren in Western Australia. Wanslea is funded by the Department of Communities WA to deliver Grandcare.

The service includes managing grandparent carer applications for the Grandcarers Support Scheme (GSS), an annual payment from the Department of Communities WA to help with the financial pressures of the caring role, connecting carers with Wanslea's support groups and other peer networks, providing information and resources, and advocacy.



In 2023, Wanslea's Grandcare assisted:

1,645 Grandparent-led households

92% of these were grandmothers

Who are grandparent carers?

Kinship care, especially grandparent care, is the fastest-growing type of out-of-home care in Australia. [1] **Grandparent carers take on full-time care of their grandchildren when their parents are unable or unwilling to care for them.** Compared with foster carers, grandparents carers are typically older, female and single carers.[2] Unlike statutory or formal carers, informal grandparent carers do not have recognition or support in the out-of-home care system.[3] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandparent carers make up many of those in informal caring arrangements.[4] The caring role has significant financial, health and personal impacts on grandparents. Grandparent care preserves children's connection to culture, stability and safety. **Their role is crucial yet demanding, and their well-being is essential to the provision of quality care for children.**[5]

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). Child Protection Australia 2021-22. Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. https://www.aihw.gov. au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-children-inthechild-protection-system
2. Boetto, H. (2010). Kinship Care: A review of issues. Family Matters.
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4. Blundell, B., Fernandes, C., & Moran, R. J. (2024). Identifying the service and social policy needs, gaps, barriers and enablers for grandparent carers. Family Relations. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.13037
5. Harding, L., Murray, K., Shakespeare-Finch, J., & Frey, R. (2020). The wellbeing of foster and kin carers: A comparative study. Children and Youth Services Review, 108, 104566. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104566

Wanslea's wellness retreats for grandmothers

Since 2019, Grandcare has provided biannual weekend retreats for grandmothers raising their grandchildren informally, held in a suburban setting in Perth.

The retreats support relaxation, connectedness, and self-care in an informal setting and are delivered by a facilitator and a volunteer with lived experience as a grandmother kinship carer.

These retreats are the only service-based option specifically for grandmothers in Perth which provides temporary respite from caregiving responsibilities.



Hospitality is provided by the Sisters at St. Catherine's, which offers a facility capable of accommodating up to 16 grandmothers and the two Wanslea staff. During the three-day weekend retreat, grandmothers are offered a range of activities to choose from, including a movie night, quiz night, mealtimes, crafts, and group sessions.

Retreats as respite

Respite is a well-established form of support that offers temporary relief for caregivers.[6] It is often cited as a significant support need of kinship carers.[7] Despite this need, there is limited research and understanding of effective respite care and service models. This includes identifying best practice service models while considering the unique cultural, family, and community issues kinship carers face.[8]



6. Fernandes, C., Blundell, B., Moran, R. J., Gilbert, J. M., & Liddiard, M. (2021). 'It's not fair': Custodial grandparents' access to services and supports in Australia. Child & Family Social Work, 26(4), 572–581. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12839
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8. Borenstein, J., & McNamara, P. (2015). Strengthening kinship families: Scoping the provision of respite care in Australia. Child & Family Social Work, 20(1), 50–61. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12055

Evaluation of the retreats

This evaluation was conducted by Wanslea's Research and Evaluation team and focused on the extent to which the retreat met its outcomes (**Figure 1**) and the effectiveness of the retreat model. Specifically, Wanslea wanted to learn from the evaluation:

- **The factors which contributed to the need for respite for grandmothers.**
- **The outcomes of the retreat for supporting grandmothers' wellbeing.**
- **The strengths and limitations of Wanslea's retreat model.**

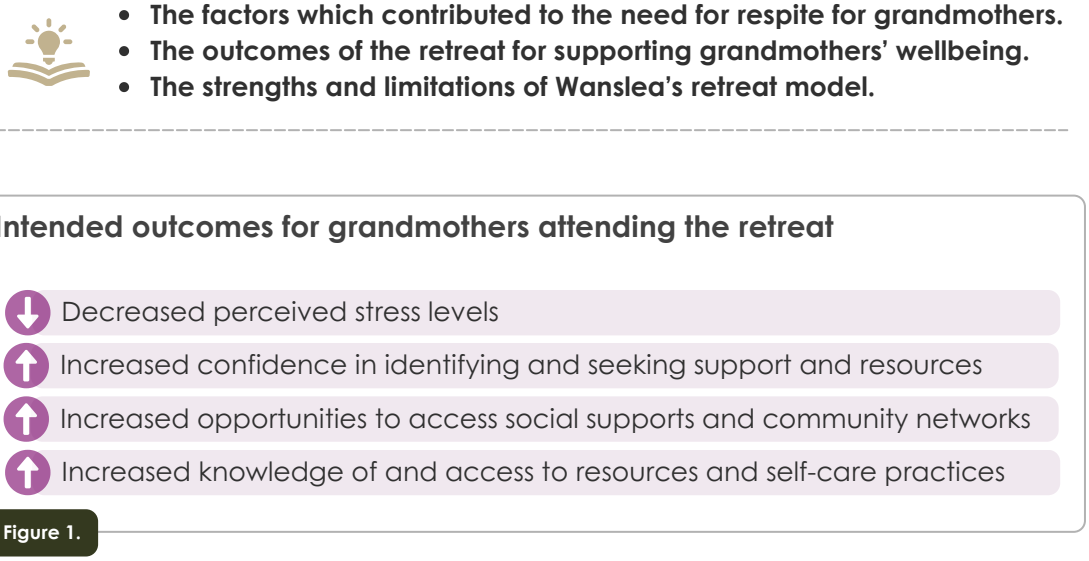


Figure 1.

Methodology

We conducted a mixed-methods evaluation of the Grandcare retreat held in August 2023. Grandmothers were invited to complete a post-retreat survey, followed by an interview two months after the retreat. All participants received an information sheet about the evaluation and were informed of confidentiality, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw. Verbal consent was obtained before each interview, including consent to be audio recorded. One of the research team members undertook the interviews with grandmothers over the phone or in person at a location they felt comfortable with, depending on their preference. Interview transcripts were deidentified and pseudonyms are used in this report. Analysis of the interviews involved multiple readings of transcripts and open and higher order coding with discussions between the research team.[9] The evaluation integrated quantitative data from 12 post-retreat surveys with qualitative feedback from interviews with nine grandmothers, the facilitator, and the volunteer. The average age of grandmothers participating in the evaluation was 60 years old, 43% were single carers, 14% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and 14% identified as being from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

9. Burnard, P. (2011). A pragmatic approach to qualitative data analysis. In In Newell R., Burnard P. (Eds.), Research for evidence-based practice in healthcare (2nd ed., pp. 118–129). Wiley-Blackwell

Key findings

1

The importance of access to the retreats

Grandmothers attending the retreat sought to reduce stress, take a break from their caring responsibilities and connect with other grandmothers. They discussed the challenges of caring for their grandchildren, including addressing complex health needs and the impacts of trauma, supporting their growth and development, and the physical and emotional impact and financial burdens of the caring role (**Figure 2**). Their experiences demonstrate the need for recognition and support services for grandparent caregivers.

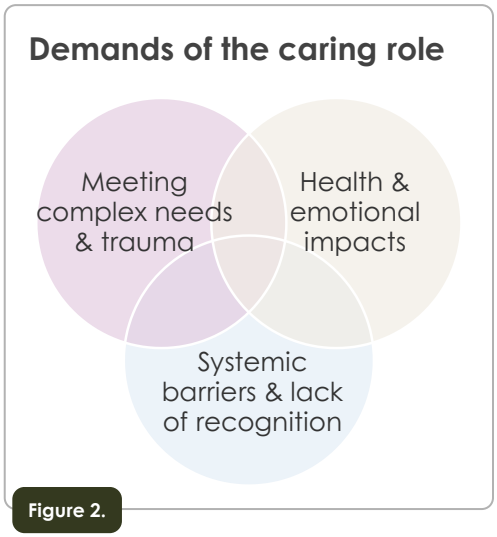


Figure 2.

> *I'm exhausted all the time. That's not Nanna's job. My job is to have them, you know, even every couple of weekends and palm them off. But then you still got to come home, and you still got to bath, and you still got to get into bed. You still got to do this. You still got to do that. No. Your life is completely changed.*
>
> **- Andrea, grandparent carer**

> *I just think politicians don't really understand fully the financial and emotional and spiritual burdens that grandchildren put on grandparents, and especially when the grandparents' children aren't coping or have mental health problems and drug problems. Like, it's not that simple.*
>
> **- Nicole, grandparent carer**

2 Key findings

Strengths of the retreat model

For grandmothers who attended, the retreat empowered choice and self-care and provided access to social support and community connection. For some grandmothers, the benefits lasted beyond the retreat experience. Grandmothers valued the chance to connect with others facing similar challenges and gaining and sharing knowledge and support. A few of the grandmothers shared how they had strengthened their coping strategies and incorporated self-care practice into their daily lives. Overall, the grandmothers reported high satisfaction and a strong desire to return to future retreats.

The facilitator and volunteer played a crucial role in creating a safe and inclusive space for grandmothers to share their experiences and benefit from the social and community support the retreat provided.



> *The respite, the peer support groups, I really do appreciate it so much. Because anything that I think I can get in regards to support eventually flows down to the children, because you can't do [anything] without being a good foundation yourself for your children. You just can't. You can't get up in the morning. You can't function. If you haven't got peer support groups, the respite, just to get you through those, how does anything flow down to your children if you're not dealing as well?*
>
> **- Elena, grandparent carer**

> *There's so much stress. So much. Money wise as well, you know, finding it hard to exist when I've only got so much. [My grandchildren] turned out to be two beautiful girls. So I have a good ending, and it's hard to see these people when I come to the retreats and listening to their stories, some of them, I'm just about in tears because of what they've got to go through and years of it. But I know they must not stop the respite. They need to increase it.*
>
> **- Volunteer and former grandparent carer**

2 Key findings

Strengths of the retreat model

The retreat's format was highly valued by participants. **Figure 3** highlights the key elements that contributed to the strengths of Wanslea's retreat model.

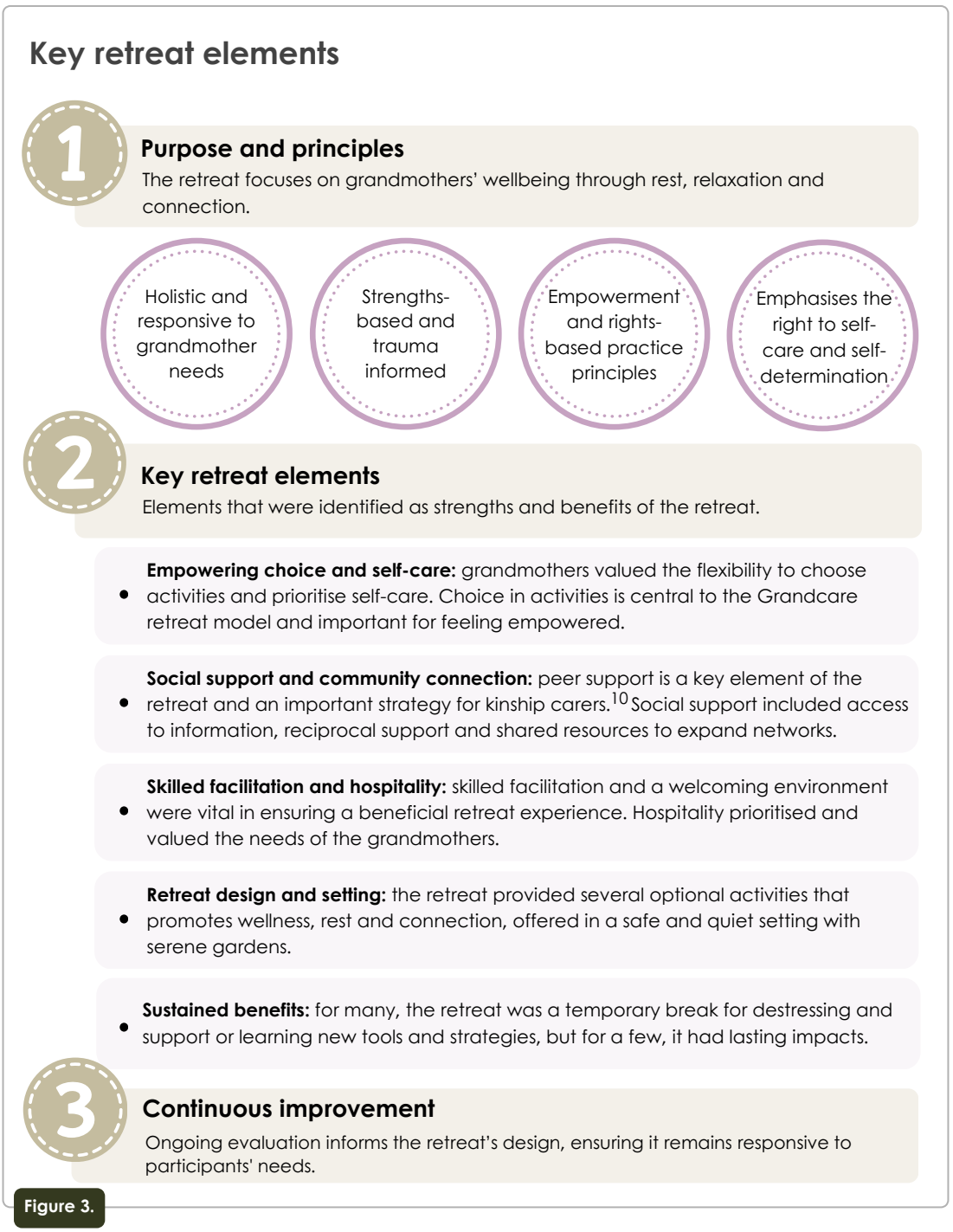


Figure 3.

10. Smart, J., Muir, S., Hughes, J., Goldsworthy, K., Jones, S., Cuevas-Hewitt, L., & Murawin, C. V. (2022). Identifying strategies to better support foster, kinship, and permanent carers. Final report. (Discovering What Works for Families). Australian Institute of Family Studies.

3 Key findings

Positive impacts of the retreat

Wanslea's retreat provided significant benefits to grandmothers, with survey results showing a 65% reduction in self-reported stress levels. Grandmothers self-evaluated their stress on a scale from 1 ('not at all stressed') to 10 ('very stressed'). All grandmothers reported feeling less stressed after the retreat, from an average of 7.4 before the retreat to 2.6 after the retreat (**Figure 4**).

Over 80% of grandmothers found the opportunity to connect with peers and prioritise rest extremely helpful to their caregiving role (**Figure 5**). Grandmothers' freedom to choose their level of participation during the retreat also allowed them to prioritise their needs and preferences.

> *I was so blessed to be around so many caring people. We were in the right place with others that cared for us, and we cared for what they were doing for us. I know now how much I needed to leave the world behind for a few days. First time I've been looked after, to this level EVER!!*
>
> **- Helen, grandparent carer**



3 Key findings

Positive impacts of the retreat



Figure 4.

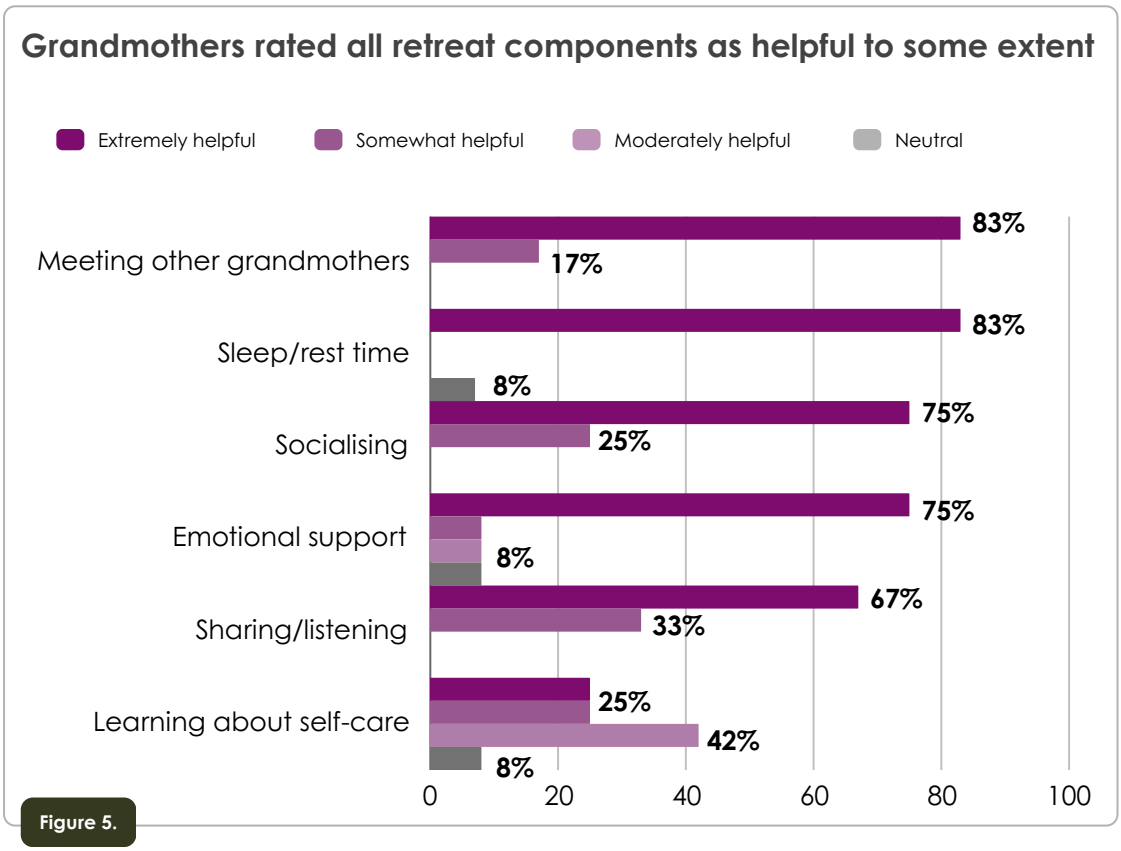


Figure 5.

Andrea's story

Andrea unexpectedly became the full-time caregiver for her two young grandchildren, both under two years old. She initially hoped this would be a temporary arrangement until the children could safely reunite with their parents. After two years of caring for her grandchildren, Andrea realised it was not temporary. The children were behind in their developmental milestones, requiring extensive physical, emotional, and social support. This required Andrea's full attention, leading to significant personal sacrifices:

"You lose your friends. Even though your friends are there. You lose your friends because your friends are moving on as what you're supposed to do, which is to be able to have your own life back".

Additionally, Andrea was trying to navigate the complexities of the legal and child protection systems, Centrelink, schools, doctors, and Medicare, in conjunction with managing the day-to-day needs of her young grandchildren, arranging, and attending medical and therapeutic appointments, and caring for her own elderly parents.

"It made me change - everything. Made me stop worrying about what other people think of me; how my life could have been because my life is not going to be that way. I'm not going to go and have luncheons with my girlfriends and dinners with my girlfriends, or go to the movies without organising my life for someone to have the kids."

At the retreat, it was a conversation with a staff member that helped her acknowledge and accept her changed reality and to change to build a new life for herself and her grandchildren:

"And that was the first time that when I came home, I thought, I have to make a life for me and the [children]. Stop worrying about what I've lost and what I could have had. This is what my life is. Make the best of it. So that retreat changed my whole mindset and it did. I am tearing up again. But it did. It was a realisation that I'm going to have these kids forever."

Along with the connections and the space the retreat provided, Andrea valued the retreat environment:

"It's the non-judgment. That's probably the best part of the retreat that there is nothing you can say that people would go, are you kidding me?"

Andrea's grandchildren are thriving. They are healthy and developing well:

"Is it costing me? Yes. Do I have much savings? No. But are the kids now in a mainstream school? Are they one of the top in the class? Yes, they are".

Andrea's story highlights the significant impact that targeted support can have on caregivers facing challenging circumstances and how this support can maximise outcomes and opportunities for grandchildren in their care.

Limitations and areas for improvement

> *Because I have my husband, it was easy. But if I didn't have my husband, that was an issue that was brought up with all the grandmothers (at the retreat) because they knew of other grandmothers that were sole grandmothers. And they didn't have any respite, which I reckon they probably need it more than, say, maybe me in the sense of I've got a partner, a husband.*
>
> **- Nicole, grandparent carer**

The participants in the evaluation represent less than 1% of Wanslea's client database, and their demographics do not necessarily reflect the broader population of grandparent carers, particularly among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families and regional households who are more geographically isolated. **The observed differences suggest the need for further research to understand access barriers to support services, ways to enhance service accessibility and understand service needs**. It is also important to highlight that due to the lived reality of caring for grandchildren with complex needs, there have been last minute cancellations at every retreat.

While there was widespread support for maintaining the retreat as is, some practical suggestions were made for improvements. Some of the grandmothers discussed the need for **more frequent respite and targeted support** for grandparent families. Increasing access to the retreat and **other forms of respite**, such as family getaways and incorporating cultural elements, was also suggested. While all the grandmothers, including partners and other family members, could access care for their grandchildren to participate, **access to care for children is a barrier** to the retreat as respite.

14. F
15. E
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Why are these findings important?

Grandparent carers are predominantly grandmothers. Their role in providing full-time care and safety for their grandchildren brings significant social and financial savings to the government and community.[11] Gender norms about women's roles as unpaid carers influence societal responses to grandparent care, and they are unsupported and undervalued.[12]

The health of grandparent carers is shown to be poorer than their peers. While this may be connected to the demands of taking on the caring role it is also associated with poverty that becomes the day-to-day experience for many grandmothers. **Previous Wanslea-led group research shows that 66 percent of grandparent carers live below the poverty line.**[11]

Importantly, for many of the grandmothers who took part in the retreat, the demands of returning to the caring role were acknowledged, highlighting the lack of resources and opportunities at a service and systems level for their resilience and well-being.[13]

Wanslea's retreat model acknowledges the unique challenges and gendered nature of their role, offering exclusive support for grandmothers. **Wanslea's retreat model aims to counter the marginalisation of grandmother carers through an empowerment-based approach, emphasising the right to self-care, access to social support and self-determination.** Having peer support during the retreat was important for many of the grandmothers. The retreat is one activity that forms part of Grandcare's empowerment and holistic-based model, which also has a strong focus on community empowerment and systemic advocacy.

The findings of this evaluation are also consistent with existing research on the demands of kinship care[14] and **the critical need for reliable and accessible support options, including respite.**[15]

11. Wansle (n.d)
12. Birchall, J., & Holt, A. (2023). Who cares? The grandmother kinship carers shouldering the burden within a gendered care economy. Journal of Women & Aging, 35(5), 465–475. https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2022.2135339
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How does this inform Wanslea's work to support grandparent carers?

- As the **only service-based respite option for grandmothers with full-time care of their grandchildren**, this evaluation highlights the value and benefits of Wanslea's wellness retreats and recognises that our work is having a positive impact on their well-being. Using evidence from this evaluation, Wanslea successfully obtained funding from the Department of Communities WA to offer further retreats in 2024.

- While grandmothers demonstrably benefit from the retreats, sustained funding poses a challenge to their continuation. **Wanslea will continue to build evidence of the value of the retreats in advocating for ongoing funding for grandmothers' right to respite and self-care.**

- Building connections with other grandmothers was undoubtedly a key benefit of the retreat. In recognition of this benefit, **Wanslea is assisting grandmothers who have participated in past retreats and are now building informal peer support groups in their communities.**

- There is a clear need for greater access to regular and reliable respite options. Research into effective respite should include more grandparent carers' stories and voices. **Wanslea's research agenda includes looking at the types of respite options that are responsive to grandparent needs.** Findings will be used to advocate for sustained funding and other forms of respite for grandparent carers.

- Alongside this work, **Wanslea is committed to continued advocacy for recognition and support for grandparents raising their grandchildren.** Wanslea is an inaugural member of the newly established Kinship Alliance Australia, a national network of kinship care advocates working to improve support for informal kinship care families.

What other action is needed to support grandparent carers?

- The Federal Government to **introduce a regular payment** to support grandparents in their caring role. This would lift families out of poverty, support care arrangements, and give grandparent carers recognition and visibility in the service system. A model similar to New Zealand's Unsupported Child Benefit for kinship carers is recommended.

- Adequate funding to ensure **specialised, culturally appropriate and ongoing support and information** are available for grandparent carers, such as a centralised resource hub and integrated case management support. Resources should be accessible and responsive to the unique needs and experiences of grandparent carers.

- Encourage the **sharing of stories to help the community understand the needs and important role** of grandparent carers in providing their grandchildren with a safe and supportive home.

- **Legal recognition for grandparent carers** is needed to ensure grandparents who provide 'informal' care for their grandchildren are not overlooked in policy and legislation and have access to the necessary support and resources to provide the best care possible.

- **Support the work of organisations in advocating for** and assisting grandparent carers, including Wanslea and Grandcarers WA Inc in Western Australia.



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