

Submission: Inquiry into Tasmania Police responses to allegations of officer misconduct

1. Overview

COTA Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Standing Committee on Government Administration B inquiry into Tasmania Police responses to allegations of officer misconduct.

Our submission is primarily directed to Term of Reference 1: the adequacy of systems, processes and oversight arrangements for responding to allegations of serious misconduct within Tasmania Police, including sexual misconduct and family violence.

COTA Tasmania does not seek to comment on individual allegations or matters currently before the Committee. Our concern is whether the systems designed to prevent, identify, report, investigate and respond to serious police misconduct are accessible and effective for older Tasmanians, including older people experiencing abuse, violence, coercive control, or exploitation.

Older people may face particular barriers to reporting abuse or misconduct. These may include dependence on the person causing harm, social isolation, disability or cognitive impairment, lack of transport, poor digital access or confidence, fear of not being believed, concern about repercussions, or reluctance to engage with formal authorities.

Where the alleged perpetrator is themselves a police officer, these barriers may be significantly amplified.

Tasmania has the oldest population profile of any Australian state. At the 2021 Census, the median age in Tasmania was 42 years, compared with 38 nationally, and approximately 20.9 per cent of Tasmanians were aged 65 years or over, compared with around 17.2 per cent nationally.ⁱ

This demographic profile makes it particularly important that systems intended to protect victim-survivors and respond to serious misconduct are designed with the circumstances, needs and barriers experienced by older people in mind.

2. About COTA Tasmania

Council on the Ageing (COTA) Tasmania is the leading body representing the interests of older Tasmanians. We work to ensure that the rights, interests and perspectives of older people are recognised in public policy and service delivery.

COTA Tasmania is an independent, non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation that works to advance the rights, interests and wellbeing of people as they age.

Our work includes policy development and advocacy, community engagement, research, information and education, and contributing the perspectives and lived experience of older Tasmanians to government policy and decision-making.

COTA Tasmania is actively involved in elder abuse prevention and awareness through initiatives including Lifelong Respect and Older Voices for Change, and is a key stakeholder in the implementation of Tasmania's elder abuse prevention framework.

3. Recommendations

COTA Tasmania recommends that the Committee:

- Ensure that reforms arising from this inquiry explicitly recognise the needs and circumstances of older victim-survivors.
- Ensure Tasmania Police policies concerning family and sexual violence involving police recognise elder abuse and the broad range of family, care and trust relationships in which abuse may occur.
- Examine whether existing complaint mechanisms provide a clearly independent, confidential and accessible reporting pathway for allegations of serious police misconduct.
- Require complaint and reporting pathways to be accessible to people with disability, cognitive impairment, communication difficulties and low digital confidence.
- Adopt a “no wrong door” approach so complainants are assisted into the appropriate process rather than being required to navigate complex organisational structures themselves, supported by collaboration between Tasmania Police, the Department of Justice Safe at Home Program, and specialist older-person and elder abuse services.
- Ensure training for police and complaint-handling personnel includes elder abuse, coercive control, ageism, trauma-informed practice and communication with older people.
- Ensure that complaint and misconduct data can be analysed by age, location and other relevant demographic factors and that appropriate de-identified data is publicly reported.
- Specifically examine the accessibility of complaint and oversight mechanisms for older people living in rural, regional and island communities.
- Include older people with lived experience, advocates and specialist elder abuse organisations in the design and evaluation of any revised reporting, investigation or oversight mechanisms.

4. Detailed Comments

4.1 Elder abuse must be visible within family and sexual violence responses

Elder abuse is any act causing harm to an older person within a relationship where trust is expected. It can involve family members, friends, carers or service providers and can take many forms, including physical, psychological, sexual and financial abuse, neglect, coercive control and social isolation.

COTA Tasmania is concerned that elder abuse can fall between existing legal, policy and service frameworks.

Tasmania's family violence framework has traditionally focused substantially on intimate partner relationships. Yet much elder abuse is perpetrated by other family members, including adult sons and daughters.

In COTA Tasmania's 2025 submission on reforms to Tasmania's family violence legislationⁱⁱ, we highlighted evidence that only a relatively small proportion of elder abuse is perpetrated by a spouse or partner, while a much greater proportion is perpetrated by sons, daughters and other family members.

This creates a risk that an older person experiencing violence, coercion or abuse may not readily identify their experience as "family violence", and that systems themselves may not recognise or respond to the abuse in a consistent way.

COTA Tasmania has recently raised this issue in its March 2026 submission on the Tasmanian Government's Family Violence Discussion Paperⁱⁱⁱ. That submission noted that Tasmania remains nationally anomalous in limiting its primary family violence framework largely to spouse and intimate-partner relationships, with the result that many older victim-survivors experiencing abuse by adult children, grandchildren, siblings, other relatives or within care and dependency relationships fall outside the primary family violence pathway.

This is not simply a technical issue of legislative definition. It affects how abuse is recognised, which protections and service pathways are available, how risk is assessed, and whether patterns of coercion and dependency associated with elder abuse are understood as part of the family violence response rather than treated as an adjacent issue.

This concern is also reflected in the Tasmania Law Reform Institute's 2025 research paper *Safeguarding Against the Abuse of Older Tasmanians*.^{iv} The Institute noted that Tasmania's current family violence legislation does not extend to violence or abuse perpetrated against an older person by children, grandchildren, siblings or carers. In those circumstances, a restraint order may be the only available civil protective mechanism.

This distinction is significant. It means that older people experiencing abuse within relationships of family, care or dependency may not have access to the same legislative protections, service pathways or systemic responses available to victim-survivors whose circumstances fall within the statutory definition of family violence. The practical effect is that older victim-survivors can enter the system through a different and potentially less protective pathway purely because of their relationship to the person causing harm.

COTA Tasmania believes Tasmania Police policies and procedures dealing with misconduct, family violence and sexual violence must expressly recognise the particular circumstances of elder abuse and the broad range of relationships in which it can occur.

4.2 Reporting police misconduct must be genuinely safe and independent

Tasmania Police identifies several avenues specifically for reporting family or sexual violence where the alleged perpetrator is a police officer, including direct reporting to Professional Standards and referral through external support services.

COTA Tasmania acknowledges the importance of these arrangements.

However, the existence of alternative reporting mechanisms does not in itself ensure that those mechanisms are accessible, understood or trusted by older people.

An older person may be especially reluctant to make a complaint where:

- the officer concerned is personally known to them or their family;
- the officer is well known within a small community;
- the complainant has previously relied upon local police for assistance;
- they fear their complaint will be discussed within the local station or community;
- they rely on another person for transport, communication or assistance;
- they are reliant on the officer concerned - including where that officer is a spouse, adult child or carer - for housing, transport, finances, care or other essential support;
- they have limited access to online information;
- they do not understand where a complaint can be made independently of their local police station; or
- previous experiences have led them to believe they will not be heard or believed.

Where police misconduct is alleged, confidence in the independence of both the reporting mechanism and the subsequent investigation is fundamental.

COTA Tasmania therefore encourages the Committee to consider whether existing arrangements provide a clearly identifiable, accessible and genuinely independent pathway through which members of the public can raise allegations of serious police misconduct.

4.3 Particular challenges for older people in rural and regional Tasmania

The challenges of reporting police misconduct can be greater in rural, regional and island communities.

In smaller communities, police officers are often personally known to residents and may be deeply embedded in local community networks. Alternative police stations or support services may be considerable distances away.

For older people who no longer drive, have limited mobility or are dependent on family members or carers, travelling elsewhere to make a report may be unrealistic.

Digital reporting options are also not an adequate substitute for accessible personal assistance. Many older Tasmanians continue to experience digital exclusion, and some may require assistance to navigate complex reporting or complaints processes.

COTA Tasmania recommends that any reform of complaints and oversight arrangements specifically test whether those arrangements are practical for people living outside Tasmania's major population centres.

The practical difficulties of accessing services and supports outside major population centres have also been raised through COTA Tasmania community roadshows, including on Flinders Island, the West Coast, the Tasman Peninsula and Bruny Island.

These experiences reinforce the need to test proposed reporting and oversight arrangements against the realities of small, dispersed and relatively isolated communities.

4.4 Accessible and supported complaint mechanisms

A complaints system can be formally available while still being practically inaccessible.

COTA Tasmania believes that complaint and reporting systems should be designed to accommodate:

- hearing, vision or communication difficulties;
- physical disability or limited mobility;
- cognitive impairment;
- low literacy or digital literacy;
- the need for information in plain English and accessible formats;
- the involvement of an advocate or trusted support person;
- difficulty recalling or describing traumatic events;
- historical allegations disclosed many years after they occurred; and
- reluctance to engage directly with police where the complaint itself concerns a police officer.

COTA Tasmania has previously cautioned against fragmented responses which require an older victim-survivor to determine whether their experience belongs in an elder abuse, family violence, criminal justice or other service pathway.

Older people should not require specialist knowledge of government structures to determine which agency, unit or oversight body is responsible for receiving their complaint. The system, rather than the person experiencing harm, should carry the responsibility for making those connections.

A “no wrong door” approach should apply, with responsibility placed on agencies to ensure the complainant reaches the appropriate independent pathway rather than expecting the complainant to navigate the system themselves.

This should be supported by active collaboration between Tasmania Police, the Department of Justice Safe at Home Program, and specialist older-person and elder abuse services

4.5 Trauma-informed and age-aware responses

COTA Tasmania welcomes the Committee’s trauma-informed approach to this inquiry.

As part of that approach, COTA Tasmania recommends that information published by the Parliament about this inquiry include the Tasmanian Elder Abuse Helpline among the support services available to people who may be affected by the issues raised.

COTA Tasmania has recently worked with the Safe at Home Program to ensure elder abuse support contacts are included in its public information, and a consistent approach across relevant government and parliamentary information would help older people identify an appropriate source of support.

Trauma-informed practice must also recognise that older victim-survivors may have very different experiences and needs from younger cohorts.

Some older people may disclose abuse that occurred decades earlier. Others may have experienced prolonged coercion, dependency or isolation. Some may minimise their experiences or describe them as a “family matter” rather than abuse.

COTA Tasmania has previously called for older-person-informed risk and safety guidance for police, courts and services, recognising that elder abuse can involve particular dynamics of dependency, housing insecurity, financial abuse, coercion and reliance on the person causing harm. We have also highlighted the need for workforce training and public information that is tailored to the circumstances of older people.

These are not separate or additional considerations: they are fundamental to ensuring that trauma-informed responses are also age-aware and capable of recognising forms of abuse that may present differently in later life.

This is particularly important where the alleged misconduct involves a police officer, as an older victim-survivor may already face heightened barriers to disclosure, reporting and help-seeking and may be especially reluctant to engage with the very system in which the alleged perpetrator works.

Police, Professional Standards personnel, and other complaint-handling bodies should therefore receive appropriate education and training in:

- recognising elder abuse;
- understanding coercive control and abuse within relationships of dependency and trust;
- identifying financial and psychological abuse as well as physical violence;
- communicating with people with cognitive or communication impairment;
- avoiding assumptions based on age; and
- working appropriately with advocates and support persons.

4.6 Data and transparency

COTA Tasmania believes better data is essential to understanding whether older people are accessing police complaints and misconduct systems and what happens when they do.

Complaint and misconduct data should, wherever possible, allow analysis by age and other relevant demographic factors.

This would help identify:

- how frequently older people make complaints involving serious police misconduct;
- the nature of those complaints;
- whether older complainants experience different investigation or resolution outcomes;
- the time taken to resolve matters;
- the prevalence of family, sexual or elder abuse-related allegations;

- geographical differences;
- whether older complainants are diverted into different service or legal pathways because of the relationship to the person causing harm; and
- whether particular groups of older people face systemic barriers to reporting.

Appropriate public reporting of de-identified data would strengthen transparency and assist the Parliament, government and community to assess whether reforms are working.

4.7 Lived experience and consultation

COTA Tasmania strongly encourages the Committee and Tasmania Police to actively seek the views of older victim-survivors and organisations supporting them when considering future reforms.

Systems designed without the involvement of the people expected to use them can overlook very practical barriers.

We recently had an example involving an older woman living in a rural part of southern Tasmania who repeatedly reported concerns to police that a neighbour was entering her property, damaging property and taking items from her home. Police attended on one occasion and subsequently referred her to Older Persons Mental Health. She installed security cameras but was unable to capture footage that substantiated her concerns. As we understand it, despite making further reports and attempting to collect evidence, police did not attend again. The woman felt that she had been dismissed because of assumptions about her mental health and became very distressed when those concerns were raised with her.

Irrespective of whether her allegations could ultimately be substantiated, she felt unsafe and unheard in her own home, and eventually sold the property and moved to an independent living village.

This example illustrates the importance of respectful, ongoing engagement with older complainants, clear communication about what evidence or further action may be required, and ensuring that an appropriate mental health referral does not inadvertently become a substitute for taking a person's safety concerns seriously.

Issues that may warrant exploration with older Tasmanians and frontline services include:

- whether people would know where to report misconduct involving a police officer;
- whether they would feel safe doing so;
- whether concerns about confidentiality or local relationships would prevent reporting;
- experiences of being believed or not believed;
- whether age, disability or dependency affected the response received;
- whether people understood what happened after a complaint was made;
- and what would have made the process safer or easier.

5. Conclusion

The issues before this inquiry raise fundamental questions about trust, accountability and confidence in institutions responsible for community safety.

For older Tasmanians, those questions have an additional dimension. An older person experiencing abuse may already be isolated, dependent on the person causing harm, uncertain of their rights, or reluctant to seek assistance. Where the alleged perpetrator is a police officer, the very institution they would ordinarily turn to for protection may itself feel unsafe.

Effective reform therefore requires more than robust internal processes. It requires systems that people can find, understand, trust and use.

COTA Tasmania encourages the Committee to ensure that the voices and experiences of older Tasmanians are considered in any recommendations arising from this inquiry, and that future arrangements provide every person - regardless of age, location, disability, or circumstances - with a safe and credible avenue to raise concerns and have them independently and appropriately addressed.

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- ⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2021 Census All persons QuickStats – Tasmania*, 2021 Census of Population and Housing. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/6>
 - ⁱⁱ COTA Tasmania, Consultation: Family Violence (Miscellaneous Reforms) Bill 2025 <https://cotatas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Family-Violence-Reforms-Bill-2025-COTA-Tasmania-submission.pdf>
 - ⁱⁱⁱ COTA Tasmania, Family Violence Discussion Paper 2026 <https://cotatas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/COTA-Tas-submission-Family-Violence-Discussion-Paper-260325.pdf>
 - ^{iv} Safeguarding Against the Abuse of Older Tasmanians, Tasmanian Law Reform Institute, 2025 https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1903153/TLRI-safeguarding-against-abuse-older-tasmanians-research-paper-no-9.pdf