

Submission: Proposed changes to regional Service Tasmania opening hours

1. Overview

COTA Tasmania does not support the proposed reductions in opening hours at Campbell Town, Currie, Oatlands, Queenstown and Whitemark on the evidence currently available. Service Tasmania should pause the proposal and complete a transparent access and equity assessment for each community before deciding whether any change is justified.

This is a regional access issue affecting people of all ages. Older Tasmanians are among those most likely to be harmed, particularly where age, disability, low income, limited transport, caring responsibilities, poor connectivity or low digital confidence overlap.

The central concern is the accumulating disadvantage created when banks, post offices, health services and government services progressively reduce or withdraw their local presence. Each decision may appear modest when considered alone. Together they can make ordinary participation in civic and economic life significantly harder.

A service may appear available on paper but remain inaccessible if it requires a long journey, private transport, reliable internet, confidence with digital systems or help from another person. Face-to-face services remain an essential part of an accessible government, especially when a transaction is complex, time-sensitive or linked to financial assistance.

The Government has not clearly explained what the reduced hours are intended to achieve.

It has said that existing regional jobs will not be lost and that staff will undertake statewide work when local centres are closed. Service Tasmania should therefore publish the projected net saving or operational benefit, how it will be measured, and why it warrants reducing public access.

Public resources are finite, but that does not remove the need for government to choose and explain its priorities.

A savings target is not evidence that these particular reductions are fair, efficient or sustainable. The Government must weigh any benefit against the costs transferred to residents, families, community organisations and other public services.

2. About COTA Tasmania

COTA Tasmania is the peak body representing the interests of older Tasmanians. We work to ensure that the rights, needs, experience and contributions of older people are recognised in public policy, government decision-making and community life.

Our role includes policy advocacy, community engagement, information and education, and programs delivered in partnership with communities and organisations across Tasmania.

Our statewide work brings us into contact with older people living in Hobart and Launceston, regional towns, rural districts, remote communities and the Bass Strait islands.

Their circumstances are diverse.

The practical effect of a government decision can vary markedly according to a person's income, health, disability, transport options, caring responsibilities, digital access and the availability of family or community support. These differences are particularly important when government considers withdrawing or reducing a local service.

COTA Tasmania brings the experience of older people into policy discussions and tests whether proposed systems will work in everyday life.

This submission focuses on the implications for older Tasmanians while recognising that reduced regional access affects whole communities. Fair access to government services across age, income, disability, location and digital capability is essential to an inclusive, age-friendly Tasmania.

Decisions about Service Tasmania should therefore be assessed for their effect on people and communities, not only for their administrative convenience or transaction counts.

3. How older Tasmanians use Service Tasmania

Many older Tasmanians rely on Service Tasmania staff to help them:

- apply for or update a Seniors Card or Ticket to Wellbeing voucher;
- access concessions and discounts;
- complete government forms;
- verify identity documents; and
- obtain printed information and guidance.

Shorter opening hours will mean fewer opportunities to receive this assistance, particularly for people who are not confident using digital services.

If access becomes more difficult, some older Tasmanians may delay applications, miss eligibility deadlines or remain unaware of benefits they could receive. This may increase financial pressure on people living on fixed retirement incomes.

4. COTA Tasmania partnership with Service Tasmania

COTA Tasmania greatly values its established partnership with Service Tasmania. Its 27 centres distribute Seniors Month program guides and help promote this flagship program through digital screens and staff interactions with customers.

Until recently, there was no face-to-face support pathway for people who needed help to apply for a Seniors Card or Ticket to Wellbeing voucher.

Through our relationship with Service Tasmania, both transactions are now supported in person at centres across the state. This demonstrates the value of the network as community infrastructure and its potential to expand, rather than contract, its role.

5. Recommendations

1. Pause the proposed reductions until Service Tasmania has completed and published an access and equity assessment for each affected community.
2. Publish the specific outcome the Government expects the reductions to achieve, including any projected net saving or operational benefit, how it will be measured, and why it warrants reducing public access when existing regional jobs are to be retained.
3. Assess need using more than completed walk-in transactions. The assessment should include unmet and abandoned demand, digital and telephone enquiries, unsuccessful transactions, repeat visits, transport availability, travel distances, demographic factors and the complexity of services sought.
4. Assess the cumulative loss of face-to-face services in each community, including banking, postal, health and other government services.
5. Retain a minimum local service guarantee for rural, remote and island communities, recognising that a small population and lower transaction volume do not remove the need for reasonable access to government.
6. Publish the evidence and methodology used to select these centres and calculate the proposed hours, including the service and equity impacts expected from the changes.
7. Consult communities on whether total hours should be reduced, rather than asking mainly how a predetermined reduction should be allocated across the week.
8. Explore alternatives that preserve access, including co-location in community hubs, coordinated outreach, appointment-based assistance and flexible staffing across agencies.
9. Develop a statewide plan to use all 27 Service Tasmania centres more fully as community access points, including opportunities to provide or host a wider range of government and visiting services.
10. Maintain accessible telephone and face-to-face support. Digital services should complement these channels, not become the default substitute for them.
11. If any change proceeds, establish public access measures and conduct an independent review within six months, with a clear mechanism to restore hours where unmet need or harm is identified.

6. The proposed changes

Service Tasmania proposes to reduce face-to-face opening hours at five regional service centres. The largest reductions are approximately half of existing hours at Currie, Queenstown and Whitemark.

All five centres already operate for fewer than standard full-time hours.

Service centre	Current hours	Proposed hours	Reduction
Campbell Town	25	16.5	34%
Currie	20	10	50%
Oatlands	25	20	20%
Queenstown	32.5	16	51%
Whitemark	20	10	50%

Source Service Tasmania consultation page. Percentages are rounded.

The Government has not published the projected saving or other measurable benefit from the proposal. Without that information, communities cannot assess whether the reduction in access is proportionate, and the proposal risks appearing arbitrary rather than directed to a demonstrated service outcome.

7. Detailed Comments

7.1 Accumulating regional disadvantage

People in rural, remote and island communities already pay a distance penalty for access to essential services. They travel further, have fewer transport options, face higher costs and often have no practical alternative provider.

On King Island and Flinders Island there is no neighbouring Service Tasmania centre. Within the islands, reaching Currie or Whitemark can itself require a substantial trip.

COTA Tasmania staff heard directly from residents during roadshows on King and Flinders Islands that access to services both on and off island is already extremely limited. Residents described thin service availability and the importance of consistent local connections. In Queenstown, the loss of banking services has already reduced face-to-face options. Removing further government access should therefore be assessed within the whole local service environment, not as an isolated adjustment to one shopfront.

The combined effect can be described as death by a thousand cuts. A bank reduces hours, a post office changes its model, a visiting service becomes less frequent, and a government counter opens on fewer days. No single decision appears decisive, but the accumulated result is a community in which routine transactions require more travel, planning, cost and dependence on others.

The impact is not evenly shared. A change that is inconvenient for a person with a car, reliable internet and flexible time may be a barrier for someone who cannot drive, depends on a carer, works irregular hours, has low literacy, needs help with a complex form, or cannot afford an additional trip. These disadvantages often overlap.

7.2 Lower foot traffic does not establish lower need

The Government says the five centres were selected after analysis of two years of customer visitation data. Lower visitation may be relevant to service planning, but it cannot by itself establish that fewer opening hours will meet community need.

Existing restricted hours influence the number of recorded visits. People who cannot attend within the available window do not appear in the data as unmet demand. Rural residents may combine several tasks into infrequent trips, delay a transaction, rely on another person, attempt a digital channel they do not prefer, or abandon the task. Completed walk-ins record successful access; they do not show everyone who needed assistance.

This creates a risk of a self-fulfilling cycle. Restricted access suppresses use, the resulting lower use is treated as evidence of lower demand, and hours are reduced again. As access becomes less reliable, more residents stop trying or find workarounds. The data then appear to validate the original reduction.

A fair assessment should measure whether people can obtain the service they need within a reasonable time and at a reasonable cost. It should also examine the consequences when they cannot, including delayed payments or applications, missed deadlines, incomplete forms, increased reliance on carers and additional pressure on community organisations.

7.3 Digital access is not equivalent access

COTA Tasmania supports well-designed digital services and recognises that many Tasmanians value their convenience. Digital delivery can expand choice, but it is not an equivalent channel for everyone or for every transaction. Reliable internet, suitable equipment, confidence, literacy, identity documents and the ability to navigate government language cannot be assumed.

Some people need a staff member to explain a requirement, check a form or help resolve a problem involving several agencies. Telephone support can assist, but it cannot always replace seeing the same documents or completing a transaction together. Where the face-to-face option is reduced, the people most affected are often those least visible in digital usage data.

Government service design should therefore preserve channel choice. Increased digital uptake may show that online services work well for many people; it should not be interpreted as consent to remove a workable face-to-face pathway from those who still need it.

7.4 Frontline service commitments

The proposed reductions are difficult to reconcile with the Government's recent public assurances about protecting frontline services. In the 2026–27 Budget announcement, the Premier said that “frontline services remain the priority”. When the voluntary redundancy program was announced on 1 June, the Premier said it was targeting non-frontline and corporate roles and would ensure frontline delivery continued to the highest standards.

The proposal may not involve the redundancy of existing regional employees. However, from the customer's perspective, a material reduction in staffed face-to-face opening hours is a reduction in frontline service availability. The method used to achieve the staffing reduction does not change the practical effect on the community.

Reassigning staff time to statewide work does not change the practical effect on the community. If existing employees will remain while local counters are closed, the Government should explain how those closures improve efficiency rather than simply transferring staff availability away from the communities they serve.

7.5 Resources reflect government priorities

COTA Tasmania recognises that governments must manage finite resources and that service models should be reviewed. Fiscal pressure, however, does not answer the central policy question: which services and functions should government prioritise?

A decision to reduce regional Service Tasmania access is a choice about where savings will fall. It should be justified against other available options and against the Government's obligation to provide reasonable access across Tasmania. Lower transaction volumes in small communities may mean that the cost per visit is higher. That is an inherent feature of equitable statewide service delivery, not proof that the service lacks value.

The assessment should identify the net saving from the proposal and compare it with the costs shifted elsewhere. Residents may incur extra travel and lose work or caring time. Families and carers may take on additional tasks. Community organisations may be asked to help with transactions for which they are neither funded nor authorised. Delays and errors may create extra work for the same agencies seeking savings.

Efficiency should be measured across the whole service system and the whole community, rather than within one staffing line. The Government should show why this proposal is a better priority choice than alternatives that preserve reasonable local access.

7.6 The consultation should test the decision itself

The consultation page invites feedback on the proposed changes, including which days each centre should open. This framing risks treating the reduction in total weekly hours as settled and limiting community influence on the distribution of those hours.

The community should be able to comment on whether the reduction is justified at all. Service Tasmania should publish the evidence relied upon, invite alternative service models and explain how feedback will affect the final decision. Consultation is most useful before the central choice has been made.

8. What next?

8.1 Options that should be considered

Before reducing opening hours, the Government should consider how the full network of 27 centres could be used more effectively for local communities. If Service Tasmania identifies genuine periods of low demand, options may include:

- co-locating or integrating services within an established community hub, including the Queenstown hub;
- coordinating Service Tasmania hours with visiting health, legal, financial counselling and community services;

- using flexible staffing so employees can support statewide work while the local counter remains available;
- offering appointments outside core counter periods for people facing transport, disability or caring barriers;
- providing regular outreach or mobile services to surrounding communities; and
- retaining properly resourced telephone and assisted-digital services as additional channels.

These options should be developed with each community.

A model that works in Oatlands may not be suitable for Queenstown, King Island or Flinders Island. Island and west coast communities require particular attention because the distance to an alternative service is not merely inconvenient; in practical terms, there may be no alternative.

8.2 Monitoring and accountability

If any change proceeds, transaction numbers alone should not determine whether it succeeds.

- Service Tasmania should publish baseline data and monitor:
- the time and distance required to reach face-to-face assistance;
- requests made when the centre is closed and people who cannot attend during the new hours;
- abandoned, incomplete and repeat transactions across face-to-face, phone and digital channels;
- complaints, referral patterns and demand shifted to councils and community organisations;
- effects on people who do not have private transport or reliable digital access; and
- whether the changes compound the loss of other local services.

Results should be reviewed with each community within six months. The review should include a clear and timely process for restoring hours where access has worsened or unmet need is identified.

9. Conclusion

Service Tasmania is often the practical doorway through which people deal with government. Its staff help people understand requirements, complete transactions, establish their identity and gain access to concessions, licences, payments and other services that affect daily life. For regional communities, keeping that doorway reasonably open is part of equitable public administration.

The proposed reductions cannot be considered in isolation. They would occur in communities that have already experienced the loss or contraction of banking, postal, health and other services. Each reduction increases the travel, cost, planning and dependence required to complete ordinary tasks.

Over time, this accumulation of disadvantage makes communities less liveable and can suppress the very service use later relied upon to justify further cuts.

The Government has not yet made a persuasive case for reducing access. It has said that existing regional jobs will not be lost and that staff will undertake statewide work when local counters are closed.

The public is therefore entitled to know what measurable benefit the reduced hours will produce, what net saving is expected, and why that benefit outweighs the loss of face-to-face availability in communities that are already facing increasing disadvantage. Finite resources require choices; they do not remove the Government's responsibility to explain and defend those choices.

COTA Tasmania asks the Government to pause the proposal and publish the evidence, intended outcomes, and access and equity assessments for each affected community.

Communities should be consulted on whether the reductions should proceed, not merely on which days the smaller allocation of hours should fall.

The Government should also examine how all 27 Service Tasmania centres could be used more fully to deliver government and visiting services, strengthen local access and make better use of an established statewide network.

If any reduction ultimately proceeds, it should be accompanied by a minimum local service guarantee, accessible telephone and face-to-face alternatives, public measures of unmet need and an independent review within six months. Hours should be restored promptly where access has worsened, deadlines or transactions are being missed, or costs have simply been shifted to residents, carers and community organisations.

A fair outcome would preserve practical access to government while using the Service Tasmania network more effectively for the communities it exists to serve.