

25 June 2024

Ian Yates AM
Office of the Inspector General of Aged Care
PO Box 350
Woden ACT 2606

Dear Mr Yates

Review of the Administration of My Aged Care

COTA Tasmania appreciates the opportunity to comment on the administration of My Aged Care through this submission process. The following comments draw on our organisation's experience listening to the lived experience of older Tasmanians, our current role as a provider of Care Finder services and past experiences supporting clients through the Aged Care Navigation trial conducted by COTA Australia.

While we recognise there have been ongoing improvements to My Aged Care, we are hearing that there are still considerable barriers to accessing aged care assessments and aged care services. In broad terms these barriers include:

- Low levels of aged care literacy in the community and the complexity of the system.
- Poor levels of digital literacy and literacy skills more generally.
- Ongoing challenges faced by My Aged Care in delivering information and services to older people who have a strong preference for face-to-face information provision.
- The rural and metro divide impacts access for those living in regional locations.
- Extended wait times for assessment.

It is our view that the My Aged Care system is not fit for purpose for a significant cohort of older Australians who experience one or more of these barriers. More needs to be done to address these barriers and provide face-to-face services more widely, while concurrently increasing community understanding of how the system operates.

Low levels of aged care literacy in the community and complexity of the system:

From our years of work in aged care navigation, it is clear to us that navigating the system is challenging for most. This is especially so if English is a person's second language, or if there are cultural differences or life experiences that make contacting a government department confronting. Equally, hearing difficulties or dexterity problems can make phone calls a

Patron

*Her Excellency the Honourable Barbara Baker AC,
Governor of Tasmania*

challenge. Moreover, it can be intimidating to make a call seeking government assistance when you don't know what to expect.

COTA Tasmania continues to encounter many older people who do not engage with the aged care system until it is critical to do so. Consequently, they come to a complex system with little or no knowledge of how it works, what the 'language' of the system is and what it means, who the key agencies are and where they should start the process. Many are not aware that government supported aged care is an option.

Over time, COTA Tasmania has conducted 1000+ information sessions with community groups to introduce them to the aged care system. These sessions have been run successfully by both staff and peer volunteers with extensive conversations continuing after each presentation. Overwhelmingly, the feedback from participants has been positive and greater confidence to embark on the process has been reported. While endeavours to simplify the aged care system are ongoing, change is a constant and many people report confusion and frustration regarding their efforts to engage with the system.

It is widely accepted that health literacy is important for consumers as it affects their capacity to make decisions and take action to manage their health and health care. Furthermore, health literacy is associated with the safety and quality of outcomes.

*"Having consumers who are partners in the processes of health care is necessary for safe and high-quality care.... when these conditions exist, there is the potential to not only improve the safety and quality of health care, but also reduce health disparities and increase equity."*ⁱ

If this holds true for health, it should be equally valid for aged care literacy and its relationship with an aged care system that is complex, constantly evolving and has direct impacts on the health and wellbeing of older Australians. Older Australians expect to be partners in their aged care and have sufficient information to make informed choices that reflect their needs.

The Charter of Aged Care Rights reaffirms this expectation in a number of rights:

- be informed about my care and services in a way I understand.
- access all information about myself, including information about my rights, care and services.
- have control over and make choices about my care, and personal and social life, including where the choices involve personal riskⁱⁱ

The My Aged Care system should enable this participation and choice for all recipients of care. To this end, it is strongly recommended that mechanisms to adequately measure aged care literacy are introduced and resourcing allocated to improve aged care literacy across the community.

Poor levels of digital literacy and literacy skills more generally:

The digital and literacy skills of older Tasmanians are among the lowest in the country and older Australians continue to have low digital literacy scores,

Digital inclusion remains closely linked to age ... Despite gains in overall scores between 2021 and 2023, people aged over 65 maintain lower scores than the national average. Those aged 65-74 record scores 12.1 points below the national average, while those over 75 record scores 24.6 points below. For people over the age of 75, disparities in Digital Ability (41.6 points below the national average) and Access (18.0 points below the national average) are considerable.ⁱⁱⁱ

Where an adult's literacy level is low, this is likely to further complicate their capacity to navigate the aged care system, even at the first point of contact with My Aged Care through to assessment.

Around half of Tasmanians were assessed as having adequate prose (51.0%) and document literacy skills (49.3%), compared with 53.6% and 53.2% respectively for Australia.^{iv}

For the system to be fit for purpose for all older Australians, it must provide context as a basis for understanding; use fewer acronyms; and provide opportunities for face-to-face engagement and communication.

The My Aged Care contact centre is the sole first point of call for everyone, including those who are digitally excluded. Feedback to COTA Tasmania is that callers are often overwhelmed, frustrated and confused about the system, and it is common to hear that people are inclined to "give up" in their attempts to access aged care services. It is well documented that the consequence of not receiving timely aged care is linked to hospitalisation and early entry into residential aged care.^v

Furthermore, it is not uncommon to hear that clients have received inconsistent information from My Aged Care. This may be a result of communication and understanding issues by the parties involved or may extend to training inconsistencies. Tracking of the client journey from the commencement of information seeking about aged care, both inside and outside the My Aged Care system, through to the assessment process would provide invaluable information to support system improvement.

Ongoing challenges faced by My Aged Care in delivering information and services to older people who have a strong preference for face-to-face information provision:

While the introduction of the Aged Care Specialist Officers (ACSOs) has been a positive initiative, the rollout has been insufficient to bridge the gaps in information and understanding for many. It has also been our experience that there are regional variations in the type of services delivered through the ACSO service.

While ACSO services are available in four locations in Tasmania (Burnie, Launceston, Glenorchy and Rosny Park), access to these centres for older people living in other regions of the state is problematic.

Tasmania's local government areas with the highest concentrations of older people who are eligible for aged care services include a number of outlying areas. For example, Tasman, Flinders Island, Glamorgan Spring-Bay, Break O'Day and Central Highlands local government areas all have between 40 and 45% of their population over the age of 60 years.^{vi} For people in more regional locations, a visit to and ACSO will involve a day trip to Hobart, Launceston or Burnie. Public transport options are very limited in regional locations and community transport options are currently running at \$1.50 per kilometre and due to increase. For a 100-kilometre round trip this is \$150.00 in total.¹ For those on low incomes, this is a considerable cost to access information about aged care services that are freely available for those in metropolitan locations. Videocall options may be relevant for some but given our very low levels of digital literacy among the 65+ age group, cannot be relied upon to address equity issues in relation to access.

Outreach services to more regional locations are required on a regular basis at the very least to redress this imbalance in the accessibility of ACSO services.

Extended wait times for assessment:

COTA Tasmania's Care Finder team has observed that wait times for assessments are extending to 8-12 weeks for RAS assessments and 12 weeks for ACAT assessments. While this information is anecdotal, in the absence of publicly available data, we rely on this client-based feedback. Often, extended wait times exacerbate stress for clients and their carers who are uncertain about the future and may be struggling to manage care without services.

As we move to a single assessment service it will be critical that skilled teams are available to undertake assessments in a timely manner. However, we are concerned that the transition period to single assessment will push out wait times for assessment further. While staffing shortages in assessment services have received little publicity, our understanding is that they are equally critical as those in front line aged care services. Urgent attention needs to be given to supporting assessment organisations through the transition period to the single assessment service, to ensure that older Tasmanians are not further disadvantaged by even greater wait times for services.

Conclusion:

Much more needs to be done to ensure that older Australians have adequate access to information regarding the aged care system. This information must be provided in a way that is understandable and empowers individuals to make choices about their aged care. This is as critical at the point of entry to the aged care system (My Aged Care through to assessment) as it is once aged care services are being delivered.

¹ Furthermore, multiple visits may be required if the person doesn't bring their financial documentation to the appointment, or the ACSO indicates that additional documentation.

It is our view that the current My Aged Care system is not fit for purpose for many older Tasmanians and requires urgent action to ensure barriers to access and understanding are addressed.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brigid Wilkinson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Brigid Wilkinson
CEO - COTA Tasmania

ⁱ Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, National Statement on Health Literacy, 2014.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/older-australians/your-rights/charter-aged-care-rights>

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2023

^{iv} 1307.6 - Tasmanian State and Regional Indicators, Jun 2008

^v <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2021-03/final-report-volume-2.pdf>

^{vi} Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Data