

# **ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility**

Melbourne – Monday 23 March 2026

### **MEMBERS**

Dylan Wight – Chair

Chris Crewther – Deputy Chair

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Emma Kealy

Nathan Lambert

Sarah Mansfield

Evan Mulholland

Lee Tarlamis

## WITNESS

Martin Turnbull, Senior Policy Adviser, Council on the Ageing Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this public hearing for the Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands each of us is gathered on today, and paying my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of the issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

My name is Dylan Wight. I am the Member for Tarneit and Chair of the committee. I have Christopher Crewther, who is the Member for Mornington and also the Deputy Chair; Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria; Nathan Lambert, Member for Preston; and Sarah Mansfield, who is also a Member for Western Victoria.

I welcome Martin Turnbull, who is the Senior Policy Adviser for Council on the Ageing Victoria.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, you may not be protected by the same privilege. The committee does not require witnesses to be sworn, but questions must be answered fully, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. It is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and that anything said may be picked up and captioned, even if said quietly. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check as soon as available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

I will now invite you to give a brief 5-minute overview of the organisation and your submission, and then we will follow that up with questions from committee members.

**Martin TURNBULL:** Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you all very much for the opportunity to come and talk to you this morning. I also would like to pay my respects to the traditional owners of the lands we are meeting on.

Just perhaps a quick word first about who we are: the Council on the Ageing – or COTA – Victoria are really the leading independent not-for-profit organisation in Victoria representing the interests and the rights of all Victorians nominally over 50 but of all ages over 50. This year we actually celebrate 75 years of service, and over that time a large part of that has always been the provision of policy advice and advocacy to government, business and the community generally around a whole diversity of issues affecting the lives of older Victorians. We are also a member organisation. We currently provide free membership to about 2000 individual older Victorians, and that is a really good way for us to stay in touch and keep our ear to the ground, together with a statewide call line, a rolling series of community education programs and also our Seniors Rights Victoria program, which provides particular legal and other supports to older people who are experiencing some form of elder abuse. It is probably just worth reminding us all that over the next 20 years Victoria is projected to gain about 800,000 people over 60, so ageing and the needs of our older population are certainly some things we cannot escape focusing on.

COTA Victoria has, I would say, a fairly established interest in voting issues, and that has included working on occasion with the Victorian Electoral Commission, supporting their planning and particularly their communications. For us, this is fundamentally an issue about ensuring that people have continued unimpeded access to voting as they get older as a key part of their right to participate in decision-making affecting everything to do with their lives. As we point out in our submission, there is a fairly big overlap between the barriers facing older people and those facing people with a disability, and that is partly because people over 65 are about 2½ times more likely to have an ongoing disability that affects their daily lives. That includes of

course certain conditions like dementia that are heavily, but of course not solely, associated with ageing. I know you will be hearing from Dementia Australia later this morning, and they will provide more focus on that particular issue. But it is also very much a matter of older people facing some additional barriers. Just broadly speaking, they have to do with digital exclusion, with isolation often, with reduced transport options and, importantly, also, a whole set of more psychological, psychosocial, barriers – reduced tolerance for crowded environments and so forth. I should say that we are not focusing here so much on but it is important to note that 5 per cent of Victorians over 65 live in residential aged care, and that is obviously a particular focus for the electoral commission. Mobile voting and postal voting are particularly important there, and these issues do apply to them as well. But they are a small but important minority of older people.

Overall it does appear, though, that attending a voting centre – increasingly, an early voting centre – is the preference for older Victorians. We conducted an online survey of our members, which is something we do on a whole range of issues. We did one specifically in preparation for this inquiry, and while we are not claiming that that survey is totally representative of the whole population, we had a pretty healthy response. 111 people took the time to answer a series of questions about their experience with voting centres. That covered a pretty wide range of ages: from people in their 60s through to people in their 80s. About 45 per cent of those people had used an early voting centre and 25 per cent voted on the day, so there is a pretty strong use of voting centres in that group. The good news is that there was a pretty high level of overall satisfaction with the centres, but our informants certainly did point to a bundle of concerns and opportunities for improvement, which we have set out in our submission. Broadly speaking, I guess they relate to three main areas. There are the location and physical access issues, there are the particular conditions people will have to endure while they are queuing and waiting to vote, and then finally there is the adequacy of information and signage.

As you will see in our submission, we have made 10 recommendations really on the basis of that input. Our overall message really, I think, is that there is a need to address both ageing- and disability-related needs in a fairly integrated way but at the same time remembering that they are distinct characteristics of the population. A large part of the improvements I think that need to be made can be done by universal design – by changes that will help everybody – but there are probably just a few specific things that we would really advocate for in terms of a focus on older people in particular. I will not run through them all in the interest of time but just highlight a few.

I think obviously the importance of meeting disability access standards is crucial, but adding to that, some adherence to some of the frameworks that are around for age-friendly environments and dementia-friendly environments would be great. Enhancing the parking and drop-off facilities so that more older people, as well as those who actually have disability parking permits already, can be assured of access. Improving information I think is really important to help older people make good decisions about when and where to vote, and as always, making sure that that is done with a good mix of digital and non-digital communication means. Expanding the availability of some of those low-sensory and similar voting times, as has been trialled, would be great for particular sets of the older population, not just those with neurodivergent conditions. And finally, an issue that came through very strongly from our respondents is how we can restrict some of that unwanted perceived harassment and contact with campaigners, which does certainly put people off attending voting centres.

I just might make a final comment that the conduct at the voting centres is of course very heavily dependent on older people as volunteers, and volunteering, in the older populations, is very important. Older people help the whole system to run through that work, and that is I think a great way to get advice and ongoing input from the older population and also about the needs of the older population in this particular context. I will leave it there.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thank you. I will open it up to questions now. We will go to the Deputy Chair Chris Crewther.

**Chris CREWTER:** Thank you, Chair. Firstly, thank you for your time and giving evidence today. In your submission you note that 21 per cent said access to useful information on candidates was poor. I am just wondering if you can elaborate on that and specific concerns that were raised in that regard.

**Martin TURNBULL:** Yes. I do not have a lot of further detail, but the people who made that point did point to what they perceived as a drop-off of the information that they had been used to getting, I think, through vehicles such as local newspapers and printed material in particular. Also, surprisingly enough, perhaps, they

often said they had not received printed information by other means – for example, through their letterbox. That might be a sign of just greater reliance on online sources of information, I suspect.

**Chris CREWETHER:** In your submission you have recommendation 9. One of the ways that people do receive information is sometimes on the voting day itself with the how-to-vote cards that are put out, both with information about how to vote but also some information on the candidates or the parties and so forth. Can you explain how that could potentially marry up with reducing overcrowding or having potential alternative entry routes for older people that are free of campaigners? How can they get that information while also having those alternative entry routes where they might not have people giving them that information, to then allay the 21 per cent concerned about a lack of information about candidates?

**Martin TURNBULL:** Yes, I certainly take your point that there is an important balance to be struck there. I think one of the suggestions people made was, for example, for that information to be provided by neutral, independent people rather than campaigners and candidates. People suggested that it be limited to the very outside perimeter and that there be options, if you like, for avoiding that perception of being overcrowded and harassed, so that potentially would give people that option. And certainly a few people suggested that some of that information needed to be provided through other community venues prior to the election day or the voting period, reducing the reliance on actually getting it on the moment of voting.

**Chris CREWETHER:** Noting what you have just said there as well, do you think there is an opportunity for alternative mechanisms where people might be given, say, a long sheet of information with 100 words on each candidate, combined with a how-to-vote card in a neutral format across all candidates, or potentially having that same information and how-to-vote cards at the back of the actual cardboard voting booths themselves – or both? Are these potential solutions that could well add to the information that is given at the moment by people who might be harassing people at the voting booths?

**Martin TURNBULL:** Yes. Look, I think both those and other suggestions too are worth testing. It would be good to perhaps do some focus groups with people, older people too, to test that idea. I think probably it needs to be provided before people actually get in the booth itself. You would not want to extend the period you are making people stand up, often in not great light, to read material, but certainly you should be making sure that material is in simple, plain English formats with large print and so forth. There does seem to be a bit of a gap for some people in accessing that sort of material.

**Chris CREWETHER:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Chris. We are going to go to Nathan Lambert online.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Martin, for your submission and for coming in. You have got some very pragmatic and strong recommendations in there, but I suppose, like Chris, recommendation 9 is the one that I might ask about. I think that is in part because, quite genuinely, what you have just been discussing with Chris is, in a way, a bit of an emerging problem, or certainly one that has ticked up recently, and so I think people's minds are on how to solve it. But as you have also touched upon, this idea of campaigners harassing voters to the point where it is a real problem for them is not an easy one for us to solve. I think, just generally speaking, this committee has considered it at some length, and I do not think any of us have a perfect answer for it yet. But to that exact end, I just wonder if you could elaborate a little bit more on the feedback you got. In particular, what I am interested in is that there is no doubt that that behaviour is annoying for a lot of people, including older people and including people with a disability, but I am just wondering if you could elaborate on the specific negatives that you see there. Is this actually stopping people voting? Is it likely to drive down turnout? How exactly do you think this negatively affects our democratic system?

**Martin TURNBULL:** I do not want to claim that we have enough input to answer that definitively, but I think the suggestions are that it is a bit more than just an annoyance for many people. Interestingly, quite a few of the people who responded to our survey described the issue in terms of the problems it was causing for their peers and other older people rather than themselves necessarily. I think you would have to do some more research and focus groups to really test that in detail, but certainly the strength of the response on that issue would suggest to us that it certainly is running the risk of dissuading people from attending centres.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Forgive me if you mentioned this in your submission. I am just trying to remember; did you specifically touch on the intersection here with dementia, with neurodivergence and with a specific cohort, if you like, of older people for whom this might be a particular difficulty?

**Martin TURNBULL:** Certainly. The proportion of the respondents to our survey who said that they had an ongoing disability that was significant in their conduct was about 50 per cent. So there is obviously a lot of crossover, which is the key point we are making, in a sense. That will be, in some cases, actual dementia. In some cases it will be just some extent of cognitive decline or frailty. So there is a wide spectrum, and of course older people experience disability, including autism and neurodivergent conditions, like everyone else, and increasingly people with those conditions are living longer into older age, so we are seeing the combined impact of disability and ageing, which is a compounding impact. For example, that affects digital inclusion as well. Ageing remains the single biggest contributor to digital exclusion. If you look at the Australian Digital Inclusion Index, which is the standard national measure, there is a sharp gradient from people in their mid-40s through to people in their 90s in terms of that. But if you add disability – we have just recently done some analysis of our own using data provided by the people who run the index, and that really showed that the compounding effect of disability and ageing is quite marked, even though ageing is up there, bigger than disability, in a sense.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** Thank you. Just to reiterate the conversation you had in answering Chris's question, as we came out of the 2022 election, where this was, as I said, a problem that certainly loomed larger than it had previously, there were big conversations about limiting the number of campaigners and big conversations about registering campaigners. But my interpretation of your answer earlier is that you do not think perhaps those measures are the direction to go. The direction to go is something that is more like a mandatory low-sensory or no-campaigners pathway for people to get into the polling centre and vote.

**Martin TURNBULL:** I would certainly suggest going in that direction. There are many older people – many people in general – who like engaging with campaigners and enjoy that part of the experience, and we certainly would not want to rob them of that option.

**Nathan LAMBERT:** No, I would not want to rob them of that option either. Chair, it is a big topic, but perhaps I should cede to other members for the moment.

**The CHAIR:** Sure. Thanks, Nathan. We will go to Sarah Mansfield, please.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. I am interested in some of your feedback about accessibility of voting centres themselves and what more can be done to make it clear about even entrances and where to go and what the procedures are and the ability for someone to go straight to the front or through an accessible entrance of a venue. I know that from my experience handing out flyers at some recent elections it was actually often the volunteers who were there who would guide people who would turn up and say, 'Actually, you don't have to wait in the queue. You can go around this way to get in the centre.' But that was just based on our recognition of a situation and someone maybe needing some better access. Is there anything more that you think could be done to help people clearly identify that there is a more accessible entrance to a voting site?

**Martin TURNBULL:** I certainly think there is more to be done in terms of the information that goes to people and the advice that goes to people before they set out to go to a centre. It certainly does seem that not everyone understands that they can ask for that streamlining, if you like, of access. Quite a few of our respondents made the point that they thought there was a gap in terms of personalised support for older people with a disability. How much of that is actually to do with the fact they did not know it was there and they did not know they could ask for it I think needs some further exploration. But certainly the information and awareness of that is one thing, and that goes back to all the different forms of communication. But I think the great work of the volunteers – probably they need a bit more person power to extend the service they provide to people and be a bit more proactive in looking out for people who perhaps need that sort of support. Some of it, as we have pointed out, is very basic, like the provision of some seating and shelter, which are sometimes lacking. So a lot of it is common sense.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** In terms of the venue selection, this is something that has come up quite a lot through different inquiries and different bits of work that we have done. While we appreciate that it can be challenging

to identify appropriate venues, we seem to get a lot of feedback that a lot of the venues that are even said to be accessible still have accessibility challenges. It may just be that while the building itself might be accessible, it is a really uneven path and dirt road that is difficult to navigate leading up to the building. Do you have any feedback about what more can be done about identifying properly accessible venues and then, as you said, communicating where those are?

**Martin TURNBULL:** Yes, that is a big set of issues there. Some of it is, I suppose, a preference for a particular type of venue. It does seem that – and this is a bit of a generalisation – older people seem to be preferring what you might call community venues, not corporate-style venues, and of course some of those community venues are not always as well resourced or as well set up, so there is a bit of a balance there to be struck. Certainly looking a bit more at access routes – as you said, roadways, pathways. The way people get to the venues from public transport was something a few people commented on, that sometimes there was either a fairly long walk from the train or the tram or that there were some barriers, bad footpaths et cetera. So there is a lot to look at there. But taking a slightly broader view of the surroundings is obviously going to be important as well. They are probably the main things.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** You have also commented on information provision and the balance of digital versus non-digital information at polling centres. Do you want to expand on that a bit?

**Martin TURNBULL:** I think the main message we would always want to give about this issue is that there needs to be a good balance and not to assume – certainly not on the basis of a person's age or indeed their disability often – a preference for one or the other. The use of digital communications of course is a fantastic boon for many people with disability, and people with disabilities, including older people, are often early adopters and enthusiastic users of that sort of technology. But they do often need aids and equipment, assistive technology, to support those things. So making sure, whether it is hearing loops or other types of equipment, the full gamut of things are available to facilitate that – that is just an important part of inclusion generally, I think.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Absolutely.

**Martin TURNBULL:** But at the same time, as the figures on digital inclusion show, older people – and it is a generational thing as much as an ageing thing – really have a strong preference in many cases for written information, and not doing away with that prematurely is important.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Brilliant. Thank you, Sarah. Thank you, Martin. We have, unfortunately, run out of time, but if there is anything else you would like to contribute to the inquiry, please feel free to write through. We will end the broadcast.

**Witness withdrew.**