

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility

Melbourne – Monday 23 March 2026

MEMBERS

Dylan Wight – Chair

Chris Crewther – Deputy Chair

Jacinta Ermacora

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Sarah Mansfield

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WITNESS

Dr Rose Capp, Policy Adviser, Dementia Australia.

The CHAIR: I declare open this public hearing of 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 this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

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

I would like to welcome Dr Rose Capp, who is a Policy Adviser for Dementia Australia.

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 and 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 it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

I invite you to give a brief 5-minute statement, both about your organisation and the submission, and we will follow that up with some questions from committee members.

Rose CAPP: Thanks very much, Chair.

The CHAIR: You are welcome.

Rose CAPP: I would like to add my acknowledgement too today and say that we are meeting on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri and Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. I would also like to thank you, Chair and committee, for the invitation to appear today.

Dementia Australia welcomes this Inquiry into Voting Centre Accessibility and in particular the committee's focus on how to improve access to voting for people living with disability, including people living with dementia. Dementia Australia is the peak national body representing people living with dementia and their families and carers. As we noted in our submission, it is estimated there are about 113,000 Victorians currently living with dementia, and that is projected to nearly double by 2054 to around 216,000. As many of you might know, 'dementia' is a broad term, so it encompasses a number of different conditions. You can develop dementia at any age, and there are people living with dementia in every community and every electorate in Victoria.

People living with dementia have the same legal right to vote as any other Australian, and as our submission reflects, unfortunately the process is not always straightforward and is often quite challenging. Dementia can affect a number of different cognitive domains, including sensory processing, communication, changes in memory and a number of other changes that can actually have an impact on whether or not someone living with dementia feels comfortable in an unfamiliar environment. By definition, a voting centre is a pretty unfamiliar environment. People can find these kinds of spaces confusing, overwhelming and intimidating. You have already referred to the noise, the crowds, particularly in that pre-voting centre zone, where campaigners are handing out information. Within the voting centre itself, issues around lighting and clear signage and

wayfinding can also have an impact. All of these things can make it much harder for someone living with dementia to participate in the voting process.

It is important here to also emphasise that while physical challenges are an issue – access to parking, ramps and other aspects of the physical environment are important – cognitive accessibility matters equally to people living with dementia, and that can include how information is presented, the kind of assistance someone is given by polling staff or volunteers and how well informed that assistance is in order to support people living with dementia to participate. It might mean the difference between someone voting or someone being discouraged to do so on the day.

Dementia Australia's submission to this inquiry is informed by people with living experience. We went out to our dementia advocates in the Victorian community and asked them specifically for feedback on positive and negative experiences and also changes that they would suggest that would help people living with dementia to participate more fully. We had a range of feedback. It is important to point out that we had advocates in metro, rural and regional areas providing feedback, people living with younger onset dementia as well as older people and people identifying as being from culturally and linguistically diverse communities as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So it was a pretty comprehensive group of people who responded to our survey. Many described situations where they found voting confusing and overwhelming. It was a bit hard to know who to ask for help when they were in the voting centre. Carers also reported that even if assistance was offered, it was clear sometimes that the polling staff or volunteers did not have very good understanding of dementia and how to assist someone with a cognitive disability.

I think what is equally clear from our submission is that people living with dementia really want to participate in the democratic process. They want that choice. So it is a great opportunity here to make some recommendations about how we can improve that process and ensure that people that choose to vote who are living with dementia can be enabled to do so. The positive message here I think from our submission is that we believe that making voting a dementia-inclusive process is achievable, and we make a number of practical recommendations, some of which have actually already been covered by Martin in the previous appearance. I will not go through all of these, obviously, but we make some clear recommendations about the environment, and a lot of that has been covered already this morning. But one of our key recommendations is that at least one staff member, and ideally more, would receive some kind of training about dementia so that they could assist a person, be able to identify if someone has a cognitive disability and also provide assistance that is appropriate and support them to vote on the day. We do make a recommendation that our dementia friends program is a really basic short introduction to what dementia is, how to support someone and a little bit about dementia-friendly communities, and that would be really good basic training. I could also be cheeky here and suggest that all parliamentarians might like to undertake the dementia friends training: less than 15 minutes and you can become a dementia friend.

We also emphasise the importance of maximising alternative options to actually attending a voting centre. This came through strongly in our responses. There was a lot of feedback that demonstrated that people were not always aware of the voting options, that there were alternatives to voting in person, so we would really like to emphasise that pre-poll voting, postal voting and even voting by phone need to be promoted more widely, particularly for people living with disability, to enable them to participate more fully in the process. I notice that the Victorian Electoral Commission – one of its key aims or statements is that true democracy must be accessible to everyone, and I think this inquiry provides the opportunity to make sure that our democratic processes are more inclusive. I think by embedding dementia-friendly principles in our voting centres and processes the Victorian government can ensure that people living with disability, including living with dementia, can be encouraged to participate – to vote – and be supported with dignity to do so. We thank again the Chair and the committee for the opportunity to appear and look forward to questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We are going to go to Jacinta Ermacora first.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hello. Thank you very much for attending this morning, Rose. I want to raise the intersectionality issue where people might experience a range of ability issues. We know that people with disabilities are more highly represented in physical and sexual abuse in our community ; in fact vulnerable people are more highly represented in rates of abuse. People with dementia are vulnerable. I have looked at your recommendations – lots of physical advice. I just wonder if there has been any consideration, or suggestions that you might have, in relation to either historic survivors of abuse who now have dementia and

are heading into the polling booth supported, or those that are now experiencing abuse as a result of their dementia? Do they have any particular unique needs?

Rose CAPP: That is an interesting question, and thank you for that. We do know that people living with dementia are vulnerable to various forms of abuse, including elder abuse, and we know that often that abuse can be perpetrated – most commonly – by family members and spouses. It is a complex issue. In terms of the impact on the ability to vote, I think our general recommendations about supporting people living with dementia to be able to exercise their vote would apply here, so we would say that people have the right to choose to vote. Again I think it goes to our point about having staff at the polling booths and volunteers who are educated and have awareness about how to support someone with a cognitive disability.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I am interested in particularly the VEC's use of silent electors, which is a way of protecting people that have experienced abuse or harassment from the public or from family, and whether or not that status is used appropriately for people who might be experiencing abuse?

Rose CAPP: Could you explain it to me in terms of the silent elector option?

Jacinta ERMACORA: So no address is available on the roll.

Rose CAPP: They do not appear on the roll. Yes, that is right. That is certainly something we did not consider in our submission, but I think that would be something that would be certainly potentially helpful for someone if they were subject to abuse and living with a cognitive impairment. Again, I think that also goes to my broader point. The feedback that we got from many of our advocates was that they were not fully aware of the options for voting if they did not feel comfortable attending face to face, in person, so I think that will go to our broader point about promoting the various options for voting, including phone voting and postal voting and, as you said, the silent election option as well.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to go to Christopher Crewther next, please.

Chris CREWThER: Firstly, thank you for your evidence and your time today. You mentioned in your submission and your oral evidence just before about getting at least one staff member at voting booths to receive training in dementia and recommended it for politicians as well, which is another good recommendation. Would you also recommend it for political parties and candidates in terms of our own training of volunteers and campaigners, both before and on election day as well?

Rose CAPP: Yes. I think that would be absolutely fantastic. We think that generally the community has quite poor knowledge about dementia. A recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare survey showed that for Australians, while many have contact with someone in their immediate circle who has lived or lives with dementia, knowledge in the general community is poor; Dementia Australia surveys on attitudes and knowledge also reflect that. There is a great need for people to have a better understanding of what living with dementia might feel like and the impacts that living with dementia might entail, and I think certainly if volunteers, parliamentarians and their staffers and volunteers had some basic education around that, that would be really helpful.

Chris CREWThER: Thank you. In terms of campaigners at voting booths, there have been reports across multiple submissions regarding harassment of voters, which is a general complaint whether or not one has a disability. What are some of the complaints in particular that people living with dementia have? What are some of the things that they have come across in terms of their experiences with campaigners? What do you think best needs to be done to deal with those sorts of issues into the future?

Rose CAPP: Interestingly, the feedback we got did not specifically address campaigners and the zone outside the voting centre itself; it was more the general sphere of the voting centre. But we all know that it is a very crowded, noisy and pretty confusing space in that area, with the campaigners handing out how-to-vote information leading up to the voting centre itself. Anything that could be done to mitigate that – it is a very visually and physically cluttered environment as well, which is certainly not helpful for someone living with dementia. I noticed that the VEC is looking at – there have been some trials of low-sensory environment polling centres, and there is a recommendation where they are looking at actually that campaign area as well

and trying to make some changes there that would modify the environment. We think that would be really helpful – any changes really that can improve both the physical barriers there but also the cognitive barriers. Visually that is quite confusing with all that sort of literature and signage and so on, quite apart from the physical aspects of that area.

Chris CREWITHER: Thank you. Can you go more into your submission about ensuring that signage and voting information and other resources are in the right format formats and provide the best visibility for people living with dementia?

Rose CAPP: Unclear signage is one of the key barriers that people could encounter. There are some really standard recommendations about what works well for people living with dementia. Generally speaking, there are some matte colours with a contrasting black text background that is large and clear; those kinds of parameters are really good in terms of general signage. We would also make the point that these kinds of recommendations are not just good for people living with dementia; they are good and they offer clarity for the whole community. I think Martin also made that point in his previous appearance, that the kind of environmental changes we have suggested in our submission would be actually beneficial for the whole voting community. In terms of information and the way that is presented – and Martin also touched on this – our preference or our suggestion is that there are a range of ways that people living with dementia would like information presented. That could be standard text hard copy. That could also be an easy or plain English versions of documents. But we often suggest that other options like audio or video formats, in terms of presenting important voting information, would also be useful. Again, picking up on Martin's point too, and it is something we also touched on in our submission: we got a lot of feedback from our advocates talking about how they needed that information well in advance of election day and their voting so that they could understand the information presented and make an informed vote on the day.

Chris CREWITHER: Thank you, Dr Capp. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Chris. We will go to Nathan Lambert now, please.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Rose, for presenting today. I will come back to a similar issue that the Deputy Chair was just raising. But first, I noticed in your submission there was a comment towards the end there by one of the people you quoted talking about people who are aged or having dementia wishing to be taken off the roll. We were talking – you may have heard – with Martin about some of our concerns that if people are not provided with ways to vote that make it as easy as possible and comfortable as possible for them, what are the risks to our democracy? I just wondered: was that comment a bit of a one-off comment, or do you think there is a bit of a theme there where if you do not work hard enough, people will actually not want to vote?

Rose CAPP: It was not a really strong theme, but several advocates commented on the fact that when someone living with dementia decided they did not want to participate in the voting process anymore, they found it quite difficult. One advocate in particular offered an example where they had gone through the process of applying to be removed from the roll and then actually found that they were still on the electoral roll when the next election came around. There were also some comments about people being fearful and frightened of the repercussions of not voting and doing the right thing.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you. We have just been talking about – and it was mentioned in your submission as well – the benefits of the low-sensory voting trial, which does seem to be, as you know, a relatively new innovation but one that I have noted in not just submissions to this inquiry but other inquiries has been well received. Would I be right in saying it is something that you would like to see expanded?

Rose CAPP: Yes, definitely. A number of advocates commented on that. There was one rather pithy comment that supermarkets can provide those kinds of environments, and I think there was a reference to the COVID time: why can't the VEC do something similar? So we would be really supportive of that. We think that would be really helpful for people living with dementia and their carers, to provide an environment that is tailored, less stimulating, more supportive, that will give someone living with dementia the confidence to vote in an environment that does not feel as confusing and intimidating as the voting centre often can.

Nathan LAMBERT: Perhaps bringing two issues together here, we may have to see political parties and candidates and campaigners very much committing to the objectives of that low-sensory voting – just touching

on exactly what you were just talking about, the complexity of these environments that people are walking into. I suppose I will put that to you as a proposition, that the VEC is taking steps in order to make those environments low sensory for voters. You would agree, presumably, that the campaigners and political parties would have to take similar steps and respect that it was a low-sensory period or pathway that was provided to people?

Rose CAPP: Yes, and again that gets back to information and education. It would be important that everyone involved in working in that environment understood why those changes have been made and the positive benefits for them – for people living with dementia and other people, neurodivergent people and so on – and that it is a positive benefit and it is making a contribution to making our democratic processes more inclusive. So I think there would need to be some education and training around what these environments are actually offering.

Nathan LAMBERT: Yes, and probably at the end, it is not a perfect solution, because it still requires people to attend at a certain specific time. I suppose it is a bit of a burden on the voter to educate themselves as well and come along at a certain time, which does not make it a perfect answer.

Rose CAPP: No, but again, it is about providing options. If people knew and knew well in advance that this was an option and a quieter environment that would be more conducive to voting, I think that would certainly be a choice that people might take up, and again, it might help boost the participation of people that may not choose to vote otherwise.

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Chair. I might leave things there, but just perhaps with a comment that I appreciate your thoughts on that. I think all of us are perhaps going to watch the next election and see whether some of the stuff we saw in the 2022 election was a one-off or whether it is a trend, and if it is a trend, I suspect this is a topic we will be returning to. I appreciate your comments.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will go to Sarah Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing and for your submission as well. I am interested in some of the observations that you have provided about experiences of people living with dementia at residential aged care facilities and voting, and in particular about how things like a lack of privacy at some facilities might make it difficult for people to want to vote. What more do you think could be done at some of those, I guess, outside of polling centre settings for people living with dementia?

Rose CAPP: Look, it is interesting. This issue came up quite consistently in the feedback from advocates, so it is clearly a concern for a number of people. The issue of privacy is interesting. That was raised by a couple of people who felt that even though mobile polling units had come to the residential aged care facility, the conditions were not necessarily conducive to encouraging people to vote. The space that was allocated for voting was not necessarily appropriate, and in one case it was in a fairly public area, so people were being observed voting. But there were also a number of other issues to do with the residential aged care context too, which I think are worth flagging here. There were some comments about how both the staff in the residential aged care facility and the electoral staff could have benefited from a bit more education and awareness about supporting people living with dementia to vote and particularly for both sets of staff to understand their roles in assisting someone to vote. Under the VEC people have the right to have a supporter or someone assisting them to vote, but that is actually not always well understood by polling staff – from the feedback we got – but also by staff in residential aged care. In terms of actually encouraging people to vote in a residential aged care setting, particularly people living with a cognitive impairment, I think, again, that gets back to educating the staff about the rights of someone to vote and the right to have assistance to vote.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes.

Rose CAPP: The other comment that came back – and this is partly, I think, to do with COVID – was that often the mobile polling units came once, so if people were not prepared, if they were at an appointment or if they were unwell, that was the only opportunity they had to vote. It was also felt that people living with dementia and older people more generally in those settings then may not have been able to exercise their right to vote, purely because of the logistics. So, again, the point was made that it would be good to have lots of information in advance so that people could be present as much as possible and exercise that right, but perhaps

there should be more than one visit by polling unit to a residential aged care facility to maximise capturing all the people that wish to vote.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes, and perhaps some more information provided to residential aged care facilities – something quite simple to explain voters rights.

Rose CAPP: Yes, and even that people living with dementia have the right to vote, because, unfortunately, given the level of education in some residential aged care facilities, some of the staff working there might also make assumptions that people do not have the right to vote when of course they do.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am just conscious of time, which we have, unfortunately, run out of. Thank you very much, Dr Capp, for both the submission and also appearing today. If there is anything else that you would like to provide to the inquiry, please do so via email.

Witness withdrew.