



**Promoting opportunities. Protecting rights. For older Victorians.**

## **COTA Victoria & Seniors Rights Victoria**

### ***Submission to the Inquiry into Community Consultation Practices***

**To:**

Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee

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## 1 About us

[Council on the Ageing \(COTA\) Victoria](#) is the leading not-for-profit organisation representing the interests and rights of people aged over 50 in Victoria. For over 70 years, we have led government, corporate and community thinking about the positive aspects of ageing in the state.

Today, our focus is on promoting opportunities for and protecting the rights of people 50+. We value ageing and embrace its opportunities for personal growth, contribution, and self-expression. This belief brings benefits to the nation and its states alongside communities, families, and individuals.

[Seniors Rights Victoria \(SRV\)](#) is a program of COTA Victoria, and the only state-wide community legal centre dedicated to advancing the rights of older people and the early intervention into, or prevention of, elder abuse in our community.

SRV has a team of experienced advocates, lawyers, and social workers who provide free information, advice, referral, legal advice, legal casework, and support to older people who are either at risk of or are experiencing elder abuse. SRV supports and empowers older people through the provision of legal advice directly to the older person.

## 2 About this submission

COTA Victoria welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into community consultation practices in Victoria. As the peak body representing older Victorians, our core mission includes advocating for the rights and interests of older people and ensuring their voices are heard in public policy and planning. Through our policy and engagement work, we have extensive experience both in conducting consultations ourselves and in participating in those led by government and other agencies.

Over the years, we have contributed to a wide range of consultations, drawing on insights from our members and broader stakeholder networks. These contributions are grounded in real-world experiences, gathered through targeted surveys, focus groups, and ongoing conversations with older people across Victoria. This approach ensures that our advocacy consistently reflects the lived realities and diverse perspectives of older individuals.

Given our deep engagement with consultation processes, we hold a strong interest in the structures, standards, and outcomes of public consultations in Victoria. This submission offers guidance on how to make these processes more inclusive and effective. In line with the guidance offered in this submission, we suggest consideration of the following key questions:

- *Are all older people aware that a consultation is taking place and that their input is valued?*
- *Are consultation materials and information accessible and understandable to all older people?*
- *Can all older people easily and confidently participate in the consultation process?*
- *Does the process actively promote emotional, cultural, and psychological safety?*

### 3 Community consultation practices of government and service providers

In our experience, older people are very willing to participate in consultation processes when given the opportunity. They are motivated not only by issues that affect them directly, such as healthcare, housing, transport and consumer protections, but also by broader social, environmental and economic concerns. Many have the time, skills, and lived experience to offer constructive and sophisticated input. However, the effectiveness of consultations varies significantly depending on the approach used.

One of the most significant barriers to meaningful engagement is digital exclusion. While some older Victorians are highly connected, a substantial proportion face difficulties with technology, whether due to lack of access, familiarity, or age-related impairments. As a result, online-only consultation processes can inadvertently exclude or frustrate those who are otherwise eager to participate. Even when older people do use digital platforms, they often report that the tools are not intuitive or accessible. For instance, many online surveys are lengthy, open-ended, or unclear in purpose, which can deter engagement.

Face-to-face consultations continue to be important for this group, especially when held in familiar, local settings such as community centres, libraries, or seniors' groups. However, these opportunities are increasingly rare. In addition, many consultation processes overlook the importance of enabling participation through the support of carers, peer facilitators, or advocates. Some older people, particularly those with cognitive or psychosocial conditions, benefit greatly from such assistance, yet few consultation frameworks account for it.

Another concern is that many consultations appear to target people who have already engaged with a service or had a specific problem, leaving out those who have never accessed the service or who face barriers that prevent engagement altogether. Similarly, older people who are socially isolated or live in rural and remote areas may not be reached at all. In these cases, there is often no mechanism for their perspectives to be heard unless deliberate efforts are made.

### 4 The use of non-government providers in consultations

COTA Victoria supports the use of established, broad-based community organisations to conduct consultations on behalf of government. Our own organisation has been engaged in this way, including in work on the Victorian Carers Strategy and consumer engagement plans developed by government agencies. These experiences demonstrate that when governments work in partnership with community-based organisations, the result is typically a deeper, more inclusive, and more trusted form of engagement.

Community sector organisations like ours bring strong relationships with participants, often built over many years. We have tailored communication channels and culturally safe processes, and we are often seen as more neutral and approachable than government departments or private consultancies. This is particularly important given that some older people report feeling mistrustful or disengaged from government-led consultation efforts, and even more so from private firms engaged to collect data.

Moreover, the use of NGOs is often more cost-effective. These organisations already possess the infrastructure and networks required to reach specific populations. Where funding is provided, it

tends to be modest compared to the budgets associated with commercial consultancies, yet it can yield more authentic and useful insights.

We recommend that government more systematically engage NGOs through standing agreements or rolling contracts, enabling them to undertake timely consultations as needed. This approach would not only improve the quality of consultations but also strengthen the capacity of the community sector.

## **5 Standards of conduct and preparedness in community consultation**

There is a clear need for stronger and more consistent standards across all government-led consultation efforts. In our view, these standards should begin with a commitment to respect and inclusion. Government agencies must be aware of both explicit and implicit forms of ageism that can shape consultation practices and ensure that older people's perspectives are actively sought and valued.

All consultation materials and formats should be accessible. This includes adhering to disability standards, using plain language, and offering materials in multiple formats, including printed and audio versions where necessary. Older people should not be excluded due to design shortcomings, whether a visual, hearing and/or other disability or age-related support need.

Consultation processes should also be transparent. Participants need to know what kind of input is being sought, how it will be used, and whether it will influence final decisions. Feedback should be provided to participants after the process concludes, to close the loop and support ongoing engagement.

Fair and consistent compensation for participation is another important consideration. While some may choose to contribute their time freely, assumptions that older people do not require or deserve compensation are inappropriate and risk diminishing the value of their contributions.

Most importantly, agencies should meet older people where they are; both literally and figuratively. This means holding events in community venues, offering home-based or telephone options where needed, and tailoring approaches to different cultural and linguistic communities. It also means building relationships over time, not only during time-limited consultations.

## **6 Underrepresented groups and strategies to improve engagement**

Within the broader population of older Victorians, certain groups are particularly underrepresented in current consultation practices. These include people living in residential aged care, older people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, First Nations elders, and people with dementia or other cognitive conditions. Carers of people with disability or chronic illness, and those living in remote or rural areas, are also less likely to have their views heard.

To address this, consultation strategies must be specific and tailored. Working through trusted community leaders and services is often essential. Peer-led engagement, translated materials, and the use of culturally safe spaces can help to build trust and comfort. Equally, the use of carers and support workers as part of the engagement process should be encouraged and resourced.

In all these cases, the barriers are not insurmountable but require a thoughtful and inclusive approach.

## 7 Engage Victoria: Use and areas for improvement

Engage Victoria has been a useful tool in broadening access to consultation opportunities. However, its effectiveness for older Victorians is uneven. The platform can be challenging to navigate, and the structure of the consultations often rely on open-ended surveys with little context or guidance, which may be off-putting to some. For people unfamiliar with the policy area or uncertain about what is being asked, the process can be overwhelming.

Another issue is that the platform does not currently serve as a consistent or comprehensive hub. Not all departments use it, and many consultations remain inaccessible to those who are not digitally engaged. This creates gaps in participation, particularly for older people. It would be useful to complement the online platform with telephone-based input, printed surveys, and face-to-face opportunities, particularly for major or high-impact consultations.

## 8 Best practices from other jurisdictions

There are valuable models of good consultation practice in other parts of Australia and internationally. For example, COTA South Australia's Plugin platform; Tasmania's HEAR process; the National Centre for Healthy Ageing's (NCHA) Living Labs and Voice platform; and local government-led Positive Ageing Ambassador programs.

While sharing a common goal of amplifying older voices, these models operate under different logics, where each model demonstrates specific strengths:

- *The Plugin* offers consumer engagement;
- *HEAR* delivers broad policy input;
- *NCHA's Voice* integrates lived-experience into research design; and
- *Positive Ageing Ambassadors* enable deep, relational consultation.

Many jurisdictions also benefit from the presence of a dedicated Commissioner for Older People, a role that once existed in Victoria. While we do not argue for a direct reinstatement of this role, we strongly support re-establishing some of its functions, especially around guiding consultation strategy and supporting large-scale public engagement efforts.

We also believe the Senior Victorians Advisory Committee could be more actively used to provide cross-government advice on consultation quality and effectiveness. Specifically, this could include enabling SVAC to support large scale public engagement efforts, supported by member organisations represented on the committee, such as COTA Victoria.

## 9 Conclusion

COTA Victoria strongly supports efforts to improve community consultation practices across Victoria. With an ageing population and persistent inequalities in engagement, it is critical that government bodies, at both state and local levels, invest in thoughtful, inclusive, and effective

consultation processes. Older Victorians have knowledge and views to offer in shaping the policies and services that affect our communities. Ensuring they are heard benefits not only older people but all Victorians.