



Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health

Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria

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Introduction

Council on the Ageing Victoria (COTA) welcomes the *Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health*, and the opportunity to discuss the impacts of the built environment and community spaces on the health and well being of older Victorians.

COTA is a community-based organisation of older Victorians working in the interests of older people to bring about positive social change. Our mission is to resource and mobilize older people and shape a society that enables people to age well. Our organisation has been effectively representing seniors' views, and facilitating the active participation of older Victorians, since 1951.

COTA is Victoria's leading senior advocacy organisation and engages with over 60,000 senior Victorians annually. COTA has expertise in policy development and community education, particularly peer education by older people.

COTA believes all people have the right to dignity, security, access to high quality services, and equality in participation in the community regardless of their income, status, background, location or any other social or economic factors.

COTA recognises that consistent with the general population, older people come from many different cultural backgrounds and have diverse social, economic and health status. The economic, health, social and cultural needs and aspirations of older people are, on the whole, no different from the rest of the community.

COTA works for a just and equitable society for all, in which older people have the right to be full and participating citizens to the extent of their abilities and wishes, and is underpinned by a strong commitment to human rights and social justice.

With an ageing population in our community, and greater knowledge and acceptance of the importance of the social determinants of health, the physical environment has a significant influence on material and social well-being of older people.

- Approximately 13 per cent of Victorians are aged over 65. By 20312 this will have increased to just under a quarter of the population, and by 2051, about 27 per cent of the population will be aged over 65 – between 1.7 and 2.1 million people;

We know that older people on low incomes are struggling and that without the confidence that a decent and secure standard of living provides, their health and well-being suffers.

We know that secure and appropriate housing is a significant issue for many older people, and will continue to impact on the ability of older people to live independently and age in their own homes.

We know that creating age friendly and inclusive environments is one of the most effective approaches for responding to demographic ageing.

We know that care and support that promotes independence and enables people to maintain control of their lives contributes to a healthier and more active ageing experience.

We know that ageism undermines the rights, dignity, participation and independence of older people and without commitment to combat ageist attitudes at all levels of the community, ageism is perpetuated, and there will be no real change for older people now, and into the future.

In this submission COTA raises a number of aspects of our physical environments and communities, that need to be considered in a whole-of-government and strategic planning framework to ensure the health and well-being of older people.

Social Inclusion and Health Outcomes for Older People

Social exclusion can have significant implication for health and well-being of all people, and can be linked to policies and developments in the area of health inequalities. Health inequalities are disparities in health status that result from social and economic influences that are avoidable and unnecessary.

The inclusion of older people and their health outcomes can be impacted significantly by the environment, community accessibility and opportunities for participation afforded by local amenity.

Australian studies indicate that:

- Levels of participation in social and civic activities were found to be significantly influenced by socio-economic status with relative lack of involvement of people with low income and education levels
- Mental health status is more strongly correlated with levels of participation in social and community life than physical health.
- Poor social networks such as weak social ties, social connectedness, social integration, social activity and social embeddedness, has been found to be correlated to mortality from almost every cause of death

With the main focus of social exclusion being on labour market participation, and capacity to increase access to economic resources, it is only relatively recently that older people have been recognised as requiring particular focus to address disadvantage through social exclusion.

The work undertaken by Britain's Social Exclusion Unit and others, in relation to social exclusion of older people, has raised a number of issues for social policy and the development of responses and services to reduce social exclusion and increase well-being amongst excluded older people, through the identification of a range of conditions and drivers that might cause exclusion in later life.

Age-related characteristics – the way in which older people are disproportionately affected by certain kinds of losses or restriction relating to income, health or reduced social ties. Such changes may take place across the life course but they are likely to feature more prominently in later life due to retirement, the impact of the onset of chronic disabling conditions, and increased needs as people adjust to living alone;

- Cumulative disadvantage – birth cohorts becoming more unequal over time due to limited educational and work opportunities, and the long term impacts in terms of reduced income in older age or limited awareness about how to access health and support services;
- Community characteristics – the way in which older people who may have strong attachments to their neighbourhoods, may also be vulnerable to changes associated with population turnover, economic decline and feelings of insecurity;
- Age-based discrimination – the impact of ageism within economic and social policies, contributing to various forms of social exclusion in old age.

The following factors have been identified as key in enabling social inclusion of older people:

- adequate income
- good mental and physical health
- low vulnerability to and fear of crime, and neighbourhood safety
- provision of adequate care

- mobility and access to transport
- good social networks
- good access to suitable local services
- opportunities for civic participation and cultural activities
- availability of basic financial services
- employment and learning and skills opportunities
- access to and opportunities to make use of digital technology
- suitable, well maintained housing
- appropriate and accessible information, advice, advocacy and redress
- capacity to use and access common consumer goods.

Environmental Design for Active Ageing

COTA identifies the provision of planning and development of appropriate living environments as a fundamental human rights issue. The WHO *Active Ageing Framework* can be considered a cornerstone for the 'ageing well' and 'ageing in place' approaches central to current service delivery, health and support programs for older people, as well as equity and inclusion agendas.

The Active Ageing Framework is underpinned by the UN Principles for Older Persons and identifies **Security, Participation, and Health** as the three pillars for an active and positive ageing experience.

Physical design, infrastructure, buildings and facilities in urban areas need to be 'age-friendly' for people across the life course. This whole-of-life approach is particularly pertinent to improving the physical conditions in cities from which benefits can flow to people across a wide age-range and wide range of mobility capabilities. This represents a challenge which is aligned to social inclusion, equity, and environmental quality.

The Active Ageing Framework has informed the WHO Global Age-Friendly Cities Project and Guide which COTA has endorsed. The Age Friendly Cities project incorporates wide ranging factors that contribute to an environment that support and enable people to age; of course, dealing with the physical factors, such as road crossings, would benefit many other groups of people, too – adults pushing prams, people with disabilities, and people riding bicycles.

This WHO project has been a useful stimulus to individuals, groups and communities interested in making their city more age-friendly. The successful *Positive Ageing* project jointly undertaken by COTA and Municipal Association, utilised the Age Friendly Cities Guide and Checklist (2007) to consider ways to make their communities more age-friendly, and has resulted in the majority of Victoria's Local Government Areas having Positive Ageing Strategies and undertaking initiatives that are strengthening the participation and contribution of older people.

The next step is transplanting the intentions of the Age Friendly Cities Guide, and mainstreaming it into plans, funding and projects across Australia.

COTA advocates for environments and planning frameworks that facilitate:

- a mix of housing types, suited to changes in household composition and physical abilities over the life course, within localities;

- local services that are accessible without reliance on private car use;
- quality conditions and services for getting around locally – from footpaths to public transport to Community Transport (and other ‘para transit services’); and
- services that are culturally appropriate.

From our interactions and engagements with older people we know they want a community in which:

- they can feel safe;
- they feel part of a network of friends, neighbours and family, with all the benefits and responsibilities that entails;
- the details of urban design (pavement services, pedestrian crossings, the provision of physical facilities and so on) take account of their needs and limitations; and
- the environment is friendly and benign.

Increasing numbers of older people mean our housing stock and physical environments will need to be accessible to people with varying degrees of mobility. A British study of older people and their risks of tripping, falling and consequent injury, demonstrated the problem of irregularities in footways. It argued that by also recognising the needs of disabled people, policies for the maintenance regime of urban footways be revised).

Housing

Housing that is secure and appropriate, is identified as a core element in the independence and quality of life experienced by older people. For age-friendly housing, the Age Friendly Cities Guide identifies fundamental requirements as:

- Even surfaces or pavements for pedestrians (including wheelchairs)
- Passages wide enough for wheelchairs,
- Appropriately designed bathrooms, toilets and kitchens,
- Housing that can be modified for older people as needed,
- Housing modifications that are affordable.

The lack of appropriate housing and the high costs involved in adapting existing housing are significant contributors to loss of independence, social isolation, and reliance on community and aged care services among older Australians. The need to address these issues is becoming more urgent as we face a significant increase in our aged population.

- About 860,000 Victorians experience some degree of restriction to the core activities of mobility, self care or communication. This figure is projected to increase by 70,520 over the next 12 months; and with core activity restriction strongly correlated to age, it can be anticipated that this figure will continue to increase significantly.
- Approximately 24 per cent of Australians living in private housing have made modifications to their home to accommodate activity restriction. In 2003, about 79,000 Victorians made modifications to their homes. However available data on modifications and people accessing the Victorian Aids and Equipment Program can not be considered to be a true reflection of the numbers needing home modifications or the extent of modifications needed.

- A study by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), found that almost 20 per cent of people over 75 felt that changes to their home, including structural modifications, would make their home easier to live in or increase their independence.
- Work undertaken by the Department of Planning and Community Development estimates that 96 per cent of new homes still lack basic accessibility features¹

The availability of suitable housing is essential if older people are to 'age well' and 'age in place'. Appropriate and affordable housing is fundamental to both the physical and the mental health of seniors, and is a crucial determinant of the effectiveness of the health and care systems.

Appropriate housing is fundamental in achieving this outcome through the development of:

- barrier-free housing options for ageing people with disabilities;
- housing in communities that encourage daily social interactions and interdependence among young and old;
- policies, programs and services that enable people to remain at home as they grow older;
- housing options for older people that eliminate barriers to independence and interdependence with family members, and encourage full participation in community and family life;
- housing security for older people to increase and enhance confidence and certainty.

The social and economic benefits of incorporating adaptability features into new housing, and locating any new housing in places with public transport accessibility (and good footpaths), will benefit not only older people directly, but will also impact on their family, networks of friends and supports, and their communities -

- It will mean that older people with mobility or core activity limitations will be able to visit friends, neighbours and families;
- It will mean that older people living in new housing arrangements will be more visitable by family members and friends who have mobility or core activity limitations, or who have young children in prams and strollers, enabling them to continue to participate in family and social activities;
- It will have benefits for older people who have fluctuating conditions, such as arthritis and Parkinson's disease, enabling them to live more inclusively with their injuries, or chronic condition. People who are impaired temporarily, such as when recovering from surgery or illness will be able to return home earlier, and recover in more comfortable and familiar surroundings;
- It will enable support and care services to be delivered in the older persons home more easily and to better effect; and under safer conditions for the care workers.

Adaptable, accessible design is an important factor in keeping people living in the community and can prevent premature admission to residential care. One study on the impact of the provision of appropriate and supported housing on older persons found that it delayed their entry into residential care by an average of six years.

¹ Department of Planning and Community Development, 2009, *Adaptable Features Housing, Regulatory Impact Statement*, p 8

Benefits and potential savings of adopting accessible and adaptable housing standards for all new housing construction would also accrue to the economy, the community and to government budgets. These broader benefits include:

- Greater social inclusion of older Australians leading to savings in health care costs, including mental health care
- Greater economic participation of older Australians leading to higher economic growth
- Potential savings in major adaptation costs by providing for such changes in the up front design of the property
- Greater capacity for older people to live independently leading to a reduced need to move into residential care and savings in home care costs
- Greater capacity of people to remain in their own homes leading to a reduced cost of rehousing
- Improved safety of living independently leading to savings due to reduced falls at home – a major cause of hospital admissions for older people
- Reduced hospital stays and stays in rehabilitation facilities, as people will be able to return home more quickly after surgery or illness

The challenge lies in matching housing stock with demographic change as it is felt in local areas so older people can choose to stay within their locality when moving to other accommodation.

The Draft Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards by the Commonwealth Government announced in March 2010 recognize the importance of accessibility to a range of public buildings. The Premises Standards commenced operation on 1 May 2011, in line with the adoption of the Building Code of Australia in each State and Territory.

Considerable work was undertaken in Victoria to introduce minimum standards for universal design features in new housing. COTA strongly supports the four features that were proposed in the VISIBLE and ADAPTABLE Housing Regulatory Impact Statement in 2010, as minimum requirements for accessibility and adaptability of new housing in Victoria, those being:

- a clear path from the street to a level entry
- wider doorways and passages
- a toilet suitable for people with limited mobility on the entry level, and
- reinforced bathroom walls to allow grab rails to be fitted inexpensively if they are needed.

We also believe that an additional feature should be included as an essential minimum requirement, to ensure that the accessibility and visitability of new homes achieves maximum benefit to a wide range of people - that is provision of a level entry shower.

Unfortunately the previous State Government failed to finalise the introduction of these landmark measures, despite wide community and sector support, as well as broad Parliamentary support. We urge the Environmental and Planning References Committee to support the adoption of these regulations as a benchmark for the rest of Australia, and we urge the Baillieu Government to take this pro-active stance to meet the growing needs and challenges associated with our ageing population.

COTA recommends that the Committee support the introduction of regulations for universal design for new housing, and consider the extension of universal design to the maintenance and retrofitting of the existing building stock, roadways (for pedestrians, safe cycling and public transport as well as cars and freight), and public domain, as well as incorporated into new development.

COTA strongly supports the incorporation of universal design into all aspects of the urban built environment: buildings, the road area and transport services, and the remaining public domains.

Transport

Older people's need for, and use of, public transport, increases with increasing age. Many older people (who may or may not have driven cars in the past) rely solely on public transport to ensure their involvement in social, family and volunteer activities, and to get to medical appointments.

Research on social inclusion² has shown that one of the most important factors in maintaining health in the community is to support social inclusion at all levels, and that access to transport is key to ensuring social inclusion.

All government policies – federal and state – reflect a priority to enable people to volunteer in a vast range of areas in life, and a majority of these volunteers are older people. In addition, policies around the provision of care for older people focus on maintaining older people independently in their homes for as long as possible. Without access to transport to get out and about, older people run the serious risk of becoming isolated in the community, with well-proven impacts on health and wellbeing.

The most urgent need in planning for older people in the Melbourne environment is to ensure adequate, safe and affordable public transport. There needs to be an incremental plan which works on five-year targeted strategies to ensure the growth needed to meet this need alone.

However, many policy directions continue to place public transport as an ancillary to private motor vehicle use.

While behaviours, a road-based culture and associated investment, cannot be turned around in a short space of time, there seems to be little real determination to create the change that many sophisticated cities in Europe and other parts of the world have made a priority.

COTA recommends that the Committee acknowledges the growing need to place public transport at the centre of its transport strategy, with increased funding to reflect this.

COTA recommends that the committee endorses an environmental design framework that gives clear direction for the development of a comprehensive, safe, affordable public transport network which has as its aim the enhancement of life opportunities of all, but particularly for those on low or fixed incomes.

The value and usefulness of the public transport system as it exists is considerably undermined, in the view of COTA, by a lack of connectedness between the systems. COTA believes there is considerable potential to increase the use of the existing system by developing integrated time-tables, increasing frequency (making time-tables irrelevant at most times of the day and evening) and ensuring, in particular, that bus services arrive and depart at times which enable people to make connections with the minimum of waiting time.

COTA recommends that the State Government set timelines and budget allocations for the improved integration of public transport, together with benchmarks to be achieved relating to accessibility, affordability, frequency, weekend and evening travel.

In addition to the public transport issues facing older people, there are other related issues:

- Make walking and cycling easier to work toward a healthier and safer community
- Develop an integrated system out of the disparate elements that comprise community transport, and ensure that people can make maximum use of public transport systems, and enhance people's mobility
- Create better links between cars and public transport systems, for example parking provision at key super-stops would reduce car use. The 'drive and ride' scheme at Doncaster, which then makes use of the freeway, is a good example.

² Wilkinson, R. and Marmot M. (Eds) *The Solid Facts*, London 1999

COTA believes there are a number of measures that could increase the use of active transport. They include

- Dealing with transport as a whole i.e. roads and public transport and ancillary services for pedestrians and strengthening efforts to integrate land use and transport planning to achieve the desired outcomes.
- Ensuring that roads projects (new or existing) design-in improvements for pedestrians and safe cycling – contrary to a number of road projects underway across the country.

For older people the following features are important:

- Compactness – proximity of a broad range of services to residential areas and reduced reliance of large centralized shopping centres.
- Provision of good footpaths, cycling paths and road crossings for pedestrians and cyclists, including adequate time for safe crossing.

Impacts of Climate Change

Climate change is a significant issue that will impact on communities across Australia.

The impacts of climate change and the costs of action and adaptation are already and will continue to be unevenly distributed, with low income earners and disadvantaged groups, including older people, likely to be affected first and worst.

Older people on low or fixed incomes, who are disadvantaged socially, or who have health issues will have less capacity to adapt and will be impacted by

- higher temperatures and longer and more significant heat waves;
- increased costs for essential goods and services; and
- damage to housing and the built environment.

In addition to addressing green house emissions and other impacts on the environment, governments have an essential role in ensuring social equity is prioritized in climate change policy directions and strategies. Climate change should be seen in the context of an ageing population, and community infrastructure and resilience – housing, transport, health, education, and community services - acknowledged as key components in enabling communities, households and individuals to adapt to and cope with the impacts of climate change.

The adverse consequences will particularly impact on people vulnerable to extreme weather conditions, including older people, as a result of higher temperatures, and longer and more significant heat waves. Other environmental health consequences, such as increased incidence of vector-borne chronic disease, will be harder on older people too.

Householders can expect significant price and cost increases in water and energy in the coming years. At the same time increases in food and fuel prices can also be expected. Low income groups, such as pensioners, will be the most affected by these increases. These groups commonly have less energy- and water- efficient housing and appliances, and their utility bills can take up a higher proportion of their spending. People in rental accommodation may be even more vulnerable.

Better thermal efficiency of homes will reduce the extent of heating and cooling required, and therefore the costs for households. It will also protect vulnerable people from extreme temperatures.

Improved standards for new homes will help reduce greenhouse emissions and the impacts of climate change over time. But to ensure the most disadvantaged groups will be protected, significant upgrading of the water and energy efficiency of existing homes will be essential.

A useful source of information is Environment Victoria's One Million Homes Campaign www.environmentvictoria.org.au/onemillionhomes

COTA recommends that the thermal efficiency of older people's homes be addressed through:

- a major program of investment so that every dwelling is retrofitted to the highest possible standard of energy efficiency.
- the introduction of minimum rental standards, as older people in rental accommodation are particularly vulnerable, and
- the upgrading of Government owned social housing to these same standards.

Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria

Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria's mission is to resource and mobilise older people and shape a society that enables people to age well.

It is committed to human rights, social justice and the eradication of ageism.

COTA Victoria is a non-profit organization, of individual older people and organizations representing older people, committed to improving the well-being of all older Victorians. There are Councils on the Ageing in each state and territory, and a federal policy group based in Canberra - COTA National.

COTA Victoria's role

- Provides education, information and services to older people, their relatives and the wider community
- Provides policy advice on behalf of older people to state and local governments, service providers and the general community
- Undertakes research and policy development on issues affecting older people
- Promotes and publicizes the needs and preferences of older people to the general community
- Encourages a high level of involvement of older people in the organisation and its activities.

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