

Seniors Speak Up! Report of Key Findings to Minister for Senior Victorians

From the Ministerial Advisory Council of Senior Victorians

Introduction

The Ministerial Advisory Council of Senior Victorians (MACSV) has prepared this report at the request of the Minister for Senior Victorians, The Hon Lisa Neville MP, to propose a range of potential strategies arising from the Seniors Speak Up! consultations for consideration by the Victorian Government.

As acknowledged in the Department of Planning and Community Development's consultation discussion paper, by 2021 close to 1.5 million Victorians or around one quarter of the State's population will be aged 60 or over and the size of the seniors population will continue to increase.

The Seniors Speak Up! consultations represented an opportunity for Victorian seniors to identify ways that governments and communities can support this growing population of older people and positively embrace an older society.

The MACSV is pleased to report that there was strong interest from senior Victorians in the State Government's response to the ageing of the population. More than 1,400 seniors attended 32 community consultations facilitated by the MACSV across Victoria during May – July 2008, including targeted consultations with seniors from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds, those with a disability and gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender seniors. Three additional consultations were organised by a local member of parliament. The MACSV also received more than 270 written submissions from seniors, seniors' groups and community service organisations.

A broad range of issues was raised through the consultations. While many participants simply appreciated the chance to be listened to, the process has affirmed not only that senior Victorians are keen to influence and be actively involved in shaping their futures and those of their families and communities, but also that they are a rich source of both strategic and practical ideas for government and communities.

The MACSV has tried to capture the breadth of the consultation discussions in a separate detailed report back to participants. Drawing on that document, this report focuses on the challenges and opportunities which are Victorian Government responsibilities, as well as important areas where Victoria may be able to work with or influence the Commonwealth and local governments.

This report begins by highlighting a number of broad themes that emerged from the range of consultations and then summarises the discussions around four priority areas for Victorian seniors: mobility and access; information; housing; and individual and community wellbeing. The report concludes by pointing to key strategies as well as more immediate responses that the Victorian Government could consider in an ageing Victoria.

Broad Themes to Enable Independence and Participation

We are the same as other sections of the community – we are still diverse – only older. Give us choices!

Written submission to Seniors Speak Up! 2008

The consultations have demonstrated that the immense diversity in interests, aspirations, and cultures found amongst Victorians is also reflected amongst older Victorians. Yet, despite this diversity, common themes emerged during the consultations. At the heart of these common themes was a strong wish to remain independent for as long as possible, to remain connected to family and friends, and to continue to contribute to all facets of community life. To fulfil these goals of independence and connectivity, there were at least five key themes, outlined below, which could help frame responses to the particular aspects of an ageing population.

Ageing is a broad social change

An ageing population is not simply an issue for older Victorians but a broader change affecting all families and communities. The consultations offered numerous examples of how this social change is already being felt, including a change in the skills and preferences of the volunteer pool, a growing demand for a greater spread and diversity in housing options and changing family care arrangements, including increasing childcare responsibilities undertaken by many grandparents.

Ageing creates opportunities

An ageing population creates new opportunities for all Victorians. The consultations demonstrated a strong interest from senior Victorians in intergenerational and cross cultural mentoring and support, as well as interest in developing suitable options for life-long skills development and work after retirement.

Transitions matter in later life

The importance of key transitions in promoting wellbeing and maintaining independence in later life was emphasised throughout the consultations. Critical transition points highlighted included: retirement, particularly for men; loss of drivers licence; death of a partner, particularly for carers and non-English speaking seniors; and the transition from mainstream support into aged or specialist care especially for older people with a disability.

Increasing diversity requires a mix of responses

The increasing diversity in the backgrounds, preferences and abilities of senior Victorians requires a responsive mix of mainstream and specialised options and supports. Key examples raised in consultations included the importance of cultural competence in service provision. Cultural competence starts with an understanding of ethnic, religious or sexual identity, the appropriate use of interpreters and creating opportunities for cross cultural sharing; and then builds towards practice that values the richness of diversity and embeds cultural norms and practices in service provision.

Ageing increases the risk of social isolation

The compounding effect of the range of issues associated with ageing, including personal transitions, such as the death of a partner, and reduced mobility and social contact, increases the risk of social isolation amongst older Victorians. A focus on maintaining Victorian seniors' connection with their communities will be central to minimise the impact of isolation in an ageing population.

Key Findings

In addition to the broad themes outlined above, the Seniors Speak Up! consultations highlighted four areas of life which appeared to be of critical importance to senior Victorians now and into the future: mobility and access; information; housing; and individual and community wellbeing. The MACSV has sought to distil the key challenges as well as a number of useful opportunities for the Victorian Government to improve or add to its existing policies and services for seniors and their communities.

1. Mobility and Access

We have a local bus service but it only goes up certain streets. If (someone) is frail and cannot walk a long distance, how can they catch a bus?

Written submission

Perhaps the most consistent priority for senior Victorians across the consultations was in relation to the mobility and transport barriers they face in maintaining their independence and participation. Discussions pointed to three distinct challenges. Firstly the lack of level and connected footpaths, regular rest points and public toilets creates physical barriers to maintaining mobility within local communities as people get older. Victorian seniors suggested that local planning should take into account the mobility needs of an older population.

Second is the increasing need for a range of transport options, not only in a number of areas where there are limited public services, especially after hours and on weekends, but also for more affordable door-to-door options, such as community buses, to complement the public transport network, which many frail older people cannot access. Possible strategies included expanding community transport initiatives and expanding access to the Government's Multi Purpose Taxi Program.

(Victorian Patient Travel Assistance Scheme) claims are sometimes knocked back because patients are not able to get to Bendigo and go to Melbourne instead.

Written Submission

An important component of a more responsive transport system is the need for more flexible medical transport options to meet the needs of older patients. For example, medical transport policies could be made more client-centred, particularly around the availability of ambulance services for transporting patients between hospitals and more prompt payment of refunds under the Victorian Patient Travel Assistance Scheme for travel to the most accessible – not necessarily closest – health service. Increasing public transport services between Southern Cross Station and major public hospitals would greatly assist Victorian seniors coming to Melbourne for specialist appointments.

Third is the challenge of accessing and safely using private and public modes of transport, particularly as there may not be adequate room or access for mobility aids and it can be difficult reach a seat or ensure a secure hold before buses and trams take-off. Practical suggestions to improve use included improving training for train, tram and bus drivers to promote seniors' safety, including the importance of smooth acceleration and deceleration; regular announcements to passengers to give up their seat for those with special needs; supporting driving retraining for older drivers; and building seniors' awareness of and access to alternatives to the car, such as making more parking available for non-commuters around train stations.

2. Information

The internet is good if you are able to use the technology.

Regional Participant

Later life is a period of change and transition for most Victorians. Change creates choices. However, when these choices occur and what options are available vary greatly based on where a person lives, as well as their skills, assets and preferences. This dynamic of change and choice mean that seniors need comprehensive, accurate, easily understood information.

The consultations highlighted the challenges senior Victorians face in navigating the multiplicity of sources of information, particularly when they face life changing decisions, such as in retirement or choosing supported aged care or facilities. Increasing availability of information online, while a powerful tool for some seniors, appears to limit access to those without the technology or skills to use the internet and leaves others under the impression that the information is not also available from other sources or in other forms. The consultations demonstrated that there was strong demand for government information in multiple communication modes, particularly the popular free media, such as local newspapers and radio, including ethnic media. A key benefit of using local media that was identified was the potential to leverage more positive ageing stories and editorials.

We need to know there are places you can go to get the information when you need it.

Rural Participant

Another key dimension in the information needs of Victorian seniors was the importance of reliable advice, particularly in complex matters, and the limited awareness or availability of 'real person' information services, either face-to-face or by telephone. It was evident that many seniors were not aware of Seniors Information Victoria's shopfront or telephone services, which could be promoted more widely, perhaps to Seniors Card holders.

At the same time, it was clear that no single one-stop-shop could provide all the answers when and where Victorian seniors may need them. The consistent view across regional and metropolitan consultations was that the Victorian Government should look at developing a strategic place-based information strategy that expands personalised information services through existing Commonwealth, State and Local Government service hubs and into locations that seniors visit regularly such as GP clinics, libraries, shopping and civic centres. One suggestion was to make the Visitor Information Centres in country towns a focal point for seniors' information provision.

3. Housing

Seniors need smaller more affordable homes or units within their own town where they have a strong social support network.

Written Submission

A third critical enabler of independence identified in the consultations was housing. Housing affordability, which has been acknowledged by all levels of government as a key social issue, was clearly a pressure on pensioners and other Victorian seniors on low incomes, particularly those living alone.

Although the issues of affordability are broader than just seniors' housing, there was support for targeted responses, such as the potential to develop and expand supported home share programs where senior Victorians are matched with suitable house mates to share living costs or home chores.

Housing needs to be adaptable and sustainable over time.

Regional Participant

Linked to housing affordability was the clear demand in the consultations for more housing options across the State in communities where Victorian seniors already live. In particular, the consultations reinforced that public and private housing planning should encourage more smaller housing options in both new and established residential areas to enable 'downsizing' in later life. Specifically in relation to public housing, a number of senior Victorians indicated that they were willing to downsize if smaller homes were big enough to allow them to have grandchildren or other family members to stay.

Buildings need to be disability friendly to help people stay at home.

Melbourne Participant

Another critical dimension of housing for an ageing population was ensuring housing accessibility for life, particularly when older people's physical capacity and needs change. A key strategy identified in the consultations was to promote incentives to apply Universal Design principles in housing design. For example, the Seniors Ministers could raise with their Planning counterparts the importance of embedding the principles of Universal Design or equivalent good practice in building standards to improve safety and accessibility in all new and refurbished homes.

In Victoria, it was also suggested that accessibility in public housing could be improved by encouraging more senior friendly design and fixtures, such as promoting the existing availability of small scale modifications, such as using lever taps, to assist public housing tenants with physical limitations and using these sorts of fixtures as standard features as part of the rollout of Victoria's significant new investment in public and social housing.

4. Individual and Community Wellbeing

A number of key factors in individual wellbeing that were raised across the consultations, primarily related to maintaining adequate income, physical and mental health and opportunities for participation. While all levels of government have a role in promoting wellbeing, there were particular challenges and strategies relevant to the Victorian Government.

As has been acknowledged by the Commonwealth Government, managing the increasing costs of living, particularly for those on the single age pension, is clearly very difficult. Importantly, Victorian seniors also noted the disincentives in the pension system to continuing work past the retirement age. Given the importance of minimising the impact of the shrinking labour force predicted over the coming decades, and the clear value many seniors place on finding suitable work in later life, the Victorian Government should advocate to the Commonwealth as part of its pension review to increase the income for pensioners and minimise disincentives to working beyond retirement. Further, Victoria could also consider extending the availability of summer and winter energy concessions, particularly to meet the likely increase in energy costs.

I want to retrain but after 60 it's like you are cut off. You don't matter.

Melbourne Participant

Aside from the financial disincentives that can exist, working in older age is also limited by attitudes of employers towards training and hiring older workers. Given the leadership that has been demonstrated by governments in modelling employment practices, a practical suggestion was for the Victorian Government to develop and promote age-friendly employment practices across its departments, as they have done for people with disabilities.

The availability of affordable medical services locally was a key concern for seniors. Critical needs were identified in relation to public dental services as well as allied health services, such as podiatry. While these services are part of a large and complex system of public and private provision, it was suggested that the Victorian Government could encourage more visiting specialists in regional areas or outreach in metropolitan areas. Combined with improved medical transport options, targeted extension of specialist services would significantly assist seniors to address health barriers to independence.

Many seniors were concerned about maintaining independence and a measure of control as they approach the end of their lives, including understanding their options for medical care and ensuring that their wishes are respected. There was strong support from a number of seniors for stronger protection under powers of attorney and guardianship laws.

A register of skills could be offered to the (volunteers in the) community with reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses, such as petrol.

Rural Participant

Finally, many Victorian seniors were keen to see governments build on successful seniors' skills based networks, such as U3As and Men's Sheds, which often created unique opportunities to develop personal and social goals. More broadly, the consultations clearly indicated that a broader range of volunteer organisations could be encouraged and supported to better engage seniors.

Practical strategies to make the most of the immense volunteering resource in older Victorians, included: better meeting some of the costs of volunteers, such as petrol; better matching volunteer skills with opportunities, such as through local skills banks, or targeting seniors to participate in emerging volunteer opportunities; promoting the strong interest in and potential of individual and group based intergenerational activities, including mentoring and supporting young people; and providing a national police check to volunteers that can be used with a number of similar volunteering roles, as happens already with the 'Working with Children' Check card.

Key Strategies

The Speak Up! consultations highlighted the increasing impact that an ageing population is likely to have across many areas of economic and social life. Challenges and opportunities from a rapidly expanding older population are already emerging in particular places and sectors.

Given the complexity of many issues and the competing pressures on governments, such as climate change and the global financial downturn, it may not be possible to address all of the pressures from increasing ageing population at once. However, by developing a mix of long-term strategic responses and short-term solutions in concert with other levels of government, the MACSV is confident that the Victorian Government will be able to effectively position Victoria to meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities in an older society.

The broad themes identified earlier in this report, including the importance of being responsive to transitions and diversity, should help guide the implementation of these long and short-term strategies.

Strategic Options

Based on the directions suggested by senior Victorians, key strategic options for the Government to consider include:

- Improve the range and reach of public transport options, complemented by localised age-friendly mobility strategies, which could include developing the Transport Connections and Age-Friendly Communities initiatives or increasing options for non-commuters, such as trialling new 'No Parking before 9.00am' places or providing more 4-hour places in train station car parks
- Improve the responsiveness of medical transport services to the needs of older patients, which could include more public services to transport patients between hospitals, improving services from Southern Cross Station around major Melbourne public hospitals and making Victorian Patient Travel Assistance Scheme refunds available for travel to the most accessible health service, not necessarily the closest service
- Developing a localised Victorian seniors' information strategy that builds seniors' capacity to utilise new technologies, increases use of local media and expands personalised information services through existing service hubs and into activity centres, such as shopping, civic centres and libraries, building on the Seniors Information Victoria service model
- Planning for more affordable and accessible private and public housing options in the communities in which senior Victorians live and close to public transport, including giving seniors in public housing the option to downsize to two bedroom rather than only one bedroom homes, encouraging cooperative housing schemes and embedding Universal Design or equivalent principles in building standards
- Creating more client centred support services for older Victorians, such as by giving HACC clients greater control of the suite of services available to them
- Working with the Commonwealth to expand public provision of critical specialist health services, most importantly dental and podiatry services in ageing communities

- Advocating to the Commonwealth Government to increase the pension levels and minimise disincentives to working beyond retirement, including through the Commonwealth pension review
- Modelling age-friendly employment practices across Victorian Government agencies.

Quick and Simple Solutions

Drawing on the many ideas from senior Victorians, this is a sample of the simple, low-cost options that Victorian Government could implement quickly:

- Work with public transport providers to further develop good practice guidelines and training for train, tram and bus drivers to promote seniors' safety, including ensuring vehicles start and stop smoothly and regular reminders to passengers to give up their seat for those with special needs
- More widely promoting the Seniors Information Victoria telephone service
- Promote the accessible features already available to public housing tenants, such as the installation of lever taps for people with physical limitations
- Promote the availability to Victorian seniors of the new police check for volunteers which may be used for similar volunteering roles in different organisations
- Encourage intergenerational community based activities as part of school and community partnerships.
- Review the succession and guardianship laws with the aim of better protecting the rights of senior Victorians.