



COTA

For older Australians

Caring for Older Australians

*Summary report on the finding from consultations in
Tasmania on aged care reform*

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1.0 Introduction

Following the release of the Productivity Commission's Report, *Caring for Older Australians* (June 2011), COTA Australia was asked by the Federal Government to oversee consultations with older people in communities around Australia. The purpose of these consultations was to find out what matters as people get older and the sort of support and services that will help them most, and to gauge older peoples' reaction to the Productivity Commission's proposed reforms.

As a member of the national COTA network, COTA TAS undertook consultations with older people in Tasmania during December 2011 to February 2012. This summary report presents the main findings of these consultations involving over 200 people in 13 Tasmanian rural and isolated communities.

2.0 Care and Support

Before even considering proposals such as the *gateway*, the Government must seriously look at addressing equity in aged care, and how to build the capacity and sustainability of aged care services in Tasmania. COTA TAS' consultations clearly highlighted that older people living in rural and isolated communities are significantly disadvantaged when it comes to aged care. Many older Tasmanians spoke about the bare fact that they cannot access the services they need, either because the service doesn't exist in their community, there are no staff to deliver the service, transport difficulties, cost, waiting lists or other bureaucratic barriers. Numerous people spoke about the need to drive (or be driven) several hours to access the care and support they need.

2.1 A single gateway into the aged care system

The concept of a single point of entry into the aged care system was supported by those who participated in COTA TAS' consultations. Older Tasmanians want a gateway that demonstrates an understanding of the local community and the services that exist in the area, and that can provide them with local information and a more coordinated approach to care. When assessed at the gateway, people want a fair and simple process for needs assessment and entitlement, that is free of duplication and delay.

A number of participants of the consultations spoke about the distress they currently experience as a result of multiple staff from multiple service organisations entering their home. Older Tasmanians want greater coordination of aged care services when their needs become

more complex. They want flexibility in the way services are delivered and suggested more multi-skilling of staff. Older people want services to coordinate their care needs with that of their partner's so that the two people's needs can be addressed in a more integrated, efficient and effective manner.

“One person from one provider comes for my care, another from another provider for my husband, then we have two different people come for home help, someone from another business comes to help with outside and two different other strangers came to do some modifications.”

The lack of coordination, lack of integration of services and lack of respect for the timing of services being delivered takes away the dignity of people trying to maintain control of their lives. Older Tasmanians want appropriate personal care services so they have some control of their day and can plan their lives. Numerous participants spoke about unreliable service provision, for example:

“I have to wait all day sitting in my night wear waiting for (a) shower and never knowing what time that will happen. Different workers come at different times when they can fit in on their run which may have all sorts of unscheduled delays.”

Older Tasmanians are concerned that in remote, isolated Tasmanian towns the community nurses are on six-week contracts so there is no continuity of service or familiarity with the local community. Where GPs are the sole referral point for services, older people have to arrange and pay for a visit to get a referral. All of these issues create unnecessary barriers to maintaining a quality of life for older Tasmanians.

Older people living on the west coast of Tasmania and in other isolated communities reported that there are no aged care services provided on weekends and public holidays. One person had not showered for several days over a holiday period because there were no personal care services over the holidays and there were no friends or family to help out. People said this was unhygienic and insulting.

Older Tasmanians who participated in these consultations also talked about the need for a greater focus on prevention and early intervention. For example, an assessment set at a specific age for everyone, which would enable those who are not accessing services to be identified and supported to maintain their independence. Many people do not ask for help until it is too late and this would reduce the loss of options that occurs when needs reach crisis point.

Older people want more information on how to stay healthy. Participants spoke about their need for technological information, financial education, including superannuation, funeral and power of attorney advice, information on mental health and depression, and more.

Mental health and wellbeing was discussed by numerous groups. There was concern, for example, that services in the home can stop people going out which can lead to a decline in mental health and wellbeing, and speed up loss of independence. It was identified that promoting mental health and wellbeing should be an integral part of the aged care system.

“Library facilities, transport and access to it, keep me alive and mentally alert.”

It was unanimous at all the consultations that the gateway should provide face-to-face interviews, person-to-person contact on the phone and reduce the need for recorded messages. Older Tasmanians reported that they preferred not to phone for assistance at all than to phone a recorded message.

“I just don’t bother to try if I have to press different buttons and wait on hold for ages to ask for anything, it is just too stressful”

Participants were cautious about the gateway being overly bureaucratic and there was reference to the gate keeping aspect of the Aged Care Assessment Team. There was also confusion about terms such as *entitlement* as well as the language used to describe the aged care system in general.

2.2 Other Issues

- There is an urgent need for more respite care in Tasmania. This is particularly an issue for Carers.

“I waited months for a knee operation and was given 24 hours notice but had to give it up because the respite centre could not take my wife for the night, even though I was on the waiting list.”

- People want greater access to aged care equipment that can be hired, as demand increases with increased frailty.
- Partnerships between GPs and pharmacists need to be strengthened. This was an issue that was particularly concerning on the west coast of Tasmania. In addition, in towns where the only GPs are locums, there are inconsistencies when it comes to prescribing medication.

"I left the script at the general store for collection by a pharmacist from another town for dispensing. Two days later I collected the medication from the store when it arrived. The next visit to the GP, the new locum disagrees with the medication and changes the prescription so I have to go through the same process again."

3.0 Housing of Older Tasmanians

The first priority for many older Tasmanians is the need for more assistance with simple household tasks and gardening. Common requirements such as changing light bulbs, standing on ladders, washing walls, windows and so forth were the things that older Tasmanians articulated their frustration with. Currently aged care services are not able to assist with many of these tasks due to health and safety restrictions.

"I might as well not have them there as they mostly only do the things I can do for myself."

Older people want assistance with their gardens. This service stands out as a universal and unanimous requirement. Gardening assistance is currently only available through aged care services where there is considered to be a safety risk, yet this service is usually the first request for help. Many said they would pay for gardening but they can't get someone to do it or if there is someone, it is too expensive especially for pensioners.

Modifications to dwellings were a high priority among participants of the consultations, particularly in West Tamar. The cost of materials, finding suitable tradespersons, and planning and building regulations were all identified as barriers to enabling people to age in their own homes. One person stated that they are routinely collected and transported to a centre for showering because they cannot afford the modifications to their bathroom.

Older people also spoke about the stress that results from the inability to maintain housing and what this could mean in terms of financial security.

"I can't move to (a) smaller unit as I can't afford to pay more than the value of my house which is going down now as I can't maintain it."

Access to public-funded and private independent living units was identified as lacking in the majority of Tasmanian towns. Public housing was considered old, not equipped or appropriately located for older people. Existing housing units provided by Councils in some municipalities

were thought to be too expensive to modify to suit the needs of older people and modern regulations.

Older people also want more information, easy access to and incentives for energy saving devices and behaviours.

4.0 Transport

Isolation makes transport vital in the small towns, especially as people stop driving. The more isolated the less services sustained in town and the more consumers depend on transport to get to allied health and medical treatment. At present, many older Tasmanians feel that transport services are not provided in an equitable manner. In one town people pay different transport costs because providers apply different charges for transport depending on their funding sources. Older Tasmanians feel that transport organisations need to collaborate so that one service is coordinated for the town.

“We want one bus, the one price for people to get to the bigger centres for business and shopping. The bus can travel to and from one town each day of the week. Now they all work separately.”

Older Tasmanians want a simplified system where transport reimbursement requires a GP and a specialist authorisation. Several consumers said they went without the reimbursement because of difficulties with obtaining signatures.

“I took my husband for treatment to Hobart for years and it cost me a fortune because the paperwork was so demeaning, having to get everyone to sign separate forms and the specialist gets impatient”.

People see lack of transport as a barrier to social interaction with their community. Generally transport is prioritised for medical transport. As a result, requests for transport for social activities rarely occurs and bookings have to be made well in advance. In addition, small towns rarely have local taxi services so any spontaneous trips to friends or meetings are out of the question.

The importance of social interaction was noted by a number of participants of the consultations. Older people said there was often a resistance to discussing mental health and that the problems often lie unspoken of and unattended. Access to transport was recognised as a critical factor in enabling social interaction and enhancing wellbeing.

"I don't drive and I can't walk to the bus anymore so I don't go out to see anyone anymore."

5.0 Residential Care

While all those who participated in the consultations were clear about the need for greater support to enable them to stay in their own homes, very few considered or mentioned the likelihood of going into residential care. Where this discussion was prompted older Tasmanians made the following points:

- Every effort should be made to ensure that couples who want to reside together in residential care facilities should be able to do so. A number of participants were very passionate about the indignity of separating couples who go to residential care.
- Older people want to have residential care located close to services and activities, and to retain easy access to the community.
- All older Tasmanians going into residential care should have the option of a room of their own.
- The process of refilling a room the same day as someone dies is considered most undignified, insulting and hurtful to the family and to the person who has died, and not healthy for the person coming into the room.

"Funding should provide for the room to settle after the death of a resident."

- Abuse of the system ("jumping the queue") should be addressed. It was understood that people transferring from hospital are given priority access to residential care over those from the community who are on waiting lists. It was suggested that this system is being abused by family members.

"This encourages bad behaviour of family members who encourage hospitalisation in order to get their family a bed in residential care. It is unfair and not right."

- Residential care facilities should operate in an empowering way, ensuring that older people are able to maintain control (as much as possible) of their endeavours. Participants spoke about their experiences with residential care facilities assuming that older people are not capable of managing their financial affairs and requesting personal financial management be handed over. This was considered to be disempowering and stripping older people of their confidence and dignity while they are trying to adapt to residential care. Consumer-focused rather than provider-focused care is what people want.

- Aged care facilities should take into consideration a person's cognitive abilities before co-locating people. Some participants commented that they do not want to be put together with those with severe cognitive impairment when they still have strong cognitive abilities. It was identified that this would make it harder to adapt and settle into an institution and takes the dignity away from those involved.

"It brings everyone down to the level of need of those with greatest need."

- Older Tasmanians want nutritious, good quality food. There were concerns that many facilities still provide sweet, heavy cakes and puddings which is inconsistent with healthy eating guidelines.
- All facilities and communities need a dedicated and secure dementia unit.
- People want community education about residential care and active efforts to bring the community into the facility so that it isn't seen as an isolated arm of the community.
- Facilities should be adequately staffed.
- The aged care assessment process should be integrated into the aged care facility and not be a separate process.
- Residential aged care facilities should utilise volunteers as an integral part of their service.

"I was amazed the overwhelming joy that was created when I took my pet dog into a facility and the pleasure it gave the residents."

6.0 Carers and Volunteers

Carers require support in their own right. A number of participants of the consultations were Carers. Their concerns related to the need for increased access to respite, improved social wellbeing and coordination of service provision, particularly where multiple service providers are coming to the home.

The need to reconsider the definition of *Carer* was raised during the consultations. For example, one participant who cares alone for her grandson needs occasional respite for herself. The son does not have a disability but is demanding. She is over 70. She cannot get respite as she is not caring for a person who is aged or has a disability and she is not eligible for services from local Carer support services. Her needs currently fall between current services.

Older Tasmanians believe that more needs to be done to encourage volunteerism and to reduce red tape to make it easier and more flexible to be a volunteer. It was recognised that volunteers are vital for Tasmania's rural and isolated communities as they provide an important

source of social support. Numerous participants spoke about volunteers who 'go the extra mile' to support people because of lack of services. Older people want more social activities and suggested that engaging volunteers in delivering social activities would be a good way to do this.

7.0 Workforce Issues

Attracting medical and allied health staff to some Tasmanian localities is a significant issue of concern for older Tasmanians. In addition, the lack of a sufficient and appropriately-trained personal care workforce was identified as a problem in many small isolated towns. As identified earlier, there was also concern about the occupational health and safety restrictions that prevent workers undertaking certain tasks, which leaves older people with nowhere to go to get jobs done.

It was suggested that all nursing and support staff have training in palliative care. If people are going to stay at home till they die, flexible palliative care services at home will be in high demand. People want more education in the community about dying with dignity and palliative support that family and the community can provide.

8.0 Quality of Care and Funding

Older Tasmanians want services to respect their needs and be responsive, and there was little detailed discussion about the government's proposals to monitoring quality standards. It was however recognised that quality is important when it comes to workforce and service provision, which was considered to be related to funding.

Similarly there was not a lot of detailed feedback on the issue of funding. There was some concern about the growing bureaucracy and the costs associated with the reform process. A few participants expressed concern about how they would fund their residential care without selling the family home. There was some unease in relation to the pricing discrepancies for services, such as transport. The idea of a set price was welcomed.

9.0 Conclusion

Greater choice, consumer control and focus, responsive services, simplification and better integration of services to help people manage in their homes are important to the participants of the consultations in Tasmania's small towns. Tasmania's older population welcomes aged care reform as long as it translates into meaningful change in their communities and lives.