



COTA Victoria & Seniors Rights Victoria

Submission to review of Victoria's Infrastructure Strategy 2021-51

To:

Melinda Crimp
Acting Director, Communications and Engagement
Infrastructure Victoria

Via email to: melinda.crimp@infrastructurevictoria.com.au

Contact:

Ben Rogers
Policy and Advocacy Manager
COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria
Phone: (03) 9655 2157
BRogers@cotavic.org.au

April 2023

COTA Victoria is supported by financial assistance from the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments.

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 legal rights of people 50+. We value ageing and embrace its opportunities for personal growth, contribution, and self-expression. This belief drives benefits to the nation and its states alongside communities, families, and individuals.

Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV) is a program of COTA Victoria and the key state-wide service 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.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work. We pay respect to elders past and present and those who continue the journey. We recognise the rich Indigenous heritage and culture of this country.

Overview

COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria welcome the opportunity to contribute to the next update of Victoria's 30-year infrastructure strategy. We appreciate Infrastructure Victoria's invitation to comment on the strategy's objectives and options to meet the challenges facing Victoria through infrastructure investment and delivery.

Our policy and advocacy priorities include various aspects of infrastructure, including housing, health and aged care facilities, transport (including road and pedestrian safety) and spaces for recreation and physical activity. More broadly, we have a strong interest in the critical role of infrastructure in supporting optimal health and wellbeing, and social and economic participation for older people.

Given the breadth of the strategy, this submission does not address all relevant elements of the infrastructure needs of older people. Rather, we focus primarily on ways in which the strategy needs to engage more directly and holistically with the changing needs of an ever growing, and ageing population.

While separate strategies on housing, health infrastructure and transport are critical in addressing the needs of older Victorians, the Infrastructure Strategy plays a key role in highlighting the way all these elements of the built environment combine to support older people.

A key aspect of our submission is to strengthen the way in which infrastructure planning and projects engage older people to ensure that their needs are well understood and embedded. Given our particular role and experience in engaging, representing, and advocating for older Victorians, we stand ready to support this objective.

Context

The number of Victorians over 60 years of age is now around 1.5 million or 22% of the total population, with this number growing much faster than the general population. Those over 80 years old comprise 4.3% of the population projected to rise to 7% by 2046.¹ The proportion of older people is generally higher in rural and regional Victoria - 26% over 60 in 2016 compared to 18% in Greater Melbourne - and this difference is expected to continue over the long term.

This scenario has significant implications for the infrastructure required, partly in terms of service provision needs in areas like health and aged care, and more broadly regarding requirements for suitable housing, mobility, accessibility, safety, and social connection within and across communities. Older people are also particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and infrastructure design must be forward thinking and follow global best practice principles. Infrastructure planning allow for adequate shade, retention of green space and Biodiversity Sensitive Urban Design (BSUD) principles embedded in planning requirements and schemes when designing new cities, communities, and suburbs as the growth areas continue to expand outward.

A number of other relevant trends are occurring in Victoria's older population. These include the incidence of older people remaining in private homes is growing. While this rise in independent living is positive, a significant number of those ageing in place will have disabilities and frailties that need effective design and infrastructure solutions for their housing and to support engagement in their local communities. Of those older people living longer in their own homes, more are living alone. In fact, about half the people living alone are over the age of 60 and this number will increase over time.²

In considering infrastructure needs linked to ageing, we must also recognise the way in which various attributes combine to create overlapping systems of disadvantage, discrimination, and barriers to ageing well. This demands an intersectional approach addressing issues including disability, diverse cultural backgrounds and Aboriginality as they impact on the experience of ageing.

Overall strategy objectives

COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria are concerned at the relative absence of specific references to older people in the strategy. While we are pleased to note the general emphasis of the objectives on preparing for population change, fostering healthy and safe communities and reducing disadvantage, very little is actually said in the current iteration of the strategy to connect these objectives to the issues facing older people specifically.

COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria strongly recommend that the strategy update incorporates more specific commitment to address population ageing and the needs of older people. This should be done in a way that encourages a holistic approach across the whole strategy, in addition to specific types of infrastructure of particular relevance to older people, such as hospitals and aged care.

In relation to the existing Strategy Objectives, relevant statements to draw attention to issues for older Victorians could include the following:

- **Objective 1: Prepare for population change** – A major aspect of population change now and over the next 25 years is the faster increase in the number of people over 60, relative to younger age groups, and even faster increase for those over 80. This has significant implications for infrastructure priorities and for the features that need to be incorporated into projects.

¹ Based on unpublished projections for 2021 cited at <https://www.vic.gov.au/ageing-well-action-plan/victorias-seniors>.

² All 2016 data are from the ABS Census of Population and Housing (2016).

Needs related to ageing will be particularly challenging for people with disabilities and chronic illness, regional Victorians and those in insecure housing.

- **Objective 2: Foster healthy and safe communities** - There are specific ways in which infrastructure developments need to respond to health and safety risks and protective factors for older people. This also relates to emerging threats linked to climate change which will impact disproportionately on older people. There is a growing need to ensure that the design of infrastructure actively supports intergenerational mixing and inclusion of older people rather than segregation.
- **Objective 3: Reduce Disadvantage** – There must be greater focus over the coming years on the role of infrastructure in overcoming the barriers faced by older people to full social and economic participation, and in avoiding structural ageism and age-related discrimination. While not all older people are disadvantaged, there are significant vulnerabilities in parts of the older population that are exacerbated by deficiencies in their physical environment.
- **Objective 4: Enable workforce participation** – Victorians are set to work much longer into older age with a growing number expecting to work well into their 70s. This will require more jobs located closer to where they live, more flexibility in the structure of employment opportunities and easier ways for older people to travel to and from work.

We also recommend inclusion of a standalone objective along the lines of:

- 1. Ensuring that infrastructure planning and renewal address the challenges faced by the increasing proportion of older Victorians as they “age in place” - including but not limited to issues of mobility, affordability, access to services, community inclusion and safety.**

In highlighting issues for older Victorians, we would draw Infrastructure Victoria’s attention to useful foundational frameworks such as the Age Friendly Cities and Communities framework from the World Health Organisation. An Information Kit for Local Government on activating this framework in Victoria, was developed by COTA Victoria with the MAV and RACV in 2017 and remains highly relevant.³ Further materials of this nature, more specifically targeted to infrastructure issues and stakeholders, are needed.

COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria recommend:

- 2. That the Strategy acknowledges and supports application of international frameworks such as the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Global Age Friendly Cities Guide when designing public spaces.**
- 3. Investment in practical guidance resources to support all key stakeholders in infrastructure planning and development to better understand the needs and preferences of older people and to assess the adequacy of infrastructure responses.**

Engaging older people in infrastructure issues

We encourage Infrastructure Victoria to pay greater attention to what older people themselves are saying they prioritise in relation to infrastructure in their local areas. While opportunities for consultation and engagement need improvement, a number of recent surveys provide some insight into these issues.

The 2022 State of the Older Nation survey conducted by COTA nationally highlights a number of infrastructure priorities for older Victorians.⁴ While respondents were generally fairly satisfied with their housing and local environments, they say they need more flexible and affordable housing

³ See resource at <https://www.cotavic.org.au/publication/age-friendly-cities-and-communities-information-kit/>

⁴ State of the Older Nation 2023, COTA forthcoming.

options, greater access to energy efficient solutions, a greater range of transport alternatives and more integrated community services.

Affordable housing is a growing issue for older people, with 5% feeling worried about their risk of homelessness in the next 12 months. At the same time, a significant percentage of older homeowners and renters express concern about their ability to adapt their homes to make them more accessible as they experience limitations linked to ageing (around 35% rating this ability as poor or limited).

While over 80% of respondents rate their access to local shops, public places to relax and medical services quite highly, some 20% rate their sense of connection to local community as poor. This is not solely an infrastructure issue but can be partly addressed through improved physical planning, enhanced mobility options and more integrated community based social and recreational facilities. Surveys such as this provide a useful indication of what matters to older people but are no substitute for effective ongoing engagement.

We encourage Infrastructure Victoria to consider ways to make this engagement easier and more equitable. This requires ways to overcome the “digital divide” that exists for many older Australians regarding the use of electronic communications, including taking infrastructure proposals to places where older people gather and offering opportunities for alternative methods of feedback (such as setting up stands or running charettes in local shopping strips and public libraries).

COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria recommend:

- 4. The development of an Older Persons Engagement Framework for the infrastructure sector and notes that we would be pleased to advise Infrastructure Victoria further on this and similar opportunities to improve engagement.**

Specific aspects of infrastructure

The following table provides a select set of infrastructure issues identified by older Victorians and potential solutions. We recommend that these be incorporated as appropriate in relevant sections of the updated strategy.

Priority infrastructure issue for older people	Potential strategy responses
<p>Affordable and accessible housing</p> <p>Fewer older people are feeling secure in long term housing. More and more will find themselves in rental or mortgage stress, with older single women a major growing group at risk of homelessness.</p> <p>As a larger proportion of older people will remain longer in their own homes, this will put pressure on affordable options for down-sizing and on the capacity for making existing housing stock more accessible for older people with frailty and disability.</p> <p>The reduction in availability of segregated housing options like Retirement Villages and Independent Living Units means that alternative models based on more integrated principles will be increasingly important to bring online.</p>	<p>Increase investment in social housing in areas and locations suitable for older people including close to accessible transport and health and social care centres.</p> <p>Prioritise the needs of older single women for expansion of social and affordable housing options.</p> <p>Improve the affordability of and approval processes for home modifications, including significant additions to family homes, to support older people remain in their homes or neighbourhoods.</p> <p>Facilitate negotiation of explicit targets for older people’s independent living units in overall requirements for affordable housing within private rental housing developments (including build-to-</p>

	<p>rent models) using inclusionary zoning where possible.</p> <p>Support measures to develop alternative, innovative models for older people such as co-housing.</p>
<p>Energy efficiency</p> <p>Moving to more energy efficient options is an increasing priority issue for older people and one of the major features they are looking for in current and future accommodation.</p> <p>This is linked to the fact that many older Victorians occupy older housing stock and have less capacity to make the conversions required for enhanced energy efficiency, exacerbated by rising energy costs. The issue has significant implications for health as older people are more vulnerable to inadequate heating and cooling.⁵</p>	<p>Introduce a wider range of programs that support and resource older people to affordably retrofit their homes for greater energy efficiency.</p> <p>Prioritise improved energy efficiency solutions for older people likely to be most affected by climate change and financial insecurity.</p> <p>Ensure that accommodation options targeted to older Victorians – including retirement villages and units attached to family homes – incorporate efficient energy solutions.</p>
<p>Health and non-residential aged care</p> <p>While the infrastructure plan for Victoria’s health system addresses relevant issues in more detail, it is important that the Infrastructure Strategy maintains a broad perspective in this area, across the whole spectrum from prevention to treatment.</p> <p>Older Victorians increasingly experience problems accessing health and social care, often linked to travel and technology requirements. They expect more integrated services closer to home, including in regional centres, and exhibit a wide range of comfort levels in relation to relying on digital technology in healthcare.</p> <p>Despite a range of relevant commitments by the Victorian Government, progress in developing integrated community care hubs and similar facilities has been slow and often frustrated by wider urban infrastructure and planning challenges, especially in growth areas.</p>	<p>Reflect relevant developments and priorities in the health system since 2021 including innovative models for older people’s mental health services, stronger needs for alternatives to emergency department visits, and advancing use of telehealth.</p> <p>Facilitate innovative urban planning and building solutions to accelerate and reduce the cost of new community health hubs and similar integrated health, social care and justice services.</p> <p>Promote the role of infrastructure in preventative health strategies for chronic diseases linked to ageing (such as diabetes), noting that these cannot be the sole responsibility of the healthcare system.</p> <p>Ensure that community service infrastructure important to older people that is owned or managed by local government is not diminished as councils continue to reduce their active involvement in aged care.</p>
<p>Walking and physical activity</p> <p>Older people are a key group making use of pedestrian and walking infrastructure, often relying on this for mobility and physical exercise</p>	<p>Invest in infrastructure to enhance walkable communities particularly around activity centres and in new residential developments, including basic facilities such as safe footpaths, underpasses and overpasses that do not unduly extend walking</p>

⁵ Paavola, J. (2017) Health impacts of climate change and health and social inequalities in the UK. Environmental Health, 16(113), 61-68. DOI 10.1186/s12940-017-0328-z

<p>more than younger people. The role of infrastructure in facilitating access to natural environments is also important, with many older people reporting that they do not get this opportunity.</p> <p>Urban design often fails to prioritise these needs and results in older people being isolated in their homes. Concerns about safety have become more complex, ranging from physical injury risk linked to design and materials, to exposure to interpersonal violence.</p> <p>Climate change is a key consideration here as older people are most vulnerable to the effects of rising temperatures.</p>	<p>distances.</p> <p>Design walking and public exercise facilities with specific input from older people and ensure they suit the capacities and safety requirements for older users, including provision of adequate shade, resting places and toilet amenities.</p> <p>Prioritise infrastructure solutions that improve pedestrian and mobility aid access to and usability of natural environments within and adjacent to urban areas.</p> <p>Make intergenerational mixing rather than segregation an explicit objective of public infrastructure development projects.</p>
<p>Road and public transport development</p> <p>This issue is linked to the walkability issue addressed above but issues for older people also need to be better embedded in road planning and public transport developments. Older people represent a disproportionate number of pedestrian injuries and deaths. The safety of vehicles on the road has generally advanced more than that of other road users including vulnerable and frail older people.⁶</p> <p>At the same time, people of 60 are the fastest growing age group of drivers on the road. While this results in improved autonomy for some older people, it must not be at the expense of other older people who are increasingly reliant on public and community transport options.</p>	<p>Implement more comprehensive infrastructure solutions to reduce collision and fatalities between pedestrians, cyclists and motorists as part of a “safe system for vulnerable road users”.</p> <p>Promote an integrated approach to improved vehicle technology plus road and public transport infrastructure design to ensure optimal safety and convenience for all older people.</p> <p>Invest in a range of safe and accessible transport options to address mobility disadvantage and support older people to self-regulate their use of different modes rather than rely on a single available option.</p> <p>Ensure that public and community transport provision is supported by user-friendly surrounding built infrastructure compliant with accessibility standards.</p>

Conclusion

The next five years will see accelerating shifts in the age profile of the Victorian population and growing recognition of the impact of this on the adequacy of our urban and regional infrastructure. While new technology will help older people overcome some of the challenges in the physical urban environment, leading infrastructure design principles and priorities must also adapt and respond.

We look forward to continuing conversations about these issues and further opportunities to contribute to shaping the infrastructure development agenda for Victoria.

⁶ See COTA Victoria’s 2020 submission to the Inquiry into the increase in Victoria’s road toll and the adequacy of road safety approaches, www.cotavic.org.au/information/resources/submission/inquiry-into-the-increase-in-victorias-road-toll-and-the-adequacy-of-road-safety-approaches/