

Older Victorians Shaping Communities

Supporting leadership in later life



Older Victorians play vital roles leading advocacy and action to improve communities. They do this through a diverse range of formal and informal groups and activities, often on a voluntary basis. Encouraging and supporting this leadership is a crucial part of making Victoria a place that respects, engages and benefits from its older citizens.

This briefing is based on a series of leadership events hosted by COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria in 2025. It addresses the following key questions:

- What are ways in which older people can exercise leadership?
- What makes older people valuable community leaders?
- What skills and attributes may need to be developed by older leaders?
- What organised supports are, or would, be effective?

We hope this will stimulate older people, the organisations advocating on their behalf, and bodies supporting leadership broadly to consider the best ways to encourage and enhance community leadership in later life.

Background

We have a long history of supporting older people to be effective leaders. We do this, in partnership with many other organisations, by:

- supporting older people's leadership directly in our work through formal representation, advisory roles, peer education and mentoring,
- advocating for older people to have leadership opportunities in government policy structures,
- undertaking projects and advocacy to boost social and economic participation that allows older people to be leaders in their communities, and
- working to combat ageism, discrimination, and abuse to unlock barriers for older people to be heard and respected.

In October 2025, we ran a public webinar to celebrate, encourage, and support older Victorians stepping into community leadership roles. The forum aimed to explore pathways into leadership in later life and offer inspiration and practical advice. A roundtable

discussion with a small group of older Victorians who responded to a call for volunteers to share their leadership journeys was held in preparation for the event.

The event, [viewable on-demand here](#), was supported by representatives of Leadership Victoria and Volunteering Victoria, each of whom spoke to current and planned programs to support older leaders. A keynote presentation by Sue Hendy, Director of the International Federation on Rights of Older People, and a panel of four older Victorians with strong community leadership experience offered their reflections and advice.

What are ways in which older people can exercise leadership?

Leadership by older people can take many different forms. It may involve being part of formal structures like boards or advisory committees, but this is only one way to exercise leadership. Older people can equally lead through personal influence and bringing people together around social, economic, and cultural issues that they care deeply about.

Different forms of leadership by and for older people include:

- Being a champion: leading as a representative to advocate change in policies and systems that impact on the lives of older people.
- Being a coordinator or activator: leading others engaged as volunteers in activities aimed at improving communities.
- Being an entrepreneur: leading a business or social venture that creates opportunities for older people in the community.
- Being an influencer or promoter: leading by articulating and spreading ideas aimed at “social purpose” outcomes.

Leadership by older people can take different forms in different cultures. For example, Aboriginal communities practice the concept of “Eldership,” combining recognition as a respected Elder with the ongoing exercise of care for community.

What makes older people valuable community leaders?

Older people often bring deep experience, perspective, and empathy to community leadership. Traits such as confidence, patience, and a desire to keep learning and pass on wisdom make them powerful drivers of inclusive and forward-looking change.

Specifically, we heard that:

- Capacity and willingness to build on previous career experience and pivot this to help drive change at the community level is often central.
- Older leaders often exercise a strong desire to pass learnings onto younger generations and focus on what’s most important for community.
- Long experience and personal memory can sometimes help to prevent reinvention of the wheel.
- With time, people often build confidence in their leadership and this extends into older age, bringing a heightened combination of insight and intuition.
- Counter to some biases, older people are often more open and less judgemental of others. They understand the need to

embrace diverse and changing perspectives.

- Older leaders can be especially keen not to be seen as stuck in the past, so make extra effort to move with the times.
- Older people often have high levels of patience and are good listeners. They also tend to be less concerned about their own ego and advancement.
- Age can bring a willingness to ask the hard questions and not be afraid to show they don't know or understand something.

What skills and attributes may need to be developed by older leaders?

While older leaders offer rich experience, they often need to adapt prior skills to new contexts, technologies, and expectations. Building communication, networking, and self-awareness as modern leaders helps them bridge generations and remain effective in evolving environments.

Specifically, we heard that:

- Prior career skills often need to adjust to new contexts, for example in making the transition from the corporate sector to the community sector.
- Communications skills may need building and diversifying, including public speaking, use of different technologies, and digital engagement.
- Some may need to develop greater comfort in being openly challenged in different ways, especially in public.
- The ability and ease to draw on your own lived experience cannot always be

assumed. Being able to represent other older people is a distinct capacity and is too often naively or unrealistically expected.

- Some adaptation may be needed to present ideas in a way that is seen as being “modern” enough and avoid being perceived as too old fashioned.
- Consciousness of being a leader may need development as many older people do it naturally or in a very unassuming way, especially in certain migrant and Indigenous communities where it is often culturally embedded.

What organised supports are, or would, be useful?

While some older people will move naturally and easily into new community leadership roles, others will need considerable encouragement, reassurance, skill development, and advice.

Targeted support structures such as mentoring, peer learning, and accessible leadership programs can help older leaders thrive and share their expertise. Opportunities to connect, collaborate, and build confidence in governance and advocacy roles are especially valuable.

Specifically, we heard that:

- Mentoring from successful older leaders, or previous office holders in a particular role, is often highly valued.
- Informal workshops and discussions are a good opportunity to share a diversity of experiences and draw out common themes.
- Focus on how to form coalitions and reach out beyond existing or usual networks would be well received.

- Programs about working with government and politicians would be useful, given this is new territory for many older leaders coming to community causes.
- Peer leadership, including volunteer coordination roles, requires a particular set of skills including dealing with difficult personalities.
- Adapted versions of the Institute of Company Directors courses and Our Community programs for community sector governance bodies would be valued, in addition to Leadership Victoria programs.
- Opportunities that provide practical insight into the operations of a consultative committee or advisory board before committing to membership would be useful.

We will also provide advice and promote leadership opportunities directly to our members and all older Victorians, through a dedicated page on our website connecting people to relevant resources and initiatives.

We invite feedback on the Older Victorians Shaping Communities webinar and any of the ideas reflected in this briefing. This can be submitted [via an online survey, found here](#).

Next steps

COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria look forward to working with partner organisations and the community on these issues. Targeted leadership development and support programs have a key role to play. We are also keen to connect with local councils and other bodies across Victoria that promote older people's community leadership as part of a broad positive ageing agenda.

We will continue to advocate to government to invest in older people's leadership and ensure that older people are well represented on public sector committees and advisory bodies on a wide range of topics – as part of a broader push to ensure that these bodies genuinely reflect the diversity of the community.