

PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2021/22

COTA NSW is the peak body representing people over 50 in NSW.

We're an independent, non-partisan, consumer-based non-government organisation.

We work with government, policy makers, service, product providers and the media to make sure our constituents' views are heard and acted on.

COTA NSW welcomes the release of the *Ageing Well in NSW: Seniors Strategy 2021 – 2031*. This is a pivotal time for older people in NSW, with serious challenges in a range of areas but it is also a period of opportunity, where the strengths of our communities can be harnessed to support and celebrate seniors in this state.

COTA NSW as the leading voice of older people in NSW looks forward to contributing to this conversation, through our community engagement program, contribution to government policy and ongoing advocacy of the issues that are important to people aged 50+ in New South Wales.

The past year has been challenging one, with dramatic changes to our economy, how we interact with each other and adjust to the new 'normal'. It has been especially so for some older people, particularly those who have lost their jobs, who don't have good digital literacy or access to devices, and the reduced opportunities to remain engaged through social groups and volunteering.

COTA NSW looks forward to continue to work with government, the non-government sector and other groups to ensure that the specialist needs of these groups are supported and the resilience of older people continues to be celebrated.

Living in age-friendly environments

Older people consistently tell us about the need for increased investment in footpath infrastructure in NSW and specifically the need to alter the Transport for NSW *Walking and Cycling Program* to include funding for Councils to construct new footpath infrastructure. We therefore welcomed the changes to the program for the 2020/21 funding round that included eligibility for local government to apply for this essential infrastructure within their communities. We call for a long-term commitment from the NSW Government to continue to fund the walking streams of this program and commit to yearly increase of 5% to the funding allocation to address the backlog of infrastructure need and stimulate localised economic activity in both Sydney and Regional NSW.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of vibrant, safe, and accessible public space. Older people have told us that they value spaces with wide footpaths, seating, shade and access to restrooms. COTA NSW has been encouraged with the recent recognition of this by the NSW Government through the trial *Streets as Shared Spaces program* and the recently announced *Your High Street* grant program. We strongly support investment in local high streets, with the associated economic and social benefits. We seek a long-term commitment to this program and continued funding in the 2021/22 financial year.

Access to appropriate and stable housing continues to be a major need for many older people in NSW. However, the ability to age in place is often hindered by the inflexibility of the home in which they live. COTA NSW is supporting the *Building Better Homes Campaign*, advocating for the inclusion of mandatory accessibility standards within the National Construction Code. The introduction of minimum design accessibility standards within the code will ensure new housing meets the needs of all people across the life span and of different physical ability. COTA NSW calls on the NSW Government to support these changes and to work with the housing industry to raise awareness and benefits of implementing gold level Livable Housing design standards.

As a member of the Ageing on the Edge NSW Forum, COTA NSW supports the call for the establishment of a state-wide older people's housing support service. This service would provide specialised case management and advocacy to help financially disadvantaged older people navigate the housing and aged care systems to achieve better housing outcomes when they are in housing crisis, and plan for their housing futures before reaching crisis point.

COTA NSW calls on the NSW Government to:

- **Commit to funding of the walking stream in the *Walking and Cycling Program* to 2031 to align to the *Seniors Strategy* and increase funding by 5% for 2021/22 financial year.**
- **Commit to funding of the *Streets as Shared Spaces program* to 2031 to align to the *Seniors Strategy* and increase funding by 5% for the 2021/22 financial year.**
- **Support the inclusion of gold level Livable Housing design standards in the National Construction Code.**
- **Provide resources to establish a state-wide older person's housing support service based on the successful Home-at-Last model in Victoria.**

Participating in inclusive communities

The risks associated with social isolation amongst older people are well established and have been acknowledged in the iterations of the *NSW Government Seniors Strategy*. The mandated restrictions on movement and social interaction; whilst essential to reduce the spread of COVID-19, in many cases had detrimental impacts on older people's health and well-being.

To support older people at risk of social isolation and loneliness, the *Department of Communities and Justice* introduced the *Combatting Social Isolation for Seniors during COVID-19 Grants Program*. This successful grant program supported local community organisations to deliver targeted and responsive initiatives to connect with older people in their communities to foster social inclusion.

Although many restrictions have eased in recent months the continued need for a multi-year funded grants program that allows community organisations to develop and implement a range of initiatives to combat social isolation in our state. COTA NSW calls on the Government to commit to the introduction of an ongoing grants program – across the life of the *Seniors Strategy* - to continue to build off the success of previous supports and allow for expansion in further localities across the state.

The pandemic has resulted in a dramatic shutdown in our economy, with the subsequent rise in unemployment and reduced working hours. Recent statistics indicated that older were amongst those age groups most adversely affected (318,000 people aged 55+ are currently receiving welfare payments). For those older job seekers, the prevailing discourse by government and employers focuses on the importance of retraining and increasing skill and experience levels in emerging industries or sectors.

Whilst many older people are enthusiastic about undertaking further study and skill development there is frustration that many employers require on-the-job experience that is not able to be obtained without being employed. During consultations with older jobseekers the need for older-worker internship scheme or similar was discussed. A state-wide scheme managed by government would enable employers to be matched with older workers to undertake internships in their chosen fields. Feedback from potential employers emphasised the need for the introduction of government incentives to encourage the participation in such a scheme. An internship for an older job-seeker would provide them with valuable experience and enable greater success in future job-seeking undertakings.

COTA NSW calls on the NSW Government to:

- **Commit to an ongoing grants program that provides funding to community-based social support programs which target isolated and vulnerable older people experiencing social isolation and loneliness.**
- **Explore the introduction of an older worker internship scheme that includes financial incentives for employers to participate.**

Staying safe, active and healthy

The way in which older people have coped with the stress and uncertainty of the past year aligns with that of the general population. In many cases their diet has been dominated by comfort foods, exercise has been restricted and in some instances consumption of alcohol has increased.

A report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 2016 indicated that approximately 18.25% of 60 – 69 were drinking at risky levels and women in the 50 -59 were more likely to drink to risky levels than any other age group. It is expected that these behaviours would have been exacerbated during the restrictions.

NSW Health has recognised the issue through the *Older People's Drug and Alcohol Project* that informs policy and treatment responses to those older people with substance abuse levels presenting in the health system. However, a broader campaign and policy response is needed to raise awareness of the dangers of high drinking levels and to promote paths for support. A Victorian initiative equips GP's with screening tests for patients to complete that identifies potentially risky behaviours. This allows the GP to provide early intervention educational resources, resources or other supports if needed.

The high proportion of people aged 60+ in pedestrian fatalities remains a concern. A Transport NSW 2019 road safety report indicated that 64% of pedestrians killed were aged 60 and older. Crash and casualty statistics for older men is also trending upward. There was a 35% increase in fatalities in older men from 2015 to 2019. Anecdotal responses from focus groups with older people, indicated a lack of recognition of physical abilities, over-confidence and unwillingness to walk to designated crossings to explain continued jaywalking and risk taking. COTA NSW recommends a state wide pedestrian safety campaign and peer education program targeting older people utilising co-creation methodologies.

The *Seniors Strategy* emphasises the importance providing a range of exercise options for older people to participate in, that allows for differing abilities, stage of life and health. Programs such as COTA NSW's *Living Longer, Living Stronger* is meeting these specialised needs and has been designed to improve strength, balance, coordination and endurance. Increased investment by the NSW Government in a range of innovative exercise programs or groups is essential to ensure that older people have access to appropriate exercise opportunities so they are able to remain active and healthy as they age.

COTA NSW calls on the NSW Government to:

- **Design and implement a state-wide campaign to raise awareness of the health impacts of high alcohol intake in the 50+ age group.**
- **Design and implement a state-wide campaign to increase pedestrian safety in older people.**
- **Invest in the development and support of diverse, low-cost programs that encourage older people to undertake regular exercise and address the financial barriers to exercise.**

Being resilient and informed

The pandemic has brought into sharp focus the importance of information dissemination and the impacts of the digital divide and the difficulties many older people experience in accessing accurate and timely information.

The necessity of imposing restrictions within the community highlighted the disparities of those that had access to technology and skills and those without. Critical and useful information is increasingly available online only, with assumptions in both the government and private sectors that most people have email addresses or the ability to access the internet. The need for a smartphone – to check-in to businesses with QR-codes - has become pervasive. Additionally, many social activities also moved to internet only services, which further isolated some older and frail people.

COTA NSW has long advocated for the need to ensure information, particularly of importance to older people, is available in a variety of formats. This means ensuring that information can be accessed in hard copy, that a public number is available for older people to contact, that government promotion is undertaken in the print media, television, radio or in public libraries. COTA NSW calls on the NSW Government to ensure that all departments commit to providing accessible information and paths of communication for all essential services and messaging, and to not solely rely on electronic information.

In 2020, COTA NSW released the findings of a survey examining older people's knowledge of palliative care, end-of-life issues and planning ahead. The survey found that the possession of a will was high amongst respondents, but other key documents such as Enduring Guardianship and Advance Care Directives were not as common. This was particularly true of younger cohorts i.e. 50 – 60. Programs such as *Legal Pathways*, that COTA NSW has delivered for more than 10 years, is a critical conduit for older people on limited incomes to obtain these important legal documents to enable them to plan ahead.

There was also a strong desire by the majority of older people to improve the public discourse around the topic of death and dying. They felt that it was still a taboo subject and that wanted to be able to talk about their own mortality with family and friends. COTA NSW supports Palliative Care NSW's call for a community awareness program that encourages further discussion and understanding on these important issues.

COTA NSW calls on the NSW Government to:

- **Ensure that essential government information is available in non-digital formats and promoted through traditional media and other easy-to-access community locations.**
- **COTA NSW supports Palliative Care NSW's call for a community awareness program that enables a broad discussion of end-of-life care, and dealing with issues related to death and dying.**
- **Commits to ongoing funding for the Legal Pathways program that supports older people with limited financial resources to draw up planning ahead documents.**